

Jailed art thief may testify Connor eyed in Gardner probe

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Federal investigators probing the theft of priceless artwork from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum will bring Myles J. Connor Jr., the imprisoned, high-profile art thief, before a federal grand jury this week, the Globe has been told.

Martin K. Leppo, Connor's lawyer, said he received two messages from his client yesterday informing him that the marshals had delivered legal papers to McKean officials, allowing them to transport Connor to an unknown destination. Others confirmed that Connor was headed to Boston for questioning.

Connor's name resurfaced in recent weeks after William P. Youngworth III of Randolph, an ex-convict and past associate of Connor, suggested to reporters that he and Connor could help locate the artwork.

FULL TEXT

Federal investigators probing the theft of priceless artwork from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum will bring Myles J. Connor Jr., the imprisoned, high-profile art thief, before a federal grand jury this week, the Globe has been told.

US marshals are transporting Connor from a medium-security federal prison in McKean, Pa., where he has been serving part of a 20-year sentence, to the Boston area, said the sources, who asked not to be identified.

Once Connor is in Boston, FBI agents and prosecutors assigned to US Attorney Donald Stern's office will question him about his knowledge of the theft informally as well as before a federal grand jury, the sources said.

Martin K. Leppo, Connor's lawyer, said he received two messages from his client yesterday informing him that the marshals had delivered legal papers to McKean officials, allowing them to transport Connor to an unknown destination. Others confirmed that Connor was headed to Boston for questioning.

Asked what Connor might know, Leppo said: "Myles has never indicated to me that he knows who was responsible for that theft or where the artwork is, but if they would release him {from prison}, he could probably find it for them. The man has contacts you wouldn't believe."

Leppo said federal authorities had sought Connor's help twice before to see if he knew anything about the March 1990 heist, but Connor rebuffed them both times.

Connor's name resurfaced in recent weeks after William P. Youngworth III of Randolph, an ex-convict and past associate of Connor, suggested to reporters that he and Connor could help locate the artwork.

In a telephone interview yesterday, Youngworth said he believes the US attorney's office wants to subpoena him to appear before the grand jury as well, but that he is unwilling to testify.

"The US attorney's office has not acted in good faith with me, and until they do, I am not interested in saying anything," Youngworth said.

Youngworth has stated that in exchange for his cooperation, he wants the US attorney's office to persuade Norfolk County prosecutors to drop drug and weapons charges lodged against him after a raid of his antiques shop last month.

Though Connor has not set conditions for his cooperation, several sources close to him told Globe reporters that if the federal authorities offered to reduce his prison sentence, he would be willing to help.

"If he {Myles} is trying to bargain himself out of prison, I don't think he'd be offering that outcome without being able to deliver what he's proposing," said a source close to Connor. "It doesn't mean he did it. But he may know who did it or who has the stuff."

Connor told the Boston Herald earlier this month that the Gardner Museum officials should talk to Youngworth or they would "pay dearly" for the paintings.

Eleven paintings, with a value of more than \$200 million, were taken from the Gardner during the early-morning hours of March 18, 1990.

Two men, dressed as police officers, forced their way into the museum. Among the items stolen was "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee," Rembrandt's only seascape, which was considered Gardner's most valued painting; two other Rembrandt works; an oil painting by Edouard Manet; and a 17th-century Vermeer.

Although Connor was in jail at the time of the robbery, his name immediately surfaced in connection with the theft. Indeed, his name has been linked with major art thefts throughout New England since the mid-1960s.

In 1974, Connor pleaded guilty to stealing Andrew Wyeth paintings from an estate in Maine, but avoided prison by helping to arrange the return of a \$1 million Rembrandt to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

In November 1989, he was convicted of stealing \$400,000 worth of paintings from the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College. A year later, a federal judge in Springfield, Ill., sentenced him to 20 years for trying to sell cocaine to an undercover FBI agent and transporting stolen artwork. He is serving time on those charges.

Sources close to Connor say that in addition to trying to get favorable treatment for himself, he is paying back associates from behind bars by giving them tidbits about the Gardner heist to help them cut their own deals with authorities -- in exchange for reward money and other favors.

The sources believe that Connor is feeding Youngworth information to help Youngworth leverage authorities -- and put pressure on prosecutors by going public with his story.

The sources say another federal inmate recently used inside information from Connor to negotiate a jail cell closer to his family in Massachusetts.

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