

THE BOSTON GLOBE • FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 1997

Offer made on painting photo

By Ric Kahn and Stephen Kurkjian
GLOBE STAFF

The lawyer for Randolph antiques dealer and convicted criminal William P. Youngworth III said yesterday that Youngworth would turn over a photograph of one of the masterpieces stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum if authorities meet his demands, including the immediate release of convicted art thief Myles J. Connor Jr. from federal prison.

But US Attorney Donald K. Stern later said he would have to first see the snapshot — purported to

be of Rembrandt's only seascape, "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee" — before his office even starts to negotiate those demands.

"I am unwilling to do anything or discuss the contours of the consideration that law enforcement might give without first being presented concrete and specific evidence" of the stolen artwork, Stern said.

While some art specialists were encouraged by the possibility that there might be a photograph available of the stolen Rembrandt, Stern stressed he was not going to engage in negotiations with Youngworth, Connor or others in the case through media interviews and press conferences.

"This is not the Geraldo show going down onto the seabed to look at the safe of the Titanic," Stern said. "I am not putting on a diver's suit and going out on the ocean floor and opening up the safe in the glare of the media and figure out what's there. That's not the process we're going to follow."

The dramatic offer came one day after Stern said his office would not bargain with Youngworth and Con-

nor until they put up bona-fide proof that they had access to the artworks — a claim the two have been making for weeks.

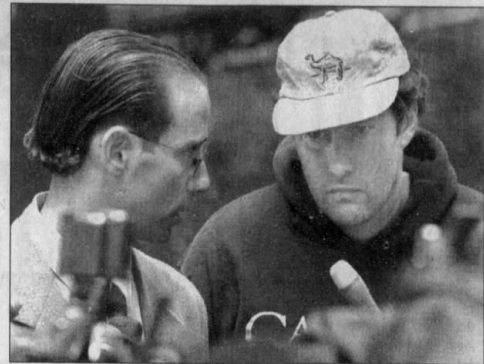
"We're now much closer to the paintings," said Howard Lewis, Youngworth's lawyer, at an afternoon press conference.

Lewis declined a request by reporters to view the photograph, and he would not say how long ago it was taken or who had it now.

Last month, Youngworth told a Globe reporter that he had an undeveloped roll of film of the paintings. But in a Herald interview, he later denied making the statement.

Officials at the Gardner museum yesterday reacted with caution to the offer, the latest twist in a high-stakes game between authorities and thieves over the return of the 13 pieces, valued at over \$200 million, that were stolen seven years ago.

Joan Norris, the Gardner's marketing director, said a clear photograph might well bring the museum closer to resolving the issue of whether Youngworth can facilitate return of the artworks. But she added: "A positive authentication of



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / GEORGE RIZER
Randolph antiques dealer William P. Youngworth III (right) and his lawyer, Howard Lewis, spoke yesterday to reporters in Boston.

Rembrandt's "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee" can only be made through an actual examination of the painting itself."

While Lewis said that any deal hinged on authentication of the photograph, some art specialists yesterday said a snapshot of the Rembrandt could easily be doctored through computer technology to look like the original in its current state — cut edges and chipped paint and all.

"With the dramatic inventions in photography and photo manipulation in recent years pictures are not as good a record as they used to be," said Norris.

Jim Wright, head of paintings conservation at the Museum of Fine Arts, was buoyed: "If it's not a good photograph, it may be worthless. But if it shows good details, that could be great."

Lewis described his client's offer to provide the photograph as a "good faith" reaction to the US attorney's requests for proof that he can broker the return of the stolen works of art.

In exchange, Lewis said, Youngworth wants a 60-day delay for his state trial on charges of receiving stolen property; the lifting of restrictions on his travel placed by Norfolk County probation officials; and the release of Connor from the final 2½ years of his 10-year federal sentence for interstate transport of stolen art.

Lewis said Youngworth's offer came after his client met for two hours yesterday with Connor. Lewis said the offer and demands were issued jointly by Youngworth and Connor — a view disputed by Connor's lawyer, Martin K. Leppo.

Leppo said Youngworth did not have authority to speak for Connor. "I had no idea Myles's name was going to be used," Leppo said yesterday.

Leppo said he was meeting with Connor in the marshal's lockup yesterday and was unaware that Youngworth was holding a press conference across the street at the same time.

While Stern said yesterday, as he had on Wednesday, that he was will-

ing to engage in negotiations with Youngworth and Connor if they first provide "specific and concrete" evidence of the artwork, meeting all of their demands will not be an easy task under any circumstances.

Connor's release would be in the hands of US District Judge Richard H. Mills. At sentencing in 1990, Mills described Connor as "rotten to the core," and added, "We don't need you, and we are society."

As for Youngworth, his trial on charges of possession of a stolen motor vehicle is scheduled to begin on Sept. 23 and Judge Elizabeth Butler said last week that she would not allow any further continuances in the case.

Norfolk District Attorney Jeffrey Locke declined to say yesterday how he might respond to any request from federal authorities to go along with a delay in Youngworth's case. But Locke said: "Mr. Youngworth's motor vehicle case, like fine wine, is sufficiently aged. It is ripe for a Sept. 23 trial."

Youngworth is prohibited from traveling outside the state without permission and must report his whereabouts daily to the Norfolk County probation office. Any change in that restriction can only be made by Judge Butler, said Edward F. Siudut, chief probation officer.

Yesterday's offer of photographic proof is a follow-up to a report last month by Boston Herald reporter Tom Mashberg, who said he was briefly shown by flashlight in a warehouse what could have been one of the paintings — a viewing Youngworth said he facilitated. The painting was "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee."

Lewis yesterday declined to say whether Youngworth could provide photographs of the stolen artworks other than that one Rembrandt.

"If they don't believe Mr. Mashberg," Lewis said of authorities, "maybe they'll believe a picture."

Judy Rakowsky of the Globe staff also contributed to this report.

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