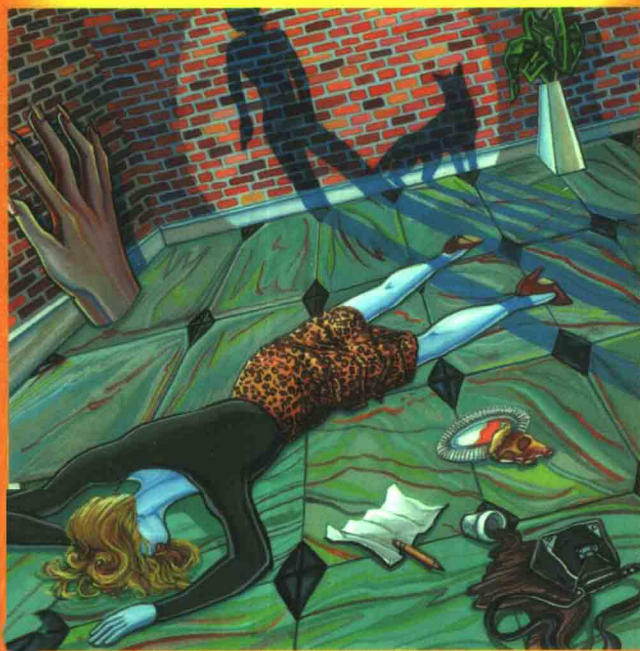


crime files

WHO FRAMED ART DECCO?



MARGARET BENOIT

Who Framed Art Decco?

Margaret Benoit

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Benoit, Margaret.

Who framed Art Decco? / Margaret Benoit.

p. cm.

Summary: A theft from an art gallery leads detective Angel Cardoni to make a series of improvised on-the-spot lab experiments and scientifically inspired deductions.

ISBN 0-07-006274-9

[1. Art galleries, Commercial—Fiction. 2. Mystery and detective stories.] I. Title.

PZ7.B447115Wh 1997

[Fic]—dc21

97-43018

CIP

AC

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 DOC/DOC 9 0 2 1 0 9 8 7 (pbk)

ISBN 0-07-006274-9 (pbk)

The sponsoring editor for this book was Judith Terrill-Breuer, the editing supervisor was Pattie Amoroso, and the production supervisor was Claire Stanley. It was set in Times Ten Roman by Dennis Joseph Smith of McGraw-Hill's Professional Book Group in Hightstown, New Jersey.

Printed and bound by R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company.

McGraw-Hill books are available at special quantity discounts to use as premiums and sales promotions. For more information, please write to the Director of Special Sales, McGraw-Hill, 11 West 19th Street, New York, NY 10011. Or contact your local bookstore.

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1

Picture Perfect

IN AMERICA'S greatest city, crime is a twenty-four-hour business. I should know. My name is Angel Cardoni. I'm a homicide detective with City P.D. I don't look like the detectives you see in the movies or on TV. I'm five-foot-six with brown hair and brown eyes, and I'm one of the few women in our department. But that's not why I got the job. I got the job because I'm good at what I do.

I had been up all night working a case, then I slept all day. It was a Tuesday. I woke up around dinnertime to find Miro stretched out next to me. She's my German Shepherd. She's not supposed to sleep on the bed. Oh, well—so much for discipline.

We ate dinner in front of the TV in the living room. I channel-surfed while I ate. There's never anything good on the box any more, so I decided to take Miro out for a walk and rent a movie from the local video store.

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Miro sniffed the beach air and roamed as far as her leash could take her along the boardwalk. We cut through an alley and made it to the boulevard. The multicolored lights of Tolowski's video store flashed on and off, and a breeze catcher spun in the evening drafts.

"Hey, Cardoni! What's new?" Mr. Tolowski's eyes twinkled as I entered the store.

I think he has been impressed with me ever since the night I tackled an armed robber inside his store. It actually wasn't a big risk. First, the guy had his gun pointed at the register, not at Mr. Tolowski. Second, I happened to be right behind the guy. In one quick move I had him on the floor and cuffed. He was escorted out and taken away by a black-and-white police car in no time flat. Mr. Tolowski had been so grateful that he promised me one year's worth of free video rentals.

I hope he hadn't regretted it—I watch a lot of movies. We're talking about four a week. I've been hooked on movies ever since I was twelve. I love getting lost in a movie. They help me fall asleep after a rough day, or night, depending on how you look at it.

Mr. Tolowski smiled as he came out from behind the counter. "I just got in a new release. You and Miro will both like it. Wouldn't you, Miro?" he cooed as he bent to pet her.

"Okay, we'll try it." I reached into my wallet for my ID card.

"No, no," Mr. Tolowski said. "I know I'll get it back tomorrow."

"Thanks," I called as Miro and I headed out the door.

As we approached my house, Miro stopped dead in her tracks and began sniffing the path.

"What'cha lookin' for, girl?" I asked. "You're not going to find Mrs. Maplewood's kitty anywhere."

