

Charles Hill, Detective Who Found 'The Scream,' Dies at 73

His investigations, often conducted under cover, led to the recovery of Munch's masterpiece as well as stolen paintings by Vermeer and Titian.



The art detective Charles Hill in London in 2007. "I've held a Goya, a Munch and a Vermeer in my hands that I personally helped to recover," he once said. "There's nothing else I want to do." Credit...Richard Ansett



By **Richard Sandomir**

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Charles Hill, [a Scotland Yard](#) detective, stood inside a house in Norway and beheld the artistic treasure he had been searching for: [“The Scream,” Edvard Munch’s 1893 masterpiece.](#)

“I unwrapped it from a blue sheet and saw first where Munch had started painting on what’s now on the back,” [Mr. Hill told Garage](#), a fashion and art magazine, in 2018. “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. I said something like ‘Holy mackerel’ while I admired it.”

It was May 1994, three months after two thieves had propped a ladder against [the National Gallery in Oslo](#), stolen [“The Scream,”](#) and left behind a taunting note that said, “Thanks for the poor security.” The Norwegian police asked for help from Scotland Yard’s art and antiques unit, which assigned Mr. Hill, a leading specialist in recovering purloined art.

“He was this crazy hybrid — an art cop — which doesn’t really go together,” said Edward Dolnick, author of [“The Rescue Artist: A True Story of Art, Thieves, and the Hunt for a Missing Masterpiece”](#) (2005), an account of the “Scream” case. “He had this grand taste for old masters but loved to tell stories of chasing a mugger around the corner.”

Mr. Hill posed as “Christopher Roberts,” a blustery, fast-talking representative of [the J. Paul Getty Museum](#) (which was in on the ruse), willing to pay steeply for “The Scream.” Working with other detectives from the art and antiques unit, Mr. Hill tracked down an art dealer who had connections to the thieves, met with him and one of the crooks in a hotel in Oslo, and agreed to pay \$530,000 (nearly a million in today’s dollars) for the painting. He then drove south with the dealer to his summer house in Asgardstrand, where he had hidden “The Scream” in the basement.

“It’s exhilarating to get what you’re going for back,” [he told BBC News in 2014](#), adding [that he felt he was](#) “doing my bit for creation.”

Four men were arrested by the Norwegian police and convicted of stealing “The Scream,” but three of them were freed by an appeals court, which ruled that the testimony of Mr. Hill and his partner was inadmissible because they had used false identities.

Mr. Hill died on Feb. 20 in a hospital in London. He was 73. The cause was a torn aorta, his daughter Susannah Lannoy said.

Charles Patrick Landon Hill was born in Cambridge, England, on May 22, 1947. His mother, Zita (Widdrington) Hill, who was British, was a dancer; his father, Landon, who was born in Oklahoma, was an Army Air Forces (and later Air Force) officer who was among the first people to enter the Dachau concentration camp in Germany after its liberation. His postwar postings included London and Wiesbaden, Germany, as well as Washington, San Antonio and Colorado Springs.

Charley, as he was known, graduated from the private St. Albans School in Washington and attended Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., before dropping out to join the Army, serving as a paratrooper during the Vietnam War. In 1971, he earned a bachelor’s degree in history from George Washington University; he then attended Trinity College in Dublin on a Fulbright scholarship, taught remedial math at a school for two years in Belfast and studied theology at King’s College London in 1976.

Shortly after, Mr. Hill was hired by [the Metropolitan Police](#), the formal name for Scotland Yard. He had already acquired a taste for the arts. His mother had taken him to galleries when he was living in Washington. During college, he avidly watched Kenneth Clark's 13-part television series, "[Civilisation](#)," and attended symphony orchestra concerts.

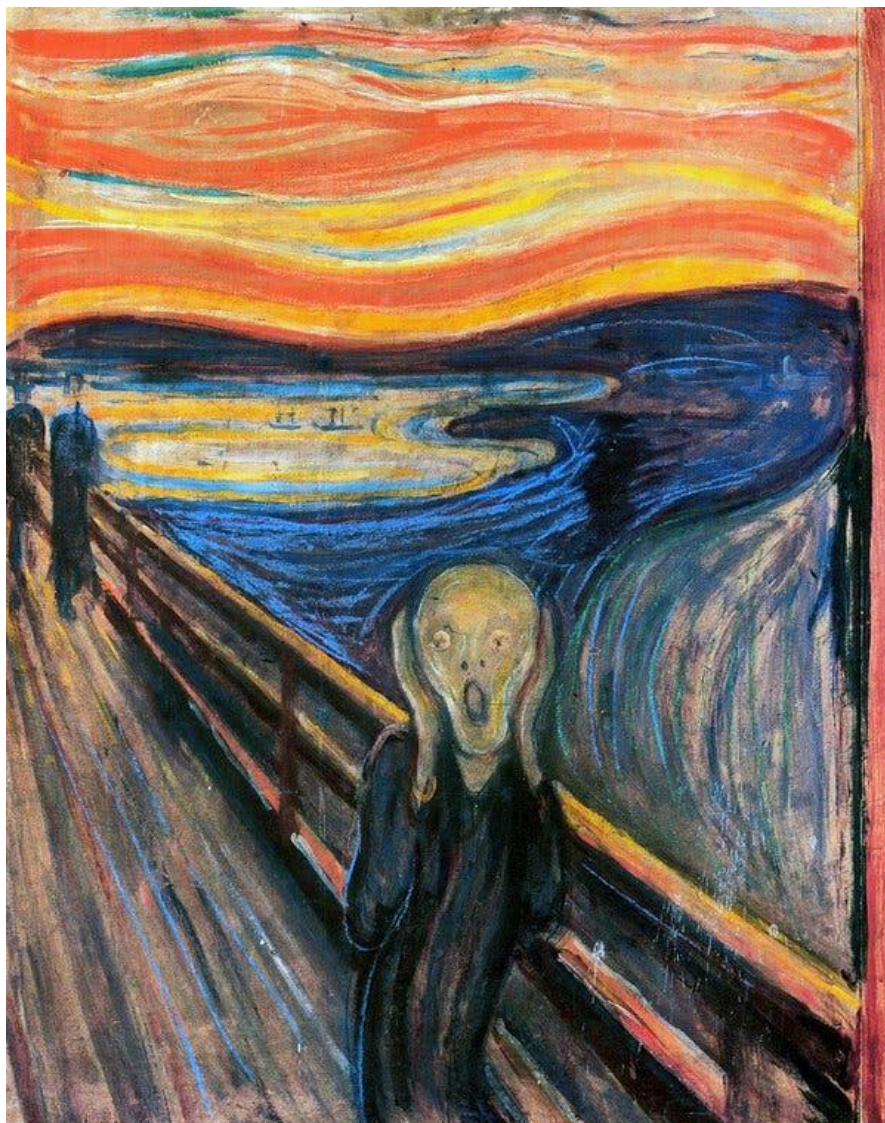
"'Civilization' had a really profound impact on Dad," Ms. Lannoy said by phone, "having come out of the jungles of Vietnam and all its horrors."

