

Remarks on the Return of Robert Motherwell's *Untitled*

[July 12, 2018, 12:15 p.m.]

Today I am pleased to announce the return of a long-missing piece by one of New York City's favorite artists and one of the most revered American painters of the twentieth century, Robert Motherwell. The recovery of this work – untitled and unfinished before its theft nearly 40 years ago – provides some finality to the foundation that Motherwell himself established for the purpose of bringing art, research, and art education to the public.

Over its life, this piece traveled a short distance, but a long stretch of time, to arrive back with the Dedalus Foundation. It was the target of a simple theft by an employee of a moving company here in Manhattan some time prior to 1978. Its whereabouts remained unknown for decades until the son of an employee at that moving company, Daniele Unti, contacted the Dedalus Foundation last year regarding the authenticity of the piece, which had been in his father's possession for the past 30 years.

The Dedalus Foundation, established after Motherwell's death in 1991, maintained photographs of this piece in the hopes that they might someday recover it and the other missing works. Through their diligence, and the readiness and ability of the FBI's Art Crime Team, this Motherwell painting is finally where it should be: with the foundation and for the benefit of the public.

Motherwell was among a group of visual artists often considered together as the "New York School." Today's return is just the latest service that the FBI's Art Crime Team has performed for that vanguard movement based here in the City. Over the past several years, the Team has debunked false bills of sale and documents from renowned patrons and gallerists like Betty Parsons, and has battled forgeries of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning by fraudsters and forgers operating around the country.¹ Those cases help to keep the art world and the public's access to fine art honest and open. And cases like today's return continue to enrich the culture of our city by bringing lost and stolen works back into the light.

It is thanks to the professionalism and integrity of the Agents on the FBI's Art Crime Team that today's return was completed swiftly and voluntarily by the man who found himself in possession of the piece earlier this year. One reason that we

¹ See *U.S. v. Spoutz*, 16 Cr. 392 (LAK).

hold these events upon the return of missing or stolen artworks is to celebrate these agents' dedication and proficiency, and to get the word out to the public that the FBI's team is ready and willing to respond to cases of suspected forgeries and thefts of artwork and cultural property.

Today, nearly 90 additional works by Motherwell remain missing. We hope they remain in the same condition as this piece and that anyone encountering those pieces in the market brings them to the attention of law enforcement.

On behalf of the Office, I thank the FBI for its outstanding work on this and so many matters of importance to the District, and take pride in our long-standing and continuing partnership with the Art Crime Team in support of its mission.