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Obituaries

## Charles Hill, who tracked down stolen masterpieces like ‘The Scream,’ dies at 73



Scotland Yard detective Charles Hill went undercover to track down “The Scream,” proudly held by the curator and director of the National Gallery in Oslo after it was recovered in May 1994. (Aleksander Nordahl/AP)

By [Harrison Smith](#)

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On the morning of Feb. 12, 1994, a pair of thieves stole a ladder, smashed a second-floor window of the National Gallery in Oslo and made off with a masterpiece — Edvard Munch’s 1893 painting “The Scream” — leaving behind a pile of broken glass, a pair of wire cutters and a postcard.

The front of the card reproduced “A Good Story,” a painting by Norwegian artist Marit Walle showing three red-faced men howling with laughter. On the back was a message scrawled by one of the thieves: “Thanks for the poor security.”

Security footage revealed that it took less than a minute for the thieves to complete their smash-and-grab, although one of the intruders had fallen down the 12-foot ladder on his first attempt to climb its steps. To get the bulky painting down to the street, he leaned out the window and slid the frame down the ladder’s rails, into the hands of his accomplice.

Most stolen art vanishes forever. But it took only three months for “The Scream” to be located by Charles Hill, a master of undercover operations in Scotland Yard’s elite Art and Antiques Unit, better known as the Art Squad.

Half-British, half-American, Mr. Hill was a Vietnam War veteran and Fulbright scholar who had planned to become a priest before joining the Metropolitan Police, rising through the ranks while acquiring a reputation as one of Britain's finest art detectives. He went on to recover purloined sculptures and paintings by Vermeer, Goya and Titian before he died Feb. 20 at 73, at a hospital in West London.

The cause was a torn aorta, said his daughter Susannah Lannoy.



Mr. Hill, in 2018, considered art theft a strike against humanity's collective heritage. (Susannah Lannoy)

Mr. Hill cut a striking figure at Scotland Yard, where he wore tortoiseshell glasses and peppered his conversations with references to medieval history and 19th century playwright Oscar Wilde. In his book "The Rescue Artist," an account of "The Scream's" theft and recovery, journalist Edward Dolnick called Mr. Hill "temperamentally allergic to blandness and routine," writing that the detective resembled an amalgam of "Prince Valiant and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe." In pursuit of stolen art, Mr. Hill often disguised himself as a dodgy art dealer with a Mid-Atlantic accent, wearing a bow tie, seersucker suit and tasseled loafers. (Personally, he preferred a Donegal tweed jacket.) After "The Scream" disappeared — on the same day that Norway hosted the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics at Lillehammer — he took on the role of "Chris Roberts," an agent of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

Mr. Hill got in touch with a group of middlemen and convinced them that the Getty would pay 500,000 pounds to recover the painting, a swirling, expressionist depiction of a howling figure under a blood-red sky. He was soon meeting with an art dealer who took him to a summer house in Asgardstrand, on the Oslo Fjord, where "The Scream" had been kept under a blue sheet in the basement.

"The picture is painted on heavy cardboard, which surprised me, but I turned it over and there was the famous image, including the original splatter marks where Munch blew out a candle on it," Mr. Hill recalled in a 2018 interview with [Garage](#), an art and fashion magazine. "I said something original like 'Holy mackerel' while I admired it."



Norwegian police recovered the painting, arresting the dealer and alleged thieves. Three of the four gang members were ultimately released, after a court ruled that the sting operation violated Norwegian law because of the false identities used by Mr. Hill and other British officers. “Still,” Mr. Hill said, “the painting was recovered, and that was the important thing.”

Art theft was far from a frivolous crime to Mr. Hill. He considered it a strike against humanity’s collective heritage, and viewed the acquisition of stolen or looted art as a similar offense. Art thieves, he often said, were typically career criminals — men who acquired masterworks to sell them, without realizing how difficult it is to do so — rather than diabolical villains like the title character in “Dr. No,” who exhibits a stolen Goya in his lair.

