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Paintings worth over £10m stolen from Beit home

By Sean Flynn, Security Correspondent

PAINTINGS worth at least £10 million were stolen early yesterday in a raid on the home of Sir Alfred and Lady Beit at Russborough House, Blessington, Co Wicklow. Some reports valued the missing masterpieces at up to £30 million.

One of the pictures, Vermeer's "Woman

Sir Alfred and Lady Beit

writing a letter", is believed to be worth at least £5 million.

Eighteen paintings from what is one of the world's finest private art collections were taken by the thieves in the second major art robbery at Russborough House. Seven of the lesser works were later discarded by the raiders three miles away from the house.

These paintings, which were framed in gold leaf, were strewn casually from the rear of a Nissan Patrol jeep, which was stolen at Cornelscourt, Co Dublin on Saturday last.

At least two paintings, a Reynolds and a Bellotto were damaged. Both paintings and the jeep will be examined by Garda forensic experts at Garda Headquarters in Dublin later today.

Last night, gardai were keeping

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an open mind on who might be responsible. However, the ability of the thieves to circumvent the sophisticated security systems and their apparent knowledge of art have led gardai to suspect professional art thieves. Last night, Superintendent Frank Hanlon, of the Garda Press Office, described the raid as "a classic art robbery" although he emphasised that he was not ruling out any possible subversive involvement.

The paintings still to be recovered include Vermeer's "Woman writing a letter" and Goya's "Portrait of Donna Antonia Zarate". At least five of the paintings taken yesterday, including the Vermeer and the Goya, were also stolen on April 26th, 1974, by a Republican gang. The English heiress, Dr Rose Dugdale, was subsequently jailed on charges relating to this raid.

Following their recovery, Sir Alfred decided in 1976 to retain the collection in trust for the State, under the auspices of the Alfred Beit Foundation.

Last night, the Minister of State for Arts and Culture, Mr Ted Nealon, described the robbery as a crime against the people of Ireland.

Sir Alfred Beit, who was in England with his wife when the raid took place, told the BBC's "World at One" radio programme that he did not know who was responsible but speculated upon a political motive.

"I cannot think other than that one of these sort of revolutionary movements are behind the theft and that they are seeking a ransom which they won't get," he said. "The pictures are so well known that they are virtually unsaleable. The Vermeer, for example, apart from another in Buckingham Palace, is the only one in private hands."

He expected a ransom demand to be made but that he would not pay. He added that the paintings were not insured because he thought that would be an encouragement to thieves.

The stolen paintings could now be sold through the international market or alternatively — if the

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Chief Superintendent James Murphy examining some of the seven paintings found at Manor Kilbride, Co Wicklow, yesterday. — (Photograph: Tom Lawlor.)

