

Museum on the mend

Anniversary of art heist finds the Gardner persevering

By Chris Black
GLOBE STAFF

A year after thieves made off with 13 precious art works in the largest art heist in history, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum has pulled itself together like an aging dowager who suffered a momentary loss of dignity in a mugging.

A trauma that museum director Anne Hawley likens to a death in the family has left a psychic scar on the museum staff and 13 empty places in the collection. But, one year later, Boston's beloved Fenway Court is resolutely rebounding in the tradition of the redoubtable Gardner, who sometimes shocked her staid contemporaries with her verve and flair.

Despite a \$1 million reward and two showings on Fox television's "America's Most Wanted," there has been no sign of the irreplaceable works. They include a Vermeer — one of 32 known to exist — three Rembrandts — including his only known seascape — five works by Delacroix, a Manet, a Flinck, a bronze Chinese beaker and a finial from a Napoleonic flag.

"We still have an ongoing active investigation. We consider this case a priority in the office," said William McMullen, a spokesman for the FBI's Boston office. The



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The courtyard at the Gardner Museum.

investigation has gone international with the assistance of Interpol and the FBI's own network of legal attaches.

But neither law enforcement officials nor specialists in art theft express any confidence in solving the spectacular burglary soon. The works disappeared without a trace after two thieves, disguised as police officers, tricked and overpowered two college-age security guards early one Sunday morning. Art theft specialists say it is not unusual for masterpieces to stay out of sight for decades.

"It really is not time to panic," said Sheila Gillenwater of SPI Inc., a Washington-based private investigative agency specializing in missing art works. "A year is really nothing in this type of art heist with such well-known works." She said that among the items sought by her agency is art that was stolen in 1939.

"It is not hopeless," said Constance Lowenthal, director of the International Foundation for Art Research, a New York clearinghouse for stolen art. "Treasures are more likely to be recovered than mediocre works of art."

Although experts say 90 percent of stolen art work is never recovered, 40 percent of well-known work is, be-

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