



FRAME BY FRAME

By Susan Carragher

Photography by Andrew French

Filmmaker Rebecca Dreyfus investigated the art crime of the century. Now she's celebrating a century-old institution, the NYDC.

Who gets to own art? Who gets to see art? These were questions posed by the award-winning, New York-based filmmaker Rebecca Dreyfus during our recent conversation. We were discussing her fascinating documentary film, *Stolen*, which examines one of the most audacious and still unresolved art thefts of the 20th century.

In the early morning hours of March 18, 1990, while the city of Boston was sleeping off its raucous St. Patrick's Day festivities, two thieves posing as police officers gained entry to the palazzo-like Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and got away with 13 works of art. Among them were paintings by Rembrandt, Diego Velázquez, and perhaps the most valued and beloved piece, "The Concert" by Vermeer.

Part investigation and part mystery, *Stolen* follows colorful and indomitable art detective Harold J. Smith tenaciously in his black eye patch and Bowler hat and traces his tireless efforts to solve the case, recover the goods and bring them back home.

For Dreyfus, the subject was more than intriguing — it was personal. She left the themed masterpieces were stolen from her and all art lovers, including Isabella Stewart Gardner herself, who spent a good portion of her life amassing one of the world's greatest art collections. Gardner saw art as her own self-expression — she reportedly once said that if someone wanted to know her, they could just "stroll the collection." Upon her death, Gardner hoped to pass on her love of art and generously bequeathed the collection, according to her last will and testament, "for the enjoyment of the public forever."

As a young girl, Dreyfus visited the Gardner museum where she first discovered the great Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer: "The Concert" has been described as everything from sensual to calming, a serene scene of a woman in mid-song performing for an enigmatic man whose back is turned to us. Upon seeing "The Concert" for the first time, Dreyfus felt she'd made a connection. And every time she visited Boston, she would also visit the painting.

But today only an empty frame hangs where the painting was displayed. The same goes for the rest of the missing works, as Gardner's endowment stipulated that nothing of the museum's interior could ever be changed. Haunted by the case and wondering who, after a decade and a five-million-dollar reward, none of the works ever surfaced, Dreyfus joined forces with relentless detective Smith to look for answers.

A fan of Dreyfus' film *Sye-Bye Babushka*, legendary documentarian Albert Maysles (Gina Shelton, *Grey Gardens*) served as director of photography on the film. Actors Blythe Danner and Campbell Scott contributed their voices, reading letters exchanged between Gardner and her advisor, Bernard Berenson.

Already a favorite at film festivals from Athens to Philadelphia, *Stolen* will be released in theaters in spring 2008.

Rebecca Dreyfus also brings her talents to an intimate look of the New York Design Center, a short film presented by House & Garden and the NYDC. As a filmmaker, Dreyfus always explores the human element and she found both "a creative, intimate space" and "a vibrant community environment" while shooting at 200 Lex. Among the 200 Lex luminaries who appear onscreen are Vladimir Kagan, Valerie Moran and Dennis Miller. Clearly impressed, she likened NYDC to an artist's palette, upon which designers blend the art and science of making furniture and transforming interiors.

An *Intimate Look* will be screened at NYDC on November 19th. For more information, contact the NYDC at 212.279.9500. For information about festival screenings of *Stolen* and the ongoing search, visit www.stolenfilm.com.

Susan Carragher is a New York-based writer and director.

Left, great detective Harold J. Smith (above, right) searched tirelessly for the Gardner loot. Johannes Vermeer's quietly seductive "The Concert" (below, right) was one of the 13 masterworks stolen from the Gardner museum in 1990.

