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# Charles Hill, art sleuth who tracked down works by Titian, Vermeer, Goya, and Edvard Munch's The Scream – obituary

He recovered The Scream during an elaborate 'sting' operation in which he posed as a representative from the Getty Museum in California

By Telegraph Obituaries

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Charles Hill, the art detective, aided the recovery of many priceless objects in an adventurous career both with the Metropolitan Police and as a freelance investigator, most sensationally Edvard Munch's The Scream and Titian's Rest on the Flight to Egypt.

A former soldier and aspirant priest, Hill gave up sword and cassock in favour of dagger and cloak. With a passion for art and a flair for theatrics, he was a plain-clothes man who could talk to academics and the criminal fraternity on equal terms.

*The Scream*, valued at £30 million at the time, was stolen in 1994 on the opening day of the Winter Olympics. While the eyes of the world – and, more pertinently, the Norwegian police – were trained on Lillehammer, two men climbed a ladder at the front of the National Gallery in Oslo, smashed a window, grabbed the painting and made off. The raid took less than a minute.

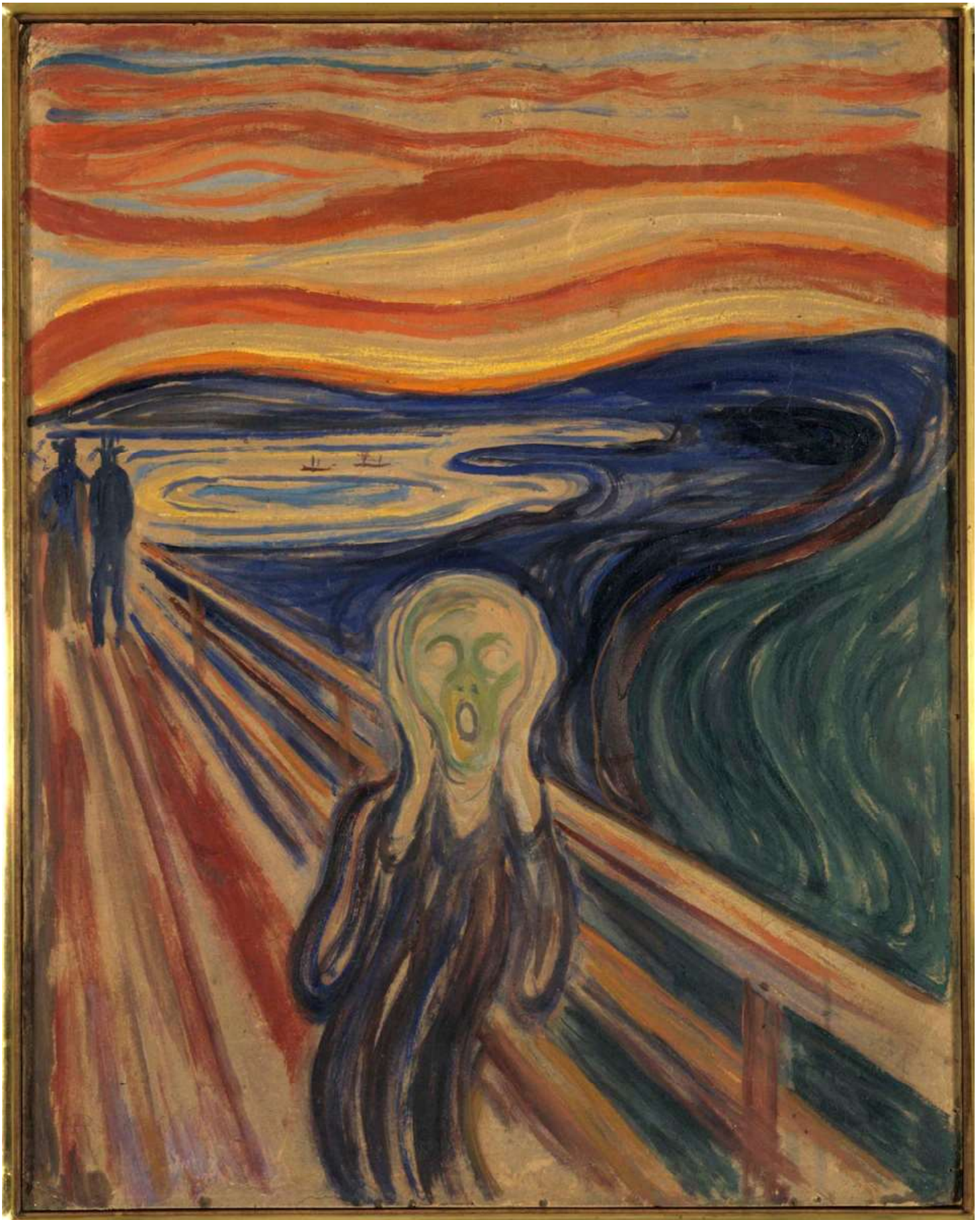
To add insult to injury, a postcard bearing the message “Thanks for the poor security” was left at the scene. The card showed a modern Norwegian painting called *A Good Story*, featuring three men laughing uproariously.

