

The Great Rikers Island Art Heist

For forty years, an original Salvador Dalí painting went unnoticed inside New York City's massive jail complex. Then a gang of thieves decided it might be worth something.

On February 26, 1965, Salvador Dalí woke up with a temperature of 101 and realized his day wasn't going to go as planned. The surrealist master had agreed to visit Rikers Island—the New York City jail complex located off the shores of Queens and the Bronx—that afternoon to paint alongside the prisoners. He was a sucker for a good media stunt, and the New York City Department of Correction had already heralded the visit with great fanfare in a press release. Dalí was due to arrive ceremoniously by boat, with his wife, pet ocelot, and a gaggle of reporters in tow.

Earlier in the year, Department of Correction Commissioner Anna Moscovitz Kross met Dalí's business associate Nico Yperifanos at a dinner party, where they hatched the plan for Dalí's visit. Kross, the first female commissioner of the jail system, believed in rehabilitating prisoners with art, including painting sessions and theater productions. It didn't take much for Yperifanos to persuade Dalí. As long as the city's newspapers would be there to capture his magnanimous act, he was game.

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But now, feverish and ill, Dalí needed to bow out. There was no way he could make the trip. From his suite at the gilded St. Regis Hotel in midtown Manhattan, he quickly slapped together a painting as an apology and summoned Yperifanos to take it to the island in his absence. News photos from that day show Yperifanos presenting Kross with the untitled work, a five-by-three-foot slapdash of brushstrokes depicting Christ on the cross. Dalí, whose paintings would later command as much as \$21.7 million at auctions, signed and dated the work in the lower righthand corner.

But the spectacle didn't make a lasting impression, and over time the painting's remarkable provenance faded from the memories of the wardens who ran the jail system.



Left: New York City's Department of Correction Commissioner Anna Moscovitz Kross accepts the Dalí painting from Nico Yperifanos. Right: Salvador Dalí in 1965.

For nearly two decades, it hung in the prisoners' mess hall. In 1981, after an inmate lobbed a coffee cup at the painting, breaking its glass casing and leaving a stain, the Dalí was taken down. A warden sent it off to a dealer to authenticate and appraise it; the painting was then shipped to a Virginia gallery for temporary display in a prison art exhibit. After its return, the Dalí was boxed up in a storage crate, forgotten again. At one point it made its way to a trash bin, where a guard saved it from being thrown out. Then it found its way to the wall of a warden's office and, finally, to the lobby of Eric M. Taylor Center, one of Rikers's ten jails. There it hung under the lobby's fluorescent lights, within a few steps of a humming Pepsi-Cola vending machine.

The work barely registered with the Department of Correction officers and visitors who passed it. But a plaque next to the painting proclaimed that it was worth an estimated one million dollars. To the island's residents, it screamed easy money.

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At 1 a.m. on March 1, 2003, the squawk of a radio announced a fire drill inside the Eric M. Taylor Center. Two thousand inmates were immediately locked down. Guards rushed from their posts and convened in a remote wing, as they had been trained to do during a drill.

After the drill began and the jail's lobby was deserted, the thieves got to work. One stood watch. Another slipped off the painting case's locks. The third kept tabs on the fire drill's progress. Within a few

minutes, a replica of the Dalí hung in its place. The substitute was far from a perfect match, and the thief standing guard wasn't convinced. "That looks ridiculous," he said.

A few hours later, in the early morning, two prison guards stationed next to the jail's lobby noticed that something about the painting was off. It seemed markedly smaller, and in place of its carved mahogany wood frame, a brown frame had been painted around the edge of the canvas. *A fake.*

It must've been an inside job, Rikers officials immediately determined. Inmates couldn't access the lobby. And the surveillance camera that pointed directly at the Dalí and linked to a recorder in the warden's office had mysteriously stopped working overnight. Just like the game Clue, everyone was now a suspect.

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Shortly after Benny Nuzzo returned home on March 1 from the graveyard shift as an assistant deputy warden at the Taylor Center, his phone rang. It was a buddy from Rikers. The Dalí had been snatched.



