

# How a Salvador Dali Drawing Was Stolen From Rikers Island

Crime 8:12 AM PDT, April 9, 2020 - SAL BONO

A jail island is not a place where someone would expect a theft of a world renowned artist's work to take place, nor would one think it's a natural home for such highbrow art in the first place, but in the late hours of March 1, 2003, truth became more abstract than fiction.

Authorities say four men stole a Salvador Dali drawing from the lobby on New York City's Rikers Island. However, the suspects were not who you think.

They were not inmates, but prison guards and deputy wardens. Here is a story about how those expected to uphold the law didn't set the example they swore an oath to.

## Dali's Drawing

In February 1965, Spanish surrealist artist Salvador Dali was supposed to pay a visit to Rikers Island and conduct an art therapy class as a favor to his friends, then-Department of Correction Commissioner Anna Moscowitz and business associate Nico Yperifanos.

But on the morning the class was scheduled, Dali woke up with a high fever and had to cancel. While feeling guilty for the last minute cancellation, he made a quick drawing inside his suite at the St. Regis Hotel in Manhattan as a gift for the inmates.

Dali drew a depiction of Christ on the cross with the note that read "To the dining room of the prisoners, Rikers Island" in the bottom left corner. He signed it and dated it 1965 in the bottom right corner.

At the time, the watercolor and charcoal drawing was valued and appraised to be worth between \$175,000 to \$185,000.

Much of Dali's work consisted of melting clocks, sexual imagery and surreal images of people, and much served as commentary on war, spirituality and vanity.

Dali's reasoning behind deciding to draw the image of Christ for the inmates remains a mystery.

"Salvador Dali was a strange man," said Alex Rosenberg, Dali's former publisher and Chairman Emeritus of the Salvador Dali Research Center. "Every once in a while he did religious work. His crucifixions of Christ are marvelous paintings."

The drawing was framed and hung in the mess hall of the jail, where it went largely unnoticed until 1981, when an irate inmate flung a metal coffee cup at the drawing, shattering the glass and staining the image. It was then taken down.

The drawing was then sent to a Virginia gallery for a brief period and before being returned to the prison where it stayed in the basement and was forgotten. There, it sustained water

damage, according to Rosenberg. Dali died in 1989, but sometime in the 1990s, the drawing was found in the trash and saved by a guard.

By 1998, it was back up in the jail, hanging near a Pepsi soda vending machine and water fountain in the lobby of the Eric M. Taylor Center on Rikers Island. Next to the drawing was a framed note from the warden explaining that the image was worth \$1 million.

“In order to determine an artist's greatness, you have to wait until he's dead, his dealer's dead, his wife is dead, his mistress is dead, and a five-year-old child walks into the museum and says, ‘Mommy, I like that.’ That's the first real criticism. Dali has been subject to that,” Rosenberg said.

### **The Art of the Steal**

Just after 1 a.m. on March 1, 2003, an unplanned fire drill occurred inside the Eric M. Taylor Center. All 2,000 inmates inside were put on lockdown and the guards on duty manned their positions, leaving the lobby empty. It was during that time that the Dali drawing was swiped and replaced with a replica.

Hours later, after shifts changed and the drama of the unplanned drill settled, a guard who quietly prayed to the Dali drawing every time he started his shift realized something was off. He went to the warden and said that the drawing was a fake. The warden noticed right away what was hanging was a smaller version of what had been in that spot for years.

The chase was on.

“I thought it was a joke,” former Department of Corrections Inspector General Mike Caruso told InsideEdition.com.

Caruso said the spot from which the drawing was taken was not only under surveillance, but also noted that “an officer [was] posted at that location 24 hours a day.” But the tapes from the security cameras pointing near the drawing were lost.

He immediately believed the incident to be an inside job.

“Investigating an officer is always difficult because they are sworn peace officers,” Caruso told InsideEdition.com.

Less than two years after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, New York's Fire Department, Police Department and Corrections Officers — its Bravest, Finest and Boldest, so to speak — were held in the highest regard. It was as if real life superheroes were walking among New Yorkers. It would be a shock no matter the time, but as the city was still healing, this was a massive and strange blow to law enforcement.

