

Robert Gentile's Decade as the Gardner Heist's Prime Suspect

Almost nine years ago now, on February 18, 2012, Robert “The Cook” Gentile was first publicly linked to the Gardner Museum Heist stolen art. It would be a slow-motion rollout for the 250-pound septuagenarian, with back pain and heart troubles. This made member of a Philadelphia organized crime family would serve as the only person of interest publicly named in connection to the historic robbery during all this time, and to date, in this century.

Over a week passed from February 10, 2012 when FBI agents fanned out across the modest Gentile property in Manchester, Connecticut, one winter’s day, before anything about the search and arrest of Gentile was ever mentioned in the press.

That would soon change. A subsequent search of Gentile’s home in May of that same year, and another in 2016 garnered regional and national headlines. But there were no reporters on the scene of the first search of Gentile’s home that February 10th, and of his backyard shed, with its secret underground storage compartment, no press account from the courthouse for Gentile’s appearance four days later. Or if there had been, the story was left to percolate until the following week. Only over a week later did the Hartford Courant published an eye-popping first installment of what was to become the main event under the Big Top of Gardner Heist news coverage for the next seven years.

The first Hartford Courant story was called: “Can A Mobster Solve Art Heist?” And was a doozy. Over six weeks would pass, however before the Boston Globe or any other publication would pick up the Gentile story. The 22nd anniversary, of the historic robbery came and went that year without any passing mention of it in the Boston news media. That too would change.

The Federal drug warrants against Gentile, which led to the search of his home, his arrest and the arrest of an associate, Andrew Parente, yielded just 80 fraudulently obtained prescription pain pills. The pills were being sold illegally by the two friends, the government charged. Parente was quickly released on bail, but Gentile was held due to a “propensity toward violence” the judge ruled, in consideration of what agents also discovered in Gentile’s home during their search.

In addition to \$20,000 cash found hidden in an old grandfather clock, Gentile’s basement was stuffed with enough firepower and other contraband to qualify for the season-one debut of *Mafia Hoarders*. The FBI confiscated five firearms, ammunition, a police cap, police badges, handcuffs, brass knuckles, five silencers, explosives, a bullet proof vest, even a stuffed kestrel and a pair of six-foot-tall elephant tusks.

Also found was a decades old copy of the Boston Herald from March 19, 1990, which was the day after the Gardner Heist. That together with a handwritten note listing all the stolen Gardner Museum art, and written estimates of each stolen work’s value on the black market, was perhaps the most damning evidence of Gentile’s connection to the historic robbery.

The old 1990 Herald, along with the black-market *Price Is Right* estimates of the stolen items, however, were not only the only things that led investigators to conclude that Gentile at the very least, had information about the whereabouts of the paintings. It only added to the evidence that they already had collected two years earlier.

The stolen Gardner art was the real reason the Feds were targeting this small-time drug dealing operation in the first place. Andrew Parent, who was arrested with Gentile in 2012, told the Hartford Courant that the FBI had been trying to question Gentile about the stolen Gardner Art for years, but Parente said, “he don’t know where they are,” a refrain that would be repeated by Gentile’s lawyer, Ryan McGuigan, somewhat more grammatically, over and over again until Gentile’s release in 2019.

The FBI first began taking a hard look at Gentile in relation to the stolen Gardner art in 2010, when the widow of a former criminal associate of Gentile’s, Elene Guarente, told the FBI that years earlier, in 2003, she had seen her husband, Robert Guarente give what appeared to be two Gardner paintings to Gentile in a restaurant parking lot in Portland, ME, after having lunch. According to Anthony Amore in Last Seen podcast the lunch meeting with the Guarente and Robert “The Cook” Gentile took place at the now closed Howard Johnson restaurant in Portland.

While acknowledging the meeting with the Guarentes in 2003, Gentile told the FBI, that he had never received any paintings from Guarente on that occasion or at any other time.

Still, Gentile agreed to cooperate with the Federal investigation of the case, though the arrangement collapsed, however, in less than a year. Investigators believed Gentile had lied to a grand jury looking into the case. He flunked a lie detector test administered by a retired FBI Agent. It was now obvious to Gentile that he remained a target of the Gardner Heist investigation, although it would still be over a year before that fact was made known to the public.

In his defense, Gentile said he did help out his old friend Robert Guarente financially, but that after he died, Gentile then explained to Elene Guarente, who was by then scraping by on a fixed income, that he had health problems himself, and would not be able to continue with the financial support he had given his old friend, despite whatever assurances she may have received from her deceased husband.

Gentile claimed this was Elene Guarente’s way of getting back at him, according to the Hartford Courant, In the same article, Gentile also said “that he got the list [of stolen Gardner Museum paintings] from [Paul] Papasodero when, about a dozen years ago, he found himself — inadvertently and entirely innocently — in the middle of a scam by Guarente to sell paintings he believes Guarente did not have.

A thief who engineered the Worcester Art Museum Heist in 1972, named Florian “Al” Monday claims to have given the list to Papasodero along with the estimates of the value of the art on the black market for Guarente’s scam.

