IN IT FOR THE MO
Last year, a gang of art thieves made headlines when they stormed a Nice gallery in broad daylight and stole four masterpieces. They thought they’d got away with it. Then this man came along. By Simon Worrall
The gang sprints to where two Brueghels are, rips them off the walls and stuffs them into bin bags.
hair and a muscular physique that could do damage. The only thing that doesn’t fit the tough-guy image is the voice. It is squeakier than David Beckham’s.

Yesterday, at their first meeting in a downtown Marriott hotel, the men had barely mentioned paintings. Today, they talk about the deal in general terms. Wittman explains that stolen art is only worth about 10% of its value in the legitimate market. “At Sotheby’s,” he says, in his gravelly voice, “The Monet alone could fetch $40m. But on the black market, all four are worth $3m to $4m, tops.” Wittman smells sweat. That’s good. It means Ternus is nervous. They arrange to meet again in a week’s time.

Sting operations, Wittman likes to say, are all about befriending and betraying. His two previous meetings with Ternus have gone a long way to establishing trust. But he wants to make sure that the Frenchman is hooked, so he arranges a honeytrap. The meeting, on October 25, takes place on a speedboat moored at Miami Beach Marina. Wittman doesn’t attend himself. He wants to stay in the background – make Ternus think that his time is too valuable for partying. Instead, he sends an “assistant” and a couple of female FBI agents with 9mm Ladysmiths hidden in their make-up bags.

Ternus says he plans to return to Marseilles to meet his colleagues and that he wants to be able to tell them he has a buyer for the paintings. He also says he is interested in buying a large shipment of cocaine to sell in Europe. “No problem,” says Wittman’s assistant. “We got a guy in customs.”

“God I love this country!” says Ternus, raising a Pacifica beer as the sun sets over South Beach.

On October 30, from an anonymous, high-rise building near Paris’s La Défense district, Pierre Tabel, head of OCBC, the body fighting against the trafficking of cultural artefacts, tracks Ternus as he boards an Iberia Airlines flight from Paris: a tall, wiry man with grey hair, a sallow face nastier than the mug shots Tabel has sent from the legitimate market. “At Sotheby’s,” he says, in his gravelly voice, “The Monet alone could fetch $40m. But on the black market, all four are worth $3m to $4m, tops.” Wittman smells sweat. That’s good. It means Ternus is nervous. They arrange to meet again in a week’s time.

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Ternus says he will try to arrange something for the week of January 16. “But not in Marseilles,” says the Frenchman, anxiously, “in case we are being watched.” “Whatever,” says Wittman, laconically. “How about Barcelona?”

It is January 19, and the rendezvous is a dingy, two-star hotel a few hundred metres off Barcelona’s main drag, Las Ramblas. The Spanish police have chosen the location and wired the fifth-floor room, a small, airless space with a stained carpet and cheap furniture. Wittman and his two “assistants” sit on one side of a table opposite Ternus and Patrick Chelelekian, who, during the three months of negotiations, has emerged as the gang’s leader. He looks even nastier than the mug shots Tabel has sent from Paris: a tall, wiry man with grey hair, a sallow face and ferret eyes. Wittman smells sweat again. But this time it is his own.

The Armenian confirms that he and his gang are holding the paintings, but he won’t say where. For the first time, though, he names a price: €3m in cash, non-negotiable. Wittman says he is okay with that. But Chelelekian has another condition. “You get two of the paintings – the Brueghels – for the first €1.5m,” he says. “If that goes okay, you get the other two more valuable paintings.” Chelelekian insists he has total trust in the American. But what if les flies (the cops) have got wind of the deal? The Monet and the Sisley will be collateral. If any of the gang is arrested they will use them as a
IN IT FOR THE MONET: continued

bargaining chip to negotiate their release.

Wittman’s last meeting with Ternus takes
place on a yacht in a marina near Fort Lauderdale
on April 18. Three months have passed since
Barcelona. The two sides have haggled over the
small print and finally agreed on the price: €3m.
But Wittman is opposed to the two-part deal
proposed by Chelelekian. He knows from
experience that sting operations are fraught
enough without having to do them twice.

The two sides also haggle over geography.
Initially they had agreed that Wittman should
travel to Barcelona with an “assistant” to collect
the first two paintings while Chelelekian sends
his people to Miami to receive the first €1.5m.
But, on April 10, Wittman’s assistants had told
Ternus that “the Boss” now wanted them to take
possession of the paintings on his behalf – in
France, not Barcelona.

The meeting at the marina today is to sign off
on the final arrangements. Again, Wittman does
not attend. He sends two underlings and a few
bottles of Dom Perignon. Ternus arrives with
the heavies Chelelekian and Lhomme.

Several times, Wittman and his assistants go
downstairs to the street to talk. Empty coffee
cups and full ashtrays litter the table. Finally, the
two sides agree that the paintings will be handed
over at a location near Marseilles. But when the
undercover agents say that, instead of them
travelling to France, as previously agreed, they
want the deal to be closed by a French associate
of Wittman’s, Chelelekian explodes.

“What the f*** is this guy? Why haven’t you
mentioned him before?” The Armenian is right
to be suspicious. Wittman’s “French associate” is
actually a member of an organisation that
handles undercover operations for the
gendarmerie. FBI agents have no jurisdiction on
French soil and if Wittman’s team are involved in
the arrests, it could derail a future court case. It is
also a question of Gallic pride. “If this is a trap,”
says Chelelekian, banging the table with his fist.
And les flics are there when we hand over the
Breughels, we will f*** ing arracher the two other
paintings!” “Tear in pieces,” translates Ternus.
“As you see, Patrick is not a big art lover.”

