

Ex-thief says his "collecting" days are over

Myles Connor has a message for the Yarmouth police: He's retired. According to Connor, a police informant named him as the mastermind behind the theft of more than \$100,000 worth of scrimshaw and other fine arts from the Captain Bangs Hallet House last July 21. Police, he says, questioned his relatives about his role in the heist. And he admits that he might be a logical suspect because of his longtime interest in scrimshaw, which he used to carve and sell.

But the 45-year-old Connor insists that he was not involved, and that his days as the best-known art thief in Massachusetts are over. "It amazes me that my name keeps coming up," he said recently. "It indicates to me why they're having little success in recovering art. I hear, 'Gee, they think you're involved.' I've been so far removed from that arena for so many years. I have tried very diligently to go straight over the last number of years, and it has been anything but easy. It irritates me that some informant is making a profit by bringing my name up."

Yarmouth police aren't talking about the investigation, but it would be surprising if they did not consider Connor a suspect. By now, whenever art is stolen in Massachusetts, the name that springs to every investigator's mind is Myles Connor. Says one former prosecutor, "Any time there's any Japanese swords stolen, or expensive scrimshaw, or Oriental art, he's always mentioned by law enforcement." An FBI agent puts it simply: "He's a legend."

The legend includes more than burglary. As a red-haired teen-ager fresh out of Milton High, the 5-foot-6 Connor was a rock 'n' roll prodigy with his own band — Myles and the Wild Ones. He kept boa constrictors, jaguars, and piranha as pets, and sang on the same bill with Roy Orbison and Chuck Berry.

Soon he turned to crime. In 1965, he brandished a mock pistol carved from a bar of soap to escape from a Maine jail. Cornered months later on a Back Bay rooftop, he wounded a Boston policeman during a gun battle in which he was also shot. In prison, he taught martial arts to other inmates and impressed authorities with his academic ability.

He was first linked to art theft in 1974, when he was charged by federal authorities with heisting Andrew Wyeth paintings from a Maine estate. Connor pleaded guilty but reportedly avoided a federal prison term in the case by arranging the return of a stolen Rembrandt portrait to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1982, federal agents searched Connor's house and confiscated more than 5,000 items, including swords from the Revolutionary and Civil wars and Persian scimitars. The FBI gave most of the items back after Connor proved he had either bought them or inherited them. But one Japanese dragon statuette was restored to the Higgins Armory Museum in Worcester, from

which it had been stolen in 1978. Also, a Maryland man whose house had been robbed in 1978 claimed that some of the art found by federal agents in Connor's house belonged to him. The matter was settled



Connor in 1985.

out of court when he and Connor divvied up the items in question. Connor never admitted any role in the theft.

One of the most precious of all state documents, the Charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was grabbed in broad daylight from the State House in August 1984. At the time Connor was in prison serving time for the murders of two Jamaica Plain teen-agers. The following March, the week after Connor was acquitted of the double murder on retrial, the charter was recovered in a Dorchester apartment next to boxes of Connor's books and papers. The timing gave rise to speculation that Connor had intended to use the charter as a bargaining chip in the event of a second conviction. "I have no doubt that Myles Connor, from a cell inside MCI-Cedar Junction, engineered the theft of the Great Charter," Secretary of State Michael J. Connolly said.

"The types of things Myles allegedly stole, like the Rembrandt and the Charter, weren't necessarily taken to be resold," says a former prosecutor. "They were to be stored away, so maybe he could make a deal at a later time."

It's often difficult to separate fact from fiction in the Connor story. Chatty and affable during a telephone interview, he claims that he was admitted from prison to Harvard Medical School, and that he is related to the poets Emily Dickinson and Julia Ward Howe.

Connor, who is divorced and has two children, is cagier about his former career. Asked about the Charter theft, he says, "That was an interesting situation." Sounding more like a consultant than a criminal, he adds, "I'm very knowledgeable about how art theft is done, about the channels it goes through. But I'm not involved in a big way. I'm not saying I never touched a hot item, but it was never a way of life."

Occasionally, bitterness against law enforcement authorities lends a sardonic edge to Connor's polished charm. He says that he spends most of his time outside the state: "If it's known I'm around, I find myself the object of unwanted attention in the form of police surveillance." He is planning four comeback concerts, including one on the South Shore.

Connor has by no means abandoned art. He says he has friends in the art world and occasionally brokers sales. He boasts about his "world-class" collection: "It's tucked away in various secluded vaults. I can never display my collection in this country, although it's quite legitimate."

And he keeps a close watch on the Yarmouth investigation, even commenting, strictly in an advisory capacity, that the \$10,000 reward for the recovery of the stolen items is far too low. He suggests that the town should take up a collection and increase the reward to \$50,000.

He says, "You've got to motivate someone to return what I believe is half a million dollars' worth of scrimshaw."

— DANIEL GOLDEN