

# Earlier tipster makes his pitch on stolen art

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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At that meeting, according to Ellis, Houghton identified 13 artworks as targets. All but two were eventually stolen, Ellis says. Houghton paid \$25,000 apiece to two experienced robbers, and then hid the paintings in a duffel bag inside a steamer trunk until his death at 52 from a heart attack in 1992, Ellis says.

## FULL TEXT

NORTHAMPTON -- Before there was William P. Youngworth III, there was Edward "Rocco" Ellis.

As Youngworth haggles with federal prosecutors over the masterpieces stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the original tipster who may have helped break the case waits impatiently in a county jail.

This past June, the 48-year-old Ellis, who has been convicted of child sex abuse, was the first to supply federal authorities with the names of two thieves he says were involved in the \$200 million heist, according to sources. And his bargaining chip worked: he was subsequently transferred from a federal prison to the Hampshire County House of Correction here, near his western Massachusetts roots.

Since then, Youngworth has gone public with much the same tale. That's no coincidence, because these two longtime criminals are funneling information from the same fount: the notorious art thief Myles J. Connor Jr.

Both of Connor's associates are looking for lenient treatment from authorities and a share of the museum's \$5 million reward. And their rivalry could potentially snarl negotiations over the return of the paintings. They appear to be competing not only for the money but also for the attention of federal investigators and the friendship of their mentor, Connor.

A colorful character straight out of an Elmore Leonard novel, Ellis boasts about his scars and tattoos, about the sleazy bars he used to own, his friendships with Mafia "wise guys" and his willingness to beat up anyone who "disrespects" him. While reluctant to criticize Youngworth directly, Ellis proclaims himself the only true spokesman

for Connor, his friend for 20 years and former cellmate at Lompoc Federal Penitentiary in California.

"Myles is very devoted to me," Ellis says. "We've been through hell and high water. He believes in me, he's my brother. I love him very much."

Connor's attorney, Martin Leppo, confirmed the friendship between his client and Ellis. "I am aware of Rocco Ellis, and he plays an important part in the overall Gardner matter," Leppo said.

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One of the robbers who donned police uniforms and tied up the Gardner's security guards, according to Ellis, was Robert Donati of Revere, a reputed Mafia associate who was murdered in 1991. Ellis says he does not know who the other robber was, but believes the man is still alive and no longer in the Boston area.

Federal officials declined to comment on the validity of this scenario.

Ellis said he refuses to inform on any living person. Asked where the paintings are today, and who is hiding them, Ellis refers the questions to Connor. He does say that their condition is deteriorating.

By revealing his role in the Gardner investigation, Ellis hopes to highlight his current effort to vacate his 1990 sex abuse conviction. That legal challenge, now pending in US District Court in Springfield, raises the same issue that led a state Superior Court judge to overturn the convictions of two members of the Amirault family in the well-known Fells Acre Day Care case in 1995.

Like the Amiraults, Ellis says he was denied his constitutional right to confront his accuser because the child whom he was convicted of abusing was allowed to testify with her back to him. Ellis, who has been knifed, beaten and had teeth knocked out by other inmates for his crime, insists he is no child molester, and he has got a cadre of devoted friends and supporters still attesting to his innocence.

"If they let me out tomorrow on the Gardner thing, I'd still pursue" a retrial, he says. "If you knew me, you'd know I could never do that crime."

He's no art thief either, but he considers himself lucky to know the best in the business: Connor. Pacing the jail's tiny "pressbox," Ellis reenacts the fateful meeting when Connor offered him a ticket to wealth and freedom -- the inside story of the Gardner heist.

First, Ellis taps on the wall, the way he did in a federal prison in Oklahoma City that summer of 1990, a few months after the Gardner theft, to find out if the "M. Connor" in the next cell was his old buddy from a Massachusetts prison. He croons "Unchained Melody" -- the signature tune that Connor, a former rocker, sang back then to identify himself.

