

The Gang That Preyed on America's Small Museums

No one mistook them for cat burglars, but the authorities say the crew spent two decades pilfering, and in some cases destroying, art and sports treasures, including Yogi Berra's championship rings.



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By Christopher Kuo

Christopher Kuo reported from Scranton, Pa., where he reviewed hundreds of pages of court records.

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The first burglary was in 1999 at Keystone College in Factoryville, Pa. One of the gang, the authorities said, sneaked onto the campus, smashed some glass display cases and walked off with memorabilia, including a baseball jersey once worn by Christy Mathewson, the legendary pitcher.

The Everhart Museum in Scranton was next, six years later. An Andy Warhol silk screen print and a painting attributed to Jackson Pollock were taken. Then the pace picked up.

The Space Farms: Zoo & Museum. The Lackawanna Historical Society. Ringwood Manor. The Sterling Hill Mining Museum. The United States Golf Association Museum and Library.

The list goes on.

Over the course of almost two decades, the crew showed up at 12 small, low-profile museums that often lacked elaborate security systems, stripping them of cherished items, including treasured heirlooms from America's sporting past, the authorities say.

Just a partial list includes — from the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame — the 1903 Belmont Stakes trophy. From the International Boxing Hall of Fame, middleweight Tony Zale's 1941 and 1948 championship belts. From the Yogi Berra Museum & Learning Center, seven of Berra's championship rings, his 1954 and 1955 M.V.P. plaques, and nine of his 10 World Series rings.

The only Berra World Series ring not stolen was the one he wore on his finger.

“These kinds of artifacts tell people the story of who we are, and they connect us to the past in a way that really nothing else can,” said Eve Schaenen, executive director of the Berra museum. “And now they're gone.”

In the fall, four men charged with taking some part in the burglaries are scheduled to go on trial in Pennsylvania, where they live. Another five people have pleaded guilty. All nine, investigators say, avoided arrest for some portion of 19 years as museum directors across five states woke up to find smashed glass and things missing.



Stolen items included, clockwise from top, "Upper Hudson" by Jasper Cropsey taken from Ringwood Manor; Roger Maris's Hickok Belt from the Roger Maris Museum; a gold nugget from the Sterling Hill Mining Museum. via Ringwood Manor, West Acres Development LLP, and Sterling Hill Mining Museum.

With so many heists going unsolved for so many years, one might imagine the thieves as some sort of a world-savvy, blueprint-studying, techno-literate crew so often seen in movies. But in court records and interviews, they come across as more 7-Eleven than Ocean's Eleven.

Prepared? Yes. Sophisticated? No.

Sometimes they just hit houses. One favorite burglary tool was an ax, according to court records. They drove cross country to rob the Roger Maris Museum in North Dakota, rather than take a plane.

“These guys were not world-class criminals,” said Michael Wisneski, an official with the Everhart museum who described the thieves as schlubby. “They were operating out of the North Pocono School District.”

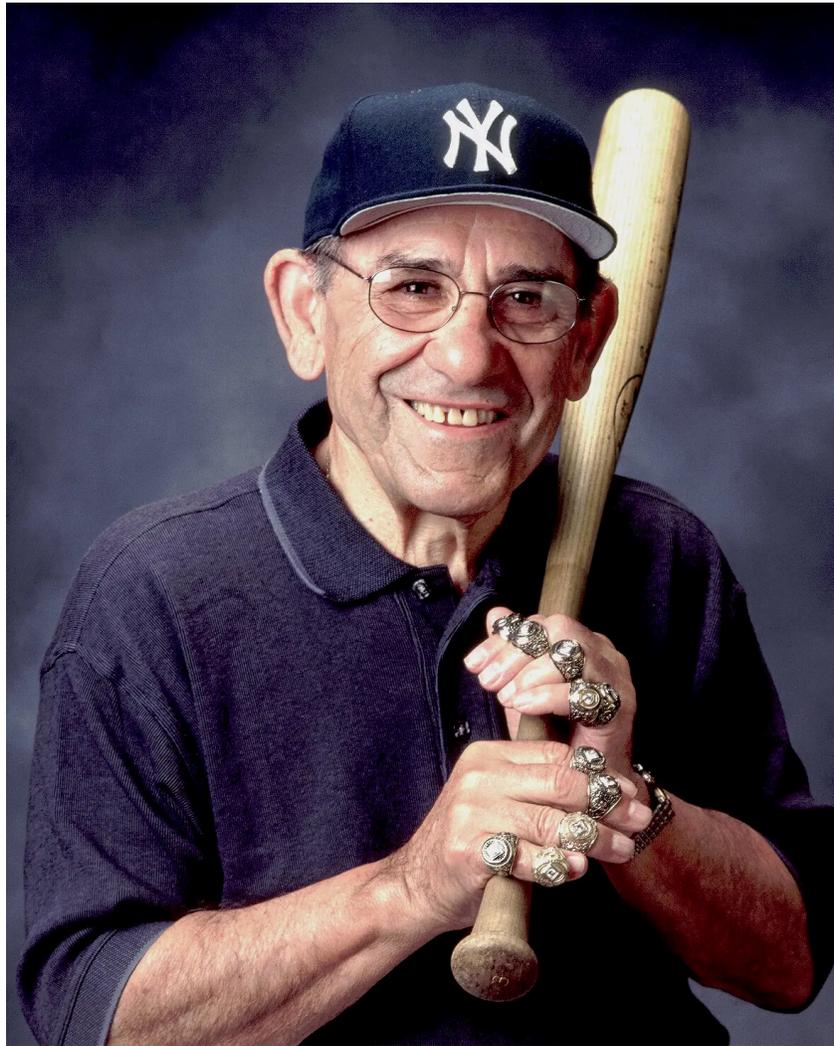
Most upsetting to many people is how little care was shown for the objects that were taken. A Jasper Cropsey painting from 1871 was torched. The crew did not even try to sell some of the high-profile sports memorabilia. Instead, gold and silver items like Berra’s rings, Maris’s M.V.P. plaque and the Belmont Stakes trophy were melted down and hocked as raw metals, according to court papers.

