

the BOUNTY HUNTER

Robert Goldman has traveled the globe tracking down stolen art

by G. PATRICK PAWLING

Robert Goldman is riding in a hot-air balloon, looking down at the mountains of Peru, when the pilot turns to him with a worried look in his eyes. "We've got to get down fast," he says. "The wind is taking us into the jungle."

That would be the Amazon jungle. Huge trees. Hungry animals. Bugs as big as domestic pets. Not the best place for an emergency landing.

They hit hard on a steep hill — an ancient burial ground — bouncing and sliding until the basket comes to rest on its side. Goldman scrambles out and, happy to be alive, starts laughing ... until the pilot fires off a flare to call for help. The flare drops into a stand of dry brush and ignites a fire that climbs toward them. This leaves them one option: to run toward the fire and get past it. Which they do, with great vigor.

Just another day at the office for Goldman? No, but if there's an award for "Best Indiana Jones-Style Adventures for a Lawyer," he would win. Until recently, Goldman was one of the nation's top prosecutors for crimes that involve art and cultural icons. He left his position as an Allentown-based assistant U.S. attorney in March to join Philadelphia-based Fox Rothschild, where he's developing an art law practice.

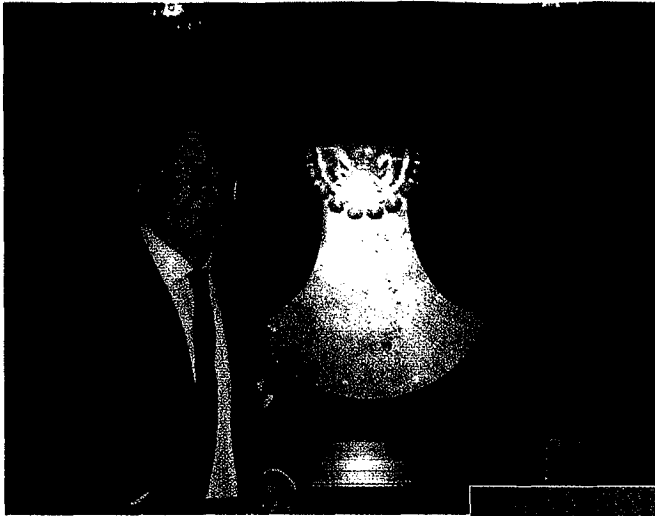
"I felt good about what we were able to get established on the criminal side, but I realized there are instances — either because of the burden of proof or other requirements of the law — that you can do more on the civil side," Goldman says. "There is a great need to pursue recoveries of stolen art, for example, for museums or countries. And buyers of art are suffering from fraud as well, and they need somebody to help them."

And so Goldman will stay in the world of art crime, which is fueled by money, excitement, fraud, greed, FBI stings and clandestine meetings. Thieves and buyers operate in a global economy; with so much money at stake, geographic boundaries mean nothing. Goldman never knew where his cases would take him: Europe, Africa or in the air over sacred burial grounds in Peru.

"You know, I'm looking down at those ruins from a few thousand feet up, and I'm thinking, 'This is a long way from Bucks County,'" Goldman says. "I like unique experiences, and that was crazy and fun."

Goldman was in Peru with friend and FBI agent Bob Wittman, working on a case that had made them national heroes there. They recovered an item that came to be famously known as the Peruvian Backflap, a 3-pound, 1,500-year-old piece of armor plate made of gold. Recovering it for Peru, an archeologist told them, was like somebody returning a stolen Liberty Bell to the United States.

The Backflap had been stolen from the ancient burial grounds of the Moche, a tribe of prosperous warriors and artisans who lived in northern Peru from A.D. 100 to 800. Upon it was carved a figure called *The Decapitator God*, which holds a severed head. The sheer size of the piece and the carving made it difficult to sell — until the middleman smugglers who were trying to fence the piece in the United States learned of a mysterious and connected art expert named Bob Wittman. Wittman told them he had a rich client who would buy anything made of gold. The buyer's name? *El Hombre del Oro* — *The Gold Man*. Yes, Wittman had artfully worked Goldman into the sting.



