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Ex-FBI agent brings new look at world's biggest art heist. Its CT link brought a recent search here

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It was a spontaneous admission during an awkward conversation in the remote Maine woods that turned the investigation of the world's biggest art heist upside down and dropped it on an obscure Hartford gangster.

What was said in Maine remains at the center of the decades-long and still unsolved investigation of the sensational 1990 Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum robbery in Boston. The first, first-person account of the conversation is a climactic moment in "Thirteen Perfect Fugitives," a compelling new book about the robbery by Geoffrey Kelly, the recently retired FBI agent who directed the bureau's art theft investigation for 22 years.

Kelly's account of the FBI's hunt for the stolen art — he inherited the case late in 2002 — weaves in and out of the brutal New England underworld. In 2010 it ended up in Madison, Maine where the investigators uncovered what remains arguably their biggest and yet stubbornly frustrating break.

Kelly was working with museum Security Director Anthony Amore. They

stolen paintings in a ramshackle farmhouse in Madison.

Like so many before and after it in the 36 years since the robbery, the search turned out to be a waste of time.

The break came when Kelly returned the keys to the farm house to Guarente's widow, Elene, who lived elsewhere in Madison. Her husband had died, ending the years of beatings that characterized their marriage,

and she was engaged in her customary afternoon routine — watching television and chain smoking.

"The air is thick with a pall of cigarette smoke, and a faint whiff of fried food undercuts the cloying stench of tobacco," Kelly wrote in the recently released book. "Over my career, it is a smell to which I've become well acquainted, that of deep-fried cigarettes."

Kelly wrote that when he introduced Amore as the Gardner security director, Elene shuddered. Pressed, she denied ever having heard of the museum.

"I tell her that I find the statement unusual, considering the fact that her husband was once considered a suspect in the robbery," Kelly wrote. "I continue, 'He never mentioned anything to you about the stolen

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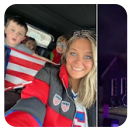

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"I ask her why she's crying," Kelly wrote.

"Because my Bobby had them," she said.

Elene ultimately told Kelly and Amore that she believes her husband once had at least a two of the stolen paintings but gave them away, to someone she knew only as "Bobby the Cook" or "Bobby from Connecticut." She said the hand-off took place in 2004 on the waterfront in Portland, Maine, outside the Holiday Inn.

Bobby from Connecticut, the FBI soon learned, was Robert Gentile, another overweight gangster who had managed — quite successfully — to fly beneath enforcement radar for most of his more than 70 years. He

grew up in Hartford and lived Manchester. He was a grifter, a drug dealer, a thief prone to unpredictable violence and — as the Gardner team would learn — a liar. Significantly, he also was a sworn member of the Philadelphia mafia family.

This Is A Robbery: Coverage of the Gardner Museum Art Heist and Robert Gentile from the Courant archives

Gentile and the story coaxed from Elene nearly two decades ago remain at the center of the investigation and accounts for much of Kelly's the book. But "Thirteen Perfect Fugitives," a title Kelly said he took from the 13 pieces of priceless art stolen from the Gardner, also reports in detail on the other twists and turns in what may be the world's most notorious art heist and the deeply frustrating, global investigation that, after three and one half decades, has failed to turn up the art.

Try as they might, Kelly and the federal law enforcement teams that supported him in Massachusetts and Connecticut could not persuade Gentile to even admit he once had any of the stolen art, in spite of credible assertions by a half dozen or so informants and other sources that he did.

A Rembrandt left behind in the robbery of Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990. (Courtesy FBI) Geoffrey Kelly (FBI Boston) Rembrandt's A Lady and Gentleman in Black, stolen from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990. (Courtesy FBI) Rembrandt's The Storm on the Sea of Galilee, stolen from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990. (Courtesy FBI) Patrick Raycraft / Hartford CourantReputed mobster Robert Gentile leaves federal court in Hartford after he pleaded guilty in a plea agreement on Thursday afternoon to illegal possession of firearms, ammunition and a silencer. Gentile is currently housed at the Bridgeport Correctional Center and is scheduled to be sentenced on August 25. This could signal the end to the government's efforts to get information out of Gentile related to the Gardner museum heist. Mark Mirko / Hartford CourantFBI agents search the Manchester home of reputed mobster Robert Gentile. Authorities suspected Gentile had information about the irreplaceable art that vanished in a sensational theft from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Photograph by Mark Mirko | mmirko@courant.com Patrick Raycraft / Hartford CourantReputed mobster Robert Gentile leaves federal court in Hartford after he pleaded guilty in a plea agreement on

