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Art talks on again, Youngworth claims

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NORFOLK — More than two months after the FBI cast doubt on his credibility, William P. Youngworth III contended yesterday that he has reopened negotiations with representatives of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum to help win the return of artwork stolen in 1990.

In an hour-long interview at Norfolk State Prison, where he is serving a two-year sentence unrelated to the Gardner thefts, Youngworth declined to provide details of the negotiations, why they had resumed, or who is speaking for the museum.

Describing the talks as "pretty intense," Youngworth said he hopes they will be successful.

"The opportunity is here again," Youngworth said. "I walked away from the negotiation table in November. We're back here again, and I urge them to seize the moment."

Gardner officials declined to say whether there were any ongoing discussions between Youngworth and anyone representing the museum, such as executives, trustees, or lawyers. One individual close to the Gardner said, "There may have been a time that we were hopeful" of gaining the artwork's return through Youngworth. But "that's not the case now."

Thirteen paintings and pieces of art were stolen in the daring, early-morning heist in March 1990; Youngworth said yesterday that he had told the authorities he could broker the return of 11 of them. He said he did not know the whereabouts of a Chinese bronze container or the bronze top of a Napoleonic flag staff that also were stolen.

Martin K. Leppo of Randolph, who has represented Youngworth in his on-again, off-again discussions with federal authorities and Gardner officials, would say only that there had been "some movement" in recent days toward restarting the talks.

Despite Youngworth's optimistic tone, he conceded that obstacles remain before he is willing to work with law-enforcement officials. Federal authorities refuse to grant him immunity from prosecution for the



GLOBE FILE PHOTO

William P. Youngworth III, shown in Dedham at an arraignment in September, says he has resumed talks with the Gardner Museum.

thefts or the hiding or possible return of the material until he provides concrete evidence that he has access to the pieces.

In hopes of gaining complete immunity, Youngworth said, Leppo had asked superiors of Assistant US Attorney Brien O'Connor, the lead prosecutor on the inquiry, to intervene. Leppo declined to discuss the issue. Howard M. Lewis of Framingham, who also has represented Youngworth in his criminal cases, also declined to comment.

Saying he was speaking for US Attorney Donald K. Stern, O'Connor said last night that the office's position had not changed: Youngworth would not be granted complete or partial immunity unless he can provide "specific and credible" evidence that he has access to the artwork.

Youngworth's main effort to date to provide evidence — turning over to authorities photographs and purported paint chips from two Rembrandts stolen in the heist — ended disastrously. In December, the FBI and the Gardner Museum announced that their separate testing of the paint chips determined that they had not come from a Rembrandt painting. The photographs also were discredited as either photographs of the paintings before

they were stolen or photographs of prints.

Youngworth's interview with the Globe was the first since last August, when he refused to speak at length unless he was paid, which the newspaper refused to do. He had, until recently, given numerous interviews with the Boston Herald in which he repeatedly said that he would be able to broker the artwork's return.

He said yesterday, however, that

his relationship with the Herald had soured because of how he was portrayed in an article written by Tom Mashberg, the Herald's lead reporter on the Gardner thefts, in the current issue of Vanity Fair magazine.

However, Youngworth insisted that the painting that Mashberg viewed briefly last August in a warehouse outside of Boston was in fact the stolen Rembrandt, "Storm on the Sea of Galilee." Mashberg's viewing of the painting, which he reported was arranged through Youngworth, remains the most convincing piece of evidence of Youngworth's credibility of his ability to broker the artwork's return.

Yesterday, Youngworth said that Mashberg's viewing of the painting had been "capitalized," and that he would have been allowed to see more of the stolen artwork if he had been "better capitalized."

Youngworth declined to say whether Mashberg or the Herald had paid him in exchange for viewing the painting. Mashberg called Youngworth's statement "preposterous." He said while the Herald had paid for some of Youngworth's travel and other expenses to help Mashberg in his reporting, the paper had never given Youngworth or anyone else money in exchange for viewing the painting.

Herald editor Andrew Costello declined to comment.

