

## Art thieves, look out

### As Toronto sees valuable artworks go missing, lawyer Bonnie Czegledi is the city's ambassador to Interpol and the FBI -- and the nearest thing it has to an art cop

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In a crowd of black turtlenecks, the Toronto Police detectives were easy to pick out. Sitting near the back of a hall at the Royal Ontario Museum in November, they looked straight out of NYPD Blue, with crisp suits, buzz cuts and wide builds. At the podium, art lawyer Bonnie Czegledi was delivering bad news: Stealing art and antiquities has exploded into an \$8-billion black market. "Canada is a fantastic place to steal art," she added, "because no one is paying attention."

The presence of the two lawmen, though, was a victory for Ms. Czegledi, who is committed to fighting art theft in Toronto, the capital of the Canadian art market. Since she opened her law practice in the Annex four years ago, she has become an unofficial ambassador in the global field of art crime, funnelling information from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and Interpol. She is also the closest thing Toronto has to an art cop; when the Ontario College of Art & Design was robbed of a painting this month, it turned to Ms. Czegledi for help.

Ms. Czegledi is unique in the visual-arts community: A lawyer and artist whose chambers also double as an art gallery, she is an enthusiastic supporter of contemporary artists -- but she is not afraid to offer scathing criticism of a local art trade she views as a haven for thieves and obsessive collectors. "Local police don't have a checklist on what to do when a gallery is robbed," Ms. Czegledi says. "I do."

That's why OCAD called her about the theft of a landscape painting by J.W. Beatty, a contemporary of the Group of Seven. The first question she says she asked was whether the college had registered the missing painting with the Art Loss Register, a database of stolen artwork searched by police the world over. OCAD had not. It's a common mistake, according to Ms. Czegledi. "The police won't tell them to do it," she says. "The victim has to take responsibility. When a stolen painting is well publicized, it's more difficult for thieves to sell on the international black market."

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The Beatty work is worth about \$25,000 -- a relatively small number in the multibillion-dollar art business -- but Ms. Czegledi doesn't take any such loss in stride. "The painting has historical and emotional value," she says passionately. "It is worth more than the money itself."

Ms. Czegledi's passion about the subject goes back a long way. Although she was raised in Don Mills, her ancestors hailed from the Carpathian Mountains in what was once Hungary (now Romania), their Szekely tribe destroyed by what Ms. Czegledi calls ethnic cleansing -- their cultural heritage erased. As a girl, Ms. Czegledi hid her paintings from a disapproving mother who encouraged a sensible career in law. At Osgoode Hall, she specialized in cultural heritage so she could "live a life amongst the pretty paintings," she says. But she soon discovered an underbelly to the art world, and a police force unprepared.

In Toronto, Ms. Czegledi says, there are no police trained in art investigations. "The Toronto police force doesn't have much knowledge, but they do have a willingness to learn," she said. "Detectives don't know where this stuff goes, or who the collectors are."

And art crime in Toronto is growing. Thefts from private residences (often unreported) are difficult to track, but Ms. Czegledi says more than a dozen local galleries have been robbed in the past few years.

Dealer Tarah Aylward of Ingram Gallery -- which was robbed three times in 2002 and 2003 -- echoes Ms. Czegledi's call for an art-crime detective. "The police offered me no advice about getting my stolen sculptures back," Ms. Aylward says. "They basically said, 'Good luck, you'll probably never see them again, and we can't help you.' "

To shine a spotlight on the illicit trade, Ms. Czegledi hosted a lecture in November at the ROM featuring the Art Loss Register's Kathryn Dugdale. Based in London and New York, the organization's databases now contain more than 160,000 files on stolen art from across the globe, but very few from Toronto. "Since our lecture, Canadians have started calling us," Ms. Dugdale says. "They usually say, 'We've just spoken with Bonnie Czegledi.' "

Ms. Dugdale says no Toronto auction houses subscribe to the Art Loss Register, which indicates they are not conducting due diligence searches on the art they sell. "When art is stolen, small auction houses are one place where it is laundered," Ms. Czegledi explains. "In France, there's a book that's bigger than the Bible filled with rules for auctions. In Canada, you know how big our book is? Well, there is no book. There are no agreed-upon guidelines or laws."

It was at Ms. Dugdale's lecture that the two Toronto detectives showed up. Detective David Alexander of 51 Division confirms that he is consulting Ms. Czegledi on the robbery last year of a house in Cabbagetown, where about 60 paintings -- worth an estimated \$4-million -- vanished one winter night. "We've been talking on a regular basis," Det. Alexander says of Ms. Czegledi. "She's a great resource and has her finger on the pulse of that community. For us, it's hard to know how much a painting is worth and who the players are. She can put that into perspective." Still, the detective said of his case, "We're stalled."

Ms. Czegledi's point to interested officers is that "to investigate art crime they must have more than a superficial understanding of the art world. They have to know which auction houses are selling it, under what circumstances, and who is collecting it. They have to get inside it."

This is especially important, she says, because many thefts are specifically commissioned. "My gut feeling is that the message is sent out from a collector, saying what that collector wants, and then it gets stolen. Thieves . . . won't steal something that they won't get money for."

A collector, she explained, might stop caring about the consequences and do anything to possess a beautiful object. "They can be compared to stalkers -- often feeling a sense of entitlement and of being above the law. They believe that they will not be caught." And with no detectives in Toronto familiar with the gallery scene, she fears this will remain the standard.

In an upcoming series of public lectures at the ROM, starting tomorrow, the lawyer will cover an array of shady dealings, including fakes and forgeries, Holocaust-looted art, and the pillaging of Iraq's antiquities, including their flow to Toronto. She will also provide tips about how to avoid buying stolen art.

At the ROM, Ms. Czegledi will also deliver her most important edict: Stealing art is not a victimless crime. "We're all victims because we can't see Vermeer's *The Concert*, or any of the hundred thousand paintings still missing from the Holocaust," she says. "Culture is the soul of a people, and to steal it is the final way to destroy a civilization."

A growing awareness of art crimes will probably mean that at least a few officers and lawyers will be present to learn from Ms. Czegledi about what's not hanging on our gallery walls. And as usual, she will keep a close eye on her audience. "Criminals attend my lectures as well," she said. "Because they need to know what I know."