Thursday afternoon to illegal possession of firearms, ammunition and a silencer. Gentile is currently housed at the Bridgeport Correctional Center and is scheduled to be sentenced on August 25. This could signal the end to the government's efforts to get information out of Gentile related to the Gardner museum heist. William Rye / The Boston GlobeRobert Gentile's connections with Robert Guarante, a bank robber seen above with a shirt over his head after an arrest in Natick, Mass., in 1968, intrigued federal authorities investigating the theft of half a billion dollars in art from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in March 1990. Alan Chaniewski / FOX CTAerial views of law enforcement personnel searching the home of reputed gangster Robert Gentile, taking out evidence and using ground-penetrating radar to search the back yard. Authorities suspect Gentile, 75, has information about the irreplaceable art that vanished in a sensational theft from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum 22 years ago. Patrick Raycraft / Hartford CourantRobert Gentile, the Hartford mobster and the last hope for recovery of paintings stolen from the Gardner museum, is wheeled into a waiting vehicle at the federal courthouse in Hartford. Show Caption1 of 11The cover of the new book "Thirteen Perfect Fugitives" by Geoffrey Kelly. (Courtesy)Expand

And the teams did try. Gentile turned down a $10 million reward. Over nearly a decade, he was convicted and imprisoned repeatedly on drug and gun charges. Every time he turned down offers to have the charges dropped and still be allowed to collect the reward if he cooperated.

He was followed by helicopters as he drove his battered old Buick, part of his under-the-radar lifestyle. During secretly recorded conversations with informants and an undercover FBI agent, he admitted having access to stolen Gardner art. But when confronted later with the recordings, he inexplicably denied what he had been recorded saying.

In 2014, Kelly and his then partner, New Haven-based agent Jamie Lawton, concocted an elaborate sting the bureau called Operation Gardner Grab. Using paid informants and an undercover agent, they persuaded Gentile that a rich marijuana importer was willing to buy any stolen art he had or could get. Under the plan, the pot dealer would cook up a story about finding he art somewhere on the west coast turn it in for the no-questions-asked reward.

Gentile showed interest in the plan for months, but never took the bait. He did spend a lot of time trying to figure a way to get a piece of the pot

business

Whatever Gentile knew, he took to the grave. He died in September 2021 at age 85. Elene Guarente and her husband have since died too, as have all the other key figures in the early investigation, compounding the difficulty facing those who have replaced Kelly.

The robbery of the Gardner, an Italianate palazzo in Boston's Fenway, took place early in the morning of March 18, 1990. As St. Patrick's Day celebrations wound down across Boston, a security guard admitted two thieves dressed as police officers. The phony cops bound the two museum guards on duty and then moved leisurely through the museum, battering and slashing some of the world's most recognizable art from walls and frames. They loaded the art into a gray and red Dodge Daytona and probably a back-up truck and drove off.

Among the stolen pieces were "The Concert" by Vermeer and two Rembrandts, one of them his only known seascape, "Storm on the Sea of Galilee." The art was uninsured under the terms of the bequest that created the museum, and empty frames now hang where art was once displayed.

There is some news in the book. Kelly presents detailed evidence he believes shows that Rick Abath, one of the museum guards on duty the night of the heist, was the inside man. Abath, who also has died, was a beer-drinking, pot-smoking music school dropout and rock 'n roll musician who occasionally reported to work drunk. He had given the museum two weeks notice three days before the robbery.

"I believe that Rick knew full well that the robbery was going to occur that night," Kelly wrote. "It is neither conjecture nor opinion; it's incontrovertible fact underpinned by he science of the motion-sensor data."

