

Gardner hosts talk on stolen artwork

By Travis Andersen

GLOBE STAFF

With authorities still struggling to solve the infamous art heist at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum as it nears its 20th anniversary, the museum's security director told a gathering at the Gardner last night that "everybody is a suspect."

Anthony Amore, who became head of security at the Gardner in 2005, appeared on stage with National Public Radio commentator Tom Ashbrook to discuss the investigation into the 1990 theft of 13 works, including paintings by Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Degas.

Amore said that while investigators have looked closely at fugitive James "Whitey" Bulger and his associates, "not a sliver of evidence" points to his outfit.

Amore told the crowd of more than 200 that career criminals in the area knew that they could use stolen art as a bargaining tool with prosecutors if they were booked on other charges, adding that gangsters could avoid jail "for anything short of murder" if they led authorities to missing paintings.

But in this case, he said, the thieves soon learned that they stole too much artwork from a priceless collection and could not bargain with the paintings, much less sell them, which is why he believes they are hidden somewhere in New England.

Ashbrook asked Amore if the two guards on duty during the theft were suspects, to which Amore said that everyone is a suspect, noting that 90 percent of art museum thefts are inside jobs. In addition, he said, it was strange for the thieves to know that the museum had no "dead man switch," buttons that museum guards push every 20 minutes or so during overnight shifts so the alarm company knows that they have not been attacked.

In the predawn hours of March 18, 1990, a guard granted entry to two thieves posing as police officers investigating a disturbance, against museum protocol.

The thieves handcuffed and duct-taped both guards, who were recent college graduates, and put them in the museum basement before removing 13 works in 81 minutes, far longer than most thieves spend in a museum, Amore said. It has been called the largest art heist in history, at an estimate of at least \$250 million.

The Gardner will host another forum on Thursday.

Last night, Ashbrook, a former Globe editor, told Amore that he hoped he was right about his theory that the thieves were local and that he could recover the paintings.

"I'll get them," Amore said. "I'm right."

Amore also said that even if FBI agents were able to obtain DNA from the duct tape used to restrain the guards, the samples may not belong to the thieves and may not come up in a criminal database.

Instead, Amore said, tips from the public have led him to focus on criminal gangs operating in the Boston area at the time.