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The Boston Globe

Turf war may have ruined Gardner heist lead

Ex-agent says FBI was on right trail

By Stephen Kurkjian

Globe Correspondent / April 4, 2010

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The FBI was on the trail of recovering the principal masterpieces stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum from a criminal gang in Corsica two years ago only to have its efforts dashed, in part because of bureaucratic infighting among federal agents and supervisors.

That is the conclusion of a nonfiction book written by a now-retired FBI special agent who posed undercover in 2006 and 2007 as a wealthy art collector interested in purchasing

several of the paintings through two Frenchmen who had alleged ties to the Corsican mobsters. The French intermediaries said they could deliver the stolen Vermeer, valued at more than \$100 million, and at least one of the two large Rembrandts that were taken. They were among the 13 pieces, now valued at \$500 million, stolen in what is considered the largest art theft in history.

As detailed in his soon-to-be released book, "Priceless: How I Went Undercover to Rescue the World's Stolen Treasures," Robert K. Wittman says he believed from French wiretaps and his covert dealings with the two French intermediaries that the Corsican mob did have control of the stolen artwork. A special agent for 20 years, Wittman established the FBI's Art Theft unit and is credited with recoveries of hundreds of millions of dollars of art and antiquities during his career, many of which he recounts in his book, along with his experiences on the Gardner case.

If true, the disclosures provide the first real clues as to what happened to the 11 paintings and drawings, plus an ancient Chinese vase and a finial, stolen out of the Gardner Museum on March 18, 1990.

Wittman, who retired from the FBI and now works as a private security consultant, could not be reached for comment. A spokeswoman for his publisher, Crown Publishers in New York, said he would not be giving interviews until the book goes on sale in June. As recently as a month ago, FBI agents who have spent the last 20 years investigating the thefts were quoted as saying that they have never received "proof of life" evidence from any of the tipsters that they had possession or access to the stolen goods.

The FBI, according to officials, is reviewing Wittman's manuscript for possible disclosure of secrets that could be damaging to ongoing investigations or national security. Special Agent Gail A. Marcinkiewicz, spokeswoman for the Boston office of the FBI, declined to respond to questions on the substance of the Corsican investigation — tagged Operation Masterpiece by the FBI — or Wittman's criticisms of the FBI's overall handling of the inquiry. Instead, in a statement Friday, she said: "Per DOJ [Department of Justice] policy, the FBI does not comment on any ongoing, pending investigations. The FBI remains dedicated and committed to this investigation with the ultimate goal being the

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recovery and return of the stolen artwork to the Gardner Museum.”

Until now, the FBI has attributed that failure to the perpetrators’ continued fear of prosecution, despite repeated pledges by federal authorities that they would not be charged if they returned the stolen items in good condition. They would also be eligible to collect the \$5 million reward being offered by the museum for the return of the paintings and other art pieces.

However, Wittman contends that the lead he worked on beginning in late 2006 — which he describes as the first credible tip received by the FBI — was sabotaged by the reluctance of FBI officials to overrule the FBI supervisory agent on the Gardner investigation who refused to allow Wittman to make his own decisions on the Corsican case.

Instead, the supervisor, who is only identified in the book as “Fred,” micromanaged Wittman’s interactions with the two French intermediaries even though he was unfamiliar with overseeing an undercover operation. At one point, Wittman writes, Fred tried to get Wittman thrown off the case by sending an official memorandum to FBI chiefs in Washington questioning whether Wittman was trying to delay completing the investigation until retiring so he could win the \$5 million reward as a private citizen.

In addition, Wittman writes, Fred — who had never before traveled to a foreign country on official business — was quick to offend his counterparts in French law enforcement on the investigation, seeking to assert the FBI’s control of the case even though many of the dealings were to take place inside France.

Despite his pleas, Wittman writes, FBI officials refused to wrest control of the investigation from Fred because of the historic reluctance of those at FBI headquarters to overrule the decisions of the agency’s local supervisors. French authorities also weakened the thrust of the investigation by mandating that a French intelligence officer work undercover with Wittman and by refusing at one key point to allow one of the two intermediaries to enter France for a meeting because he was a fugitive wanted in France on another crime.

“Bureaucracies and turf fighting on both sides of the Atlantic had destroyed the best chance in a decade to rescue the Gardner paintings,” Wittman writes. “We’d blown an opportunity to infiltrate a major art crime ring in France, a loose network of mobsters holding as many as 70 stolen masterpieces.”

Despite his criticisms of the investigation, the key question that emerges from Wittman’s book is whether the lead was a legitimate one. Did the French intermediaries — a fugitive accountant named Laurenz Cogniat and his associate, identified only as Sunny — have real ties with Corsican mobsters and did those mobsters have control of the paintings? Or was the pair just trying to pull a scam on Wittman, who had told them that he was able to put up millions to buy the Gardner paintings?

Wittman says he believed he was on track to recover the Gardner paintings after French police told him that they had spotted Sunny meeting with Corsican mobsters in Marseilles and Sunny had been heard on wiretaps speaking of “frames for Bob.” Wittman’s undercover name was Bob Clay.

But while the three met repeatedly over a two-year period in France, Spain, and in the United States, Wittman had trouble focusing the intermediaries’ attention on closing the deal for the Gardner paintings. Wittman dropped out of the case in early 2008 when Sunny approached him to see whether he was interested in buying four paintings that had just been stolen from a museum in Nice. Wittman turned the lead over to another FBI undercover agent. Sunny was subsequently arrested in the deal, ending Wittman’s hopes of using him as a conduit for recovering the Gardner paintings.

Wittman ends his book recounting a wistful conversation he had with Pierre Tabel, then the chief of France’s National Art Crime Squad, about their efforts

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over the previous two years to recover the Gardner paintings.

“Pierre,” Wittman asks him, “do you think we had a chance? For the paintings?”

“Absolument,” Tabel responded. “We have a good idea who has them. We know to whom Sunny was speaking. But now that we arrest Sunny . . . the case is gone. We will not have this chance again for many years.”

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