

Report reignites art heist probe Officials approach reporter, 2 others

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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According to sources who asked not to be identified, the investigators plan to appeal to the Boston Herald, which reported yesterday that an informant guided a Herald reporter to a warehouse somewhere in the "Northeast" to view the stolen Rembrandt masterpiece "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee" in the early morning of Aug. 18.

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FULL TEXT

Ric Kahn and Dan Golden of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

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The account of the viewing, by reporter Tom Mashberg, raises questions about whether the painting -- unrolled from a tube and glimpsed quickly by flashlight -- is authentic or a well-crafted forgery, common in the art world among Rembrandts.

But a key investigator said that the FBI and US attorney's office, lacking a significant break in the spectacular case, had no choice but to assume the painting is authentic.

"We are encouraged and we are guardedly optimistic," said one investigator who asked not to be identified. "We have to assume that the reporter is accurately reporting what he saw, and what he saw was the actual painting or a very good copy."

Ultimately, the investigator said, those who led Mashberg to the warehouse and showed him the painting apparently are savvy enough to realize they cannot win the immunity from prosecution they are seeking by bluffing that they have the artwork.

But some investigators said they are skeptical of the report. They emphasized that only an expert can prove the painting's authenticity, and that Myles J. Connor Jr., the convicted art thief, and William P. Youngworth III, his associate, have so far refused to provide verifiable information.

Federal authorities said they spent much of yesterday trying to contact Mashberg, Connor and Youngworth, hoping to discuss and negotiate the case.

"We are looking to negotiate, not confront people," said one investigator.

Brien T. O'Connor, chief of the public corruption unit of the US attorney's office, said federal authorities want to talk to Mashberg, and are willing to negotiate with Connor and Youngworth. Youngworth is also facing state criminal charges.

"We are hopeful and anxious to work through this to recover the paintings."

Gaining their cooperation will be difficult: Both Connor and Youngworth want to claim the \$5 million reward; Connor wants an early release from federal prison, and Youngworth wants immunity from drug and weapons charges pending in Norfolk County.

And Mashberg, as a newspaper reporter, is bound by the ethics of his profession to refuse to reveal the identities of his sources.

Mashberg's lawyer, Harvey Silverglate, said yesterday that he is waiting to hear from authorities. But he said he is ready to fight any possible attempt to bring Mashberg before a federal grand jury.

Connor is serving the last three years of a lengthy sentence for transportation of stolen artwork and the sale of cocaine to a federal undercover agent. To gain his cooperation, prosecutors must consider releasing him from jail, said Martin K. Leppo, Connor's lawyer.

Such a step, while common in organized crime and drug cases, is unheard of in cases involving stolen artwork, experts say.

"It has a great deal in common with the ransom scenarios for kidnapping," said Constance Lowenthal, director of the International Foundation for Art Research.

Last week, Youngworth had a stormy meeting with federal agents that ended abruptly when they declined to negotiate with him.

"I've got nothing to say to them," Youngworth told the Globe on Tuesday. "If they want to meet with me, they've got to crawl."

In a telephone interview yesterday, Youngworth denied he was the "informant" who purportedly led Mashberg to

the stolen Gardner artwork. When pressed on his role in the case, Youngworth refused to comment.

"I've got nothing to say," he said, and hung up.

If Connor and Youngworth refuse to tell what they know, federal authorities can bring them before a federal grand jury by promising immunity from prosecution for any involvement they might have in the missing artwork. If they still refuse, they could be jailed indefinitely for contempt of court.

Although the five-year statute of limitations on the theft ran out in 1995, federal authorities could bring other charges, including moving the artwork across state lines.

Though he did not reveal the location of the warehouse where he says he viewed the painting, Mashberg reported he traveled there by cab. He reported that he was inside for 15 minutes and got only a brief look at the painting, which was rolled up and stored in a large airtight tube.

Six or seven similar containers were packed in a large canvas satchel at the bottom of a storage bin, Mashberg wrote in the Herald's front-page story yesterday. His informant was quoted as saying the containers held the rest of the stolen paintings.

Art conservators, while hopeful the paintings will be recovered, worried yesterday about the condition of the paintings after seven years away from their climate-controlled home at the Gardner Museum.

"These thieves are really ruthless criminals; they ripped them out of the frames to begin with, so I don't think they have too much sensitivity," said Teri Hensick, paintings conservator for Harvard University's art museums.

Rolling a canvas into a tube can cause the paint to chip and line the work with crevices, the specialists said. Depending on the quality of the tubes -- and the climate inside the storage room -- exposing the artworks to fluctuating temperatures could cause the paint to flake even more.

The specialists said it's difficult to know whether the pieces are damaged beyond repair.

"I worry about conditions of paintings even when they're in the museum," said Jim Wright, head of paintings conservation at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. "Any time paintings are moved, it's of concern. They're fragile."

Yesterday, the Gardner Museum reiterated its reward of \$5 million for the return of the art in good condition, and asked anyone with information to contact the FBI.

"The museum -- and the world -- await the return of the works of art stolen in March of 1990," said Joan Norris, the museum's marketing director.

It is unknown how Youngworth and Connor may have come to possess the paintings or learn of their whereabouts.

In its report yesterday, the Herald's version of the heist differed from past reports. That account stated that the burglary was pulled off by five men, including Mafia enforcer Robert A. Donati. A source in the Herald story said Donati, who was killed in 1991, was tortured to death after boasting of his role in the heist.

The Herald's source also contends the theft was commissioned by an international organized crime figure who

promised to pay the five burglars \$100,000 each. But the deal broke down, according to the Herald, because the men failed to take specific paintings by Botticelli and Titian.

All museum officials and investigators had previously said about the heist was that two men disguised as police officers distracted security guards with a bogus attempt to serve a warrant on one of them.

The thieves then removed 11 paintings, including cutting what is believed to be Rembrandt's only seascape, "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee," out of the frame. A bronze beaker from China's Shang Dynasty and a finial from a Napoleonic flag were also stolen.

Illustration

PHOTO; CAPTION:1. The Boston Herald reported yesterday that an informant guided a Herald reporter to a warehouse somewhere in the "Northeast" to view the stolen Rembrandt masterpiece, "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee." 2. GLOBE STAFF FILE PHOTO/JOHN TLUMACKI / Since "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee" was stolen seven years ago, visitors to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum have seen only an empty frame where the famous Rembrandt painting once hung. 3. AP FILE PHOTO / William P. Youngworth III wants immunity from charges pending in Norfolk County in exchange for his cooperation.

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