The financial challenges facing Elene Guarente were quite real. She needed money for car repairs when she contacted authorities about the stolen Gardner art. Gardner Museum security director Anthony “Amore advanced Mrs. Guarente \$1,000 from the museum to have her car fixed,” Stephen Kurkjian wrote in “Master Thieves,” although Amore strongly denies he ever gave money to Elene Guarente.

There was now additional information supporting Elene Guarente’s account, which linked Gentile to the Gardner Museum’s stolen art, Gentile’s possession of that old copy of the Herald from the day after the Heist, along with the pricelist of the stolen Gardner art, which he inexplicably continued to keep in his basement for over a year, well after he knew he was considered a suspect in the case.

Five years earlier, in 2005, a year after Robert Guarente died, Guarente’s daughter and a close friend named Earle Berghman, contacted the Gardner Museum about the possibility that Guarente had

possession of the Gardner art, specifically, Rembrandt's *"Storm on the Sea of Galilee."* The evidence they offered was not deemed credible, however, and the information was not even forwarded to the Gardner Museum Security Director, nor the FBI by Gardner trustee Arnold Hiatt, who met with them twice that year, although it may have been before Amore was hired in the fall of 2005.

In addition, the Hartford Courant reported on January 3, 2016 that In a series of interviews, a longtime Gentile associate, [Sebastian "Sammy" Mozzicato] who agreed to work with the FBI, said he told agents that Gentile has acted for years as if he had access to the missing art, has talked about selling it and, for a time, kept what appeared to have been a lesser-known Gardner piece — a 200-year-old gilded eagle — at a used car lot he owned in South Windsor. Mozzicato's claims likely explain why the Gardner Museum offered a separate \$100,000 for the stolen Gardner Museum eagle finial, an amount twenty times or more than what can be purchased for a comparable item on ebay.

In a Hartford Courant article from September 5, 2017 Federal prosecutors disclosed in court that, in April 2010, according to the informant, [Mozzicato] Gentile said that his pal Guarente "had masterminded the whole thing" and had "flipped" before he died in 2004.

Mozzicato also told federal investigators, that in the late nineties, he had been instructed to transfer a package containing what he suspects were paintings between cars outside an apartment unit, used as a Waltham, MA safe house by organized crime figures involved in cocaine trafficking. He also claimed to have overheard Guarente and Gentile arguing about what to do with a painting that Gentile described as "worth in a fortune" during a heated discussion.

"Also, in the late 1990s, Mozzicato said Gentile gave him photographs of five stolen paintings and asked him to act as an intermediary in recruiting a buyer," the Hartford Courant reported in the same January 3, 2016 article.

Based on the 2012 drug investigation and searches of his home, Gentile received a 2 ½ year sentence, on drug and weapons charges. He was released in April of 2014. But before long, Gentile was approached by two long time former associates, Sammy Mozzicato again, and his cousin Ronnie Bowes.

The cousins, working as informants for the FBI, ingratiated themselves with Gentile by paying him protection money for a marijuana dealing operation they only pretended to be running as an ongoing concern. Meanwhile, the FBI was secretly recording the conversations between Gentile and their informants, who were wearing "wires" and regularly brought up the stolen Gardner art.

Later, "a federal prosecutor claimed — during a proceeding in an unrelated case — Gentile 'specifically suggested' he was in possession of two of the paintings. Eventually, according to Mozzicato, in response to his overtures, Gentile took steps towards selling one of the stolen Gardner paintings for \$500,000 to a buyer Mozzicato told him he had lined up, in exchange for a promise he would share in the reward money from the Gardner Museum. Gentile expressed complete skepticism that the Feds would ever let him have a share of any reward money.

Mozzicato told the Hartford Courant, that in 2014 Gentile instructed him to go to a pay phone, that was about a twelve-mile drive northeast of Hartford, in South Windsor, CT. A call to the payphone directed Mozzicato to a truck stop 25 miles east in Ashford, CT. There he met Gentile who told him to leave his cell phone and his car at the truck stop. Mozzicato says he was next driven by Gentile another 20 miles,

this time north, likely through the Nipmuck State forest to a house across the state line, in Massachusetts.

At the house, Mozzicato says he was frisked as he and Gentile met with three men. One of them said 'So Sammy. How ya doing? I heard about you from Unk,'" a nickname for Robert Guarente. It was an indirect and unverifiable way of claiming organized crime connections. "Unk" had been dead for ten years.

One of the men questioned Mozzicato about his plan to serve as a go-between in buying the art on behalf of his made up, big time marijuana supplier connection, whom Mozzicato refused to name. The man speaking in carefully worded hypotheticals to Mozzicato about a deal for the art also refused to give his own name.

A few days after the meeting, Gentile instructed Mozzicato to rent a storage unit and later accompanied him as he picked up a supposedly indestructible German lock from a used-car lot in Hartford's South End. Then, Mozzicato said, Gentile went silent again. Mozzicato said he believes Gentile had grown suspicious, he told the Hartford Courant, in this fascinating January 3, 2016 story by Edmund Mahony.