After meeting with Wittman on the New Jersey Turnpike, the two smugglers flew to Peru and picked up the Backflap, then bribed a customs agent to get it to Panama. The deal was to conclude with another meeting with Wittman on the Turnpike, but when the smugglers pulled up to the rest area, they produced something that surprised Wittman: In their car was one of the highest-ranking Panamanian diplomats in the United States, who had smuggled the Backflap through U.S. Customs in his diplomatic pouch. This presented a problem. Could the diplomat be arrested without causing an international incident? Thinking quickly, Wittman told the men they had to drive the Backflap to Philadelphia, where it could be verified by an independent appraiser.

Above: Goldman became a hero in Peru when he rescued this 1,500-year-old gold Backflap. Right: Next to a headdress formerly owned by Geronimo.



As he led the men down the turnpike he made a series of calls to Goldman, asking, "What the heck do we do with this guy?" After conferring with Justice officials in Washington, Goldman told him they could take down the smugglers, but not the diplomat — not right away, because they needed more paperwork to arrest him. When they stopped in Philadelphia, the smugglers opened the car trunk and showed Wittman the gleaming Backflap. He gave the signal and armed agents closed in to arrest the two smugglers. Within days the smugglers decided to cooperate with police, which opened the door for arresting the diplomat. But it was too late: He had fled the country.

And that's how Goldman and Wittman wound up in hot water in the air over Peru. After the Backflap was officially returned to the country, they were given the opportunity to fly over the ruins where the Backflap had been buried. As they boarded the balloon they noticed that the pilot was wearing an official-looking badge bearing his name and the acronym "H.G.I.C." Wittman wondered if that was a certification of some kind.

"No, it means Head Gringo in Charge," said the pilot, who was from Miami. Turns out he was trying to convince the Peruvian government to let him fly sightseeing tours over the ruins.

"Ah, what the heck," Wittman remembers thinking, and they were off. Just not for long.

Goldman was interested in history and art as a young student but opted for law school at Villanova. He began his career as a prosecutor soon after graduation. About 19 years ago, after being appointed an Assistant U.S. Attorney, he was paired with Wittman on a case involving a \$350,000 armored car robbery. One of the defendants: mobster Joey Merlino. Goldman and Wittman won Merlino's first federal conviction — and have worked together ever since.

They started out handling jewelry smash-and-grab cases. Goldman came up with the idea of sending a newly busted suspect into a store whose owner was suspected of buying stolen items. The perp walked in with a bandaged and bloody hand clutching a McDonald's bag filled with Rolexes still bearing their price tags. The jeweler looked at the man, the bag, the tags, and asked what happened to his hand.

"Cut it when I smashed the case," the perp replied.

Then, with a hidden tape recorder rolling, the jeweler asked, "How much for the watches?" Bingo. Another case made.

"The bloody hand was a nice touch," Goldman says. "It's fun when you come up with something and it works out."

The two soon began working on art-theft cases. It was a good fit. Both were passionate and knowledgeable about the arts (Wittman is the son of a Japanese-antiques dealer). And law enforcement was just beginning to understand the severity of art theft; it ranks today as the fourth most common crime in

the world, behind drugs, money laundering and illegal arms trading. The timing was perfect.

"Bob and I hit it off from the beginning," Goldman remembers. "Back then he was just starting out, and he wasn't the principal agent on the cases, but he was more energetic and more personable than the older agents. We were dealing with some questionable characters and he learned how to work with them."

Goldman will miss Wittman.

"That is the only regret I have in changing positions," he says. "I have a tremendous amount of respect for Bob. If I could specialize in just art [as a federal prosecutor] I would probably not have left."

Together they convicted more than 35 art smugglers and dealers, and recovered items worth more than \$150 million. Once they brought someone to trial on art-related cases their conviction rate was 100 percent.

"The guy is tenacious," Wittman says of his former partner. "He gets 10 times better when there is any kind of adversarial situation. He is the best guy in court I have ever seen."

"I just don't like losing," Goldman says. He was the first prosecutor to file criminal charges using the Theft of a Major Artwork

statute, which was ushered into law by Sen. Ted Kennedy after the 1990 theft of a Rembrandt, a Vermeer, five Degas drawings and other works worth \$300 million from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. Goldman used the law after the 1996 Pennsbury Manor thefts of about 50 antique and reproduction ceramics and decorative arts worth more than \$100,000. When the theft started getting too much publicity, the thieves threw many of the pieces into the Delaware River. Divers retrieved some, but many of the wood pieces were lost. When it came time to prepare charges against the suspects, Goldman initially was at a loss.

