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Second theft of Beit paintings

The men who found the paintings: Michael Foley, Richard Stenson and Robert Hosty. — (Photograph: Tom Lawlor).

By Nigel Brown

ON APRIL 26th, 1974, 19 pictures valued at approximately £8 million were stolen from Russborough House by an armed gang of four men and one woman. The gang assaulted Sir Alfred Beit and abused him and Lady Beit and members of this staff before tying them up and removing the pictures. A Vermeer, a Goya, two Gainsboroughs and three Rubens were among those taken.

Eleven days later Gardai recovered all the pictures undamaged in a rented cottage at Glandore, Co Cork. Dr Bridget Rose Dugdale, a member of Provisional Sinn Féin and daughter of a millionaire British stockbroker, was sentenced to nine years in Limerick jail for her part in the robbery. She was released in 1980.

In the course of the nationwide search for the stolen works of art in 1974, a ransom note was received by the then-director of the National Gallery, Dr James White demanding £500,000 and the transfer from British prisons to Northern Ireland of the Price sisters and two other men at that time on hunger strike in British prisons for their part in London car bombings.

While in Limerick jail, Rose Dugdale gave birth to a son, Ruairi Gallagher, and also married the boy's father, Eddie Gallagher, by proxy. Gallagher is serving a 20-year prison sentence in Portlaoise for the kidnapping of Dr Tiede Herrema, the Dutch industrialist. One of the demands during the Herrema kidnap was for the release of Dr Dugdale.

Goya's portrait of the actress Dona Antonia Larate and Vermeer's "Woman Writing a Letter," two of the 18 paintings stolen from Russborough House. Both were also stolen in the 1974 theft.

During her trial in the Special Criminal Court, Dr Dugdale pleaded "proudly and incorruptibly guilty to the charge of having received the stolen paintings knowing them to have been stolen.

The Beit collection of over 100 paintings was given to the State by Sir Alfred in 1976 through the auspices of the Alfred Beit Foundation, and Russborough House was opened to the public in 1978. Following the previous robbery a £1 million malicious damaged claim was lodged against Wicklow County Council and a £100,000 reward was offered for information leading to the apprehension of the thieves.

The collection is beleived to be one of the most valuable in the world outside of art galleries and more valuable than many gallery collections.

Among the works of art taken in 1974 were Vermeer's "The Letter," Franz Hals's "Portrait of a Cavalier," Goya's "Woman in a Mantilla," a Gainsborough small portrait; a Gainsborough landscape, a Rubens sketch of Venus; a Rubens protrait of a monk; a Rubens portrait of a man with long fair hair; a Metsu — man writing a letter; a Metsum— interior; two Guardi — views of a city; a Murillo — half portrait of a woman wearing a muff; a Ruisdael landscape; a Velasquez — portrait of a kitchen maid; and four other paintings.

Sir Alfred (83), a financier and member of a wealthy South African diamond family was born in London and is a former Conservative MP for St Pancras South East.

He went to live at Russborough House in 1952 to retire from politics after serving as a parliamentary private secretary to the Financial Secretary to the British War Office and to the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

The Beit Foundation collection is internationally known and considered priceless. The collection was begun by Sir Alfred's uncle, the late Alfred Beit who with Rhodes found diamonds at Kimberley and gold at Johannesburg. The collection was continued by Sir Alfred's father, Otto, who founded the Beit Fellowships.

On March 19th last a five-man armed gang got away with paintings, silverware and jewellery worth about £1 million after they tied up the elderly occupants of the Georgian house near Fethard, Co. Tipperary. A Vermeer, a Velasquez and a Van Dyck were said to be among the valuable paintings taken in the raid on the house owned by Mrs Betty Farquart (87). There were no arrests following the robbery and Garda investigations are still continuing. Following publicity on the raid there was some controversy among art experts over the authenticity of the alleged original works as not much was known about them before they were stolen.

Last year two members of the IRA were jailed for their part in the robbery of £100,000 worth of paintings, prints and silverware from the home of Mr and Mrs Nicholas Coddington at Oldbridge, Co. Meath.