Carry-le-Rouet, a seaside resort 30 kilometres
west of Marseilles, is famous for its sea-urchin
festival, les oursinades, and as the place where the
jazz singer Nina Simone lived out her final years.
It is here, on May 16, that Chelelekian has
chosen to meet Wittman’s French connection.
He has a lock-up garage where the blue Peugeot
van is hidden, with the four paintings inside it.
But he will only show the agent two of them,
Breughel’s Allegory of Water and Sisley’s Lane
of Poplars at Moret.

They meet at a friend’s apartment. The French
undercover agent studies the paintings for a few
moments then asks for the guns. Not to take a
leak but to study the canvasses under a portable,
ultraviolet light to make sure they aren’t fakes.
Chelelekian follows him into the bathroom and
waits as the purplish light sweeps across the
canvasses. When the agent is satisfied, the two
men go back into the living room and the agent
“flashes” Chelelekian half the money: €1.5m
inside a briefcase. “The Boss says it’s got to be
one deal, though,” insists the agent. “None of this
two-part bullshit. We get all four paintings. You
guarantee the money. And that is his big
mistake. “Okay,” he says, shaking the undercover
agent’s hand. “It’s a deal.”

On the day of the handover, June 4,
Chelelekian, Lhomme and Noel-Dumarais
leave Marseilles by car just after dawn. As they
wind along the Riviera towards Carry-le-Rouet,
the Mediterranean glints like tinfoil.
They are not alone. As the climax of the sting
operation approached, Pierre Tabel and his team
in Paris ordered what the French call surveillance,
“closed surveillance”. For the past month, a

It is a myth that
paintings are
stolen to order by
criminals with a
passion for great art

team of police officers have been monitoring
the gang’s every move. Around 15 people are
under surveillance, the hard core in Marseilles,
the rest in Paris.

In Carry-le-Rouet, they load up the
paintings and head back to the Prado area of
Marseille and park by the corniche. Noel-
Dumarais stays by the van. Chelelekian and
Lhomme walk a few hundred yards to the bar
where they have arranged to meet the SIAT
agent. The agent will hand over the money.
Lhomme and Chelelekian will then take him to
the van and hand over the paintings.

From an unmarked patrol car half a mile
away, Pierre Tabel monitors the operation over
the radio. More than 50 police officers, some
disguised as street cleaners, postmen or passers-
by, are positioned in and around the Prado area.
Some watch Lhomme and Chelelekian.

Others cover the blue van. Five addresses
in Marseilles and Paris are also under surveillance.
On the other side of the Atlantic, in Cooper
City, Florida, FBI agents are staked out
around Ternus’s house.

It is 9.10am when Tabel gives the order. Agents
with guns swarm out of doorways. Others launch
themselves at the men with flying rugby tackles.
Motorcycles and police cars, sirens blaring, block
off the adjacent streets. Bundled to the ground
and handcuffed, Chelelekian, Lhomme and the
SIAT agent are pinned face down on the
pavement. Inside Chelelekian’s jacket, police
find a Colt .45 pistol. Lhomme has a Czech-
made hand grenade. To avoid suspicion that he is
an agent, the police are especially rough with
the man from SIAT. At the Corniche, police
overpower Noel-Dumarais. They find the
paintings in the van, packed in cardboard boxes.

Twenty minutes after the arrests in Marseilles,
Tabel calls Wittman in Miami. Under US law
night-time arrests are only possible in
exceptional circumstances, so Wittman and his
team have to wait until 6am to enter Sonny’s
home in Florida. The Frenchman is still in his
pyjamas when a SWAT team breaks down the door.
His wife and children are asleep. Ternus offers no
resistance as he is overpowered and handcuffed.
Six days later he pleads guilty to conspiring to
transport four stolen paintings knowing they
were stolen. He also pleads guilty to visa fraud
for lying about his criminal record. Sonny’s
American dream is over.

In a banquet hall on the edge of
Philadelphia on September 19, several dozen
people – FBI agents, museum curators and
security experts, Wittman’s family and closest
friends – assemble to bid farewell to the most
famous art detective in the world, who, after 20
years, is retiring to start a new life as an art
security consultant and author. “I’m hanging up
my gun and badge,” he tells me. “And replacing
them with pen and paper.”

Wittman downplays the dangers of the job
that has taken him to over a dozen countries, but
he is lucky to still be alive. In Copenhagen three
years ago, he had to hide in the bathroom with a
Rembrandt self-portrait worth millions when a
Danish Swat team burst into his hotel room to
arrest the Iraqi-born leader of a gang that had
tried to sell it to him after one of the most violent
art thefts of recent years. After torching a car to
block the only road leading to and from
Sweden’s national museum, the gang had burst
into the museum with automatic weapons,
ripped the painting from the wall and escaped by
speedboat. In another case, in Madrid, Wittman
had to throw himself to the floor when the
Spanish police failed to recognise him as they
burst into the room to arrest a drug-trafficker
named Angel Flores, who had tried to sell
Wittman The Temptation of St Anthony by
Pieter Bruegel the Elder, which had been stolen
from one of Spain’s richest women.

One of the most pervasive myths about art
theft is that paintings are stolen “to order” by
sophisticated criminals with a passion for great
art, as portrayed in The Thomas Crown Affair.
Wittman knows that for art thieves paintings are
just another black-market commodity, like drugs
or cars. And though it is masterpieces like
 monet’s cliffs near Dieppe that make headlines,
or cars. And though it is masterpieces like
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