

NATIONAL POST

The case of the missing painting: Office Space - Bonnie Czeglédi

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"I guess I have a high tolerance for danger," muses international art and cultural property lawyer **Bonnie Czeglédi**, as she relaxes into a leather chair in her bright, airy downtown Toronto office. That attribute isn't a job requirement for most professionals, but working to recover stolen art sometimes exposes Ms. Czeglédi to dangerous people; stolen art, she says, is often used to sweeten a drug deal or kidnapping.

To cope with that particular career hazard, she says, "I try to stay away from certain criminals. I try to be very careful in terms of people I deal with."

Not all stolen-art situations involve armed felons. Ms. Czeglédi also works on cases where people have inherited collections that include stolen art. "Europe was drained of all its art in '41, and about 100,000 paintings are still missing. This issue is coming up now in estates."

She sometimes gets calls from people who want to sell a particular painting, but can't because it is stolen. She will do research to find the rightful owner and negotiate a solution that benefits both parties.

Ms. Czeglédi chose art law because she says she thought it would be "a beautiful life. I thought, 'I'll be around beautiful paintings.'"

"Art is my first love," she says, gesturing to an abstract jazz triptych on the wall opposite her desk, which she painted, "But I was not encouraged to become an artist."

When working on a case, Ms. Czeglédi spreads all the files out on her large cherry-stained desk so she can see everything at once. She also uses a large white board that is on the wall to the left of her desk, to write out the case history. When a visitor drops by, she's careful to wipe the white board clean and lock the case materials in a large filing cabinet.

"I need to keep my client files confidential," she says.

However, an Interpol poster with pictures and a brief description of the latest stolen art from around the world stays right on top of her desk for everyone to see. Right now, she's grieving the theft of antiquities from Iraqi museums. "It's so sad because that is biblical history, the cradle of civilization," she says.

I wonder why people steal art, if they can enjoy it in a gallery or museum. "For some criminals it's just a lark, for others it's currency -- although paintings like [Edvard Munch's] *The Scream* are so famous they are impossible to unload. And for others still, it's kind of like a secret trophy. They want something that is rare and exotic," Ms. Czeglédi explains.

She's been asked this question many times in the course of her talks on art crime at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. (Her next one is on April 22.) She also teaches law students in the LL.M program at the University Jean Moulin 3 in Lyon, France, about law and taxation in the art market.

When she is in Toronto, she spends a lot of time in her office, where every painting has a story to tell, and, she says, "I love uncovering the truth about history."

Illustration:

- Black & White Photo: Brennan O'Connor, Special to the National Post / Art and cultural property lawyer Bonnie Czegledi recovers stolen art for clients. Her own art -- she once had dreams of being a painter -- hangs on the walls of her office.
- Black & White Photo: Brennan O'Connor, Special to the National Post / Abstract jazz triptych: A work of her own.

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