

# 'This Is a Robbery' revisits the art theft at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

Keough, Peter . Boston Globe ; Boston, Mass. [Boston, Mass]. 11 Apr 2021: N.7.

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## FULL TEXT

When shot at night, at the right angles, with spooky music on the soundtrack, the genteel elegance of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum makes for an ideal film noir setting. Such recurring images of the Venetian-style palazzo with its eerie low-lit galleries, its ornate central courtyard spectral in the night, its shadowy tunnels and passageways highlighted by cobwebs, set the mood for Colin Barnicle's four-part, 3½-hour "This Is a Robbery: The World's Biggest Art Heist," on Netflix.

Barnicle and his brother Nick, an executive producer, are the sons of former Globe columnist Mike Barnicle. Another executive producer is Linda Henry, the Globe's chief executive officer.

And well it should feel like a film noir. The investigation into the March 18, 1990, theft of 13 works from the museum —worth an estimated \$500 million and ranging from "The Concert," one of the world's 30 or so Vermeers, and "The Storm Over the Sea of Galilee," Rembrandt's only seascape, to unlikely objects such as a finial from a Napoleonic battle standard and an ancient Chinese drinking vessel —is a tale of shady characters, bungled investigations, dead leads, and dead bodies. With its atmospheric reenactments, lucid, witty editing, and entertaining interviewees (including Globe reporter Shelley Murphy, columnist Kevin Cullen, and retired Pulitzer Prize-winner Stephen Kurkjian), the film might not solve the three-decade-old case, but does transform it into a frustrating and irresistible mystery.

One mystery is why the museum had not been robbed before. As an interviewee says, "it was an art thief's delight." The then-financially challenged museum, despite a recent security upgrade, was no Fort Knox. With relative ease, two thieves disguised as Boston police officers managed to convince the entrance guard to open the door, and after duct-taping him and his partner, spent a leisurely 81 minutes helping themselves to the riches inside. Who were they? The crime scene offered few clues, and the preliminary investigation by the Boston Police and FBI was not well executed. Though there wasn't much evidence, there were plenty of suspects, and before long you'll need to set up your own link chart of suspects and locations to follow the frustrating trail of clues.

Could it have been an inside job? Suspicion lingers over the desk guard, a long-haired musician prone to showing up for work stoned. Might he have deliberately let the robbers in? Interviewed today he says, "I'm the only person not trying to figure it out. I'm just glad to be alive." Was the Irish Republican Army behind the heist, intending to sell the art to buy weapons? A former IRA press officer scoffs at the idea. Another tantalizing suspect is legendary local art thief Myles Connor, deserving of a documentary if not a miniseries of his own. He denies involvement though admits he once considered pulling off the job, and since he was in prison at the time of the robbery, his alibi looks good.

Connor's history brings up another possible motive for the crime —in 1975 he masterminded the theft of a Rembrandt from the Museum of Fine Arts and offered to exchange it if the sentence for another art theft he had been charged with was reduced. The deal worked. This might have suggested to the Boston mob —whose leadership ranks had recently been depleted by the FBI —that they could barter stolen masterpieces for the early release of those behind bars. So the investigation focused on local wise guys, a rogue's gallery of characters that would be right at home in a Martin Scorsese movie. Investigators tracked down leads from Maine to Philadelphia, from an auto body shop in Dorchester to a shed in Connecticut.

All for naught. Almost all those colorful suspects are now dead, some of natural causes, some found stuffed in the trunk of a car. The paintings are still missing, and though the Gardner Museum's reward for their recovery now stands at \$10 million, the empty frames that hang in its galleries testify to the incalculable loss to the world of art. "This Is a Robbery: The World's Biggest Art Heist" can be streamed on Netflix.

Go to [www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com).

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Credit: By Peter Keough GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

## DETAILS

<b>Subject:</b>	Film noir; Art galleries & museums; Art theft; Criminal investigations; Security management; Robbery; Motion picture directors & producers
<b>People:</b>	Gardner, Isabella Stewart
<b>Company / organization:</b>	Name: Netflix Inc; NAICS: 512120, 518210, 532282; Name: Federal Bureau of Investigation–FBI; NAICS: 922120
<b>Publication title:</b>	Boston Globe; Boston, Mass.
<b>First page:</b>	N.7
<b>Publication year:</b>	2021
<b>Publication date:</b>	Apr 11, 2021
<b>Section:</b>	LIVING ARTS
<b>Publisher:</b>	Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Boston, Mass.
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, Boston, Mass.
<b>Publication subject:</b>	General Interest Periodicals–United States
<b>ISSN:</b>	07431791
<b>Source type:</b>	Newspaper
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	News
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	2510652797
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/this-is-robbery-revisits-art-theft-at-isabella/docview/2510652797/se-2?accountid=9758">https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/this-is-robbery-revisits-art-theft-at-isabella/docview/2510652797/se-2?accountid=9758</a>

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**Last updated:** 2021-04-11

**Database:** U.S. Newsstream

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