Then he pantomimes Connor's gesture as they walked together in the prison yard. Ellis had been complaining that he had been framed by a former girlfriend for sexually abusing her daughter. Promising to help, Connor began drawing in the air, outlining paintings.

Stolen paintings, to be exact.

Born in North Adams, the 48-year-old Ellis has a criminal record that includes convictions for statutory rape, cocaine possession and attempted extortion.

While in prison in 1985, Ellis met Catherine DeCouto, who was married to his former counselor. By the time of his release from prison in 1986, her marriage was breaking up. Ellis began living with DeCouto and her 6-year-old daughter. That same year, he and DeCouto had a daughter of their own.

But the family harmony was short-lived. Ellis and DeCouto separated acrimoniously. In 1989, as Ellis was pushing in court for custody of their daughter, DeCouto accused him of sexually abusing her other daughter.

The case was heard in federal court because Ellis was charged with interstate transport of a minor with intent to commit rape and abuse. At Ellis's trial in 1990, Judge Frank Freedman allowed the girl to testify at a table set up next to the jury box, with her back to Ellis. She testified that Ellis had inserted his hands, fingers and toes in her vagina and forced her to have oral sex with him. The prosecution also contended that the girl had overeaten to become fat and less attractive to Ellis, and that Ellis had taunted and ridiculed her.

"This child was severely traumatized, beyond the point of many I have worked with," says Susan Via, who prosecuted Ellis and is now an assistant US attorney in Tucson. "She was genuinely terrorized."

Ellis insists he never abused the girl. He says that she twice acted out sexually towards him, and that he suspects a family friend of abusing her. Although he begged to tell his story to the jury, Ellis says, his attorney refused to put him on the stand. His lawyer, Morris Goldings, says he strongly advised his client not to testify, and Ellis made the final decision.

Describing the assaults as "unusually heinous, cruel, brutal and degrading," Freedman sentenced Ellis to 25 years in prison without parole. Ellis lost on appeal in 1991.

Then Ellis found an unexpected benefactor: Diana Sandgren, a Needham housepainter and former human services worker. Sandgren, who had become friendly with Ellis in 1986, began researching his case.

DeCouto "just hit the optimum moment to bring false allegations of child sexual abuse," Sandgren says. "The McMartin case was on the national news every night. There was enormous national hysteria, and an industry had sprung up around child sexual abuse."

Sandgren accumulated nearly 20 affidavits from Ellis's friends and family contending that he was a good parent and that they saw no evidence of abuse. One prosecution witness, who had testified about the taunting of the victim, said in a 1990 affidavit he had changed his mind and believed in Ellis's innocence.

Sandgren also discovered that Ellis's lawyer, Goldings, had previously represented DeCouto in seeking a liquor license. Goldings, who did not disclose his prior representation of DeCouto at Ellis's trial, says he did not have a

conflict of interest because her case was unrelated to Ellis's.

Goldings acknowledges that he did not challenge the special seating for the victim. A subsequent US Supreme Court decision, Goldings says, has reinforced the right of defendants to confront their accusers, and Ellis "does have a point to raise on that issue." DeCouto, who has since remarried, declined comment. Ellis, who wears his daughter's name on his left biceps, is not allowed to have any contact with her, but does not want to surrender his rights as her father.

Ellis also sought favor from authorities by contending that he had inside information on the 1983 bombing of a US barracks in Beirut. But the account was never substantiated.

In 1993, after the deaths of Houghton and Donati, Ellis began shopping information about the art theft to federal prosecutors. But when they refused to move him to the jail of his choice, he clammed up. After the museum raised its reward last year from \$1 million to \$5 million, Connor authorized Ellis to reopen negotiations.

Ellis says he has no doubt that his information will prove correct, and that the paintings will turn up. "There are two things I don't do," he says. "Steal, or lie."

### Illustration

PHOTO; CAPTION:EDWARD "ROCCO" ELLIS / Longtime friend of Connor

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