

## The Trusted Museum Insider Who Turned Out to Be a Thief

By WILLIAM H. HONAN  
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On Jan. 10, Prof. John Quentin Feller, a widely published authority on Chinese export ceramics, examined a finely crafted Chinese serving platter at the Winterthur Museum outside Wilmington, Del. The dish, which once belonged to George Washington and was later owned by Robert E. Lee, seemed to radiate history.

Instead of returning the platter to the locked case from which an attendant had removed it, Professor Feller slipped the platter into the drawer of a sideboard in the museum and reported it missing. When questioned by a Delaware State Police officer, he denied trying to steal the platter. When it became clear his story would not hold up, however, Professor Feller began to spill the details of an 18-year criminal career in which he stole more than 100 precious objects from 8 museums in the United States and England, making him one of the biggest art thieves of the century.

The monthly bulletin of the International Foundation for Art Research dubbed Professor Feller a Robin Hood of the arts because he frequently stole from one museum or private collection and lent or donated the spoils to another. In one case he stole a rare Chinese export tea and coffee service from the Rhode Island School of Design and presented it as a long-term loan to the Peabody Museum of Salem in Massachusetts, which was so grateful for his donations that it put him on its board. With Laughter and Tears

Later he retrieved a two-handled cup and saucer from the service, which bears the Great Seal of the United States. He donated the cup to the diplomatic reception rooms at the State Department in Washington in memory of his parents. He eventually sold the saucer to the State Department for \$4,500.

Last Thursday, the day before he began serving an 18-month sentence at the Allenwood Federal Prison Camp in Montgomery, Pa., Professor Feller, a slightly built, boyish-looking 51-year-old, discussed his crimes with a mixture of sober reflection, laughter and tears.

His case exemplifies the growing problem of insider crime at museums. Most recent thefts from museums have turned out to be the work of trusted staff members or scholars like Professor Feller who are frequently given special privileges, said Dr. Constance Lowenthal, executive director of the International Foundation for Art Research. The problem is serious enough that the American Association of Museums plans a panel discussion on the subject at its annual meeting in April.

Professor Feller, who was born in Baltimore, graduated from Loyola College in Maryland in 1962, and later earned a master's degree and Ph.D. in history from Catholic University. He furthered his studies as a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Munich in 1962-63 and has been teaching history at the University of Scranton since 1969.

Professor Feller said he began to steal in 1972 when he discovered a cache of nearly 30,000 pieces of antique porcelain in the basement of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. Appalled to find thousands of what he called the "van Goghs of the porcelain field" covered with dust and ignored, he stole about 18 prize items, usually by hiding them in his camera bag or by stuffing them under his shirt, and turned them over to the Peabody Museum, which specializes in objects from the China trade and put them on prominent display. It was then that the Peabody made him a trustee. **Terror of Being Caught**

Professor Feller was on the history and political science faculty of the University of Scranton, and he began to publish what was to become a distinguished series of 5 books and 34 scholarly articles, mainly about antique ceramics and glass. Over the summer, Prof. William J. Parente, a colleague in the history and political science department, observed in a letter to the sentencing judge that Professor Feller "has literally published more than the other 15 of us put together."

Professor Feller said that unlike many thieves who are drawn to crime by the excitement of breaking the law, he got no thrill from stealing. "Each time I took something," he said, "I was terrified."

Psychologists who specialize in criminal behavior say that such assertions must be treated with caution and that many thieves derive pleasure from putting themselves in jeopardy and "suffering."

Professor Feller described several instances when he narrowly escaped being caught and said they were especially frightening. "Once in the early 1970's," he said, "I took a plate and immediately realized this isn't something the Peabody needed or would want. The next day, I took it back and the guard checked my briefcase. I didn't think he saw it there so I put the plate back. On the way out, the guard checked my briefcase again and said: 'You had a plate in there when you came in. You'd better go back and get it. You don't want it mixed up with our

collection. I went back and got it. What else could I do?"

"It was the worst experience I ever had," he said. "Every time something like that happened, I vowed I'd never let myself do this again. I'd be filled with terrible remorse and fear." Confession to a Priest

Nevertheless, he soon began to steal from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, N.Y., the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England, and private collections.

In 1977, he confessed his crimes to a Roman Catholic priest. The priest, Professor Feller said, recommended that he prepare a will leaving all the pieces he had stolen to the Peabody Museum. Professor Feller followed this advice, he said, and for the next few years he stole no more.

By the early 1980's, Professor Feller told a friend, he began to think of the porcelains he knew about in storage in certain museums as "orphaned and abused children, rejected and outcast by their parents," and he resumed his criminal activity.

He maintained that his hiding the Washington-Lee Chinese platter in a sideboard at Winterthur in January was an attempt to be caught. "I knew that there only could be one outcome of that," he said.

After Professor Feller pleaded guilty to having stolen eight objects valued at \$133,000 -- the statute of limitations had long since expired for most of his other thefts -- James L. West, the United States Attorney for the Middle District of Pennsylvania, argued in a sentencing memorandum that Professor Feller stole and lent artworks simply to "advance his career and standing in the academic and art community."

Professor Feller's lawyer, Joseph R. D'Andrea, argued in an opposing sentencing memorandum that his client had a diminished capacity to tell right from wrong. To buttress his argument, he attached a letter from Dr. Jorge A. Pereira-Ogan, a professor of psychiatry at Thomas Jefferson University Medical College in Philadelphia, who interviewed Professor Feller over a period of three months.

Dr. Pereira-Ogan concluded that Professor Feller suffered from "an appalling poverty of interpersonal relationships" and therefore found in what he stole "surrogate objects to love, admire and take care of." He said the fact that Professor Feller painstakingly restored some of the pieces he stole, only rarely sold them and never took a tax deduction for his gifts lent weight to this analysis.

Professor Feller himself said in the interview that his crimes were so unlike every other aspect of his life that although not superstitious he could not exclude the possibility of demonic possession.

He also acknowledged having felt a surge of pride when invited to be a trustee of the Peabody Museum and in seeing his name listed as the lender of many objects on display there. He felt gratified, too, by being socially accepted by his aristocratic fellow Peabody trustees. "I'm sure I'm the first Roman Catholic who was ever on the board of that stuffy old institution," he said.

Some of the museum patrons and collectors whom he victimized have stood by him, Professor Feller said, but he was reduced to sobbing when he spoke of the loss of his friendship with Peter J. Fetchko, director of the Peabody.

"He betrayed us," Mr. Fetchko said. "Once you've lost your honor, things can never be the same."