

Art in America

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Gardner Theft Explored in Film

A new documentary film about the 1990 theft of 13 masterpieces from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum will open in New York on Apr. 21, and will appear in selected cities through the summer. Directed and produced by Rebecca Dreyfus, *Stolen* began as a film about the heist before itself becoming an investigative tool. It centers on an investigation conducted by the renowned art sleuth Harold Smith, who died last year after a 50-year battle with skin cancer. The film follows the dapper and impassioned detective, always seen wearing an eye patch, derby hat, prosthetic nose and various bandages on his face and hands, as he tracks down numerous leads in the infamous case, in which two men dressed as Boston police officers gained access to the museum on St. Patrick's Day, tied up museum guards, and absconded with 13 works valued at an estimated \$500 million. Among the lost works is Vermeer's *The Concert*, which is the film's focal point, and Rembrandt's *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*.



The late Harold Smith, in *Stolen*.

With voiceovers by Blythe Danner as Gardner and Campbell Scott as art connoisseur Bernard Berenson, the film provides a glimpse into the life and collecting activities of the museum's flamboyant founder. From letters written between the two, we learn of Gardner's sometimes questionable acquisition practices, including her suggestion that a Giorgione be smuggled out of Italy in the bottom of a trunk.

Dreyfus interviews a number of noted Vermeer scholars and enthusiasts, including Anthony Bailey, Katharine Weber, Celeste Brusati and novelist Tracy Chevalier, as well as the former head of Scotland Yard's stolen art squad, who suddenly stops participating with the film's probe, perhaps out of fear for his own safety. But the film's fascination comes from the cast of bizarre and shady characters who have turned up over the years in relation to this and other investigations. They include feuding ex-cons Myles Connor

and William Youngworth, who had earlier enticed *Boston Herald* reporter Tom Mashberg with 17th-century paint chips and a glimpse of the purported Rembrandt; a fast-talking, smoke-ring-blowing reformed art thief known as the Turbocharger; and the fugitive Irish-American mobster Whitey Bulger, who has ties to the IRA. Humorous if frustrating moments occur with the litany of phone messages relaying tips Smith received in response to a publicity campaign. "It's at the Bellagio in Las Vegas," one caller says.

Bound by Gardner's will, which states that no work be moved or replaced, the museum has left the empty frames hanging in the galleries, also serving as a powerful public reminder of the still unsolved crime. After its April opening in New York, the film appears in Boston on May 12, Washington, D.C., in June, Seattle in July, and Los Angeles and San Francisco on dates to be determined. It will be available on DVD via Netflix at the end of the summer, and is scheduled to air on "Independent Lens" on PBS in late 2006/early 2007.

—Stephanie Cash