Perhaps it was the people that Gentile and Mozzicato met in Massachusetts about a deal for the stolen Gardner art, who grew suspicious and not Gentile himself.

Through his attorney, however, Gentile claims he knew all along it was a sting and that he was working a con to get the tribute money the informants were paying him, just so they would have continued opportunities to discuss the stolen Gardner art. This has to be the worst defense in history, since your defense is then that you were working a con against the very people, federal prosecutors, who are investigating you, and who quickly lashed out at Gentile in open court.

"There is a 99 percent certainty that Mr. Gentile was lying when he said he didn't know anything about the Gardner Museum robbery *before* it happened, he had never seen any of the Gardner paintings and didn't know where any of them were," John H. Durham, an assistant United States attorney, said during a court session on April 20, 2015, the New York Times reported four days later. These comments were not picked up other news media and the claim that Gentile knew about the Heist before it happened never became part of the story of Gentile's possible involvement with the stolen art.

Gentile should have known or strongly suspected an FBI sting, or setup. After his release from prison, on their first meeting with Gentile these same two longtime associates, had informed him that the feds asked them about his possible involvement with the stolen art.

Why would someone dealing illegal drugs, an ongoing criminal conspiracy, seek out Gentile, someone they knew was under the watchful eye of federal investigators? Gentile would have known that there were other ways of selling weed in Hartford that did not involve protection from someone in his compromised situation.

But then when the Gardner art sting failed to deliver, one of the same informants involved in that effort, Ronnie Bowes, set Gentile up on the purchase of a revolver, which led to another arrest, another search of his home and another three years behind bars.

If Gentile had been suspicious all along or had grown suspicious over time, then why did he trust Bowes on a risky thousand-dollar gun sale? As another high profile Gardner heist suspect said to me of Gentile: "They fucked him over good but he did it to himself...TWICE!"

But what of the Feds? They spent millions of dollars, investigating, searching, transporting, hospitalizing, prosecuting, and incarcerating Gentile with taxpayer money and without getting any art back, without seemingly trying to use the private funds offered up by the Gardner Museum, to make a recovery.

Gentile has expressed skepticism that the feds would ever allow him to have a share of any reward, and there is very little in the public record showing the Feds attempting to put the Gardner Museum's private reward money into play as an incentive to recover the art, quite the opposite.

William Youngworth, a criminal associate of Rembrandt art thief Myles Connor remarked in the 2005 documentary "*Stolen*," that based on his experience in 1998 of trying to exchange some of the art for the reward money that "the FBI takes this public posture that, listen, we just want the stuff back and we don't really care how it comes back. That's not true. I mean I have sat there behind closed doors and they only have one agenda the only thing they want is names," he said.

Also perplexing, is the lack of effort in the public realm of any kind of attempt to determine who the people were, who met with Mozzicato and Gentile to discussing selling the Gardner art. The Mozzicato angle never made into the Boston media, except for a single article in Boston Magazine, and no public effort has been made to identify the men that Mozzicato was introduced to at a house in Massachusetts.

At the start of the federal crowd-sourcing, social-media campaign that began in 2013, it was made very clear that the sole mission was to recover the stolen Gardner art, and not to identify or apprehend the thieves.

Who were these three unknown men, who met to discuss the sale of stolen Gardner paintings? What did they look like? Where is this house that Gentile drove to with Mozzicato for that meeting? Why has the public not been engaged in trying to answer these questions?

If Gentile knew no more about the Gardner Heist stolen art than what has been in the news media, we can probably conclude that this nine-year saga would have ended sooner. The same is true if he knew exactly where the paintings were. Gentile would have told the Feds where they were, to avoid first one and then another prison sentence, perhaps get some of the reward money, or write a book about the experience and make some money that way.

Actions speak louder than words, but Gentile's actions seem to contradict in a mystifying way considering the stakes for him, his life and health, and his family.

One explanation that could give some consistency to Gentile's actions is that he *knows* something, but he does not *have* something. That might have made it difficult, though perhaps not impossible for him to extricate himself from his dire predicament, by working with the FBI.

A federal prosecutor charged that Gentile threatened an undercover FBI agent he thought was a drug dealer saying to him: "'Do you know who I am?' and stated that he could have people killed and make them disappear," the Hartford Courant reported.

Why then, couldn't Gentile use these same strongarm tactics against the people who have the Gardner art. One explanation is that whoever Gentile knows to have had the art, also has organized crime connections, equal or greater than his own. Or that it is people within the very same criminal group, who have control of the paintings.

The fact that whoever has them cannot be bullied into handing over the paintings to hardened criminals the way that Florian "Al" Monday was, shortly after the 1972 Worcester Art Museum Heist, combined with the FBI's continued unwillingness to make use of the Gardner Museum reward money, in actual practice, as an incentive to get the art back, suggests two things: The first is that the art is controlled by someone with crime connections, at least on a par with Robert Gentile's. The second is that whoever has the stolen Gardner art, they are those who the FBI will not accept as recipients of any share of the Gardner Heist reward money, either because the original thieves, still continue to control the art, or for some other reason.

Kerry Joyce

Copyright 2021