Mrs. Maplewood was my next-door neighbor. She was a retired schoolteacher who volunteered at the library and worked part-time as a music instructor. Her cat, Millie, had taken an instant dislike to Miro when I had brought my fuzzy friend home from the pound. Millie had stopped coming over for treats.

We were going around to the back of the house when Miro let out a few deep, gravel-sounding barks.

"What is it, girl?" I asked.

She growled and showed her teeth. That meant business. I took out my gun and crept toward the house. We were just at the kitchen door when I heard an ear-shattering SMASH.

Someone was in the house! I opened the door and Miro raced in, her claws scraping the tile floor. I was right behind her.

Suddenly the front door banged open. The

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thief was getting away!

I ran to the door. I could barely make out a large shape ducking into the alley. By the time I had gotten over the fence, whoever it was had disappeared.

Miro ran to the eight-foot-high fence and barked in frustration.

"Is everything okay?" Mrs. Maplewood shouted from her upstairs balcony.

"Just an unwanted visitor," I said grimly. "Check all your doors and windows, Mrs. Maplewood."

I said good night and went in. Miro tore over to the living room and sniffed loudly.

"What's up?" I asked. I turned on the lights. The TV and VCR were gone.

2

Abstract Art

WEDNESDAY, 3 P.M. I fell asleep with the video in my hand. I dreamed about chasing a bad guy in the Amazon forest. He was running away with my TV and VCR, then suddenly I was running for my life . . .

I sat bolt upright. My heart was pounding, and I was all sweaty. Miro was snoring on the bed next to me. Oh, to be a dog. I went downstairs to get the paper. Miro galloped out to the yard.

While I waited on the steps for her, I looked at my handiwork from last night. I had tucked a small piece of plywood into the window. There were no fingerprints on the door jambs or the shelves where the TV and VCR had been. I could kiss them both good-bye, I thought.

What would we do this evening? I skimmed the newspaper for something different. An advertisement caught my eye.

Now appearing at Art's Gallery and Exhibit Hall: The Electric Five. Check out the interactive show that's got people talking!

The rest of the paper was so-so. One headline caught my attention as I scooped up the last bit of my cereal.

"Dealer Takes Two?"

The owner of Art's Gallery and Exhibit Hall in Point Amalia was questioned yesterday after a second piece of art was stolen from his gallery. Just two weeks earlier, Arthur Decco placed a claim with his insurance company, Ranesco, for the missing display, entitled, "Magnets in Action," by artist Marlis Geyer.

Insurance company personnel would not comment on the risk that artists might be taking to exhibit with Arthur Decco. Decco himself could not be reached for comment, but a spokesperson reports that the gallery is expecting a large turnout for tomorrow night's opening for The Electric Five.

A visit to this art gallery would be interesting. It beat staying at home staring at the shelf where the TV and VCR used to be. I called the gallery. No, they didn't have a

problem with pets if they were leashed. I got dressed, strapped on my gun—it's a habit—and we were good to go in ten minutes.

We jumped into my truck. There was plenty of room for Miro. She roamed around the back and came up to sit in front.

Art's Gallery was in a warehouse down by the bay. A canvas sign proclaimed *The Electric Five*. I probably would have found the place even without the sign—it was practically the only building there. All the others had been torn down. I wondered if Art's Gallery was next. The building looked like it hadn't changed a bit since the city was built. The old glass panes were still in place. The bricks were spotted white with age.

Miro shoved her way in, nose first, through the old doors. My shoes squeaked on the slippery smooth floors. Bright lights glared from overhead. An army of heavy wood coat racks stood in the lobby, probably for tomorrow night's opening.

The first display room was filled with baskets made of different colors and thicknesses of wires. Information cards identified their gauges and the amount of electrical current each one could carry.

I looked at the biography card near the last work in the room. The photograph of Ricardo Fernandez was as colorful as the baskets. He wore red-tinted glasses and a

stack of colorful wire friendship bracelets. He had started his career as an electrician, the card read.

In the next room, an interactive display showed lightbulbs in parallel lines. I played with the switches and saw the lights get brighter when fewer bulbs were lit. Weird! But it was interesting. There were hundreds of tiny lights twinkling on the displays, stuck on the wood.

I looked at the paintings filled with tiny sparkling lights. Then I saw the price. It would cost me one year's salary to purchase a special wired painting by Ricardo Fernandez. The bio card told me that Ricardo was a huge hit in Europe.

"At those prices, *hitman* is more like it," I grinned at Miro. She yawned loudly.

"That piece was created four years ago, right before they tore down the old City Hall," a voice said from behind me.

The man wore a crisp white shirt and black pants. He had curly black hair and a friendly smile. He stuck out his hand and said, "Arthur Decco. I own the place."

"Angel Cardoni. I'm visiting the place."

We shook hands.

"Please call me Art," he said.

"Please call me Cardoni," I said.

Miro yawned from her spot by the wall. Well, *aren't you going to introduce me?* she

seemed to say.

"And that's Miro," I said.

"What a nice-looking dog," exclaimed Art Decco. "Miro was also the name of a great artist, you know."

"Somehow, I think she knows that," I said with a smile.

