

Thefts from Churches

The stealing of art in bulk is a growing area of crime. Sometimes valuable items stolen from churches (or elsewhere) are sold on fairly quickly in this country; sometimes they are shipped abroad, possibly even before the theft is noticed; and sometimes items are simply stored away for years. Under civil law in many other parts of Europe, a good faith purchaser gains title to goods after a statutory period which is usually only about three years.

What items may attract a thief?

The most obvious item is silver; but pewter and brass are also saleable, as are old wooden objects like chairs and chests, paintings, memorabilia like old documents and funeral biers, lecterns and carpets. Certain thieves will also be interested in Registers to aid in the falsification of documents. In fact, almost anything portable is vulnerable.

Prevention is better ...

Consider the church building: How can you prevent people stealing items from your church?

The most obvious answer is to keep the church building locked. But most of us would feel that this is a last resort, and for two reasons. Firstly, many of us like to visit parish churches in other parts of the country, and are sad if we find that their doors are closed. Secondly and more importantly, there are many members of our communities who do not attend Sunday worship regularly, but who like from time to time to drop into their parish church for a period of quiet and personal prayer. This is often their one link with God and the Church.

So bearing in mind the valuable nature of our church fittings, how can we safely leave our building open? Even the most deeply rural areas are now vulnerable to theft.

Some churches, determined to remain open, make sure that any portable valuable object is kept in a vestry under lock and key. This may not foil the most determined thief; but it will deter the majority. Some churches have chained the larger of their moveable objects (such as a lectern) - but please remember that this requires Faculty permission. A plain wooden cross might replace an ornate brass one during the week; valuable candlesticks are brought out just for worship.

One or two churches have alarmed their sanctuary area, with large notices to warn potential thieves. But the best option, if it can be arranged, is for the building to be staffed while open. This not only provides the necessary security, but an opportunity for the church member on duty to engage in conversation with a visitor, and to point out interesting features. A bookstall can also be made available.

Consider the objects themselves. What can you do to keep them more secure?

Those who are insured with the Ecclesiastical Insurance Group will have received from them a pack to 'Alpha Dot' their valuables. Again, this will not deter the most persistent thieves; but may well keep others away, and aid recovery of lost objects.

But *most importantly*, take photographs of everything. Take a general picture of an object, and then supplement that with a close-up of individual features such as hallmarks, inscriptions, and so on. Always include a scale or object of known size in the image. Keep also a detailed written description of each object, including its dimensions. It is useful to have at least two sets of the photographs, preferably kept in different places; this will help not only if one set gets lost, but if you need to hand one copy to the police to aid recovery after theft.

What about recovery?

You will certainly report a theft to the police and to your Insurers. Please also make sure that the Diocesan Office and the Archdeacon know, since from time to time both are contacted by Police forces when stolen materials are discovered.

Please also report a theft to the ***Art Loss Register***. Their database has over 110,000 uniquely identified stolen objects, and these items are matched continuously against the auction house and dealers' catalogues all over the world. Through the work of the ALR, over 4000 valuable items have been recovered, including many church items.

But recovery of stolen objects cannot be made if churches do not record the details of their precious objects and take suitable photographs. To assist those responsible, the Getty Information Institute's *Object ID Checklist* is accepted internationally as the minimum recommended standard for identifying an object. The points it makes are identical to those used by NADFAS Church Recorders in their format for recording an object, with the additional recommendation that, having documented the object, the information should be kept in a safe place. It is never too late to register a stolen or missing object with the ALR because recoveries are frequently made many years after the theft.

The Art Loss Register may be contacted at 020 7235 3393 fax: 020 7235 1652; e-mail artloss@artloss.com

The Getty Information Institute's Object ID checklist: Make a note of...

<i>Type of object</i>	<i>What kind of object is it? (e.g., chalice, painting)</i>
<i>Materials</i>	<i>What is it made of? (e.g., brass, oil on canvas)</i>
<i>Techniques</i>	<i>How was it made? (e.g., carved, cast, beaten)</i>
<i>Measurements</i>	<i>What is the size and weight of the object? (specify which unit of measurement is being used, such as inches or cms, and to which dimension the measurements refer (height, width, depth)</i>
<i>Markings</i>	<i>Are there any identifying markings, numbers or inscriptions? (e.g., dedication, hallmarks)</i>
<i>Distinguishing features</i>	<i>Does the object have any characteristics which might help to identify it? (e.g., damage, manufacturing defects)</i>
<i>Title</i>	<i>Does the object have a title by which it is known?</i>
<i>Subject</i>	<i>What is pictured or represented? (e.g., Madonna and child)</i>
<i>Date or period</i>	<i>When was the object made? (e.g., 1893, early 17th century)</i>
<i>Maker</i>	<i>Do you know who made the object -perhaps and individual or a company?</i>

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