“You can’t do anything with these paintings except lay them down somewhere and work out what to do with them,” Mr. Hill told the *New York Times* in 2002. “The thieves make a small amount of money in relation to the value of the picture, and then it moves around various hands in the criminal network.”

Mr. Hill was instrumental in recovering many of the 18 paintings stolen in 1986 from Sir Alfred and Lady Beit’s Irish estate, Russborough House, by mobster Martin “The General” Cahill. Posing as an art dealer who had lined up Arab buyers, Mr. Hill traveled to a Belgian parking garage in 1993 and unwrapped Vermeer’s “Woman Writing a Letter, With Her Maid,” which he later called “the greatest masterpiece I’ve had the pleasure to hold.”



Vermeer’s painting, “Woman Writing a Letter, With Her Maid,” completed around 1670, was exhibited at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in the mid-1990s. (Charles Tasnadi/AP)

Along with the Vermeer, he helped recover Goya’s “Portrait of Doña Antonia Zárata,” and vowed to Lady Beit that he would find the remaining stolen paintings. Until his death, he was still searching for the last two, a pair of Francesco Guardi landscapes that he suspected were hanging in the home of an unwitting buyer in Florida.

“I’m confident that the owner of these very beautiful paintings will eventually realize their origins,” he told the Irish Daily Mail last year, “and return them to the Irish people.”

Patrick Charles Landon Hill was born in Cambridge, England, on May 22, 1947. Charley, as he was known, later reversed his first two names, preferring Charles to Patrick. His mother was a British dancer who performed with the high-kicking Bluebell Girls. During World War II, she met his father, an Army Air Forces officer from Oklahoma who was later haunted by memories of liberating the [Dachau concentration camp](#).

His father’s postings led the family to move across the United States and Western Europe, where his mother took him and his sisters to art museums in Florence and London, before settling in D.C. Mr. Hill graduated from the private St. Albans School and studied at Trinity College in Connecticut before dropping out in 1967 to fight as a paratrooper in Vietnam, in what he later described as a burst of “sophomoric idealism.” (*173d Airborne Brigade 6/1968 - 6/1969 C 3/503*)

Returning home unsettled by the violence that had killed most of his platoon, he increasingly turned toward art while going to the National Gallery of Art on Sundays to watch screenings of [Kenneth Clark’s](#) “Civilisation” series.

After graduating from George Washington University in 1971, he studied history at Trinity College Dublin and theology at King’s College London, planning to become an Anglican clergyman before deciding he was better suited for the Metropolitan Police.

In 1979, he married Caroline Stewart, a niece of Irish painter Louis le Brocquy. In addition to his wife, of London, survivors include three children, Elizabeth Hill of Alameda, Calif., and Susannah Lannoy and Chris Hill, both of London; two sisters; and two granddaughters.

Mr. Hill said he started working on art cases after taking an undercover assignment in which a pair of criminals showed him a painting, believing it to be valuable. He correctly identified it as “a Victorian pastiche” worth just a few thousand dollars. He was later promoted to detective chief inspector and, after leading the Art Squad for several years, retired from Scotland Yard in the mid-1990s.

Continuing his investigative work as a private detective, he tracked down paintings including Titian’s “Rest on the Flight Into Egypt,” which had been stolen in 1995 from the English estate Longleat. Seven years after the theft, he discovered the small panel painting wrapped in parcel paper and stowed in a [plastic shopping bag](#) at a bus stop in west London.

Other pieces continually eluded him, including 13 works stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. He singled out crime boss [Whitey Bulger](#) as a prime suspect for the 1990 theft and spent years [seeking out information](#).

“Art is part, in substance and theory, of the values we have as human beings,” he said in a [2012 interview](#), explaining why it was so important to find stolen works. “There are 7 or 8 billion of us, and we need art, especially great art and architecture, literature and ideas and traditions to help us be and become more fully human. I think that is our common, even though warring or conflicting, humanity. In my opinion, art is God given.”



[Harrison Smith](#)

Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post’s obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago.

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