

Statute of limitations to expire on Gardner Museum art theft

Associated Press

BOSTON — Five years after two thieves bluffed their way into the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and pulled off the biggest art heist in history, the statute of limitations on their crime is set to run out.

The deadline is midnight tonight for prosecuting the March 18, 1990, theft of 12 artworks valued at more than \$200 million — including paintings by Rembrandt, Vermeer and Manet.

Although the thieves' trail is cold, authorities say they haven't given up tracking the artworks. And they also could charge the robbers with other crimes, such as selling the artworks or transporting them across state lines.

"Five years . . . in art theft is not a long time," said Boston FBI agent Thomas Cassano. "A lot of paintings which have been recovered, in Europe especially, have been out as long as 10 or 15 years."

The theft occurred early on a Sunday morning, when two thieves posing as police officers talked their way past the guards, then overpow-

ered them and tied them up.

They made off with two paintings and an etching by Rembrandt, three prints and two charcoal drawings by Edgar Degas, one painting each by Edouard Manet, Vermeer and Govaert Flinck, and a Chinese bronze beaker dating from 1200 to 1000 B.C.

The thieves told the guards they would seek a ransom for the artworks within a year, but no ransom demand was ever received. And although the theft was featured on "America's Most Wanted" and a \$1 million award was offered, the thieves and artworks have not resurfaced.

Because of strict conditions in the will of Gardner, who founded the museum, no other works can be displayed where the stolen pieces once hung or stood.

In their stead, the museum displays placards reading "Stolen March 18, 1990."

"We've missed these works terribly," said Anne Hawley, the museum's director. "They're not here for teaching and for people to enjoy."

"I always say it's like a death in the family, only this is multiple losses."