

Police paint artist who told of theft as master of fraud

Dealer has left trail of lawsuits

ARTIST, FROM 1BR

States in 1950.

Posed with celebrities

By 1984, he was promoting his "King Tut Collection" with splashy brochures, a slick videotape and pictures of himself with celebrities.

The works are reminiscent of the Egyptian boy king's treasures, brightly painted on a black surface and adorned with gold and jewels. At various times, Verdult touted the exhibit's value at \$20 million, \$60 million and \$100 million as he took it on the road.

He created a stir wherever he went.

Verdult rented a gallery at the Sahara Hotel in Las Vegas where Savalas was playing. He gave

as a painting that Verdult claimed was worth thousands of dollars, then posed for a picture with the TV star.

Next he took the Tut paintings to St. Petersburg in 1985. The exhibit was open a single day. He abruptly shut it down after getting into a heated dispute with his landlord.

Verdult moved back to California, exhibiting in seaside galleries and advertising "business opportunities." A Modesto investor heard his pitch and thought it too good to be true. He phoned Newport Beach police. They went in undercover.

Verdult promised huge returns from art sales and T-shirt concessions, police said. He said he owned 19 galleries, did shows in Las Vegas that "took over the whole damn hotel," and had so much money he didn't know what to do with it.

'A helluva businessman'

"I'm an artist, but I'm a helluva businessman, too," a wiretap recorded him telling the undercover officer. "I like making money. I like my Rolls-Royce. I like my Stutz. I like my big houses . . . I want you on am."

Authorities didn't pursue the case, saying there wasn't enough proof to prosecute.

"You have to be able to show intent. That is very difficult to show in cases where people are dealing in art objects," Newport Beach Sgt.

'It is one thing when you are hit over the head and robbed. It's another when you unclasp the bracelet yourself. It is so humiliating.'

MICHELLE WEST, society columnist

Todd Wilkenson said. "What someone values as treasure is someone else's junk."

Still, many people sued. By 1988, Verdult had 25 lawsuits pending against him in California. Others filed complaints with the Costa Mesa, Calif., police.

From there Verdult moved to Hawaii and tried to set up a show in

a Waikiki hotel. Honolulu police investigated when they heard about the Newport Beach charges.

Verdult left the South Pacific and moved to Florida, displaying his work first on Las Olas Boulevard, then Galt Ocean Mile.

Again he called himself "the Dutch Master," likening his talents to those of Rembrandt and other 17th Century painters.

Michelle West, a society columnist for Weekly Scene magazine who has a fortune in Egyptian-style jewelry, went to Verdult's gallery to interview him.

She said Verdult quickly took note of her seven-carat diamond ring.

Promised \$1 million return

"He said, 'I'm just now getting ready to complete my King Tut Exhibit by looking for a stone to go into the King Tut Death Mask.'"

Verdult told her the painting was being sold at a benefit and promised West a \$1 million return on her investment, police said. She said she gave him the diamond and scads of other jewelry.

"Every time I'd wear something new he would grab it off my neck. 'What do you need it for? You will be



PROMISE OF RICHES: By 1984, William Verdult was promoting his 'King Tut Collection' with brochures such as the one shown here.

helping all these kids in the Make-a-Wish Foundation," she said.

He attended Mass with West each morning, and compared himself with her brother, who was adopted by another family when she was a child, she said.

West organized high-society shows of his work to benefit the Muscular Dystrophy Association and Catholic charities.

She helped persuade her friend, Ohannes Melkonian, to purchase 1 percent of the Death Mask for \$15,000. Police say a \$750,000 return was promised.

The investment returns never materialized. West said she knew Verdult was a phony when he donated \$600 to Catholic Community Services and the check bounced.

"It is one thing when you are hit over the head and robbed," she said. "It's another when you unclasp the bracelet yourself. It is so humiliating."

She and Melkonian went to the police. That's when, police say, the smooth-talking artist panicked — and the years of allegations began to catch up with him.

Said he was burglarized

On Feb. 10, Verdult reported a burglary. After moving about 50 paintings to the Miami Home Show he said, he returned to the gallery to find 83 paintings worth \$1 million missing.

The officer noted no sign of forced entry. Verdult accused West and Melkonian. Later that afternoon, back at the home show, he gave a TV interview on the theft.