"Bob and I really wanted to do this case but we needed a federal hook, and I remember thumbing through the code thinking, 'What can we apply?'" he says. "Then I just stumbled on this statute. Turns out it had never been used. It was fabulous to be able to apply this statute and use it for the first time in a real case."

Part of Goldman's success as a prosecutor was his ability to write an indictment that went beyond just the facts. In the Backflip case he described a lost civilization, a warrior tribe whose only remaining link to our world is the artifacts they left in their sacred burial grounds. In a case involving a stolen sword, he explained that this wasn't just any ordinary weapon — it was the sword given to Gen. George Meade for leading the Union forces during the battle of Gettysburg.

"The idea is to explain the significance of the crime and add to the weight of the indictment," he explains. "It's not just an object that is taken, it's a piece of our history that you can see and touch. To steal that is a very serious thing."

His dedication to the cause has not gone unnoticed. In March the Smithsonian Institution presented him with the Robert Burke National Award for Cultural Protection Achievement. This is the highest award given in the United States for contributions to the protection of cultural property.

Goldman prosecuted non-artwork cases as well. One that stands out is the so-called Berks County Coroner case, a scheme in which workers asked for compensation for transporting many more bodies than they actually transported.

"I remember seeing the statistics in Berks, looking at how many were reported to be dead over a given time — and all of a sudden you see a spike in the number of dead," Goldman says. "Either the bubonic plague hit Berks County or something was wrong with the records."

But nothing compared to his work in retrieving stolen art. It was a unique satisfaction. Convicting a person who has committed a violent crime doesn't undo the horrors committed by the perpetrator. But when a valued part of a nation's history is recovered, things are made right again. It's why he remains committed to this type of work, even now from the private side.

"Having worked for the government for 29 years I am not opposed to a pay increase, but money has never been the driving force for me," Goldman says. "What motivates me is job satisfaction and challenges — and art crimes is a very exciting field. Unfortunately the federal government doesn't have the manpower to touch all the issues. So there are cases that beg for assistance by a lawyer who understands this field, and Fox Rothschild is very supportive in developing this area of practice.

"Besides," he says, "these objects should outlast us. They tell our story." ❖

A Pilfered Bill of Rights Copy

One of the 14 original copies of the Bill of Rights, belonging to North Carolina, had fallen into private hands and had been offered for sale for \$4 million. Wittman went undercover, and soon he and Goldman had returned one of the most valuable documents in American history to North Carolina.

Live by the Sword

During a 10-year period starting in 1987, more than 200 objects were stolen from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, including swords given by the citizens of Philadelphia to Gens. George G. Meade, David Bell Birney and Andrew A. Humphreys for their heroism in the Civil War. That case led to the home of a Delaware County history buff who had paid a society custodian about \$8,000 to steal the artifacts.

Geronimo!

Goldman and Wittman recovered a headdress that belonged to Geronimo — a case that came to them when a lawyer in Atlanta offered the headdress for sale. Trouble is, it's illegal to sell anything with eagle feathers on it because of the Bald Eagle Protection Act. Goldman and Wittman had to act quickly because the lawyer was trying to sell it to somebody from outside the country; once it crossed the border it would probably be lost forever. They set up a sting and recovered the headdress.

Antiques Road Show Scandal

Experts who appeared on the program used their *Road Show* clout to fleece families of their Civil War heirlooms, including a bloodstained coat that belonged to Gen. George Pickett. The scam: They promised the items would be placed in a national museum but instead sold them to private collectors at enormous profits. Goldman and Wittman tracked down the perpetrators, and many of the items were returned.

An Insistent Call From Germany

The German embassy called Goldman to report that three paintings by Heinrich Burkell, which were stolen from an air raid shelter during World War II, had been offered for sale by a Concordeville, Pa., auction house on behalf of a New Jersey woman. The director of the museum in Pirmasens, Germany, where the paintings rightfully belonged, noticed the advertising for the sale. Goldman and Wittman verified the paintings, convinced the owner they were stolen and made sure they were returned to the museum. — G. Patrick Pawling