

10 years later, no signs of a real break in Gardner Museum theft

By Stephen Kurkjian
GLOBE STAFF

Ten years ago today, two men disguised as Boston police officers forced their way into the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum two hours after midnight and pulled off the greatest art theft in modern history.

In less than 90 minutes, 13 pieces of art, including paintings and sketches by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Degas, and Manet, were ripped from their frames or the walls. The thieves then vanished into the rainy night.

Although hundreds of FBI agents have worked on the case throughout the decade, running down leads from Charlestown to

Japan, investigators say they see no sign of a significant break in the baffling case.

"The work is steady, but I am not personally looking for a near-term solution as much as we'd all love to see it," said US Attorney Donald K. Stern yesterday.

The man who tantalized authorities in the summer of 1997 by insisting he could facilitate the artwork's return says Stern ought not look to him for help — unless and until his conditions are met.

William P. Youngworth III, a hard-luck antiques dealer who is serving the final months of a three-year prison sentence for possession of a stolen vehicle, wants museum and federal officials to acknowledge that he was prosecuted for that

crime only to force his cooperation on the Gardner case.

"I am willing to engage in a dialogue with them on what I know, but before that happens I want to be restored to the station of life I was in before they tried to break me," Youngworth said in an interview this week at Southeastern Correctional Center in Bridgewater. "At the very least that means an apology."

Federal officials rejected Youngworth's request for an apology, noting that the case had been prosecuted by the Norfolk County District Attorney's office.

Having rarely spoken publicly about the investigation, museum officials and authorities are using the 10th anniversary of the stunning heist to engage in a major media campaign.

"I want to appeal to people's consciences," said Anne Hawley, director of the museum. "These are major works in Western civilization and deserve to be returned to the public. The longer they remain missing, the more the chance that

they will be damaged, and that would be such a tragedy."

Both Stern and W. Thomas Cassano, the lead FBI agent on the case, say that those who may have access to the art but fear prison time should know that authorities have said they are willing to work out a deal for immunity. Since the five-year criminal statute of limitations has run out for the theft, authorities can only prosecute those who have been hiding the artwork.

Cassano said the paintings probably were not stolen to help finance some political or criminal enterprise. And he doubted that David Houghton and Robert Donati — two local, low-level hoodlums whose names surfaced during the investigation — pulled off the heist. Both men are now dead.

Instead, Cassano believes that the job was carried out in the belief that the artwork was insured, and that within a reasonable length of time the museum's insurance company would offer up a customary reward — five to 10 percent of the paintings' value. But the museum

carried no theft insurance on the priceless artwork because the premiums were too high.

Authorities believe that the Gardner's \$1 million reward, which was boosted to \$5 million in 1997, must have been considered too small to risk negotiations on such a major crime.

As for its current whereabouts, investigators don't believe the pieces — particularly the most celebrated paintings, Rembrandt's "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee" and "A Lady and Gentleman in Black," and Vermeer's "The Concert" — are hanging in some wealthy art lover's hideaway.

Instead, they said, the centuries-old art most likely is hidden in some warehouse, cellar, or attic, vulnerable to deterioration from extreme heat or cold, while those who control them await the most advantageous moment to make their interests known.

"My fear is what's happened to them while they've been gone," Hawley said. "They've been gone for a long, long time. Too long."

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