During an early undercover operation in 1980 to recover a painting stolen by two veteran criminals who believed that it would finance their retirement, he posed as an art dealer and bluntly told them that it was a forgery and not worth much.

"It took them aback," Mr. Hill told Garage, "but they were happy enough to pour cognac down my throat and took me back to Park Lane, where I was staying. They were soon raided by the Flying Squad from Scotland Yard."

His estimate that the painting was worth only a few thousand pounds was borne out by an auction house, which determined that it was a forgery of a 16th-century work by Parmigianino.

"From that point on," Mr. Hill said, "I was a made man."



In May 1994, three months after thieves had stolen it from the National Gallery in Oslo, Mr. Hill led the team that recovered Edvard Munch's "The Scream."

Credit...Photo 12/Universal Images Group, via Getty Images

His reputation was further enhanced when he recovered Vermeer's "Lady Writing a Letter With Her Maid" in 1993, seven years after it and 17 other paintings had been stolen from a mansion in Ireland by a gang led by the brutal Irish criminal Martin Cahill. Posing as a middleman for a Middle Eastern tycoon, Mr. Hill dealt with a gangster who had come into possession of four of the paintings that had not been recovered in other countries.

Mr. Hill recovered
Vermeer's "Lady
Writing a Letter With
Her Maid" in 1993,
seven years after it
and 17 other paintings
had been stolen from a
mansion
in Ireland. Credit
...Heritage
Images/Getty Images



In the denouement — in the parking garage of the Antwerp airport — Mr. Hill saw the gangster take one of the paintings, Goya's "[Portrait of Doña Antonia Zárate,](#)" out of a sports bag in the trunk of his car and unroll it like a cheap poster before the Belgian police arrived. The other three paintings were in the trunk as well, including the Vermeer, which had been in a trash bag.

"I've held a Goya, a Munch and a Vermeer in my hands that I personally helped to recover," he once said. "There's nothing else I want to do."

His analysis of the motives and personalities of art thieves was not complimentary. The "Scream" robbers, he said, were a "bunch of Oslo no-hopers." [And he told The Guardian in 2003:](#) "There is a madness that afflicts these people. They are not necessarily art lovers, but they view the works as trophies."

Mr. Hill retired from Scotland Yard in 1996 but continued to work until he died, for an insurance company for a few years and then as a private detective.



Mr. Hill in 2019. He retired from Scotland Yard in 1996 but continued to work as a detective until he died. Credit...BBC

In addition to Ms. Lannoy, he is survived by his wife, Caroline (Stewart) Hill; another daughter, Elizabeth Hill, known as Lizzie; a son, Christopher; two granddaughters; and his sisters, Martha Harmon and Nikki Baugh.

In 2002, one of Mr. Hill's most noted recoveries as a private investigator was Titian's "Rest on the Flight Into Egypt." It had been stolen in 1995 from Longleat House, a grand country estate in Warminster, England.

Mr. Hill directed the investigation and had spent several years chasing tips that came to naught. But after discussing the painting and the offer of a \$150,000 reward on the radio, he got a call from a man who claimed he could get the Titian back.

After negotiating with him, Mr. Hill and Tim Moore, the manager of Longleat House, agreed to wire him the reward money. Once he received the money, the man led Mr. Hill to a bus stop across from a railway station in London.

"So off they went," [Mr. Moore told The New York Times](#), "and I thought, unless poor old Charles Hill is going to end up with a knife in his back or in a sack in the Thames, maybe we're on to something."

They were.

The Titian was found at the bus stop in a plain brown wrapper, next to an old man.

Correction: March 11, 2021

An earlier version of this obituary misstated the given name of the leader of a gang that stole 18 paintings from a mansion in Ireland in 1986. He was Martin Cahill, not Guy.

Correction: March 12, 2021

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this obituary misstated the name of a stolen Vermeer painting Mr. Hill recovered in 1993. It is "Lady Writing a Letter With Her Maid," not "Lady Writing a Letter With Maid in Antwerp." The error was repeated in a caption.

Richard Sandomir is an obituaries writer. He previously wrote about sports media and sports business. He is also the author of several books, including "The Pride of the Yankees: Lou Gehrig, Gary Cooper and the Making of a Classic." @[RichSandomir](#)

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