



## **Art Theft from Institutions**

During his time as a director of the Tate Britain, Sandy Nairne wrote a book about the theft of two priceless J.M.W. Turner paintings. *Art Theft and the Case of the Stolen Turners* is a fascinating account of the efforts that the museum made in order to restore its paintings to the gallery. The text reads like crime fiction, something the author had not intended and Nairne asserts that art theft should not be considered a thrilling story but a great tragedy. Nairne tries to elucidate the harrowing processes that people have to go through in order to return works of art to safety and the cost of the loss to both the gallery and the art viewing public.

The Tate Britain, and all those involved, spent many years chasing down the works of art, with many disappointments along the way, as well as multi-million pound insurance claims fulfilled. It is fascinating to read about the resources allocated to attempt the recovery of national treasures. Insurance and the support of the insurance companies were integral to the safe return of these invaluable paintings.

South African institutions have also had loss of major works due to theft. The Pretoria Art Museum suffered a hold up at gunpoint recently during which several valuable pieces were asked for by name. The assailants eventually abandoned the majority of the work under a bench, in a graveyard in the Eastern Cape, over a thousand kilometres away. The largest of the works stolen, an Irma Stern painting, couldn't even fit into the getaway vehicle and was abandoned in the museum parking lot. Items stolen from Groot Constantia Manor House were mostly abandoned on a neighbouring property before assailants made off with a small number of wares that are still missing. A theft of a J.H. Pierneef painting at the SABC went terribly wrong when the thieves cut the work from its frame, cutting off an entire corner of the canvas and leaving a large portion of the damaged work behind.

Thieves are often clumsy, uninformed and destructive, whether willingly or not. Even if the theft is not completed, work may still be in danger. One should also take vandals into consideration. Recently a Rothko painting was vandalised in the Rothko Room of the Tate Modern, London. Public sculptures in South Africa are exposed to vandalism. There was the complete destruction of Angus Taylor compact earth artworks on university campus grounds in Stellenbosch and Johannesburg.

Because we can never rest assured that thieves are what we stereotypically expect them to be, or what condition works will be if they are recovered, it is important to consider theft or destruction a viable, and ever present threat.