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GETTY AND UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA PARTNER TO CONSERVE LONG LOST WILLEM DE KOONING PAINTING

*The painting was stolen from the University of Arizona Art Museum in 1985 and returned
in 2017*



Willem de Kooning's *Woman-Ochre*, 1954-1955 in August 2017, shortly after it was recovered in New Mexico and returned to the University of Arizona Museum of Art. © 2019 The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Tucson, Ariz./Los Angeles – More than 30 years after it was cut from its frame, ripped from its backing, rolled up, and stolen from the University of Arizona Museum of Art (UAMA), Willem de Kooning's 1955 painting *Woman-Ochre* will be conserved and studied by conservators at the J. Paul Getty Museum and scientists at the Getty Conservation Institute.

Woman-Ochre was stolen from the University museum on the day after Thanksgiving 1985. The painting was missing for more than 30 years before being discovered by the owners of an antiques store in New Mexico who immediately returned it to the museum. Badly damaged in the heist, the painting now needs professional care.

Through an agreement reached with the University of Arizona, paintings conservators at the J. Paul Getty Museum and research scientists at the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) will undertake technical study and conservation treatment of the painting.

"At the Getty we were thrilled to learn that this once-lost painting—a remarkable de Kooning—was returned to its rightful place in the collection of the University of Arizona Museum of Art," said James Cuno, President and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust. "We are deeply honored to lend our expertise in conservation to bring this painting back to its best state and on view for the public once more, and to use this as an opportunity to advance the field of conservation."

Conservators and scientists at the Getty will work together to study, repair, clean, conserve, and document the painting. This will include reuniting it with the original frame as well as repairing and restoring remnants of the canvas that were left behind after the theft and retained by the UAMA since 1985. The project will take approximately a year beginning in April 2019. In summer of 2020 the painting will go on view at the Getty Museum before being returned to the UAMA.

"I am thrilled that the Getty Museum and the Getty Conservation Institute are taking on the challenge of restoring *Woman-Ochre*," said Robert C. Robbins, president of the University of Arizona. "This brings us significantly closer to returning this masterpiece to the campus community and public for examination, education and appreciation."

The project will be overseen by Ulrich Birkmaier, Senior Conservator of Paintings at the Getty Museum and Tom Learner, Head of Science at the Getty Conservation Institute. The Getty and the university will use the project as a teaching tool, providing access to students like a University of Arizona Ph.D. candidate in chemistry who has experience in materials analysis on paintings.

The GCI is well versed in the work of de Kooning. In 2010, the GCI worked closely with Susan Lake, then head of collection management and chief conservator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, on an in-depth study of his paintings from the 1940s through the 1970s. De Kooning's idiosyncratic working methods had long engendered intense speculation and debate among conservators and art historians, primarily on the basis of visual inspection and anecdotal accounts rather than rigorous technical analysis. The Getty's study of de Kooning's creative process used comprehensive scientific examinations of the artist's pigments, binders, and supports to inform art historical interpretations, and was published by the Getty as *Willem de Kooning: The Artist's Materials*.

The Getty Museum regularly undertakes the conservation of key works of art from institutions around the world as part of the Getty's overall philanthropic mission. The Museum has developed an active collaboration program where it works in conjunction with guest conservators and the curators from institutions whose works are being conserved. These projects are undertaken at no cost to the institution in exchange for the opportunity to show the work in the Museum's galleries following conservation.

About *Woman-Ochre*

Willem de Kooning was born in the Netherlands and moved to New York in 1926. He was one of the pioneers and leaders of the abstract expressionist movement, which began in New York after World War II. In 1950, de Kooning began his best-known body of work, his "Woman" series, which included *Woman-Ochre*, completed in 1954-1955. The series is considered monumental in the way that it imagines the human figure.

Woman-Ochre was gifted to the UAMA in 1958 by donor Edward Joseph Gallagher, Jr. The painting was regularly exhibited at UAMA and loaned to several important exhibitions on de Kooning and related artists at major museums around the world.

On November 29, 1985, two people, a man and a woman, followed a staff member inside the UAMA as soon as the museum opened at approximately 9 a.m. The woman distracted a security guard while the man went upstairs and cut *Woman-Ochre* from its frame with a sharp blade, ripping the canvas off its backing and rolling it up to conceal it. The two hurried out of the museum and never returned. They had been inside less than 15 minutes. The heist remains an ongoing FBI investigation.

In 2015, knowing that stolen art often surfaces when thieves die, the UAMA worked in coordination with the FBI to publicize the 30th anniversary of the theft. This resulted in widespread news coverage of the missing painting and proved to be a key factor in its recovery.

In August 2017 David Van Auker, Buck Burns and Rick Johnson purchased the painting, along with furniture and other art, from the estate of a deceased couple in Cliff, New Mexico. They took the items to their store—Manzanita Ridge Furniture & Antiques—in nearby Silver City and displayed the work, unaware of its origins. Several customers commented on the painting's authenticity, prompting Van Auker to research his purchase and connect it with the heist. He immediately called the UAMA and secured the painting. UAMA staffers traveled to New Mexico to retrieve the picture and brought it back to Tucson. At the museum, conservators were able to examine the painting carefully, matching it to the remnants of the cut canvas they had preserved after the robbery, and confirming that it was in fact *Woman-Ochre*.

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The Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) works internationally to advance conservation practice in the visual arts—broadly interpreted to include objects, collections, architecture, and sites. The Institute serves the conservation community through scientific research, education and training, field projects, and the dissemination of information. In all its endeavors, the GCI creates and delivers knowledge that contributes to the conservation of the world's cultural heritage.

The J. Paul Getty Museum collects Greek and Roman antiquities, European paintings, drawings, manuscripts, sculpture and decorative arts to 1900, as well as photographs from around the world to the present day. The Museum's mission is to display and interpret its collections, and present important loan exhibitions and publications for the enjoyment and education of visitors locally and internationally.

This is supported by an active program of research, conservation, and public programs that seek to deepen our knowledge of and connection to works of art.

The University of Arizona Museum of Art offers a year-round schedule of exhibitions, programming, and events designed to engage diverse audiences, inspire critical dialogue and champion art as essential to our lives. The permanent collection includes masterpieces that span eight centuries and innumerable artistic styles. Highlights include the Altarpiece from Ciudad Rodrigo, The Visitation by the Master of the Catholic Kings, Jackson Pollock's Number 20, Mark Rothko's Green on Blue (Earth-Green and White), and Red Canna by Georgia O'Keeffe. UAMA invites all community members to enrich art on campus, in Tucson and beyond by contributing their voices and stories.