

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / WENDY MAEDA

Inmate's expected transfer chills Gardner case

By Stephen Kurkjian
GLOBE STAFF

Four months ago, Myles J. Connor Jr. was transported from a federal prison in Pennsylvania to a holding cell in Rhode Island to participate in negotiations with federal officials for the return of valuable artwork stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston.

The transfer heightened speculation that the 1990 art theft — the largest in history — might soon be solved, but now Connor is about to be sent back to Pennsylvania, according to his lawyer and others.

"I have been informed that the US attorney's office [in Boston] has made arrangements to send him back to Pennsylvania," Martin K. Leppo of Randolph, Connor's lawyer, said last night.

Negotiations with the office of US attorney Donald K. Stern

"stopped" before Christmas, Leppo said, when federal authorities were unwilling to provide Connor and his associate, William P. Youngworth III, with total immunity from prosecution in the theft, possession, or return of the artwork.

Connor and Youngworth rejected a limited-immunity offer from federal authorities that would have protected them from being prosecuted for any act they committed facilitating the artwork's return.

Leppo said yesterday that while he has dropped out of the negotiations, others continue to talk with Gardner officials on behalf of Connor and Youngworth. A museum official declined comment last night. However, in recent weeks, other Gardner executives have said that they had abandoned hope that Connor and Youngworth might be able to broker the art's return.

A friend, who spoke to Connor by

phone yesterday afternoon, said Connor expected to be taken by federal marshals in the next 24 hours. "Negotiations are basically at a stalemate," the friend said Connor told him.

Along with last month's announcement by federal authorities that dismissed the authenticity of paint chips allegedly from the two Rembrandts stolen, Connor's return to the federal prison in McKean, Pa., reduces hope that he and Youngworth will facilitate the return of the artwork.

Beginning in late summer, Youngworth told reporters that he and Connor could broker the return of the 13 pieces of art, stolen from the Gardner on March 18, 1990, if federal authorities granted them concessions on their legal problems — and the \$5 million reward money offered by the Gardner for return of the artwork.

In several interviews with the Boston Herald, Youngworth said he wanted federal authorities to recommend commutation of Connor's federal prison term — he is serving the final two years of a 10-year sentence for transportation of stolen artwork — and to persuade the Norfolk County district attorney's office to drop or at least delay his own trial on unrelated state charges. Youngworth was later convicted on one of the charges and is serving a two- to three-year prison sentence.

The negotiations, which appeared ready to begin in earnest when Connor was transported from McKean to the Wyatt Detention Center in Central Falls, R.I., in late August, never materialized. In early September, Stern said that he was unwilling to negotiate until Youngworth and Connor provided "specific" and "concrete" evidence that they had access to the art.

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