Having failed to secure a “buy back” deal with the Norwegian government, the gang approached an associate in Britain. A meeting was arranged in London and Scotland Yard set an elaborate sting in motion.

The thieves took the bait. “Chuck Roberts”, a representative from the Getty Museum in California, was introduced and, after initial meetings in London, was dispatched to Oslo with a suitcase containing £500,000 and a bodyguard named “Sid Walker”.

A rendezvous had been arranged in an Oslo hotel and two days of fraught negotiations with the robbers began. All did not run smoothly, however. By chance a police convention was in progress at the hotel and the place was awash with officers. But with only the money in view, the gang were fortunately blind to the other hotel occupants.

Having agreed a ransom of £300,000 – with a further £15,000 to cover the gang’s expenses – Roberts was driven 50 miles to the village of Aasgaardstrand, on a fjord where Munch himself owned a summer house, while Walker remained in Oslo with the money.



Edvard Munch's The Scream, which was stolen from the Munch Museum in Oslo | CREDIT: Sidsel de Jong /AP

There, tucked away in the cellar of a chalet and wrapped in a bed sheet, was *The Scream*, the edges frayed but otherwise undamaged. Roberts verified its authenticity by the wax-splatter on one corner of the canvas where Munch had blown out a candle.

“Roberts” returned to Oslo with the painting and the trap was sprung. But far from being a bow-tied American with a steady patter of Californian art-speak, Roberts was Charlie Hill, and his “minder” was a fellow officer from Scotland Yard. The Norwegian police pounced, the painting was recovered and the four members of the gang arrested. All before Interpol had even issued a “wanted” notice.

Patrick Charles Landon Hill was born in Cambridge on May 22 1947 to Zita, née Widdrington, the daughter of a clergyman and a dancer with the Bluebell Girls who introduced her three children to Europe’s art galleries, and Landon Hill, an American Air Force Officer, who had flown B-26 Marauders in the Second World War and was among the first US soldiers to arrive at Dachau concentration camp in 1945.

When Charles was nine the family moved to Washington. On leaving high school, where he was a classmate of the young Al Gore, he volunteered for Vietnam, to satisfy his “intellectual curiosity”, and served for a year with the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

Patrolling near the Cambodian border with an M 16 rifle in one hand and a book in the other, Hill was nicknamed the “Professor” and came to be regarded as a talisman by his comrades, on account of his talent for avoiding hostile fire.

He then enrolled at George Washington University to study History, paying his way by working night shifts as a security guard. Saturdays, however, were reserved for concerts by the Washington Symphony Orchestra. On Sundays, after church, he would go to the National Gallery to watch Kenneth Clark’s *Civilisation* on the big screen.



Charley Hill: for him, art theft was not a 'gentleman's crime' | CREDIT: Teresa Levonian Cole

On completing his service, Hill won a Fulbright scholarship to Trinity College Dublin to study Modern History. Spiritual curiosity, perhaps encouraged by his maternal grandfather, nudged him in the direction of a Theology degree at King's College, London.

But the Church did not promise sufficient excitement. Instead, Hill joined the Metropolitan Police in 1978, later working undercover with various crime squads, most notably the art and antiques squad, which he led as chief inspector between 1994 and 1996.

His first undercover art assignment, to retrieve a stolen 16th-century Parmigianino, came in 1982. He mugged up on Mannerism and, posing as an American art dealer, set out to win the trust of two criminals who wanted to offload the painting. Over a bottle of Rémy Martin and tales of Vietnam, Hill examined the Parmigianino and declared it a fake – he did not want it, he said. The next day, after police raided the pair, Christie's confirmed Hill's suspicion. "From then on," said Hill, "I was the Yard's art 'expert'."

