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# Register

## Obituaries

# Charles Hill

Art detective for Scotland Yard who by going undercover retrieved stolen masterpieces including, most famously, Munch's *The Scream*

On a freezing cold morning in February 1994, two Norwegian thieves drove up to the National Museum in Oslo. They ran through the snow, climbed a ladder and broke a window. An alarm sounded but was ignored by guards. Within 50 seconds the pair had removed Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, then valued at £40 million. They ran off with it, leaving behind wire-cutters and a postcard reading: "Thanks for the poor security."

The Winter Olympics began in Lillehammer that day and the disappearance of *The Scream* was guaranteed to attract maximum international press coverage. "The theft was a jeering insult, a raised middle finger directed at Norway's cultural and political elite," explained Edward Dolnick in *Stealing the Scream: The Hunt for a Missing Masterpiece* (2007).

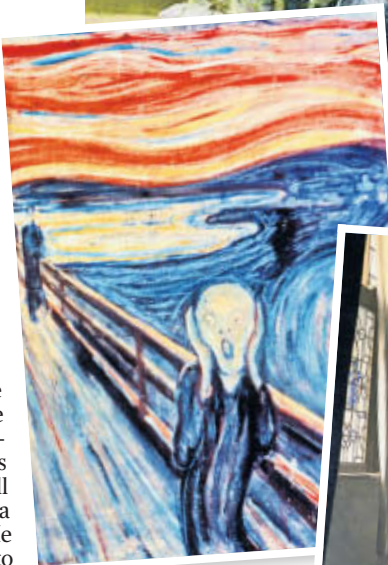
The embarrassed Norwegian authorities sought help from Scotland Yard's art and antiques squad. The case was assigned to Charley Hill, a detective once described by an interviewer as a loner with maverick tendencies, a fierce intelligence and a low tolerance for bureaucracy who "radiates Morse-like insubordination as well as the charm".

Hill created an undercover operation in which he posed as a fast-talking American art expert. The J Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles provided him with an elaborate false identity as "Chris Roberts", including business cards and employment records. "He was very good at quick research," recalled a colleague. "He absorbed useful bits of information and brushed up on Munch very quickly."

Making contact with "a dodgy art dealer known to the thieves", Hill offered £500,000 for the painting and agreed to meet the dealer and an associate at the Plaza Hotel in Oslo. On arrival he was horrified to discover the hotel full of police officers attending a narcotics officers convention. He knew two of them but was able to warn them not to acknowledge him. The associate insisted on his expenses being paid, warning that otherwise *The Scream* would be destroyed, "eaten, shat out and sent to the minister of culture".

Five months after the theft Hill was driven to a chalet in Asgardstrand, where Munch once had his summer house. "The denouement of the drama came when I was invited to go down to the basement to claim the painting," he told *Garage* magazine. "I was not prepared to be held in that basement until the following Christmas so I told my host, the dodgy art dealer, what I thought of that idea in language that could be best described as Old English vernacular. So he went and brought it up himself."

Hill confirmed its authenticity by examining Munch's candle-wax drippings and the gang members were arrested soon afterwards. Four men were jailed but their convictions were later quashed because a post-Second World War Norwegian law did not permit foreign police officers to use false identities. "Still, the painting



**Charles Hill was proud of his work recovering art such as Munch's *The Scream*, and *Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid* by Vermeer**



was recovered and that was the important thing," Hill concluded.

He worked on several other heists and in 1996 recovered 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. Still unresolved is the case of Caravaggio's *Nativity with St Francis and St Lawrence*, which was stolen in Palermo in 1969, and the theft on St Patrick's Day 1990 of 13 paintings worth \$1 billion, including three Rembrandts, from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Massachusetts, and now thought to be in Ireland; Hill believed that James "Whitey" Bulger, the American crime boss, was responsible.

Although finding *The Scream* brought Hill the most publicity, including a BBC documentary, he insisted

that his greatest thrill came from locating

Vermeer's *Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid*, which had been stolen in 1986 by Martin "the General" Cahill, an Irish mobster, from the Alfred Beit Foundation at Russborough House in Co Wicklow. It was also his most dangerous assignment, involving a confrontation in a Belgian hotel with Niall Mulvihill, a Dublin taxi driver who was later murdered.

