

'Madonna' will star at the Met

A Renaissance masterpiece of Madonna and child will go on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art this week, nearly 40 years after it was stolen from an Italian museum.

The "Madonna of Senigallia" by Piero della Francesca, which will be exhibited with three other works by the artist, commonly known as Piero, is on its first trip to the United States.

The small devotional painting, which dates to around 1474, went missing for more than a year after it was snatched along with another Piero and a Raphael from the Ducal Palace in Urbino on Feb. 6, 1975.

But it seems the thief didn't initially want the Madonna. He was after the Raphael, and stealing it was so easy, he got greedy.

"When he found himself with 35 minutes more that he could do something, he took the other two paintings," said Frances Vieta, an Upper East Side resident and journalist who was living in Italy at the time and married to one of the detectives who cracked the case.

Vieta would sometimes help her husband on cases, posing as a curator from the Met seeking to buy a stolen painting.

The Ducal Palace paintings were virtually unsellable because of their fame. But the thief and his accomplices tried, eventually finding a buyer who alerted police.

Melissa Klein