Benny Nuzzo

Courtesy of Benny Nuzzo

“Who gives a shit?” Nuzzo replied.

“They’re saying *you’re* involved,” the friend said.

Bullshit, Nuzzo thought, but he wasn’t surprised. Aside from being the top officer working the night before, he believed the Department of Correction had it out for him. Nuzzo wasn’t shy about reminding some of his coworkers how they’d behaved before they’d moved up the chain. But while the higher-ups disliked him, the forty-nine-year-old commanded the respect of the officers beneath him. He cared about his crew, and occasionally let officers leave shifts early.

When he was five years old, Nuzzo's family emigrated from Sicily to Bushwick, Brooklyn—a tough neighborhood where residents used to

say kids either became police captains or capos in the mob. He'd dreamed of joining the NYPD and tested for the city's police force, the FDNY, and the Department of Correction. Rikers was the first to call with an offer. Now Nuzzo had been on the job for nearly twenty-five years and would receive a full pension if he reached that milestone. He poured most of his spare cash into his retirement funds. His careful saving was hard on his wife and children, but he knew it would pay off when he clocked out for the last time.

He could easily give investigators a whole timeline of his shift. He'd overseen the fire alarm response team, then shot pool with a few other guards after the drill ended. At 2 a.m., he made his rounds, watched some TV in his office, and filled out paperwork. A relatively normal night.

Plus, he couldn't care less about the Dalí, making the investigators' suspicions all the more ridiculous. To him, it looked like scribble. "My son could do better than that," he'd joke.

When Rikers guard Timothy Pina returned to his Staten Island home after working the same graveyard shift as Nuzzo, he felt wracked with guilt. His wife and children left the house that morning so the forty-four-year-old Pina could be alone. But he was so distraught that he pulled out his gun, cocked it, and pointed it at his head. Sixteen years on the job at Rikers had come to this.

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Instead, he began to weep and put his gun down. He'd go to the investigators, he decided, and tell them everything.



Mitchell Hochhauser

Andrew Savulich/NY Daily News Archive/Getty Images

Mike Caruso arrived at the Taylor Center the morning after the theft. During his fourteen years as an inspector general at the city's Department of Investigation, where he was charged with weeding out bad correction officers and corrupt bosses, Caruso had seen all kinds of weird cases. A prison guard who impregnated an inmate, helped her escape, and then discovered she was lying about the unborn child. A guard who arranged to be shot to cover up his role in a gun-smuggling ring. An inmate who paid a guard four thousand dollars to forge documents to secure an early release. But an art heist—that was a new one.

Caruso and his team pored over the parking lot surveillance video, checking to see who'd left the island the night before. They read through logbooks detailing the comings and goings of everyone on Rikers.

Within hours, they'd homed in on the prior night's unscheduled response drill. The jail rarely had drills, and no one could recall one occurring during the night shift. The cover was almost too obvious.

When Pina arrived in Caruso's office, his entire story tumbled out without much prompting.

Benny Nuzzo and Mitchell Hochhauser, another assistant deputy warden, had approached Pina about stealing the Dalí four months earlier, Pina told Caruso, in October 2002. They assumed the fake wouldn't be noticed for months, if ever. At first Pina thought they were joking, but he realized the scheme was more than idle talk when the duo kept finding excuses to visit the Taylor Center's lobby, where Pina was stationed, and started taking photographs of the Dalí.

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In February, Pina said, Nuzzo told him that the heist was on. Pina had to be involved because he manned the front entrance's security desk—a crucial post for pulling off the crime. His cut would be fifty thousand dollars; Nuzzo and Hochhauser would split the rest. Pina felt he was being bullied, but Nuzzo was his boss, and he'd threatened violence if anyone talked.

They'd need a fourth member, though. Someone who could stand watch in the small room next to the lobby—the only other place with a direct view of the Dalí. They decided to bring in Gregory Sokol, a thirty-eight-year-old Staten Island resident and Rikers guard who often carpooled to work with Pina.

