

Theft Reveals Lapses in Chinese Museum's Security

By **Keith Bradsher**

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HONG KONG — A bungled art theft this week at the Palace Museum in the Forbidden City in Beijing may not have been worthy of a master thief, with the police quickly claiming to have found the suspect, but the episode has nonetheless produced questions and criticism about security at Chinese museums.

Details of the theft from the police and museum officials — and a brief, televised confession by the burglary suspect — suggest an amateurish effort that art experts said the museum should have been prepared to withstand. But the official account also left some unanswered questions, including whether the suspect was acting alone.

A short, gaunt 28-year-old identified as Shi Baikui went on national television on Thursday morning to say that while visiting the famous museum as a tourist on Sunday evening, he had suddenly decided to rob it. With his face nearly expressionless and his voice flat, Mr. Shi said that he stayed after everyone had left, then stole jewel-encrusted gold purses and powder cases on loan from a wealthy Hong Kong art collector.

According to museum and police officials, the burglar bashed open at least one display case and took nine of the purses and powder cases, all of Western design and made in the 20th century, including a round Tiffany powder case from the 1950s. Another case with even more valuable objects in the same temporary exhibition was also battered, but it did not break open and nothing was lost from it.

A museum worker tried to stop a “suspicious man” in the museum at 10:30 p.m. and sounded the alarm, according to the authorities. But the man fled and eluded the workers, guards and armed police officers who soon converged. Two of the nine objects were found with slight damage on the museum grounds, but the other seven were gone.

Mr. Shi was arrested Wednesday evening. Some but not all of the seven objects were recovered, a Beijing police spokesman said by telephone on Thursday, declining to elaborate.

There were conflicting reports on Thursday about why the crime was not detected immediately by security cameras and stopped. Before the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and ever since, the police have festooned mile after mile of lampposts along Beijing roads

with thousands of outdoor surveillance cameras, while the Forbidden City itself has hundreds of them.

State news media said that a surveillance camera had captured an image of the suspect, but did not say when or where. In a report that appeared to suggest a more ambitious criminal scheme, The Beijing Evening News cited an unidentified source as saying that someone had cut off the electricity to at least part of the museum before the display cases were robbed, depriving the museum's surveillance center of video.

The Palace Museum issued an apology and said it would improve security.

Art experts were highly critical of the museum on Thursday as details of the crime dribbled out.

"It's a great embarrassment for what is considered to be the premier museum of China," said Marc F. Wilson, a prominent Chinese art expert and the former chief executive of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo.

At the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the Nationalists took most of the Palace Museum's best works to Taiwan, where they are now on display at the magnificent National Palace Museum on the outskirts of Taipei. But the Palace Museum in Beijing occupies a special place in China as a symbol of national heritage, like the Louvre in Paris or the Prado in Madrid, and Beijing officials have demanded for decades that Taiwan return the rest of the collection.

The National Palace Museum declined Thursday to comment on the Beijing art theft, except to say that no similar crime had ever taken place in Taiwan.

Most art museums now take special precautions with gold or bejeweled artifacts because these tend to draw amateur thieves, Mr. Wilson said. The exhibit should have had very tough plexiglass that would have resisted battering for quite a while, as well as motion detectors and surveillance cameras.

Museums also have a tradition of providing strong security for any exhibits on loan, and particularly on loan from other international art centers. The nine artworks were on loan from the private Liangyi Museum in Hong Kong, which holds the collection of Peter Fung, a well-known investor over the past 30 years in companies across Southeast Asia. Mr. Fung did not return telephone calls on Thursday.

The timing of the government's announcements about the crime suggested careful choreography. The Palace Museum kept the crime a secret on Monday and Tuesday. On Wednesday morning, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage ordered the country's museums to close temporarily to review their security. Several hours later, the Palace Museum announced the crime at a news conference.

The police then announced late Wednesday that they had already caught the suspect at 7:40 p.m., at an Internet cafe in southwestern Beijing.

Chinese law requires that all Internet cafes and nightclubs have security cameras that continuously send images directly to neighborhood police stations. Face recognition computer software is being rapidly installed at police stations across the nation to process these images, according to surveillance industry executives.

The software tends to produce a lot of false positives — people who may bear a passing resemblance to a suspect. But Chinese law provides few legal remedies for cases of false arrest, making it easier for the police to use the technology on a large scale.

In a statement, the Beijing police said only that the suspect had been found “through the use of technology in an era of Internet cafes,” and noted that the case had been cracked in only 58 hours.

Heavy coverage by state media seemed intended to dismiss — without actually mentioning — the possibility of theft by an insider. Art scholars have long complained of periodic thefts by insiders at provincial museums across China.

The Forbidden City itself lost many valuable works, including its most famous painting, in the years after the overthrow of the last emperor, Pu Yi, in 1911. When Pu Yi was forced to leave the premises in 1924, he took the early 12th-century painting, “Along the River During the Qingming Festival,” with him. The Japanese later installed Pu Yi as their puppet ruler in Manchuria, and he still had the painting when the Soviet Army captured him at the end of World War II.

It was returned to what was by then the Palace Museum and remains there, although it is seldom exhibited because of its fragility.

Hilda Wang contributed reporting.