**Police sting recovers stolen Burne-Jones**

Sarah Jane Checkland reveals how a pair of pre-Raphaelite beauties, snatched on a London street, found their way home

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A major painting by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Sir Edward Burne- Jones, which was snatched from a van parked outside a branch of Lloyds Bank in South Kensington, London, last August, has been recovered in dramatic circumstances.

The depiction of languid lovelies, Two Girls with a Viol and Music, had been expected to cause great excitement on its arrival in the London art world from the United States. For 30 years experts had known of the painting's existence, but not its whereabouts.

The heirs of its late owner were set to make a fortune: it had been valued "well in excess of pounds 500,000".

But before it could be shown to prospective buyers, who were likely to include Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, an avid collector in this field, the painting became subject to a "jump up". This is underworld speak for an opportunist theft, undertaken by villains stalking vans or lorries awaiting their chance to pounce.

Now, thanks to the combined efforts of a London-based arts investigation agency called World Heritage, the leading fine art loss adjuster Mark Dalrymple and the input of an informant, the painting's prospects are back on course. And the informant looks set to win a substantial reward.

The drama began at high noon on 13 August, when the van stopped on Old Brompton Road to make a delivery. By the time the alarm was raised, two crates had disappeared, one containing the precious painting, the other a group of contemporary sculptures.

As neither crate was labelled, the crooks had no idea of the value of their stash. "We believe that the Burne-Jones was sold on by them to a handler for a few hundred pounds," Mr Dalrymple said. Soon, however, the news was out.

"Through Scotland Yard we put out a press release in which I, on behalf of the insurance company, offered a reward of up to pounds 50,000 for information leading to the recovery of the painting," Mr Dalrymple said. Details of the reward were repeated in advertisements in the art and antiques press, and the news of the theft was flashed around the world through Interpol.

Meanwhile, the handler began working the underworld in an effort to sell the painting, and the informant got wind of events. Initially he contacted a representative of World Heritage, who approached Mr Dalrymple at Tyler & Co. Together they went to the art and antiques squad at Scotland Yard, and an officer had a secret meeting with the informant to check out his story.

Things then moved to a climax when officers raided a hotel in Belgravia where they recovered the painting, happily in perfect condition. According to Mr Dalrymple the swoop could well have been "in the nick of time", prior to the painting being spirited out of the country.

Last night Scotland Yard confirmed that the painting had been recovered. But all they would say about the case is that "the police investigation continues".

Art world watchers are now saying that private detective agencies such as World Heritage are a taste of things to come. With art theft running at an estimated pounds 500m a year, and only two dedicated art squads serving the entire country, such help is sorely needed.

Meanwhile, the informant can sit back and await his cheque. "Once I am satisfied through the police that he is not involved in the theft or the handling of the picture, my principals will reward him generously," said Mr Dalrymple. But, he added: "It will not be so much as to encourage thieves to steal specifically in order to get a reward."

Any other aspiring informers who know the whereabouts of the other crate should not get too excited. Its contents are only worth pounds 15,000.