

Reputation catches up to art thief dealt 20 years in prison

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SPRINGFIELD — Myles Connor Jr.'s reputation as a master art thief finally caught up with him yesterday, when a federal judge waived sentencing guidelines to hand him a 20-year prison term — double the maximum requested by the prosecutor.

The red-haired, bushy-bearded Connor, 47, of Cohasset, Mass., had traded stolen art for leniency on earlier charges, U.S. District Judge Richard Mills noted.

If Connor tried to repeat his success this time, it didn't work. Mills instead used Connor's history as a reason to give him the longer sentence on



Myles
Connor

drug trafficking and stolen art charges stemming from a March 1989 FBI sting at a Bloomington motel.

Connor, along with attorney Gregory Collins of Springfield and First Assistant U.S. Attorney Byron Cudmore, huddled with Mills for a half-hour before the sentencing, but Cudmore and Collins wouldn't comment on that proceeding. Cudmore and Collins also declined to say if art has been recovered with Connor's cooperation.

Connor's reputation is such that some Boston and national media speculated that he masterminded March's robbery of Boston's Gardner Museum from his cell inside a Chicago federal jail.

That speculation grew from reports that Connor avoided a federal prison term for the 1974 theft of Andrew Wyeth paintings from the Woolworth estate in Maine by arranging for the return of a stolen \$1 million Rembrandt portrait to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Massachusetts' secretary of state also accused Connor of engineering the 1984 daylight robbery of the Massachusetts Bay Colony charter from the Statehouse in order to trade it for leniency on two murder convictions.

Connor's convictions in the deaths of two teen-agers were later overturned.

"You've bargained some very, very serious things away," Mills told Connor during his sentencing. "You barter off this and barter off that. You pull things out, kind of like an inventory.

"You are a very smart man. Unfortunately, you're rotten to the core. You're a very poor influence on our society. ... We don't need you."

Connor was eligible for about 10 years in prison under routine federal sentencing guidelines, but Mills ruled that those didn't adequately reflect Connor's history.

Collins said he expects Connor to appeal, but if the sentence is upheld, Connor will serve a minimum 17 years behind

bars.

Although Cudmore dubbed Connor "a menace to society," Connor protested that "reputations are sometimes gathered in life in an undeserved way," and said he was drawn into the Bloomington FBI sting by a government informant paid \$36,000 in cash and expenses.

He pleaded guilty last November to seven art theft and drug charges stemming from his Bloomington arrest; a February 1989 drug buy from an undercover informant in Massachusetts; and a June 1989 attempt to escape from the Menard County Jail using hacksaw blades smuggled to him in a book binding by two women friends.

The Bloomington motel room served as a rendezvous point for the exchange of a half-million dollars worth of drugs and stolen art in what prosecutors said was an attempt by Connor to set up a new cocaine distribution network using art as collateral for drug trafficking loans.

The art included two 17th century "Old Masters" paintings valued at \$100,000 and stolen in 1975 from Amherst College in Massachusetts; a 17th century grandfather clock stolen in 1974 from the Woolworth estate; a smaller 18th century painting; 12 ancient Japanese swords; and two replica 16th century ivory flintlock dueling pistols.

Mills noted that Connor — an articulate, cultured, charismatic man — excelled as a student, as a rock-and-roll prodigy who played with Roy Orbison and Chuck Berry, as an art and antiques dealer and as a martial arts expert.

"I can't help but to think, what a tragedy, what a waste. Where did you get off the track?" Mills wondered. But he said that when Connor is released from prison sometime in his late 50s, "the odds are you will do something (illegal) again."

Connor showed no reaction during sentencing, but at the conclusion turned toward the federal agents who arrested him, raised his eyebrows and shrugged.