



Q&A



Sarah Carmichael is Operations Manager at the Art Loss Register (ALR) - the world's largest private international database of lost and stolen art, antiques and collectibles. In light of a recent spate of jewellery and watch thefts, Carmichael recommends collectors get registered.

What is the Art Loss Register?

The Art Loss Register is a private company, established in London in 1991. Its shareholders include Sotheby's and Christie's and the British Antique Dealers Association. We operate the world's largest privately managed database of lost, stolen, missing and looted art and collectibles.

How wide does the Art Loss Register net stretch?

Our website is available in six languages and we work internationally, dealing with reports of thefts and requests for searches of the database from all over the globe.

How closely do you work with other agencies such as the police?

We work very closely with a range of law enforcement agencies. We have most contact with the police, registering details of stolen items, checking items



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about which they are concerned and helping identify owners of items found in one area that were stolen hundreds if not thousands of miles away.

You are known for the work you do in recovering lost art works, but you also work to recover collectibles, jewellery and watches. How big a problem is the theft of these items and is there a big market for the pieces?

It is a major problem, especially with the rise in gold and diamond values. Jewellery can be easily be broken down or altered, thereby becoming unrecognisable as well as easier to smuggle across borders. We are also concerned that thieves follow a similar line with watches, and overlook the huge amount of skill and workmanship that has gone into their creation. Although some pieces are undoubtedly 'stolen to order', these thefts tend to be primarily opportunistic - the breaking and entering may be well thought out but often what is taken is simply what the thief or thieves are able to remove.

Sadly, we have had an increase in the number of watch thefts reported to us in the past couple of years, although we have seen little in the way of owners taking extra precautions to prevent theft and aid recovery.

How successful has the company been in tracking down stolen pieces?

We have assisted in the recovery of over £100 million of stolen art - including watches and clocks. The more precise the description, the better the chances of successful recovery. Unique reference numbers, images, and notes of any engravings are very important.

So what do you suggest collectors do to safeguard their most valuable pieces?

We suggest a range of measures, from registering the item with us or another agency pre-loss, which can help deter unauthorised sales, to keeping proper records in a secure location that is separate from the item. There is a range of marking devices on the market and we suggest you discuss with your insurer or broker to determine their preference.

We also recommend that before buying a valuable pre-owned timepiece, collectors either ask the Art Loss Register to carry out a search of our database or ask the seller or dealer to do so and then exhibit the ALR Certificate. When buying a used car, people will get a garage to look at it first. But they'll spend thousands on a timepiece without having anything checked. It's crazy.

THE ART LOSS REGISTER

"Our picture was stolen in a burglary, we reported it to the police, then we simply visited The Art Loss Register website and registered the painting as stolen!"

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Register a lost or stolen item
Report the theft or loss of an object or valuable item to the Art Loss Register for registration on the database.

Forgot a possession
Register items for the Art Loss Register's new private database, a safe compartment to safely protect your most precious possessions.

Search to see if an item is lost or stolen
Request a search of the Art Loss Register's database to discover whether or not your item has been registered as lost or stolen.

Range of services
Find out about the additional services the ALR provides, including search operations and professional research.

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The Art Loss Register evolved out of The International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR), a not-for-profit organisation based in New York. In an attempt to deter international art theft, IFAR established an art theft archive in 1976 and began publishing the *Stolen Art Alert*. Ten years later, IFAR had over 20,000 manual records and, while it was successful in recording the details of losses, it was apparent that recoveries would only materialise with substantial capital investment and a corporate vehicle allowing the records to be computerised and the database made available worldwide.

To this end, the ALR was established in London in 1991 by founding shareholders from both the insurance and art industries. Subsequently offices in New York, Cologne, Amsterdam and Paris have been established. The ALR is now the world's largest private database of lost and stolen art, antiques and collectables. Its range of services includes item registration, search and recovery services to collectors, the trade, insurers and worldwide law enforcement agencies. These services are efficiently delivered by employing state of the art IT technology and a team of specially trained professional art historians.

Conceptually, there are two aspects to the business. First, by encouraging both the registration of all items of valuable possessions on the database and also the expansion of checking searches, the ALR acts as a significant theft deterrent. Criminals are now well aware of the risk, which they face in trying to sell on stolen pieces. Second, by operating a due diligence service to sellers of pieces and also being the worldwide focus for any suspicion of illegitimate ownership, the ALR operates a recovery service to return works of art and collectibles to their rightful owners. In recent years, the service has been extended to negotiate compensation to the victims of theft and a legitimising of current ownership.

Ah yes, dealers. How receptive have they been to the service?

Actually, we would say standards are improving – despite the tough economic market. It's important to have cooperation in order to solve crimes and stem the flow of stolen pieces. It has to be a worldwide effort, and dealers have to cooperate with collectors. But there are always some who will take a risk and be content to let their purchaser suffer later, so we would recommend asking to see an ALR Certificate before committing to a costly purchase. Alternatively make a note of any unique reference numbers or features and contact us directly for a search.

If an item is recovered after an insurance settlement has been made, what claim, if any, does the original owner have?

Where the claim has been fully settled, the insurer usually is the one with legal rights of ownership. However many policies give the theft victim the right to buy the item back should it be recovered. Even where this is not written in to the policy, the insurer may still be happy to agree to this.

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How do people go about registering their watches with the ALR and what is the cost of the service?

We recommend they create an account on our website, www.artloss.com, select the appropriate service, which may be positive registration or registration after a loss or theft, or even a search if they are thinking of acquiring a valuable vintage timepiece. The one-off registration fee is £10 per item. And the database is not limited to high value, high profile pieces. In fact the majority of the items registered are objects stolen from private homes and are typically valued at around £1,000. ☺