"He didn't know I was a police officer," Hill recalled. "I was straight with him and told him he wanted too much for some of the paintings but he was a greedy so-and-so." Earlier Hill had told a colleague where he would be, "so if I'd be floating out to sea in Antwerp harbour they would have identified my body more easily".

Patrick Charles Landon Hill was born in Cambridge in 1947, the second of three children of Zita (née Widdrington), a British ballerina with the Bluebell Girls who enjoyed taking her children around art galleries, and her husband Landon Hill, a US Air Force officer who in April 1945 had been one of the first people to enter

Dachau concentration camp; he had two sisters, Martha and Nikki.

His early years were spent mainly in Great Easton, Essex, often in the care of his maternal grandfather, a clergyman who was a big influence. Eventually the family moved to the US and Hill was educated at St Albans School in Washington DC, where Al Gore, the future vice-president, was a classmate. He was 18 when his father, driven to alcoholism by his wartime experiences, died in a car crash.

He volunteered for the Vietnam war "out of intellectual curiosity", serving as an infantryman with 173rd Airborne Brigade. He survived unscathed and went on to study history at George Washington University, paying his way by working as a security guard, though not on Saturdays. "I had a season ticket to the Washington Symphony," he told *Country Life*. "I believe you gain a better understanding of history through culture." On Sundays he watched Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation*.

A Fulbright scholarship took him to Trinity College Dublin, from where he moved to Belfast as a school teacher and youth worker. He arrived in London three years later to read theology at King's College, though he soon concluded that "I wasn't going to make it as a clergyman in the Church of England, and I didn't want to teach because of that wonderful jibe of Henry Kissinger, 'The stakes are so low.'"

Instead he joined the Metropolitan Police and was stationed in Stoke Newington, north London. "My beat was the top of Stamford Hill — three different groups of Orthodox Jews in

the area and high immigration, so it was a high-pressure job," he recalled. "I mainly arrested muggers, because I was fitter then and a good middle-distance runner — if they couldn't get away from me in the first 100 yards I had them."

He was promoted to detective sergeant and in 1980 was assigned to an undercover job, visiting two hardened old criminals who had put away a painting for their retirement. "They met me at Heathrow," he recalled. "They thought I was some dodgy dealer who'd just come off Concorde." He took one look at their painting and told them it was a Victorian pastiche. "It took them aback, but they were happy enough to pour cognac down my throat," he said. Later the pair were raided by the Flying Squad and art experts confirmed Hill's hunch that their painting was a copy of a 16th-century Parmigianino worth barely £3,000. "From that point on my career was made," he said.

In 1979 Hill married Caroline Stewart, a civil servant he had met in Dublin; she was a niece of the Irish artist Louis le Brocquy. Caro survives him with their children: Susannah, a lawyer; Elizabeth, who works for a music agent in California; and Chris, a data analyst; and grandchildren, Georgia and Olivia. Other than art, Hill had few interests outside work, although he was prone to quoting from the Bible. In his younger

**'They thought I was some dodgy dealer who'd just come off Concorde'**

days he had been a decent oarsman and latterly he was partial to a glass of brandy, especially over intellectual banter at the Special Forces Club.

His day job included spells with Europol and in criminal intelligence at Scotland Yard. However, he was best suited to undercover work, playing the role of benefactor, intellectual or art dealer. He had a round, convivial face framed by broad, tortoiseshell spectacles and curly brown hair. Few who encountered his gentle aesthetic nature or heard his mid-Atlantic accent would mark him down as an archetypal police officer.

He retired in 1996, saying that art crime had become too big, too international and too specialised: "The Metropolitan Police began to ask, 'What does all this have to do with policing in London? How does it serve the community?'" However, he continued as a private detective and in 2002 recovered Titian's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* that had been missing since 1995 for the Marquess of Bath. He was a consultant for the insurance specialist Nordstern, now part of Axa, and taught at Sotheby's Institute of Art, but stopped working undercover — he said that it was a young man's job.

Although his own financial gains were small, Hill insisted that what he did was worthwhile. "I've held a Goya, a Munch and a Vermeer in my hands that I personally helped to recover," he said. "There's nothing else I want to do. This is my vocation."

**Charles Hill, detective, was born on May 22, 1947. He died of a ruptured aorta on February 20, 2021, aged 73**