One of those arrested is accused of using some of the stolen gems to make himself a scepter.

“They could have done a smash and grab at a strip mall jewelry store and come away with more gold,” said Lindsay Berra, the granddaughter of Yogi.

When the accused crew members were finally named in an indictment last June, federal prosecutors laid out the inventory of what had been taken. It included stolen paintings, at least five 19th-century firearms, a Tiffany lamp and sports memorabilia that included more than 30 golf and horse racing trophies. Prosecutors valued the lot at \$4 million. Most of the objects have not been recovered.

“This was a group of dishonest people that saw easy marks,” said William Kroth, executive director of the Sterling Hill Mining Museum. He called them “low life grifters.”



The Yogi Berra Museum & Learning Center suffered the loss of multiple items once owned by Berra, including nine of his 10 World Series rings. They were melted down for their metal. Steve Crandall/Getty Images

‘A Violation of Trust’

Michael Wisneski of the Everhart Museum remembers the morning in 2005 when he woke up and turned on the local television news. To his surprise, the reporters were in the parking lot of his museum, talking about a break-in.

When he arrived at the building, he found the back door smashed in, the Warhol and Pollock gone.

“It felt like somebody broke into your house,” he said. “It was a violation of trust or of security.”

According to the authorities, Thomas Trotta, 48, of Moscow, Pa., had used a ladder to smash the door of the museum.

Of the nine people later arrested, Trotta had been the one relied on to venture into the museums to take things, according to court papers. But he was helped in meaningful ways, investigators say, by Nicholas Dombek, 53, who has known Trotta since they were teenagers. After Trotta was arrested, he accused Dombek of being the ringleader, according to court papers. But Dombek's lawyer, Ernest D. Preate Jr., said in an interview that Trotta was the ringleader, and he described his client as a handyman, not a mastermind, who did not even operate a computer.

Trotta's lawyer, Joseph R. D'Andrea, declined to comment.

In an interview that aired Sunday on "60 Minutes," Trotta said that he had grown up loving baseball and that part of why he stole sports memorabilia was to "touch history." He wore Mathewson's jersey and tried on Berra's rings after stealing the objects, he said.



Thomas Trotta, who is identified in court papers as the person who personally entered the museums and stole items. He has pleaded guilty to theft of a major artwork.

via Pennsylvania Department of Corrections

Dombek, who has pleaded not guilty, is from Thornhurst, a rural patch of Pennsylvania, where he lives on a street that carries his family name. His father and his brother were both science teachers, but Dombek never graduated from

high school, and in a 2019 court hearing testified that he was in financial straits and was two months behind on his mortgage.

Still, he was not without ambition and, according to a search warrant affidavit, Trotta told investigators that Dombek had constructed something like a chemistry lab in his garage. Dombek himself spoke during the court hearing of hoping to cure cancer by tinkering with the chemical properties of water.

Dombek's garage became an informal headquarters where the group planned break-ins, Trotta told investigators according to court papers. It was there that Dombek constructed a collapsible ladder and other tools for Trotta to use at heists, afterward using the space to melt down stolen memorabilia, according to court papers.



Nicholas Dombek, who the authorities have charged in the museum burglaries.
via U.S. Attorney's Office for Middle District of Pennsylvania

Most of the targeted museums were in Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey. Each facility was studied before a break-in to determine access, security measures and what looked good to steal, investigators said in court papers. During one scouting trip, Dombek tested the thickness of a display case at the golf museum in New Jersey by scratching the glass with a coin, the papers said.

Trotta would sometimes wear a disguise, dressing as a firefighter when they stole from the Roger Maris museum, and as a Hasidic Jew when they went to break in to the Harvard Mineralogical & Geological Museum, the indictment said. (The theft was called off because a particular diamond they hoped to steal was no longer on display.)

The other accomplices are accused of playing a variety of roles: sometimes as getaway drivers, sometimes as transporters of stolen materials after the burglary.

