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Photograph sheds new light on unsolved \$100 million art theft of Willem de Kooning painting

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Rita and Jerry Alter were in Tucson the day before the theft [YOUTUBE/WFAA](#)

A family photograph has provided an intriguing twist in the case of a stolen \$100 million oil painting discovered in a retired couple's New Mexico home after their deaths.

The picture, released to the *Arizona Republic* newspaper by a relative of Jerry and Rita Alter, places the couple in Tucson the day before *Woman-Ochre*, an artwork by Willem de Kooning, was stolen from the city's Arizona Museum of Art.

It also bears an uncanny resemblance to composite sketches of the suspects released by police following the 1985 heist, adding to speculation that the seemingly unassuming middle-class couple were the culprits behind the painting's theft.

"We have no idea when they got it, how they got it, if they were involved, if they bought it from someone," Ron Roseman, their nephew and executor of their estate, told the newspaper. He admitted, however: "Ultimately, there's a lot of coincidence."

The work was discovered hanging behind a door in the master bedroom of the Alters' home in Cliff — a rural community 220 miles from Tucson — one year ago, after the death of Mrs Alter, aged 81. Her husband had died in 2012.



Willem de Kooning's *Woman-Ochre* TIMES NEWSPAPERS LTD

Its significance and value were not realised at the time and it passed to an unwitting antique dealer, who purchased it and other furnishings for a total of \$2,000 in a house-clearance sale. It was only when visitors to his shop recognised the piece as the work of De Kooning, a renowned 20th-century Dutch-American abstract expressionist, that its identity became clear. A similar De Kooning work, *Woman III*, sold for \$137.5 million in 2006.

Prior to retirement, Mrs Alter was a speech therapist and her husband a professional clarinet player and teacher. They enjoyed travelling and culture and had written three books, one a compendium of fictional travel adventure tales that featured a story in which a couple steal a 120-carat emerald from a museum.

Police raised the theory last year that the artwork could have been stolen by the Alters, or by Mr Alter and his son, dressed as a woman, before handing over the case to the FBI.

The emergence now of a photograph showing Mr and Mrs Alter together in Tucson on Thanksgiving Day in 1985, sitting side by side at a table with plates of pumpkin pie spread out before them, has resurrected the mystery.

The image raises striking similarities to the couple who one day later distracted a museum guard, hacked *Woman-Ochre* from its frame, rolled it up under a coat and fled.

The FBI has not commented on the matter. Mr Roseman said that he did not want to believe that his beloved aunt and uncle may have been art thieves, but added: "I can see that it's possible."