

US attorney demands proof on stolen art

Ric Kahn and Judy Rakowsky, Globe Staff . Boston Globe ; Boston, Mass. [Boston, Mass]. 11 Sep 1997: A, 1:5.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

Stephen Kurkjian of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

US Attorney Donald K. Stern said yesterday that he will not bargain with William P. Youngworth III until the rogue antiques dealer proves his claim that he has access to precious artworks stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

"There have been no negotiations -- and there won't be -- about what law enforcement might or might not be willing to do until there's some showing that we know what we're dealing with," Stern said. "We want to have some confidence that what we're dealing with are priceless works of art -- not the work of a bull artist."

Last month, a Boston Herald reporter said he glimpsed by flashlight what could have been one of the purloined paintings in a warehouse -- a viewing Youngworth says he facilitated. The front-page story, Stern said, falls short of bona fide information.

"We have not yet been provided the kind of concrete and credible evidence one looks for in this case," Stern said. "With all due respect, it's not credible and concrete just because I read it in the newspaper."

In the last several weeks, Youngworth has made headlines by boasting that he could help authorities recover \$200 million in paintings stolen from the Gardner Museum in March 1990.

In return for his help, Youngworth has demanded immunity from prosecution, amnesty on criminal charges he

currently faces in Norfolk County, the release of imprisoned art thief Myles J. Connor Jr. and the \$5 million reward.

Stern declined to say whether authorities had asked for more proof and were rebuffed. But his comments appear to reflect growing frustration over Youngworth's refusal to support his claims with evidence -- such as a paint chip from one of the canvases, or a snapshot of the art.

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Youngworth reportedly walked out after O'Connor, the lead prosecutor in the Gardner investigation, would pledge only "partial immunity" in exchange for his help.

Yesterday, Stern implied that Youngworth overstated his case.

While not ruling out leniency for Youngworth in the future, Stern said discussions with the antiques dealer had not reached the point of formal negotiations.

Stern said the only inducement his office would give at this stage is a standard offer of protection: authorities would not use Youngworth's statements against him, but they could prosecute him if they developed other evidence.

Stern declined to say if they made Youngworth that offer.

"We haven't paid much attention to his so-called demands," Stern said. "Until we get the credible and concrete evidence we're looking for, discussion about his unilateral demands is pointless."

But time could be a factor for Youngworth.

He is scheduled to stand trial Sept. 23 in Norfolk County Superior Court for allegedly being in possession of a stolen van when Randolph and Boston police raided his home in February 1996.

Under most circumstances, the offense probably would result in little, if any, prison time. But Youngworth, a repeat felon, could face up to 15 years behind bars under the state's habitual offender law.

Earlier yesterday, Youngworth held a two-hour strategy session with Connor -- who has been brought from federal prison in Pennsylvania to take part in the discussions over return of the artwork -- and Martin K. Leppo, Connor's lawyer.

"There's been a lot of encouraging conversation," Leppo said after the meeting. Connor and Youngworth plan to meet again today.

In recent weeks, Youngworth has said he wants federal authorities to convince Norfolk County prosecutors to delay his criminal trial, or drop the charges completely.

Both federal and state prosecutors declined to say yesterday whether they had discussed Youngworth's demands. But Norfolk Superior Court Judge Elizabeth Butler has told Youngworth and his lawyer that she will not delay the

DETAILS

Subject:	Art theft
People:	Youngworth, William P III Stern, Donald K
Company:	Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum-Boston MA
Publication title:	Boston Globe; Boston, Mass.
Pages:	A, 1:5
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	1997
Publication date:	Sep 11, 1997
Section:	METRO/REGION
Publisher:	Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC
Place of publication:	Boston, Mass.
Country of publication:	United States, Boston, Mass.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodica Is--United States
ISSN:	07431791
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
Accession number:	04703167
ProQuest document ID:	403890321
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/us-attorney-demands-proof-on-stolen-art/docview/403890321/se-2?accountid=9758
Copyright:	Copyright Boston Globe Newspaper Sep 11, 1997
Last updated:	2017-11-10

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