

Gunmen flee museum with stolen Rembrandt

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By Robert J. Anglin
Globe Staff

A Rembrandt painting said to be worth at least a half-million dollars was stolen at gunpoint from a public gallery in the Museum of Fine Arts on Huntington avenue yesterday.

Museum Director Merrill C. Pueppel said the value of the painting was inestimable, "but a half million dollars would not be surprising."

Two armed men removed the painting, "Portrait of Elisabeth Van Rijn," dated 1632, from two hooks on a gallery wall on the second floor of the Evans wing of the Fenway side of the museum at about 12:40 p.m.

At gunpoint they held at bay one guard who accosted them as they were removing the painting, and hit another guard over the head when he tried to stop them as they ran down a flight of steps and out the Fenway entrance.

Museum security director Gerald

Shirar said the men fired "at least two, maybe three shots" in the direction of pursuing guards and fled in a car driven by a third man. Nobody was wounded. Museum guards are unarmed and could not return the gunfire.

Police and FBI agents were at

the museum within minutes after the theft.

Police broadcast a bulletin for "two unknown white males, one with long, blond hair and glasses and a leather cap. Both armed with 9 mm automatics."

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Rembrandt's "Portrait of Elisabeth van Rijn" was on loan to museum.

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★ REMBRANDT

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The men fled intown on the Fenway in a black and gold Oldsmobile or Buick with Massachusetts registration number 981-544.

Shirar said the daring daylight robbery was part of a pattern of similar robberies of art museums "across America and all over the world. It's a tragedy."

It was the first such robbery at the Museum of Fine Arts, although several articles have been stolen and later recovered. A similar theft occurred nearly three years ago at the Worcester Art Museum, when four paintings, a Rembrandt, Picasso and two Gauguins valued at more than \$1 million — were taken by two masked men who shot an unarmed security guard as they tried to halt them from leaving the museum.

The painting taken yesterday was one of seven Rembrandts in the museum's collection. It was on loan from the descendants of Robert Treat Fine, a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Rueppel said the cash value of the painting would be determined in part by the amount of insurance carried by the owners who, he said, wished to remain anonymous. He said he did not know how much the painting was insured for.

The oval portrait is painted in oil on a wood panel. It measures 22½ inches by 16½ inches and weighs about 20 pounds.

Shirar said one of the gunmen "had his hands

ful" carrying the painting out of the building.

The portrait is of Rembrandt's younger sister. It shows a blonde woman in her 20s wearing drop pearl earrings and pearls in her hair. She is clothed in a dark garment with gold edging. The signature R. Van Rijn and the date 1632 appear on the right of the painting over her left shoulder.

"It wouldn't be too easy to find a market for it," Rueppel said. "It's too easily identifiable. Even a disreputable dealer would have a very difficult time selling it. Nobody in their right mind would buy a painting like that."

Vito Magaletta, 53, of Medford, the guard who came across the two men as they were removing the painting, said: "It was on two hooks and something underneath and they were just lifting it up.

"I said 'What are you trying to do with the painting?'" Magaletta said.

He said the man with the blond hair aimed a gun at him and said: "Shut up, or I'll kill you."

Magaletta, who speaks with a pronounced Italian accent, was visibly upset later, telling of the incident. He said he ducked behind the wall of the gallery and blew his whistle.

This alerted guard John J. Monkouski, 66, of Dorchester, a retired Boston policeman, who was on duty at the Fenway entrance on the first floor, down a flight of winding marble stairs and about 150 feet away.

Monkouski tried to stop the men as they ran toward the turnstiles inside



Merrill Rueppel, director of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, adjusts self-portrait of Barend Fabritius which was hung in place of stolen Rembrandt. (AP)

the entrance, and one of them clubbed him with a pistol butt.

Magaletta, who was coming behind the armed men, said: "I saw them hit John. I saw blood."

Mankouski was taken to Peter Bent Brigham Hospital for treatment. Shirar said he received a number of stitches for a head wound.

"These men did their job. But what can you do in the face of a gun?" security director Shirar said.

Rueppel said the museum guards have traditionally been unarmed. "They are there primarily to prevent the public from touching the collection," he said.

"The thing that is appalling is that as far as I know it is the first theft by violence in an American museum.

"I think they're crazy. "It would be virtually impossible to find an art dealer to handle to handle this. It's like stealing a statue of Paul Revere," Rueppel said.

Asked of the possibility the painting had been stolen for ransom, the museum director said: "I suppose if that's what they have in mind they'll let us know."

Rueppel said he believed the two men knew what they were after when they entered the museum. "The fact that they came in, held a guard at gunpoint and took a valuable painting makes me believe they were pretty serious.

"But I can't believe that a professional art thief would choose this kind of picture. It's too easily identifiable," he said.