



CRIME

Whodunit—and Wyeth?

The reappearance of a stolen Andrew Wyeth painting casts a spotlight on Sears, Roebuck's high-art aspirations—and its brief fling with the actor Vincent Price. BY SARAH DOWNEY

FOUR YEARS AGO, a man showed up at the downtown office of Christie's, the famed auction house, bearing a 60-pound painting—apparently the work of Andrew Wyeth. Was this the real thing? the man wanted to know. The Christie's staff looked at the piece, then shipped it to their New York office for further evaluation.

"We did due diligence and approached the Wyeth Foundation," recalls Christie's senior vice president Eric Widing. "Then we learned there was an issue with it."

It turns out the painting—a watercolor depiction of a shuttered window—was in fact an original Andrew Wyeth, a 1966 painting called *The Studio*. According to the FBI, which took possession of the work from Christie's, in 1967 the painting had been reported stolen from the Sears-Vincent Price Art Gallery, then located at 140 East Ontario Street in Chicago. Where had *The Studio* been for 33 years?



>> Vincent Price and (top) the recovered watercolor

The case of the stolen Sears Wyeth remains open as Christie's prepares to auction off the work this month. But the mystery recalls a curious, if short-lived, collaboration between the retailing giant based in Hoffman Estates and a cultured star of horror movies, partners in the

notion that Americans would want to place a piece of fine art alongside their new sectional sofa.

Sears, Roebuck and Co. had long offered artwork through its catalog; in 1895, for example, oil paintings could be had for 90

cents apiece. But in 1962, Sears reached out to Vincent Price to promote its plan to bring fine art to the greater public. At the time, Price was flying high in his career as the star of popular Hollywood shockers such as *The Fly*, *House of Wax*, and

The painting arrived in Chicago in March 1967; Sears offered it for \$30,000. Five months later, it disappeared.

The Raven, but his greater love was art. As a 12-year-old in his hometown of St. Louis, he'd bought his first work—a Rembrandt etching—at a visiting exhibition for \$37.50, and he had gone on to study art at Yale and the University of London. Throughout his successful acting career, Price collected art and served on several art coun-

cils, including the White House Fine Arts Committee, overseen by Jacqueline Kennedy.

In what he would later recall as "the most exciting project" of his life, Price traveled the world buying art for Sears; his wife, the costume designer Mary Grant Price, served as the chief selector of frames. By 1965, nearly 40,000 pieces were part of the Vincent Price Collection. Among the \$300 to \$500 works by unknown artists, there were also pricier Chagalls, Mirós, and Picassos. More than \$100,000 worth of artwork sold during the collection's stop in Hicksville, Long Island, in February 1965. Three months later, the \$26,500 sale of an Andrew Wyeth watercolor, *The Road In*, racked up what was then the biggest single-ticket sale of any kind in Sears's history. Sears soon decided to phase out the traveling exhibitions and instead establish galleries for the Vincent Price Collection. The Chicago gallery opened in 1966 in a second-floor space off Michigan Avenue, 4,000-square-feet atop what is now the Burberry boutique.

Shortly before the gallery's opening, one of Price's scouts, the art dealer Jeffrey Loria (today the owner of the Florida

Marlins), bought *The Studio* for the Vincent Price Collection. Nicholas Wyeth, who brokered the sale for his father, says the painting depicts the house in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, where he and his brother, Jamie, grew up. "It was our family's living quarters at one end and my father's studio at (continued on page 30)

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the other," Wyeth says. "He said he walked to work." The Wyeth family still owns the house.

The painting arrived in Chicago in March 1967; Sears offered it for \$30,000. Five months later, it disappeared. Fred M. Zucker, a gallery salesman, remembers walking into the room where the Wyeth was hung. "There was an empty spot on the wall. The first perception wasn't that it was stolen. I thought it had been moved. I said to [gallery director] Harold [Patton], 'Did you move the painting?' Then we began to realize it was missing."

Police arrived; questions were asked, photos taken. As the days and months passed, many people speculated that a professional thief had lifted the work for a private collector. Patton remained hopeful. In April 1968, he told *The Philadelphia Inquirer* he had reason to believe "within the next few months, I'll be getting the thing back." But Patton and Vincent Price—indeed, almost everyone who could be helpful to authorities—had passed away by the time *The Studio* finally turned up at Christie's in December of 2000.

THE PERSON WHO brought it in was a man named Leo Wenger, a retired process server for the Cook County sheriff's office. He told authorities he'd had *The Studio* hanging in his home, a neat brick house near Sacramento and Pratt avenues, for close to 30 years, yet he couldn't produce a receipt for the purchase. "He claimed he bought it from a 70-year-old lady at a house sale in Highland Park—address unknown, but he knew it was Highland Park," says FBI special agent

Janet Thomas, who at the time specialized in tracking down stolen art.

The Sears-Vincent Price Gallery had long since closed, shuttered in 1971 due to declining demand, but Sears officials were thrilled when *The Studio* turned up and, as the last owner on paper, immediately countered Wenger's claims to the work; Wenger eventually relinquished his claim to the painting in exchange for \$7,500 from Sears. Now 76, Wenger declined to comment on his involvement with the Wyeth painting, saying only, "I don't want to go through that again."

Federal investigators still want to know exactly how and when Wenger took possession of the painting. Paul B. Cogswell, who was the director of corporate investigations for Sears at the time *The Studio* was recovered, believes it traveled the underground circuit before passing into Wenger's hands.

The Studio's next appearance in public will likely be even more fleeting than its first—Christie's is scheduled to auction it off in New York on December 2nd. Bids are expected to be in the \$70,000-to-\$100,000 range. "There's an emotional life to his pictures," says Christie's Widing. "[*The Studio*] is characteristic of what Wyeth is best known for; it's a great example of his work." The sale's proceeds will benefit the Sears Foundation.

Nicholas Wyeth says his father, who is now 87 and continues to paint every day, is particularly pleased that *The Studio* has at last been recovered. "It's a very personal thing—the fact it was his house," Wyeth says. "And the fact that both us boys lived in it. The building has roots." Indeed, after its sale, *The Studio* may finally be given a chance to plant some. ■