After confessing to Caruso, Pina begged to go home. But Caruso already had one guy talking, and it had taken practically zero effort on his part. Now he wanted to flip Sokol.

Later that night, Pina adjusted the wire he'd been given as he walked up to the Java Den, a coffee shop tucked away in a Staten Island strip mall, where Sokol was waiting for him. Pina's excuse for the meeting was simple: The heat from investigators was getting to be too much, and he needed to unload. Sokol felt similarly despondent. "I can't sleep, I can't function," Sokol said. "I can't go on like this."

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The two men had worked together for a decade. Sokol was on his fourteenth year at Rikers and had a plum assignment answering the phone in the Taylor Center control room and doling out Nuzzo's instructions and work duties to other guards. In his spare time, he sold real estate on Staten Island.

They wished they'd never gotten involved, Pina and Sokol agreed, and vowed they wouldn't rat on each other. "I would never say that you had anything to do with it—never," Sokol said.

"You're like my brother," Pina agreed. They talked for hours, and said goodbye a little before 10 p.m.

As soon as Sokol got into his car, investigators swooped in. He fell apart on the spot, agreed to talk, and drove to Caruso's office in downtown Manhattan.

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Caruso walked into his office to find Sokol curled up on the floor, sobbing.

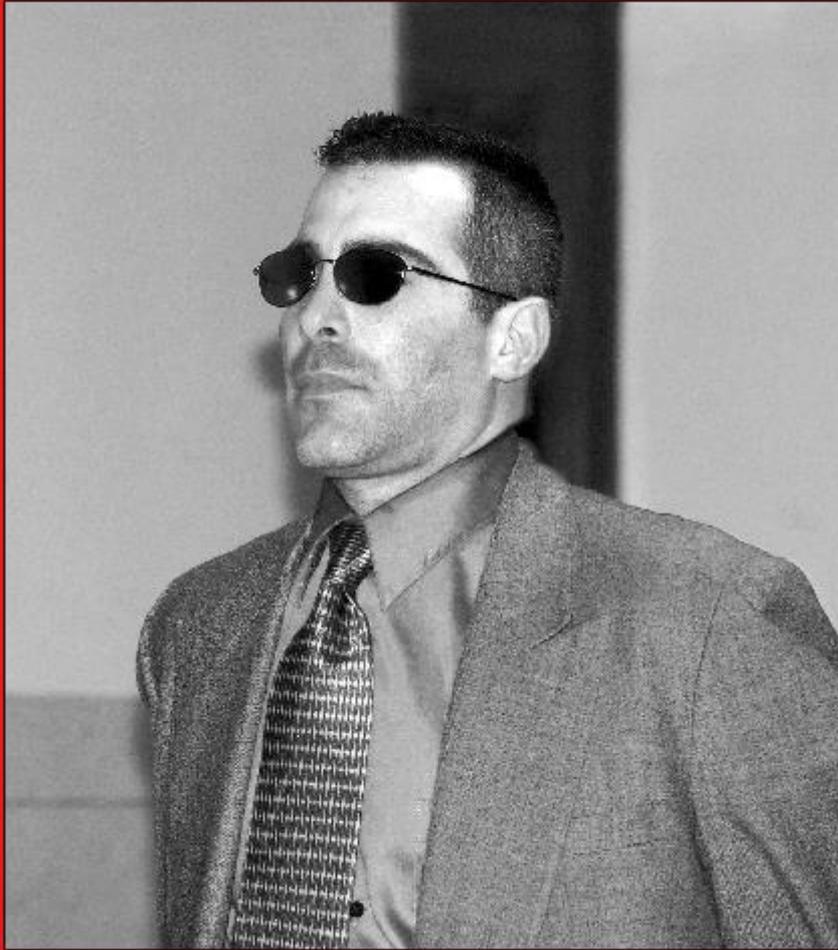
For the second time in two days, Caruso was gifted with an easy confession: Sokol had only learned of the Dalí scheme a few weeks prior, he told Caruso. Pina had given him the broad rundown—the fire drill, the fake, the need for a lookout—during a carpool to work. On the night of the theft, Nuzzo told Sokol to alert the on-duty officers about the fire drill and emphasize that everyone needed to attend. To ensure a good turnout, Sokol told them agency brass planned on monitoring the exercise.