We turned back to the canvas.

"I read about your problems with disappearing artwork," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you," Art said. After a pause, he added, "I'm being framed."

"Really?"

"It's quite simple. I pay a sizeable amount of money as a premium each year to my insurance company. If one of my displays is stolen or damaged, the insurance company pays me what the piece of art is worth. The art I sell in this gallery is worth a lot—and a lot of it is being stolen. It looks like I'm stealing the art myself to make money. Ranesco is now threatening to cut me off if I place another claim."

"How much art has been stolen?" I asked.

"I've had two pieces of artwork and one interactive display get up and walk out," he said.

"My TV and VCR did the same thing to me last night," I said. "I know how you feel."

"I just wish the police would believe me," he said.

"Maybe I can help," I replied.

"How?" Art asked.

"Investigation," I said. At his blank look I added, "I'm with City Homicide."

"Did they send you?" Art asked.

"No," I said. "It's my day off." *Or about to not be my day off*, I thought.

"You're not what I would expect," he said.

"I hear that a lot," I said.

"You're on, then," Art said. "It would be great if you could work undercover. Isn't that what you call it? You could pretend to be a serious art collector."

"At these prices, that's about all I could do," I said with a chuckle. "I'm ready when you are."

Art held out his arm and I took it as if I had been browsing in art galleries my whole life. We spent the next half hour strolling from room to room. The artists were busy preparing for the big opening. Art introduced me to each of them. Leon Grubick worked with neon signs and interactive displays. He was tall with blond hair, and wore a neon yellow T-shirt.

"So, you're a big collector?" Leon inquired while I was studying some of his neon signs. I felt as though I had time-warped into the next millenium. There were neon signs advertising products that didn't exist yet. This guy had a great imagination.

"You never can tell what she just might decide to buy on the spot," Art said

"Oh?" Leon said with a raised eyebrow. "My favorite kind of collector—impulsive. I hope you enjoy your visit "

We left Leon's area and wandered toward the other end of the gallery. A young woman was arranging photographs on the floor. Her dark features were framed by long black hair braided in corn rows. She wore a denim jacket, a sandy brown dress, and sneakers.

"Angel Cardoni, meet Lareesha Jones. Lareesha has her own research lab at the University," Art said as he introduced us. "She's studying lightning strikes, but her work qualifies as art."

"Then you are *Dr. Jones*," I said as we shook hands. "Your work sounds interesting."

"Striking, to some people," she cracked.

I admired a sequence of photographs. They were quite dramatic. There was a swell of purple clouds in the first photo. Lightning seemed to rip through the skies like roots of a petrified tree. I read the information card: *Moving air currents create regions of charge separation. The base of these clouds has a strong negative charge. The ground beneath it has a strong positive charge.*

The next photo showed a dark purple cloud: *The air conducts electricity and a flash of lightning rushes through to the ground. The*

beginning of the lightning bolt could be seen.

Opposites attract was the next caption. The glaringly bright bolt of pure electric energy flashing through the sky was spectacular.

In the next room, I met Harvey Ballinger. He was a handsome guy—tall with brown hair and brown eyes. As he grabbed at his shirt to loosen the collar, his gold cuff links and buttons sparkled against his black shirt. He shook my hand firmly and his eyes lit up when he saw Miro.

“Just visiting or are you a serious buyer?” he joked as he patted Miro’s head.

“She’s looking right now,” I said lightly. Wow. What a classy guy. I caught a whiff of his cologne, sort of a sandalwood mixed with something musky.

“Don’t believe her,” Art said. “She’s considering adding to her collection.”

“Really?” Harvey said. “Please feel free to stop back and I’ll demonstrate some of my chess boards to you. They really are one of a kind.”

I was admiring the glittering metalwork when a security guard approached Art.

“Are we ready to lock up?” she asked him as she looked at me and Miro questioningly.

She was tall, athletic, and her auburn hair was pulled back in a braid. She wore her uniform with pride. The shoulder patches with the security company logo were ironed flat

and her boots were polished jet black.

"That's okay, Debbie, they're with me. You can go ahead and lock up," Art said.

Debbie withdrew a huge key ring and twirled it around her fingers. She left the room, keys jingling musically.

In another exhibit room, I met Marlis Geyer. She was young but had dyed her hair gray. She wore a fuzzy gray sweater and lots of silver-gray jewelry. I listened to her rings clinking together as she organized an interactive display of magnets.

"I was sorry to read about your stolen piece," I said.

"It's awful," she said.

"Maybe Ms. Cardoni will find something of interest among the pieces you have displayed here," Art said.

"Wonderful!" Marlis exclaimed. "I hope you see something you like."

Marlis created magnetic art, literally. I read one of the cards beside a canvas: *A compass is a magnet. The arrow inside the compass is actually a tiny bar magnet that points to magnetic north and not the North Pole.*

I studied the canvas. It looked as if someone had sprinkled pepper grains in a striking pattern of circles and ovals all around two rectangular bars. It was an interesting pattern. It could have been a butterfly with outspread wings or a dog with big floppy ears.