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FBI recovers Chagall work stolen nearly 30 years ago

The painting, taken from the Manhattan home of an elderly couple, had been stashed in a Maryland attic

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Members of the FBI's Art Crime Team holding a recovered work by Marc Chagall, Othello and Desdemona (1911) FBI

The FBI has recovered a Marc Chagall painting stolen from the Upper East Side apartment of a philanthropist couple in 1988. The work—a 1911 oil on canvas titled Othello and Desdemona—is being returned to the couple’s estate, which will sell it and donate most of the proceeds.

Ernest “Pick” Heller, a jeweller, and Rose “Red” Heller were cultural philanthropists and collectors who owned works by Hopper, Picasso, Renoir, and others. The theft occurred when the then octogenarians were away on their annual two-month trip to Aspen. According to [an article at the time by UPI](#), the couple returned home to find jewellery, artwork, silverware, and carpets missing from their apartment, including the Chagall painting. The total value of the theft was said to be \$600,000; they received a \$100,000 insurance payout for Othello and Desdemona, their estate’s lawyer told [artnet News](#).

“I liked the Chagall,” Ernest said in the UPI article. “I liked them all, but the Chagall was a very interesting one because it was a 1911 painting.”

In today’s [news release](#), the FBI claims the painting was stolen by someone who worked in the Hellers’ building. “It was an inside job,” said Special Agent Marc Hess, who works on the FBI’s Art Crime Team. Soon after the robbery, the thief met with an unidentified Maryland man in an attempt to sell the Chagall. The deal fell through, but the Maryland man kept the painting and tried to consign it to a Washington, DC gallery in 2011 and 2017. Concerned about the work’s provenance, the gallery owner suggested the man contact the FBI. He did, and when investigators arrived at his home last year, they found the painting stored in the attic in a homemade box “crafted out of a door jamb and plywood.” The box was labelled “Misc High School artwork.”

Because the statute of limitations for the theft has expired, no charges are being brought against the Maryland man or the original thief. The latter was previously convicted and served time for selling stolen property, including art taken from different apartment buildings.

The Hellers' estate will use the proceeds of the Chagall sale to reimburse the insurance company. The rest of the money will be split between the MacDowell Colony, where Red was a longtime board member, Columbia University, and NYU Medical Center, according to artnet.

The Chagall is the only artwork from the 1988 Heller robbery that's been found thus far. "The investigation into the other missing paintings continues," Hess said in the release.