At 1 a.m., Hochhauser got on the radio and announced the drill, then oversaw the response from a staging area outside the control room. The location was perfect for keeping others away from the scene of the crime. Just beyond the control room, a long corridor led to different wings housing the prisoners' dorm rooms. It was Hochhauser's job to ensure that the guards stayed within the wings.

With the lobby empty, Sokol told Caruso, Pina pulled on latex gloves and used a key to open the two locks to the glass case that held the painting. Nuzzo directed the action: When Pina had difficulty turning

the locks, Nuzzo assisted him, then ordered Pina to take the original out of the case. Pina struggled to extract the painting, and Nuzzo asked Sokol to help. The two eventually unhinged the work, handing it to Nuzzo, who ran it out the front door of the lobby to a parking lot.

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Gregory Sokol

Andrew Savulich/NY Daily News Archive/Getty Images

That was the last he saw of the painting, Sokol said. About a minute and a half later, Nuzzo returned with a rolled-up replica—a slightly smaller version of the original that Hochhauser had smuggled in. Like the real Dalí, the fake had the artist's misspelled inscription: "*For The Dinning Room of the Prisoners Rikers Ysland S.D.*" But even an untrained eye would have spotted inaccuracies. Dalí painted the original on paper in India ink, applying a small amount of gouache to accent Christ's face, and glued it to a cardboard mounting. The fake was oil on canvas, with a painted-on wooden frame. Since it wasn't

mounted, the fake couldn't be hung correctly, so, instead, Pina tried to staple the painting to the wood on the back of the glass case.

The staples weren't catching, and Nuzzo grew impatient. "Just bang the stapler!" he yelled. "Get it up, get it up! We need to get it up and finished."

Eventually, Pina stapled it in and hurriedly closed the glass case. A nearby potted plant got caught inside the case's door, so they had to quickly open it again to release the leaves. Sokol watched the comedy of errors with a mixture of amusement and apprehension: "Anybody who comes up here is definitely going to see that this is a duplicate," he said.

When Sokol returned to work the night after the heist, he said, Nuzzo cornered him: They were already suspects, Nuzzo said. Nuzzo had hidden the painting in the ceiling of his mother's Brooklyn home, he said—then ripped it up after getting word that investigators were on to them.

Caruso noted Sokol's strange demeanor as the guard talked. He vacillated between joking and panicking about the situation. First he'd suggest which actors should play their roles in a movie version of the theft; then he'd break into sweats, fearing that Nuzzo and Hochhauser would come after him for cooperating.

With two confessions down, Caruso needed to get Hochhauser and Nuzzo—and he needed to find the painting. He knew it wouldn't be hard to convince Sokol to wear a wire, just as Pina had. Sure enough, Sokol agreed.

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During his next shift, at 11 p.m. on March 5, Sokol decided he'd copy Pina's strategy: He told Nuzzo and Hochhauser that he was anxious and needed to talk. He was worried Pina had flipped, he told them. They all met shortly after midnight in the jail's basement, in an abandoned, dimly lit locker room nestled behind a weight room. An old boiler rattled while a stereo in the weight room blasted music.

The men ordered Sokol to take off his clothes, so he could check for a wire. Sokol knew Nuzzo well, but he didn't really know Hochhauser. A thirty-nine-year-old father of three, Hochhauser wasn't overly tall—five feet and ten inches—but Sokol was intimidated by his bald head and two-hundred-sixty-pound frame. So he did what he was told, hanging up his jacket in the locker room and stripping down to his underwear. No wire. The recorder was safe in the pocket of the jacket—the one item of clothing they didn't check.

