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\$200 million art theft

For a certain sleuth, it pays to get hold of the big picture

By Thomas Palmer
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Sheila Gillenwater may not be on the Gardner Museum art theft case for several years, but she started making calls yesterday.

Gillenwater, whose SPI Inc. investigative agency operates from Poolesville, Md., specializes in art theft investigations and recoveries.

She often gets the cases after law enforcement authorities have given up. Less than six months ago, Gillenwater was contracted to find about 25 Picassos stolen from a castle in France in the mid-1970s.

No luck so far on that one.

But, just in case she is called in on the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum case later, she phoned a few of her sources yesterday.

Gillenwater was employed by the Smithsonian Institution and Interpol, the international police network, in its Washington office before starting her own agency of five investigators in the early 1980s.

While her employees pursue white-collar crime and private cases, she specializes in art theft, having earned master's degrees in art history and museum administration.

"I couldn't make a living just doing this," Gillenwater said of art-theft investigations. "You get two or three cases every two years if you're lucky."

Apparently art-theft investigators do not have a lot of competition.

Margaret I. O'Brien, spokeswoman for the International Foundation for Art Research in New York, said Gillenwater is the person her group recommends to victims of art theft.

"Otherwise, we would look for a retired policeman who has good art-theft experience," O'Brien said.

Gillenwater, who said her sources are 'the perpetrators themselves,' declined to give her exact fee but said, 'It's in the ballpark of \$800 to \$1,200 a day.'

The foundation, supported by art-auction houses and museums, is a clearinghouse of stolen art items and publishes a registry of stolen items.

In the United States, only the Los Angeles and New York police departments have officers who specialize in art theft.

"We have a lot more going for us usually than private investigators do," said Detective William E. Martin of the Los Angeles Police Department.

The FBI does not generally rely on private investigators when it is assisting in art-theft investigations, according to spokesman Paul F. Cavanagh, in the Boston office. However, agents will accept information from any source, he said.

Gillenwater, 44, said she gets results because she has good sources.

"I know art thieves. They are the perpetrators themselves," she said. While declining to give her exact fee,

she said, "It's in the ballpark of \$800 to \$1,200 a day."

She added that most of the contacts she talked with yesterday were just learning of the Gardner theft — and had no useful information for her.

"They have a network," she said of those who live by the stolen canvases. "...They have territories. They have arts they specialize in. Some will only steal paintings. Some will only steal postage stamps."

Though the Picasso theft is not solved, two other big cases she took on were, Gillenwater said.

It took her almost a year to solve the theft of several Raphael Soyer paintings from his studio in New York a few years ago, right after his death.

It took only six weeks to solve the theft of "seven or eight Impressionists" from a private collection in San Francisco.

Solving the theft of the 12 items stolen from the Gardner Museum early Sunday morning will not be easy, Gillenwater said, because some of the paintings are so well known.

"They may not appear for 50 to 100 years, conceivably," she said.

One art-theft mystery Gillenwater said she has not solved is why many art thefts happen during winter months.

She also is not sure what prompts art-theft victims to call her in, sometimes years after the theft.

"Sometimes social pressure," she speculated. "Sometimes reminiscing."

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