

If reward, immunity can restore the paintings, they're worth it

AT FIRST, the surprise announcement that the FBI had identified the thieves in the legendary Gardner Museum heist sounded like a dramatic breakthrough — a sign that the 13 lost paintings, missing pieces of Boston's cultural heritage for 23 years, would soon be returned to their empty frames in the Italianate mansion on the Fenway. Later, when the full impact of the announcement was felt, it seemed a little less hopeful: The FBI could only trace the whereabouts of the paintings up through about 10 years ago, when they were offered for sale.

Then the trail went cold. The bureau is showing its hand in hopes that a source might emerge to fill in the gaps.

Whether this is an expression of confidence or desperation is anyone's guess, but it's reassuring to know that the FBI remains deeply committed to finding the paintings. The museum has offered a \$5 million reward for fruitful information, an amount that should be high enough to draw out stray accomplices — especially if they suspect the FBI is getting closer on its own — or knowledgeable members of the public.

This is, of course, similar to the strategy that led to the capture of Whitey Bulger. The FBI's decision to air ads with images of Bulger and his companion Catherine Grieg ultimately led to the breakthrough that put the notorious gangster behind bars.

In the Gardner case, the FBI will be posting images of the paintings — among

them, two world-class masterpieces, Rembrandt's "Storm on the Sea of Galilee" and Vermeer's "The Concert" — on digital billboards in Connecticut and Pennsylvania. The decision follows the search last spring of the Connecticut home of a Mafia figure with ties to organized crime in Philadelphia. The hope, explained Richard DesLauriers, the FBI's special agent in charge of the Boston office, is to jog the memory of anyone who might have seen the works.

US Attorney Carmen Ortiz has wisely offered the possibility of immunity for any informant who

was involved in the theft. Punishing the thieves is secondary to recovering the artifacts, in what would be a moment of joy and civic renewal for Boston.

The perpetrators — who likely are part of a crime syndicate — are nonetheless guilty of a heinous offense: Exploiting the Gardner museum's uniquely open characteristics. The museum is the vision of one collector, Isabella Stewart Gardner. Her will stipulated that no artwork be moved, a requirement that compromised security. In conning the museum's guards and stealing the works, the thieves repaid Gardner's faith and generosity with perfidy. But anyone who, having participated in the crime, now endeavors to restore the works, has a chance to redeem himself or herself. Now is the time for any such person to accept Ortiz's offer of immunity and make Boston's cultural scene whole again.

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