

# Vermeer exhibit reminds of Gardner theft

## ► GARDNER

Continued from Page A1

picts a man and two women playing music, and was one of 13 artworks stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum on March 18, 1990, in what remains the world's largest art heist. Other items taken include works by Rembrandt, Flinck, Manet, and Degas; collectively the 13 works are valued at more than \$500 million.

On the 33rd anniversary of the theft, empty frames remain on the walls of the Gardner. None of the works have been recovered, despite a \$10 million reward, nor has anyone been charged.

The popularity of the Vermeer exhibit in Amsterdam underscores the significance of the loss, but also the hope that Boston and the larger art community will one day see the works return.

"Sooner or later, anybody who saw the real picture is going to be dead," said Jonathan Janson, an American artist living in Rome and author of *Essential Vermeer*. Janson was one of the estimated 450,000 people who scored a ticket to the Vermeer exhibition, and he also saw "The Concert" when it was still hanging at the Gardner.

"It's just a huge loss for no reason whatsoever," Janson said. "The picture is really dead ... it won't mean anything anymore because it's not there anymore."

Anthony Amore, the Gardner museum security director, who has worked with the FBI on the investigation for the past 17 years, said the search continues.

"I really do believe we'll get the paintings back ... and we won't stop looking for them," Amore said. "They need to come home. No institution in the world has made the effort that the Gardner museum has made since Day One to get its paintings back."

US Attorney Rachael Rollins expects to soon announce new efforts to increase awareness and generate tips that could lead to the their recovery.

"One of my first steps as US Attorney was to make sure the Gardner Museum heist was treated as an active federal investigation rather than a documentary film series or classroom discussion," Rollins said in a statement. "With renewed enthusiasm and interest it is my hope that the public will help us return these treasured pieces back to their rightful place, Boston."

Kristen Setera, a spokeswoman for the FBI's Boston office, said the agency continues to pursue leads and urged anyone with information to come forward.



KOEN VAN WEEL/ANP/APF VIA GETTY IMAGES



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2019

Visitors looked at Vermeer's "Mistress and Maid" in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam last month. At left, Anthony Amore, security director of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, was reflected in the frame for the missing Vermeer.

signed for the top of a flagstaff, and asked how much it was worth. Calantropo said he immediately recognized it as the Gardner finial, refused to touch it, and told Donati, "Jesus, Bobby, why didn't you steal the Mona Lisa?"

In his 2011 biography, notorious art thief Myles Connor wrote that he had cased the Gardner museum with Donati years before the theft.

Connor also said a longtime friend, David Houghton, visited him in federal prison shortly after the robbery and told him Donati was one of the thieves.

"He told me, 'We've got several paintings and we're going to use one or two to get you out,'" Connor, now 80, said during a telephone interview Tuesday.

In September 1991, Donati was attacked outside his Revere home and his body was found several days later in the trunk of his Cadillac. Six months later, Houghton died of a heart attack.

"I know Donati was involved and I know David Houghton was involved, but I'm not sure where the hell [the paintings] went after that," Connor said. "There are people who are incredibly wealthy and have their

own art collection. I think it's very possible someone of that magnitude may have decided, 'I could buy these.'"

Connor said he tried to recover the art, and believes it's possible that someone will come forward for the reward. "Where there's life, there's hope," he said.

The FBI believes its suspects frequented TRC Auto Electric Co., a Dorchester repair shop operated at the time by Carmelo Merlino, a mob associate who boasted to two informants that he planned to recover the artwork and collect the reward. Instead, he was caught in an FBI sting in 1999 and convicted of trying to rob an armored car depot. Merlino died in prison in 2005.

The FBI's theory, outlined in a PowerPoint presentation years ago, is that Merlino's associates George Reissfelder and Leonard DiMuzio, who both died in 1991, were involved in the theft, along with others.

The FBI believes the stolen artwork ultimately ended up in the hands of Robert Guarente, a convicted bank robber with ties to the Mafia who died in 2004.

In 2010, Guarente's wife, Elene, told the FBI that shortly before her husband's death, he gave two of the stolen paintings to a Connecticut mobster, Robert Gentile, during a rendezvous at a restaurant in Portland, Maine, according to authorities.

Gentile offered to sell the paintings to an undercover FBI agent posing as a drug dealer for \$500,000 apiece, according to a federal prosecutor. But after his arrest he insisted he never had the paintings and didn't know where they were. He was released from prison in 2019 and died two years later at 85.

In a recent interview, Gentile's longtime attorney, A. Ryan McGuigan, said he believes Gentile had access to the paintings at one time, though his client never admitted that he did.

"I conclude that he knew more than he was willing to tell me or the government," McGuigan said. "I believe they are either in a barn somewhere, stuck in a wall, or they're destroyed."

Amore, the Gardner security chief, believes the artwork is most likely hidden locally and has a message for the person who has them: "We are the only buyers for the paintings. If you have information that you believe will lead us to the paintings, not theories, but information, please be in touch. We can bring this to a happy resolution."

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The crime has been one of Boston's most enduring mysteries.

In the early morning hours after St. Patrick's Day in 1990, two thieves disguised as police officers talked their way into the museum, tied up two guards, and removed the masterpieces from their frames. Among the 13 pieces are three by Rembrandt, including his only seascape, "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee," "A Lady and Gentleman in Black," and a stamp-sized self-portrait; Flinck's "Landscape with an Obelisk"; Degas sketches; "Chez Torton" by Manet; an ancient Chinese vase; and a

bronze finial eagle from atop a Napoleonic flag.

The criminal statute of limitations for the heist expired decades ago, but anyone caught knowingly possessing the stolen artwork could face charges.

Over the years, the theft investigation has featured countless theories, a string of discredited con men, and a dizzying array of suspects, including local petty criminals with Mafia ties, Irish gangsters, and a Hollywood screenwriter.

In 2013, the FBI announced it was confident it had identified the thieves, two local criminals who died shortly after the heist,

but declined to name them. The FBI said it believed the artworks were moved through organized crime circles to Philadelphia, where the trail went cold around 2003.

Robert Donati, who had been in and out of jail for robbery and hung out with local mobsters, has never been publicly identified by the FBI as a suspect, but several people have implicated him in the heist.

Former jeweler Paul Calantropo told the Globe that in the spring of 1990, Donati showed up at his office at the Jeweler's Building in downtown Boston with a decorative piece, de-