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The FBI Has Recovered a Crimson Robert Motherwell Painting Stolen 40 Years Ago by a Moving Man

The theft was an inside job.

Eileen Kinsella, July 12, 2018



Robert Motherwell *Untitled* (1967) was stolen in 1978 and will be returned to the Dedalus Foundation. Photo: Eileen Kinsella.

In 1978, Robert Motherwell was switching storage companies and employed a moving company to transport his paintings from one unit to another. Somewhere along the way, dozens of his works went missing.

Today, at least one of them has returned home. The Manhattan District Attorney hosted a repatriation ceremony in downtown New York City today to announce the recovery of an untitled abstract painting by the artist that was among those stolen 40 years ago. The painting, which Motherwell created in 1967, will now be returned to the headquarters of the Dedalus Foundation, which was established the same year he died to promote the artist's work and legacy.

The work is likely worth millions given recent sales of comparable works by Motherwell. The artist's auction record, \$12.7 million, was set at Phillips just this past May for *At Five In the Afternoon*(1971). To date, more than 30 works by Motherwell have sold for more than \$1 million at auction, according to the artnet Price Database.

The red and black abstract painting was recovered after the son of an employee of the moving company, whose father is now deceased, brought it to the Dedalus Foundation earlier this year in hopes of having it authenticated. Jack Flam, the president and CEO of the Dedalus Foundation, quickly matched the work with images and other records documenting the stolen trove.

That's when the FBI's art crime team got involved. The unidentified individual—who is not believed to have had any knowledge of the theft and has not been charged with wrongdoing—voluntarily agreed to turn it over. The investigation into the rest of the missing Motherwell works is ongoing, officials at the press conference confirmed.



Prior to the unveiling. Photo: Eileen Kinsella.

The ceremony had its fair share of pomp and circumstance—along with moments of levity. Uniformed staff from art storage company UOVO stood on either side ready to unveil the work, which was covered with white cardboard and rested on styrofoam lifts.

But first, US attorney Geoffrey Berman had a little fun. “Today I am pleased to announce the return of a long missing painting by Robert Motherwell, one of the city’s favorite artists and one of the most revered American painters of the 20th century,” he told the crowd. Gesturing to the blank white cover, he said, “the painting is to my right, and as you can see, it’s quite large and quite beautiful. Notice the excellent use of negative space. It is both provocative and cerebral... and that’s just the cover,” he said, as the room erupted in laughter.



US Attorney Geoffrey S. Berman at the podium; from left: Bill Sweeney of the FBI; Dedalus Foundation president and CEO Jack Flam; special agent Chris McKeogh. Photo: Eileen Kinsella.

Motherwell hired the Santini moving company in 1978 to store and transport the red painting and other items to a new storage facility, according to Bill Sweeney, the assistant director in charge of the FBI art crime team’s New York field office. Soon after, the artist identified dozens of paintings, including *Untitled*, as missing or stolen.



The newly recovered painting by Robert Motherwell. Photo: Eileen Kinsella.

"We're honored to restore this extraordinary piece of art to the Dedalus Foundation today so that those who appreciate the value of fine art will now come to know the true narrative of the painting's past present and future," Sweeney said. "We can only hope that anyone who may know the whereabouts of the other paintings will bring them to the attention of law enforcement so they too might be enjoyed by society."

Flam of the Dedalus Foundation thanked the FBI and attorney's office and reiterated how pleased the foundation is to finally have its hands on the work, which has never been shown publicly.