Timothy Pina

Andrew Savulich/NY Daily News Archive/Getty Images

Sokol worried aloud that Pina had taped them talking about the Dali, he told the duo. Deny, deny, deny, Hochhauser coached Sokol. If investigators played a recording of Sokol and Pina talking, he said, then Sokol should just tell them he was joking around.

“The only person that can give them you is *you*,” Hochhauser said. “*We’re* not giving you up, understand?”

They wouldn't be in this position if the fake had been a better replica, Sokol snipped. Like if it had a real wooden frame, for one. “Nobody would have known,” he said.

Nuzzo grew fed up with the arguing and walked out of the basement, leaving Hochhauser and Sokol behind. Sokol repeated what Nuzzo had told him: that Nuzzo had hidden the painting in the ceiling of his mother's Bushwick home, then destroyed it. Hochhauser disagreed. “He thinks he's going to get away with this scot-free, with the painting,” Hochhauser said. “He's never going to give it back.”

The recording was far from clear. At times, the stereo and boiler drowned out the three men's voices, and some of what investigators and the Bronx District Attorney's Office heard was ambiguous. But it was enough to get a search warrant for the Brooklyn home of Nuzzo's mother.

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Caruso was certain Nuzzo was the ringleader. Still, he couldn't help but like the guy. Unlike the other three suspects, Nuzzo was affable

and charming. Caruso saw Hochhauser as a typical jail guard, with little personality. The other two were too soft to have masterminded the crime.

During the weekend after the heist, the NYPD and Caruso's team combed Nuzzo's mother's apartment, opening painted-shut fireplaces and checking the ceilings and walls. Caruso repeatedly asked Nuzzo to just give up the Dalí. If the painting was returned safely, he said, Nuzzo might get out of this. "I didn't take it," Nuzzo replied.

A few days later, Caruso's team checked Nuzzo's mother's home again, casing every floor in the three-story building. After a few hours, an investigator shouted to Caruso: "You gotta come in here." They'd discovered two lockers, a gun box, reams of unused logbooks, and other Rikers supplies—but no painting. Investigators wrote up Nuzzo on departmental charges of stealing more than one thousand dollars' worth of supplies.

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Over the next few weeks, Caruso continued to visit Nuzzo, hoping to convince him to come clean. He tried persuading Nuzzo's mother and sister to help. He and his investigators took Nuzzo on drives, passing by the cemetery where Nuzzo's father was buried. Nuzzo made the sign of the cross as they rode by, and Caruso wondered if he'd buried the painting in the grave.

Considering the investigator was trying to put him behind bars, Nuzzo thought Caruso was a good guy. Both men were Italian, both close to their families. Nuzzo's mother, who was battling cancer, had even grown fond of the investigator; Caruso was respectful to her during each visit. On the Feast of Saint Joseph, she invited Caruso, who was parked outside her home, in for pastries.

After three months, Caruso gave up trying to extract a confession and charged the four men. All four showed up in court on the morning of June 17, where, based on Sokol's confession and the wiretaps, prosecutors accused them of conspiring to steal the painting. Each faced up to fifteen years in prison.



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Three months after the arraignment, Hochhauser pleaded guilty to attempted grand larceny in the second degree and received one to three years in prison. Pina pleaded guilty to grand larceny in the third degree and was sentenced to five years' probation. Sokol, who was a cooperating witness, would get a deal for his testimony.

Nuzzo, the last man standing, insisted on his innocence and was dead set on beating the charges, no matter the cost. He hired Joe Tacopina, a pricey celebrity defense attorney who handled high-profile criminal cases, and the trial started in May 2004.



The Dalí work at Rikers Island in 2001.

Angel Franco/The New York Times/Redux

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Tacopina began his defense by attacking the price of the Dalí, which the city valued at two hundred fifty thousand dollars. According to penal law, defendants convicted of grand larceny for stolen property worth less than fifty thousand dollars faced a maximum of seven years in prison. So if Tacopina could prove that the painting was worth less than that, Nuzzo's sentence—if he was convicted—would be greatly reduced from fifteen years.

