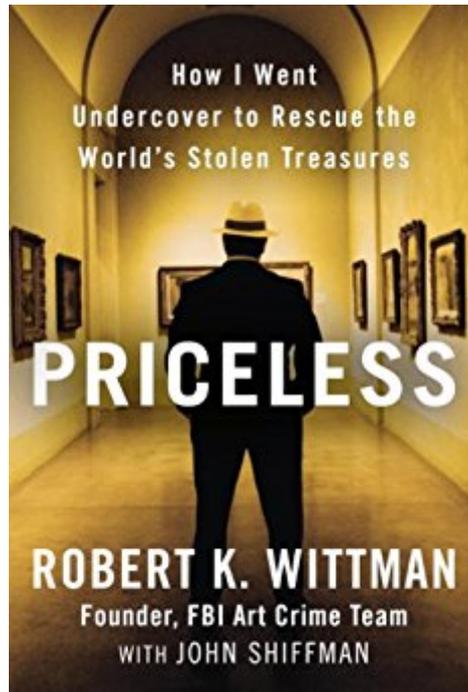


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Priceless: How I Went Undercover To Rescue The World's Stolen Treasures



Synopsis

The Wall Street Journal called him "a living legend." • The London Times dubbed him "the most famous art detective in the world." • In *Priceless*, Robert K. Wittman, the founder of the FBI's Art Crime Team, pulls back the curtain on his remarkable career for the first time, offering a real-life international thriller to rival *The Thomas Crown Affair*. • Rising from humble roots as the son of an antique dealer, Wittman built a twenty-year career that was nothing short of extraordinary. He went undercover, usually unarmed, to catch art thieves, scammers, and black market traders in Paris and Philadelphia, Rio and Santa Fe, Miami and Madrid. • In this page-turning memoir, Wittman fascinates with the stories behind his recoveries of priceless art and antiquities: The golden armor of an ancient Peruvian warrior king. The Rodin sculpture that inspired the Impressionist movement. The headdress Geronimo wore at his final Pow-Wow. The rare Civil War battle flag carried into battle by one of the nation's first African-American regiments. • The breadth of Wittman's exploits is unmatched: He traveled the world to rescue paintings by Rockwell and Rembrandt, Pissarro, Monet and Picasso, often working undercover overseas at the whim of foreign governments. Closer to home, he recovered an original copy of the Bill of Rights and cracked the scam that rocked the PBS series *Antiques Roadshow*. • By the FBI's accounting, Wittman saved hundreds of millions of dollars worth of art and antiquities. He says the statistic isn't important. After all, who's to say what is worth more -- a Rembrandt self-portrait or an American flag carried into battle? They're both priceless. • The art thieves and scammers Wittman caught run the gamut from rich to poor, smart to foolish, organized criminals to desperate loners. • The smuggler who brought him a looted 6th-century treasure turned out to be a high-ranking diplomat. • The appraiser who stole countless heirlooms from war heroes' descendants was a slick, aristocratic con man. • The museum janitor who made off with locks of George Washington's hair just wanted to make a few extra bucks, figuring no one would miss what he'd filched. • In his final case, Wittman called on every bit of knowledge and experience in his arsenal to take on his greatest challenge: working undercover to track the vicious criminals behind what might be the most audacious art theft of all. • From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

The most interesting elements of "Priceless" were the facts regarding art and art theft and the awe and respect with which the author describes the pieces he views and recovers. "Americans, in particular, are said to be uncultured when it comes to high art, more likely to go to a ballpark than a museum. But as I tell my foreign colleagues, the statistics belie that stereotype. Americans visit museums on a scale eclipsing sports. In 2007, more people visited the Smithsonian Institution museums in Washington (24.2 million) than attended a game played by the Nations Basketball Association (21.8 million), the National Hockey League (21.2 million), or the National Football League (17 million)." I was shocked by that fact. I was also surprised by the different priority level that the US places on art theft, compared to other countries. Despite the record prices being paid for historical and artistic pieces now, the penalties for their theft weren't comparable. The trails that Wittman goes through trying to deal with and change the investigation procedures in these cases was very interesting. But the points at which I was most interested in this story, in the memoirs of this FBI agent were when he described his reactions to the stolen treasures he tried to restore to their place in the world. "This was my first antiquity case, but as I would learn, looters are especially insidious art thieves. They not only invade the sanctuaries of our ancestors, plundering burial grounds and lost cities in a reckless dash for buried treasure, they also destroy our ability to learn about our past in ways other art thieves do not. When a painting is stolen from a museum, we usually know its provenance. We know where it came from, who painted it, when and perhaps even why.

If you are a connoisseur of crime books that range from criminal psychology to the Mafia to serial killers and beyond... and the thought of reading a book that revolves around some of the world's great works of art... including Matisse... Monet... Rembrandt... Picasso... et al... turns you off... or just plain scares you... hold on a minute! I have a large library of the aforementioned category of crime books and I was extremely apprehensive about buying this book for those very same "artsy" aversions. In retrospect... I'm thrilled that I took the chance and bought this book anyway. What the author, Robert Wittman, a former FBI special agent does so magnificently is he draws the reader in with the usual promise of FBI crime titillation... then educates the reader so gently and rhythmically it becomes an almost subliminal indoctrination into what I had previously viewed as a "hoity-toity" upper-crust world that was not meant for me. Wittman starts you off with names that any layman would be familiar with such as Rembrandt and Picasso... and then takes you on the same educational journey he himself traveled... such as getting educated in a course at an art gallery that simply takes you aback when you're told: "ON THE WALL IN FRONT OF ME, SURROUNDING A THIRTY-FOOT WINDOW HUNG THREE WORKS WITH A COMBINED WORTH OF HALF A BILLION DOLLARS." (Picasso's "THE PEASANTS"... Matisse's "SEATED RIFFIAN"... and Matisse's "THE DANCE".) What the author does from there on out is not only illuminate the world of art... but he shares such a strong empathy for the people whose works of art have been stolen. At times the victims are individuals... at times the victims are galleries... at times the victims are cities and states... and at times the victims are entire countries.

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