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\$200 million art theft in Boston

Smooth theft at Gardner evokes the 1950 Brink's heist

By Desiree French
GLOBE STAFF

The theft of a dozen art objects from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum makes the \$2.7 million Brink's robbery of 1950 look like peanuts.

When two bandits took off early that morning with an estimated \$200 million worth of art, including a priceless Jan Vermeer painting and two works by Rembrandt, the robbery tipped the scales, making what was once dubbed the "World's Greatest Robbery" seem trivial.

But similarities between the two cases do exist. Both robberies were extremely well planned, although "the Brink's robbers got something that was easily negotiable, namely money, whereas the museum thieves have stolen something that can't easily be sold on the open market," says Alan Dershowitz, professor of criminal law at Harvard University.

Each theft shattered the illusion that these institutions – a world-famous art repository and a top-level security outfit – could not be penetrated.

On Jan. 17, 1950, after two years of planning, seven men wearing identical chauffeur caps, cloth gloves, Navy pea jackets, rubber-soled shoes and Halloween masks entered and robbed the Brink's North Terminal Garage in Boston. Inside the building, the seven, protected by three others assigned as lookouts, overpowered, tied and gagged five guards.

As was the case at the Gardner Museum, no one was harmed. However, unlike the museum heist, which took about two hours to complete, the Brink's robbery was consummated in less than 20 minutes.

The hunt for the Brink's robbers quickly became the most detailed and extensive search in Boston

crime history: For weeks, more than 3,000 local, state and federal agents worked around the clock. More than 400 docks, houses, warehouses and other sites were searched for clues.

"We won't see anything on that scale now because this pales in comparison with what goes on every night in Boston," says Dershowitz. "People were taken with the audacity of the Brink's crime. This is an

upper-class crime that doesn't have that sort of appeal."

The neat execution and perfect timing of the Brink's robbery led people in the 1950s to speculate that it was carried out by professionals or insiders. When trying to make sense of this latest crime, Norman D. Bates, assistant professor of criminal justice at Northeastern University, had some similar thoughts.

"It must be some kind of inside job, or whoever planned this must have worked inside the museum, if only for just six months, to see how the operation is set up," he postulated. "This one doesn't sound like it took that much time to plan. It was pretty simple."

The Brink's robbery also seemed simple, but the advance planning was meticulous; the thieves even

conducted a dress rehearsal. Among their preparations the Brink's robbers broke into a burglar alarm company to study the system used by Brink's.

It took six years and the production of a movie, "Five Bridges to Cross," before the 11 men involved in the robbery, including its mastermind, Joseph F. McGinnis, were brought to justice.



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