“They're there to uphold the law, to provide care, custody and control for the inmates that they oversee,” Caruso said. “This would be the last thing you would expect that they would be the actual subjects of the investigation.”

But less than a week after the theft, the group allegedly responsible started turning on one another.

In the early afternoon of March 4, 2003, guard Timothy Pina was the first to turn himself in. Authorities say Pina implicated Greg Sokol and Mitchel Hochhauser as well as the suspected ringleader Benny Nuzzo. All those who were named worked at Rikers.

Pina told Caruso that Nuzzo and Hochhauser first approached him in November 2002 about swiping the drawing, according to court documents. He reportedly said each were going to walk away with \$40,000 to \$50,000 after they sold the Dali on the black market.

Pina said that Nuzzo gave him a stapler and gloves and “ordered Sokol and myself to take the painting down,” according to court documents. Pina said he did as he was told and then was ordered to staple their version of the drawing to the wall. Pina added that after the heist, he and Sokol returned to their homes in Staten Island. Pina said he threw the staple gun in the water and they threw their gloves into a sewer.

While Pina spoke to authorities, people inside the prison also started talking. It was during this time that Nuzzo reportedly told his alleged cohorts that he had destroyed the drawing, according to court documents.

After speaking to Caruso, Pina agreed to wear a wire for investigators and met with Sokol. The duo met inside a Staten Island coffee shop.

“I don’t even think Benny f\*\*\*\*\* destroyed that painting. I even think they’re not even gonna give us anything, you know?” a man authorities identified as Sokol was recorded saying on the wire. “It’s just totally ridiculous. They set us up. I should have stopped it too. I was just in fear. I was in fear for my family. I mean, did they actually think that they were gonna get away with this s\*\*\*?”

Sokol was taken into custody as he left the coffee shop. Sokol then allegedly confessed.

“They were very nervous because not only were their careers on the line, but they were facing jail time,” Caruso told InsideEdition.com. “Sad to say, one of the officers actually contemplated suicide by putting a gun to his head, but luckily he saw one of his children and he thought better of it.”

Caruso got Sokol to wear a wire and record his conversations with Hochhauser and Nuzzo when he went to work at Rikers on March 5, 2003.

“The only way we’re going to get f\*\*\*\*\*, okay, is if we f\*\*\* ourselves up,” a man authorities claim was Nuzzo was recorded telling Sokol. “I’m telling you now, we’re all going together. For now on, we’re in deep s\*\*\* now. I have total faith in you. I have total faith in him. I have total faith in us.”

Sokol told the others that he feared Pina was wearing a wire, which Caruso said was a ploy to get them to talk.

“The only person that can give you up is you, me and him are not going to give you up,” a man investigators identified as Hochhauser was recorded telling Sokol. “We’re going to our graves with this.”

At the same time, Caruso zeroed in on Nuzzo. He frequently visited Nuzzo's home in Brooklyn, which he shared with his mother, who was sick with cancer. Though Caruso was there to see if her son had hidden the drawing in the home, Mrs. Nuzzo often greeted him with coffee and pastries, making the investigation that much harder, Caruso said.

But professionalism and the quest for the truth won out. Investigators searched Nuzzo's home and say they found more than \$1,000 worth of items stolen from Rikers. The Dali drawing was not among them and Nuzzo maintained he had no part in the heist.

Investigators also determined that a fifth Rikers employee drew the phony image after being told the drawing of Christ was a gift.

“Two of the individuals knew an officer in another facility that had exceptional skills, as far as artwork went, so they approached him. He was given a photograph of the original Dali and he's the one that prepared to duplicate. He was later administratively charged for preparing the duplicate and not reporting it to the office of the inspector general,” Caruso said.

In June 2003, Nuzzo, Sokol, Pina, and Hochhauser, were charged with second-degree grand larceny. If convicted, those facing that charge could be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison.

### **Abstract Aftermath**

Sokol, Pina and Hochhauser pleaded guilty to second degree grand larceny, while Nuzzo denied the allegations and fought the charges until the end.

