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Stolen de Kooning Resurfaces More Than 30 Years Later

By SOPHIE HAIGNEYAUG. 11, 2017



Members of the University of Arizona Museum of Art staff inspect Willem de Kooning's "Woman-Ochre," which was stolen in 1985 and recently returned to the museum. Credit: Courtesy of the University of Arizona Museum of Art

They knew it was a cool painting. But Buck Burns and David Van Auker hadn't thought it a masterpiece until visitors to their New Mexico furniture and antiques shop began asking about the work that they had bought as part of an estate.

It turned out it was indeed an important work, a painting by Willem de Kooning stolen 31 years ago from the [University of Arizona Museum of Art](#) and lost until Mr. Van Auker positioned it in a public place — lying on the floor of their shop in Silver City.

“Woman-Ochre” — one of a number of Abstract Expressionist paintings that Mr. de Kooning did of women in the 1950s — was stolen on the day after Thanksgiving in 1985. There was no surveillance video, but investigators pieced together a rough narrative of the theft that began with a man and a woman following a staff member into the museum around 9 a.m.

The woman distracted the staff member, while the man cut the painting from its frame with sharp blade. In less than 15 minutes, the two departed with the painting.

Mr. Burns said that when he first saw it, he just thought it was “cool and unique.” Then visitors began asking if it was a de Kooning, and they looked online, found an article about the still-missing work, and compared photos to the painting in their shop.

They immediately decided they had to return it, Mr. Burns said. “For us, it was the equivalent of finding a lost wallet and returning it. It was a no-brainer.” On Aug. 3, Mr. Van Auker phoned the museum. Later, he called the F.B.I.

“It snowballed very quickly from there,” the museum’s interim director, Meg Hagyard said. “I was expecting a marathon, but instead it was a sprint.” She said the museum is very confident, based on its analysis, that this work is the original painting.

“The best way I can think to describe it is that it’s sort of like Cinderella’s glass slipper,” Ms. Hagyard said. “We had the original frame and remnants, and we were able to match the painting with that. It fits like a glove with the canvas.” There was also evidence of previous conservation work that had been done.

On Monday, the painting will be unveiled at a news conference, then sent for restoration. Ms. Hagyard said that though it’s in relatively good condition considering the theft, there is damage to be fixed before it can go back on the walls. “When we hang it, that will be a moment of celebration,” she said.

The University of Arizona Police Department declined to comment on the case and whether there was still any interest in figuring out who might have stolen the de Kooning.

Mr. Burns declined to say what they had paid for the estate. The museum would not speculate on how much the painting might be worth, but de Kooning’s work can be wildly valuable. A Chicago billionaire was reported

to have paid [\\$300 million](#) for de Kooning's painting "Interchanged" in 2016. Another "Woman" painting [sold for about \\$137.5 million](#) in 2006.

The prize for Mr. Van Auken's return of the painting? "We're so excited to take him to dinner and to toast him," Ms. Hagyard said.