At the Berra museum, the thieves cut the glass to gain entry, and were able to elude security cameras during one of the larger hauls, according to museum staff.

“They knew exactly where to break in,” Schaenen said. “They had a method to it.”

The Harness Racing Museum & Hall of Fame in Goshen, N.Y., had a motion sensor but no cameras in place when the thieves arrived in 2012. It lost 14 trophies and afterward, Janet Terhune, the executive director, said she called the staff of the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame in Saratoga to warn them to increase their security. Both museums upgraded their protection.

It didn't matter.

The next year, Trotta smashed glass displays in Saratoga with a center-punch tool and grinder and took off with five trophies, according to court records.

Brien Bouyea, the communications director for the Saratoga museum, said the institution had a solid security system in place at the time of the thefts.

“The smash-and-grab style of the robbery, however, narrowly beat the police response time,” he said.



The Lackawanna Historical Society in Pennsylvania lost a Tiffany lamp in a 2010 burglary. via The Lackawanna Historical Society

A Fateful Traffic Stop

Even with the snow blanketing Route 307 outside Scranton early on the morning of March 4, 2019, the maroon Pontiac was swerving too much.

Two Pennsylvania State Police officers pulled the car over. Trotta, whose eyes were reddish pink and watery, was driving.

At the time, investigators in Pennsylvania had already found a DNA sample at a residential burglary that matched DNA samples taken from museum burglaries in New York and New Jersey that were in a national database. In 2015, for example, blood was left behind at a splintered glass window at the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, N.Y. And surveillance photos from some of the crime sites had recorded a particular vehicle: a maroon Pontiac sedan.

But until then, officers had struggled to find someone who matched the DNA.

At the police station where Trotta was arrested on charges of driving under the influence, officers gave him a cup of water to drink. They later retrieved the cup. Bingo. The DNA in his saliva was a match, according to court records.

Inside the car, the police found bolt cutters, a sledgehammer, headlamps, ski masks, gloves and several phones.



Clockwise from top: Tony Zale's world middleweight championship belt taken from the International Boxing Hall of Fame; a silver Fabergé and a gold trophy from the Harness Racing Museum & Hall Of Fame. via Haley Zale and the Harness Racing Museum & Hall Of Fame

The police at that point charged Trotta for burglarizing a home and an antiques exchange in Pennsylvania. Prosecutors also cut a deal with him: the promise of a more lenient sentence in exchange for information and cooperation. During interviews with law enforcement officials, Trotta detailed many of the museum thefts he had committed and identified several people as his accomplices.

And he agreed to wear a wire during numerous meetings with Dombek, where the two men chatted about past crimes, according to court records.

By May 2019, according to court papers, Dombek had grown suspicious that someone involved in one of the local residential burglaries, not Trotta, had been talking to the police. He discussed his concerns with Trotta in wiretapped conversations, according to a search warrant affidavit for Dombek's house, and mentioned the possibility of giving the accomplice cocaine laced with fentanyl or perhaps false hellebore, a toxic plant that had been growing in his backyard.

But the accomplice was not hurt and Dombek's sister, Cindy Fiorani, said her brother would never do something like that.

"My brother would give you the shirt off his back, and wouldn't even ask why," she said. "Nick is a joker. He likes to kid around," she added.

In the summer of 2019, the crew planned a second heist at the horse racing museum in Saratoga, but the theft never happened, according to court papers. Dombek was arrested in August of that year and charged for a Pennsylvania burglary and was later charged with witness intimidation.

It would be four years before investigators would bring federal charges in the larger museum theft cases in an the inquiry led by the F.B.I. and the Pennsylvania State Police.

The U.S. attorney's office for the Middle District of Pennsylvania declined to comment on the timeline of the investigation.

The four men now facing trial are accused of a range of offenses, including theft of major artwork, which carries a maximum penalty of 10 years. Trotta is one of the five people to have pleaded guilty in the case, but he and the others have yet to be sentenced. He was arrested on theft charges last week in connection with a report of items taken from a house in January but the charges were withdrawn.

In the “60 Minutes” interview, Trotta expressed remorse over his actions, particularly melting down the Berra memorabilia for its metal, for which he said he and others received \$12,000.

“Emotionally, I destroyed people,” he said. “I know this now.”

The authorities have not recovered the Warhol or some other stolen items that were not destroyed. Trotta said in the “60 Minutes” interview that the last time he saw the painting attributed to Pollock was in 2018 at a house in New Jersey. Museum officials say they try to be optimistic that some of the items will resurface.

“We’re always watching online auctions,” Terhune said about the Harness Racing Museum’s lost trophies.

Even those who have been told the heirlooms they cared about were likely melted down are not quite ready to move on.

“I think we all harbor some secret hope,” Lindsay Berra said, “that in like 20 years, somebody’s going to die, and their kids are going to go through their stuff, and they’ll find a couple of grandpa’s World Series rings.”

Christopher Kuo covers arts and culture as a member of the 2023-24 Times Fellowship class. More about Christopher Kuo

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