Nuzzo also hired hotshot attorney Joe Tacopina.

Tacopina, a hotshot attorney whose recent clients include Jay-Z, Alex Rodriguez and Meek Mill, told InsideEdition.com that he used Sokol's wiretaps against the prosecution. He presented them to the jury, saying that you cannot clearly hear what was being said on them during the parts of admission.

“But on the vital parts, the part where Benny's allegedly making an admission, 'I did this, I took the painting, I knew what the plan was, don't worry about it, I destroyed it.' On those vital parts, the word 'do' and 'don't' were interchangeable. 'I do know where it is' and 'I don't know where it is,' were not distinguishable,” Tacopina said.

He also read back the government's transcript to Sokol, purposefully replacing dos with don'ts and vice versa, effectively changing the meanings of sentences completely. Sokol said he could not tell when Tacopina had swapped out words, which Tacopina said proved his point that the wiretaps may not have been accurately transcribed.

“That was the watershed moment in that trial,” Tacopina said. “The death knell to the prosecution's case.”

Nuzzo was offered a deal in which he would plead guilty in exchange for just four years behind bars. He maintained his innocence and still refused. Ultimately, Nuzzo was found not guilty and was acquitted of the charge.

Unlike every day during the month-long trial where Nuzzo helped his attorneys carry his case files out of court, Nuzzo instead quickly shook his attorney's hand, thanked him and ran out of the courtroom, Tacopina said.

"We got down to the car and I called Benny, I said, 'I just wanted to see what was that all about?' I go, 'Hey Benny, how are you doing? Listen, your gratitude's overwhelming. Really, that was great. I appreciate the handshake. By the way, the boxes, you decided you didn't need to help us?'" he recalled.

"Joe, I'm so sorry. I'm coming to your office tomorrow. I'm going to bring you the biggest gift ever. You saved my life," Tacopina said Nuzzo told me. "I go, 'Yeah Benny, but why'd you then act like that? Why didn't you just hang around the courtroom?'"

"What he said to me as one of the great lines I've ever had relayed to me by a client, he said, 'Joe, I just had to get out of there. I was just afraid the jury was going to change their mind.'" I think Benny was just as surprised as we all were," he said.

After an internal investigation conducted by administration officials, Nuzzo was found guilty of stealing more than \$1,000 of items from the prison in an unrelated administrative trial. He was fired from his job.

Sokol was given three years' probation and had to pay a \$1,000 fine. Pina was sentenced to five years' probation. Hochhauser was given one to three years in prison.

"In regards to the individual that was acquitted, you have to respect the decision of the jury," Caruso said. "That's the way the system works. The only thing I didn't understand is why the other individuals that were found guilty would implicate this person."

The Dali drawing has never been recovered.

"We did the best we could. We exhausted all investigative avenues," Caruso said. "I still feel that the painting is out there and I would suggest if anyone knows where it is, that they contact Department of Correction Inspector General's office."

"This ranks in the top five of the most challenging case that I've ever tried, from an evidentiary standpoint, for sure," Tacopina said. "This definitely ranks as my favorite case I've ever tried because it wasn't just a criminal trial, it wasn't a, he said, she said. It was a criminal trial with the focal point being Salvador Dali."

When reached by InsideEdition.com, Sokol and Hochhauser declined to comment. Messages left for Pina went unanswered.

Nuzzo declined to be interviewed for the story, but told InsideEdition.com he has not spoken to Sokol, Hochhauser or Pina since 2003, but would welcome meeting with them down the line.

"I am at peace in my heart with myself and if they want to have a cup of coffee, I am OK with that," he said. "I struggle every day and I make a living, but I am at a good place."

In 2017, Nuzzo and Caruso reconnected and met for the first time since the trial.

“It was a little bit strange because I hadn't seen him in 14 years. I'd seen him frequently when we were both active in the department, but it was cordial. He was basically laying it out how he wasn't involved,” Caruso recalled.

As for Dali's take on the heist? Alex Rosenberg, the Dali expert, is confident in what his reaction would be.

“It would be a big joke to him,” he said.