

Court asked to void sentence of figure in museum probe

By Stephen Kurkjian

GLOBE STAFF

The lawyer for a one-time key figure in the effort to recover art masterpieces stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990 yesterday argued before the Massachusetts Appeals Court that his conviction for possession of stolen property should be thrown out because it involved a police attempt to force him to cooperate on the Gardner probe.

William P. Youngworth III, formerly of Randolph, served three years in prison following his conviction in 1997 for possession of a stolen van. However, Lisa Siegel Belanger, Youngworth's attorney, yesterday asked the Appeals Court to order a new trial because prosecutors improperly withheld from Youngworth the identity of an informant who told Boston Police of the stolen vehicle in Youngworth's garage.

Belanger said the informant, a previous associate of Youngworth, was cooperating with police in an effort to have a prison sentence on

an unrelated crime reduced.

Had Youngworth's lawyers known the identity of the informant, they would have been able to raise the defense that Youngworth was "set up" by law enforcement and that the car was planted on his property by the informant.

However, Norfolk County Assistant District Attorney Brian A. Wilson said that the identity of the informant was not central to the charge that a stolen van was found on Youngworth's property.

In the months leading up to his 1997 trial, Youngworth contended that he could facilitate the return of the 13 pieces of art, including paintings by Vermeer and Rembrandt, stolen from the museum.

However, the US attorney's office rejected Youngworth's request to provide him complete immunity from prosecution for the theft or illegal possession of the artwork without some concrete evidence that he could arrange the artwork's recovery. Negotiations between both sides broke off, and the artwork remains missing.