

A book review on: *Priceless: how I went undercover to rescue the world's stolen treasure*

Robert K. Wittman and John Shiffman. New York: Crown Publishing, 2010. ISBN 978-0307461476. Hardcover: US \$25.00. 336 pp

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In his new memoir, *Priceless*, retired FBI agent, Robert Wittman (along with cowriter John Shiffman), recounts his many years investigating art crimes. Wittman's story is a compelling and fascinating one, from his humble beginnings, to his experiences while leading the FBI's Art Crime Team.

Over the years, art crime has emerged as a considerable presence in the world of property theft, yet it was not always a priority at the FBI. Wittman carved out a niche for himself in this area, and in doing so, helped to create and develop the FBI's art crime Team. His accomplishments brought accolades and recognition to this previously underserved area of crime.

Art crime has been a growing topic of research within the last decade and the literature continues to expand in its scope. Increased recognition in law enforcement has resulted in the FBI's expansion of its Art Crime Team, which currently includes thirteen special agents who are specifically trained in art and cultural property investigations (www.fbi.gov).

The topic of art crime has been the topic of increasing study and scholarship over the past decade or so. Although there is certainly some distinguished academic literature on art crime, it is still an emerging area of research which will undoubtedly continue to develop.

Those in academia who publish on art crime are a somewhat small but well respected group. Their work can be found not only in traditional criminology journals, but looking more broadly, is also found in anthropology, archeology and art history publications.

The connection between organized crime and art crime is well represented in the literature [3, 5, 6]. Organized crime in this area should not be confused with the typical associations of organized crime, such as mafia related. Rather, it is meant in the broader sense of interconnected organized networks in which the goods are trafficked.

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Additionally, scholarship focusing on stolen antiquities can be found by Alder et al. [1], Bowman [2] and Massy [4]. There is some overlap of antiquity theft and organized crime research, as would be expected.

Priceless is a valuable compliment to the current scholarly research. It provides a unique view into the world of art crime. One that is accessed through the lens of both those who recover, and traffic in, valuable stolen works.

Priceless chronicles some of his most notable cases and recoveries, including: paintings by Picasso, Rembrandt Monet, an original copy of the bill of rights, a rare civil war battle flag, Geronimo's headdress and many other antiquities and pieces of art. Although the monetary value of the property he has recovered is placed at over \$200 million, the value is truly incalculable because of the history and cultural importance attached to the artwork.

Art crime has been the subject of several popular movies in which the thieves are portrayed as dashing and charismatic, romanticizing the world of art theft. Wittman dispels these Hollywood manufactured portrayals and brings us into the gritty, real world in which these crimes are committed. Although the entertainment industry's depiction of the world of art crime bared little resemblance to Wittman's experiences, his story is replete with intrigue and suspense.

As a young man, Wittman did not work in law enforcement, as one might think. Initially rejected by the FBI in his twenties, he went into his family's agricultural publishing business. Although he didn't know it at the time, this is where he would develop the people skills that would eventually serve him well in his undercover work, such as being able to form quick connections with people and being able to gain their trust. Later, he reapplied, was accepted and able to realize his dream of joining the FBI at age 33.

Wittman's assignments took him to Paris, Rio and Copenhagen, as well as several other locations abroad and domestically. Usually unarmed, Wittman had to rely on his finely honed instincts and ability to adapt to the situation, in order to maintain his cover.

In order to learn about high art, he studied at Barnes Foundation, learning to recognize and identify different aspects of the masters. Not only did his knowledge grow out of these classes, but so did a great appreciation of art.

The high stakes world of art crime made Wittman's work inherently dangerous, with adrenal pumping encounters a regular, but never routine, part of the job.

One of the fascinating parts of *Priceless* is Wittman's writing about the essence of undercover work. The underlying theme of all undercover work being the ability "befriend and betray" the target, according to Wittman. Usually posing as an art dealer or art collector, he was able to infiltrate the world of world class art thieves, slowly gain their trust and build relationships with them.

We learn about how an undercover agent must develop a false identity and the creation of the paper trail needed to support this new identity. Wittman had several of his own techniques, which he employed when crafting undercover personas, such as using his real first name and keeping the story as uncomplicated as possible. The general idea was the less lies to remember, the better.

He also takes us through, step by step, his personal process when working undercover. In describing his approach, he provides insider details the public is seldom privy to. No, he's not giving away any FBI secrets, but he does give the reader an insider's view into this precarious work.

You become a fly on the wall, along for the ride with Wittman, whether on a boat in Miami or in a hotel room in Madrid. His description of the surroundings, the atmosphere, the tension in the air, give the reader a true sense of what was happening at the time.

The access Wittman offers into the world of high priced art crime is engrossing, as he so adeptly conveys his apprehension, focus and exhilaration at different stages of his investigations. When he gives the signal and a suspect is finally taken down, you cannot help but share in the excitement and pride of a job well done.

Wittman provides a peek into the less than glamorous parts of his job, such as the paperwork, red tape and the bureaucracy that was at times, unavoidable when working for the FBI. Other times, Wittman favored his own instincts, ingenuity and quick thinking, rather than official FBI training. Despite being so proactive, Wittman was never reckless. Quite the contrary, as returning safely to his family was always uppermost in his mind.

Each one of the cases included in *Priceless* are interesting, but Robert Wittman's personal story, his experiences and the primer on fine art, all make *Priceless* a fast paced, enjoyable read.

This riveting book would appeal to students and/or faculty in the fields of criminal justice/criminology, art history or fine arts, members of law enforcement and art enthusiasts. Engaging and accessible, *Priceless* has wide appeal and is a great resource to introduce the general public to the subject matter.

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