

“The Carnegie Library Art Heist”

As a target for art thieves, the Public Library would seem an unlikely place. Nevertheless, janitor Robert Butler had an unwelcome surprise when he opened the doors of the library on Friday morning, February 5, 1909. As Butler climbed the stairs to the art gallery on the second floor, he was shocked by the sight of empty picture frames strewn along the baseboards. Fifteen oil paintings on loan from prominent local artists had disappeared.

“VALUABLE PAINTINGS STOLEN FROM LIBRARY,” screamed the headline in the *San Diego Sun*. The works of art were part of the “midwinter exhibit” by the San Diego Art Association, the city’s first organization for local artists. The downtown Carnegie Library was a popular location for exhibiting art. Open twelve hours a day during the week and three hours on Sunday, hundreds of San Diegans viewed the art each day.

The doors and windows were locked “the same as I left them Thursday night,” janitor Butler told the police. Butler guessed that a burglar had concealed himself in a storeroom before the library closed at 9:00 p.m. With the whole night ahead of him, the thief then leisurely removed the paintings from their stretchers, rolled them up, and strolled out the library doors.

The *Los Angeles Times* offered a different theory, reporting that thieves “drove up to the building with a wagon, entered through a window, loaded the wagon and drove off.” City Librarian Hannah Davison declared the value of the paintings were in the neighborhood of \$3,000.



The library’s art gallery on the 2nd floor. *San Diego Public Library*

Victimized artists included Albert R. Valentien, Mary B. Williams, Charles A. Fries, and seven others. Valentien surmised that the thieves were connoisseurs who intended to sell the paintings “in the east.” But he was optimistic that the art would be found soon, “as they are so well known that it would be difficult to dispose of them.” The police were less confident, telling the *Evening Tribune*, “it is doubtful whether any of the pictures will be recovered.”

To find any news of the stolen canvasses, the San Diego Police Department flooded U.S. cities on both coasts with circulars, describing each painting, the title, and artist. In the meantime, the San Diego Art Association urged the immediate hiring of a night watchman, warning that without such protection, “artists and other owners of valuable property will not be willing to make loans for purposes of exhibition.”

Two days after the discovery of the thefts, janitor Butler found an unlatched window leading to the basement in the library. The window, seemingly locked when Butler and police detectives examined the building after the thefts, had been temporarily secured by someone. “It is barely

possible,” Butler told a reporter from the *San Diego Union*, “that the thief used the curtain cord as a wedge by which to close the window and make it appear as though the catch had been used.”

Police now theorized that the thief had rigged the window frame one day and then returned at night “to throw the window wide open.” Suspicious marks on the window sill appeared to be scuffs from shoes. The detectives decided the thief had “crawled through, jumped to the floor, closed the window behind him, went up into the gallery, gathered up his pictures and made his exit in the same way.”

Discovery of the thief’s likely entrance site did not get detectives any closer to an arrest, or recovery of the stolen paintings. But after weeks of chasing dead ends, the detectives got a lucky break.

A burglar had recently been arrested in Santa Ana for robbing a gun store. After a quick trial, 23-year-old John R. Keene began a five-year sentence at San Quentin. Shortly after his conviction, Orange County Sheriff Theo Lacey found a receipt among Keene’s effects for a package stored at the Union Warehouse Company in Los Angeles.

Lacey called on Sheriff Bill Hammell of Los Angeles and the two men visited the Union warehouse. With the receipt in hand, they found a large package of stolen goods, including fifteen oil paintings in one large roll. The sheriffs immediately recognized the art as work described in the circular sent two months earlier by the San Diego police.

On April 7, two months after robbery, Charles Fries took the train to Los Angeles and personally identified the stolen paintings belonging to him and the other artists. San Diego Police Chief William Neely brought the paintings back to San Diego ten days later.

Art Association president Daniel Cleveland declared his organization was overjoyed with the news. “These pieces,” he said, “were of inestimable value to their owners and the association would never have recovered from the shock had they not been recovered.”



Library at 8th and E Streets.
San Diego Public Library

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