Verdult provided Detective Pat Treudle with a list of stolen paintings. Without showing the list to West and Melkonian, the detective had them review a videotape of the home show interview.

They identified several paintings in the background that were on the list of stolen items.

Treudle asked Verdult to show her the Death Mask. He refused, saying it had to be transported in Brinks security vans. The detective learned that Verdult actually used Rental Plus vans to move his work.

Treudle got a warrant for Verdult's arrest on Feb. 27 and drove his home in Plantation.

Stored in the garage, were the "stolen" paintings.

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Police paint artist as master con man

Dealer staged theft, cops say

By SALLIE HUGHES
Herald Staff Writer

William Verdult called himself "the Dutch Master," claimed his gem-encrusted paintings were worth millions and offered star-studded references:

Telly Savalas, Gerald Ford, Jack Lord — even Farrah Fawcett, whom he described as "a collector and artist in her own right."

Two Fort Lauderdale investors parted with a \$65,000 diamond ring and \$15,000 cash to buy shares in a painting that Verdult told them was worth \$13 million.

Months later, when they began to ask questions, Verdult reported a burglary at his Galt Ocean Mile gallery. The valuable painting and many others were stolen — a million-dollar heist, he said.

Police investigated. Although

Verdult can paint, they say, he's really a different kind of artist:

A con artist.

Police say he bilked the investors and staged the burglary to cover his tracks. They say his artwork "has a fair market value of zero" and the gems in his paintings are fakes.

"In his own right, he is a pretty good artist, but his work is not what he claims," Assistant State Attorney Scott Dressler said.

Verdult has left a trail of lawsuits and police probes from one resort to the next: Las Vegas, Newport Beach, Honolulu and St. Petersburg. Finally, in Fort Lauderdale, big trouble caught up with him.

Detectives arrested Verdult in February and charged him with organized fraud and grand theft.

Verdult didn't want to talk about it. "He is not making any statements," said his wife, Sandra.

Verdult, 52, has said he was born in Holland and moved to the United

PLEASE SEE ARTIST, 6BR



STAFF PHOTOS/JACKIE BELL

Sgt. Robert Smith, left, and police aide Adele Smith inspect fake King Tut art taken from artist's home.

Police: Tut art collection fake

Paintings seized; fraud charged

By KEVIN DAVIS
Staff Writer

FORT LAUDERDALE — It was billed as the world famous \$100 million King Tut art collection — a series of Egyptian-style paintings encrusted with diamonds, rubies, sapphires and gold.

But police say the collection appears to be nothing more than painted canvases with pieces of glass, aluminum foil and worthless stones glued on. Top value: \$30,000.

Detectives seized dozens of these paintings, including a "King Tut Death Mask," in connection with an art scheme that defrauded investors across the country for hundreds of thousands of dollars, police said.

The art work was taken from the Plantation home of artist William Verdult, 51, who was arrested on grand theft and fraud charges after he claimed \$1 million worth of paintings had been stolen from his gallery.

"I was totally devastated," said Michelle West, 40, a Fort Lauderdale woman who was persuaded to give



Paintings such as this were used to defraud investors, police say.

Verdult a \$65,000 diamond to put in his King Tut Death Mask painting as an investment. "I admired him. I used to think he was the most wonderful person in the world."

Verdult, owner of the William Verdult Gallery, 1055 NE 33rd St., told police on Feb. 1 that 25 to 30 of his paintings had been stolen.

found no signs of forced entry into the building.

Detectives Patricia Truette and Stephen Ruebottom suspect that Verdult staged the theft to defraud West and her friend, John Melkonian, 35, who lost \$15,000, Truette said.

The detectives found some of the missing paintings at Verdult's home on Wednesday night. Verdult was being held at the Broward County Jail in lieu of \$85,000 bail.

The King Tut Death Mask appears to contain semiprecious or almost worthless stones that Verdult claimed were valued at up to \$13.5 million, police said.

One licensed appraiser told detectives the whole collection probably was worth no more than \$30,000.

"The man is a good artist," Sgt. Robert Smith said. "He has a painting in his house of his daughter that is really good. It seems to me that he has a lot of potential that he put to use in the wrong area."

Truette said Verdult showed potential investors phony appraisals and told them he was expecting big returns from the sale of his collection. She also said Verdult used phony gem appraisals to persuade an art apprais-