

Painting stolen from Croatian monastery could be by Gossaert

New attribution spurs search for the work, which has been missing for nearly 40 years



DUBROVNIK. The International Trust for Croatian Monuments, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, has received fresh impetus in its search for the country's stolen art after learning that a painting, *Madonna and Child*, stolen in 1972 from the Franciscan monastery of Dubrovnik, could be attributed to Gossaert.

According to Lady Jadranka Beresford-Peirse, the founder of the trust, nothing has been publicised about this theft to-date. Beresford-Peirse hopes to use the current Gossaert show at the National Gallery in London (until 30 May) and the recently ended exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York to raise awareness of the painting's plight.

For Beresford-Peirse, clues as to the whereabouts of the Gossaert painting are also important in relation to her year-long search for a portrait by Robert Edge Pine of Rudjer Boskovic, a Croatian scientist credited with important contributions to astronomy and an elected scholar of the Royal Society, London. The portrait, painted in 1760, was stolen in the same year and from the same monastery as the *Madonna and Child*. In November, the Royal Society will host a major exhibition devoted to Boskovic, marking the 300th anniversary of his birth. For Beresford-Peirse, the show presents a real goal. "We would absolutely love to be able to include his portrait in the show", she said.

Dr Lorne Campbell, a senior curator at the National Gallery, London, said that the monastery's lost *Madonna and Child* was a variant composition of a painting in The Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague, currently on loan to the National Gallery. Campbell was unable to say whether the monastery's version was by Gossaert himself.

Croatia has a long history of art theft. Dr Joško Belamaric, a Croatian art historian, who conducted a survey of works stolen from Dalmatia between 1945-85, said that "several hundred" works of art, as well as archaeological and ethnographic objects, had been stolen in that period, particularly from the country's churches. However, a spokesman for the organised crime unit of Croatia's ministry for the interior said that recent campaigns conducted by government departments had seen the art-theft rate decline over the last five years, with new protective measures introduced for the country's churches.