There is another factor that Kelly believes weighs against Abath: As the robbers bound the security guards in the museum's cellar, one said, "If everything goes alright, then you'll get a nice reward in about a year's time."

A year later, a wrapped pound of marijuana appeared at Abath's Allston apartment. He told his girlfriend, disingenuously, it arrived "magically" and was probably a reward from the police for his cooperation.

Kelly spends the first half of his book running through a who's who of the New England underworld, gangsters and mob wannabes who likely came into contact with the art before the investigation reached Maine and Gentile. Kelly and his colleagues ruled out the notorious Irish gangster James "Whitey" Bulger. They ran down numerous leads involving gangsters hunting for the art themselves, hoping to use it to buy the release from prison of associates.

Kelly said he has determined who the two robbers were: Boston hoodlums George Reissfelder and Lenny DiMuzio. Reissfelder was found dead of a suspicious drug overdose a year after the robbery. Relatives said they had seen a painting in his apartment that looked remarkably like "Chez Tortoni," the Gardner's stolen Manet. DiMuzio was found murdered about three weeks later.

The book implies they were killed to keep them from talking about the heist.

Once the investigation moved to Gentile, it stayed there for years. FBI agents searched his modest Manchester ranch three times. In addition to a clutter of hundreds of items that included $22,000 in cash, police uniforms, what a judged called "a veritable arsenal of weapons, a bucket of silencers and, remarkably, a pair of elephant tusks, the agents found a Boston newspaper clip reporting the heist. Folded inside was a list of the stolen art and estimated black market value.

Kelly portrays Gentile as, at once, the FBI's best and most frustrating lead. There was persuasive evidence that, even if he didn't possess any of the art, he had information that could help the agents find it.

At one point Gentile agreed to submit to a polygraph examination, presumably to demonstrate his denials were truthful. The result: a 99.9 percent probability that he was lying.

Kelly writes that Gentile's bald lies were maddening. It is a subject without a definitive explanation that the book returns to repeatedly. At one point in the investigation, Kelly ordered two Gentile associates who were wearing hidden microphones as paid informants, to confront him.

"As the operation dragged on, I was haunted by a nagging question: Why didn't Gentile simply cooperate with us and collect the reward?" Kelly wrote. "I needed closure to this maddening riddle, so during a recorded meet on October 27, I directed the sources to ask him why he didn't just

turn in the stolen artwork himself and make millions.

“Gentile’s reply spoke volumes: Yeah, the FBI are (expletives). You give them one or two (paintings) and they don’t know where the rest of them are, they put the heat on you and they still put you in jail. They’re (expletives).

The FBI’s believes some or all the art has moved to Philadelphia, a theory based in part on what they learned from investigating Gentile’ and his membership in the Philadelphia crime family. Multiple Gentile associates have reported conversations before his death in which he talked about sending a stolen painting — invariably one of the least valuable pieces — south as some sort of tribute to the Philly crime boss.

Kelly writes in his book about a bizarre incident in which a Gentile confidant-turned-informant — referred to by the FBI as Meatball — reported that Gentile once ordered him and a mob associate to deliver what the informant believed was a box containing Rembrandt’s “Storm” to Philadelphia in a poultry truck. The picked up the box near Gem Auto, a used car lot Gentile once owned in South Windsor.

“Gentile instructed him and a mob associate named John “The Jackrabbit” Jackmauh to drive a poultry truck down to the Philadelphia area,” Kelly wrote. “According to Meatball, they picked up the truck, which was parked near a barn in South Windsor, just a short distance from Gem Auto, and drove it down to a warehouse on the outskirts of Philadelphia.

“Meatball, a drug-dealing convicted murderer (three times, no less), told us he’d never been more nervous than he was during that long drive to Philly. When they arrived at the warehouse, Meatball and Jackmauh off-loaded three cardboard boxes, one of which he described as large and oblong.”

The heist investigation may have moved south to Philadelphia, but even in death, Gentile is still in the picture.

Last week FBI agents were in South Windsor searching for paintings in the barn Meatball described as being near Gem Auto.

They found nothing.

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