He went on to play a part in some of the great art-theft recoveries. In 1991 he helped to retrieve Pieter Breugel the Elder's *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, which had been stolen from the Courtauld Institute in 1982. Two years later Vermeer's *Lady Writing a Letter With Her Maid* and

Goya's Portrait of Doña Antonia Zárate were recovered with other paintings stolen from the home of Sir Alfred and Lady Beit in Ireland by the Dublin gangster Martin Cahill, known as "the General".

In 1996, Hill worked on the recovery of a hoard of paintings and statues stolen in Moravia and Bohemia that included Lucas Cranach's The Old Fool from the National Gallery in Prague.

Hill's round, convivial face was framed by broad, tortoiseshell spectacles and curly brown hair, and he combined a donnish air with a transatlantic accent, a wheezing laugh, and a penchant for sartorial flamboyance.

This all made him a natural for covert work in the art world, but his role as the art squad's principal undercover officer inevitably involved a risk of overexposure. The criminal fraternity came to beware "the American with the glasses", and, as Hill himself confessed, "coming home with the imprint of a double-barrelled shotgun on my neck did upset my wife somewhat."

The Met's specialist operations were reorganised in 1996, and the art squad, together with other small specialised squads, became "focus units" within the Organised Crime Group. There was no position for the detective chief inspector of the art squad, and Hill was posted to Belgravia police station. Although he put a brave face on the move, it was shortly after that he left the police to join AXA Nordstrom Art Insurance in the City of London as risk manager.

Still later he turned freelance, forming the specialist art crime investigations agency, Charles Hill Associates, in 2001. He was also appointed security adviser to the Historic Houses Association. Working in the private sector gave Hill the freedom to follow his own interests in his own way.

He was, as far as stolen masterpieces were concerned, "more interested in recovering the art than capturing the criminals". This preoccupation was reflected in the large reproductions of recovered paintings by Vermeer, Goya and Munch that decorated the walls of his office.

It also gave him the opportunity to renew his pursuit of works stolen while he was still a policeman. In 2002 he masterminded the safe return of Titian's Rest on the Flight to Egypt, valued at £5 million, stolen in a raid on the [Marquess of Bath](#)'s drawing room at Longleat House in Wiltshire in 1995.

The police had advised Lord Bath that the only way to recover the painting was to offer a hefty reward and publicise the theft so extensively that the work would be identified as stolen as soon as it surfaced on the market.

The Marquis and his insurers posted a £100,000 reward. The publicity attendant on the heist was huge. But the response proved discouraging and after several fruitless years, the Marquis turned to Hill.

Hill enlisted the help of a man convicted of handling stolen goods, including a Rembrandt painting lifted from Wilton House near Salisbury. The ex-prisoner was paid expenses to use his criminal contacts to make inquiries and publicise the reward.

But the decisive information leading to the painting's recovery came from another unidentified source. After mentioning the picture in a radio interview, Hill was contacted by a man who claimed he could get the painting back in exchange for the cash. Longleat's lawyers accepted the deal.

Hill met the man and drove him around until he was told to stop outside a railway station in west London. An old man was standing at a bus stop opposite and next to him was a big plastic red, white and blue shopping bag.

He just said to Hill: "There it is." Hill, who had spent the previous day looking at the Titians in the National Gallery, ripped open a corner of the cardboard wrapping and saw the head of Joseph which he had been hunting for seven years.

Hill was keen to dismiss the image of art theft as a gentleman's crime as outdated, and insisted that the modern art criminal was "dangerous, violent and bad news". He was equally scornful of the popular myth of the criminal mastermind who adorns his secret hideaway with Old Masters.

"Blofeld and Dr No do not exist," he said. "It is something of a trophy crime for crooks who have moved on from stealing hub caps. They've seen the movies and think it's cool, sexy. Even the less intelligent ones realise they can't sell a Monet or Cezanne to the local art dealer or ask Sotheby's to get the best offer.

"But that doesn't mean the work is worthless. It's about kudos. If you arrive for a drugs deal with masterpiece in your boot, the other team know you're serious."

Hill remained focused on his work, with little time for hobbies, although he became a keen gardener over the last decade, filling the house with fresh flowers.

In the weeks before his death Charley Hill went to Ireland, acting on new information concerning Rembrandt's Storm on the Sea of Galilee – one of the paintings stolen in a \$1 billion heist in 1990. "It takes time," he said. "You could call me bloody-minded. But I never give up."

In 1979 he married Caroline Stewart, a niece of the Irish artist Louis le Brocqy. She survives him with their two daughters and a son.

**Charles Hill, born May 22 1947, died February 20 2021**