Tacopina called Alex Rosenberg, an appraiser who'd worked with Dalí—as well as an editor and publisher of more than one hundred

original Dalí etchings and lithographs—to the stand. The Dalí was more a simple drawing than a painting, Rosenberg said, and in poor condition thanks to the coffee stain, abrasions, and water damage. He estimated its worth at twenty thousand dollars and compared it to a 1967 crucifixion scene of Dalí's, done in pen, ink, and watercolor. While smaller than the Rikers Dalí, this painting's detail and color increased its appeal, yet it only garnered \$34,100 at Sotheby's in 2001.

Then Tacopina went after Sokol, poking holes in his testimony. Since the guard was promised leniency for his cooperation, he had an incentive to tell prosecutors what they wanted to hear, Tacopina argued. (Sokol later pleaded guilty to a petit larceny misdemeanor and was given three years' probation and ordered to pay a one-thousand-dollar fine.) An acoustics expert noted the garbled nature of the recording of Nuzzo, Hochhauser, and Sokol in their taped locker-room conversation, making it hard to parse each voice.

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When the jury began deliberating after the monthlong trial, Tacopina came to Nuzzo with a deal from the DA's office. If he pleaded guilty, he could serve four years and be done with it. Nuzzo refused.

"John Gotti would have taken this deal," Tacopina said.

"John Gotti was a criminal," Nuzzo said. "I'm not."

Within four hours, the jury reached a verdict. Nuzzo knew the quick turnaround was a bad sign. He handed his watch and jewelry to his family and told them where his car was parked so they could drive it home once he was ordered into custody. He'd remained calm throughout the trial, but now he felt panic take hold as the jurors took their seats and court officers surrounded him

The jury foreman stood up and announced the verdict: not guilty. "You're free to go," the judge said.

Stunned, Nuzzo shook his lawyers' hands and ran from the room. A few hours later, he called Tacopina to explain his hasty exit: "I didn't want them to change their minds," he said.

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On a sunny June day in 2017, two men met at a Queens diner. Their conversation picked up where it had left off fourteen years earlier.

“How’s your family?” Mike Caruso asked Benny Nuzzo. (They’d agreed to get together after speaking individually for this story. Caruso had said he’d liked Nuzzo so much that if he ever saw him again he’d buy him a beer.)

They gossiped about Rikers wardens and updated each other on people they both knew through work. Caruso, now sixty-four, is a security consultant. Nuzzo, sixty-five, was forced to postpone his carefully planned retirement. Shortly before his trial began, the Department of Correction fired him over the logbooks and lockers found in his mother’s house. The early termination hurt his pension, and his defense tab ate up nearly five hundred thousand dollars of his retirement savings. He now works as a private investigator, looking into malingerers to pay the bills.

“Did you *really* think I took that painting?” Nuzzo asked.

Time hadn’t changed Caruso’s mind. The wire recordings were incriminating, he said.

Nuzzo had theories to explain it all: He’d been used as a scapegoat, and Rikers officials pressured the men to implicate him in the theft. He even had a hypothesis for what happened to the Dalí, which remains on the Art Loss Register, an international database used by art sellers and law enforcement—that the “original” wasn’t, in fact, an original. (Since the painting had bounced around Rikers so much after its arrival in 1965, Nuzzo imagines that someone else—long before the bungled 2003 heist—must have swiped it).

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He hasn’t spoken to Pina, Sokol, or Hochhauser since they were arrested, he said. (Pina is now a children’s author and wrote a book about a young Benjamin Franklin’s encounter with bullies. Sokol still works in real estate. Hochhauser was released from prison in 2005 and lives on Long Island. This account comes from court records and interviews with Pina, Nuzzo, and Caruso; Sokol and Hochhauser declined to speak for this story.)

“When you leave here today, are you gonna still say I stole that painting?” Nuzzo asked after the third cup of coffee.

“The bottom line is, you had your day in court,” Caruso said. “It’s over.”

“Yeah, but what do *you* think?”

“I’m still trying to figure why all three would put it on you.”

Then the two started going over the case once again.