

# A Rembrandt hidden in a chicken truck. An informant named Meatball. Retired FBI agent offers new intel on Gardner Museum heist.

By [Shelley Murphy](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 17, 2026, 5:30 a.m.



Retired FBI agent Geoffrey Kelly, who investigated the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum heist for 22 years before retiring two years ago, stands beside a print of Vermeer's "The Concert," given to him by the museum. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

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Is it possible that Rembrandt's only seascape, "Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee," stolen 36 years ago from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, was delivered to mobsters in Philadelphia in *a chicken truck*?

That's what an informant told the FBI, according to a recently published book by retired FBI agent Geoffrey Kelly, [who spearheaded the investigation into the theft](#) for 22 years until retiring two years ago.

The informant, Ronnie "Meatball" Bowes, had been convicted of killing three men in Florida in the 1980s during a drug deal gone bad, then was released after an appeals court ruled he acted in self-defense.

Yet during a meeting with Kelly and another agent in 2012, he confided that "he'd never been more nervous than he was during that long drive to Philly" as he and a Connecticut mob associate nicknamed "The Jackrabbit" rumbled down the highway in a poultry truck a decade earlier.

He was convinced that several cardboard boxes placed in the truck by a Connecticut mobster contained some of the stolen Gardner paintings. But he was too afraid to look.

"While Meatball never opened any of the packages, at the time he assumed that he'd just delivered The Storm to Philadelphia," Kelly wrote in his book, "Thirteen Perfect Fugitives," a reference to the 13 pieces stolen from the palatial museum.

The FBI announced more than a decade ago that it believed some of the stolen Gardner artwork went through organized crime circles while moving from Boston to Connecticut to [Philadelphia](#), where the trail went cold.

But Kelly's book offers new details about the evidence gathered by the FBI leading up to that announcement, part of a first-hand account of the twists and turns in the sprawling investigation into the world's largest art heist, which remains unsolved.

"It's basically a scavenger hunt for 13 objects, and the whole world is in play," Kelly, 58, said during a recent interview. He is now a partner at Argus Cultural Property Consultants.



The empty frame from Rembrandt's oil painting "A Lady and Gentleman in Black" lies on the floor of Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum with the canvas cut out, March 21, 1990, and a space on the wall of the museum (left) remains bare where Rembrandt's "Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee," once hung. JIM BOURG/REUTERS

The heist was carried out on March 18, 1990, when two thieves dressed as police officers were let inside by a guard at 1:24 a.m. after claiming to be investigating a disturbance. They tied up the two guards on duty and spent 81 minutes inside, slashing and pulling masterpieces from their frames.

Besides “The Storm,” they stole two other Rembrandts, “A Lady and Gentleman in Black” and a stamp-sized self-portrait; Vermeer’s “The Concert”; Flinck’s “Landscape with an Obelisk”; five Degas sketches; “Chez Tortoni” by Manet; an ancient Chinese vase; and a bronze finial eagle from atop a Napoleonic flag.

None of the works have been recovered, despite a \$10 million reward. No one has been charged with the crime.

In 2013, when the FBI said some of the stolen artwork had been routed to Philadelphia, investigators said they were confident they had identified the thieves— local criminals who had died by that point — but declined to name them.

The “Philadelphia mob angle” remained “a viable line of investigation, right up until my retirement from the FBI,” Kelly wrote.

Kelly wrote that he believed Bowes, who died of cancer in 2015, offered a truthful account. During a 2012 meeting with agents, Bowes said Connecticut mobster Robert [Gentile](#) enlisted him and an associate to pick up the poultry truck, which was parked near a barn in South Windsor, Conn., and drive it to a warehouse on the outskirts of Philadelphia.

Rembrandt's "Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee," 1633, oil on canvas ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON

Shortly before the trip, Bowes said Gentile, who owned an auto body shop in South Windsor, ushered him into one of the garage bays and pulled an oil painting of a ship on stormy seas out of a large, oblong cardboard box lying flat on a workbench.

Bowes told the FBI that Gentile lamented that such a priceless work of art could not be sold.

“Do you know what this thing’s worth? Nothing,” Bowes recalled Gentile saying. “This thing is worth nothing. Nobody wants it.”

Bowes's cousin also told the FBI that he believed he had seen the Gardner museum's stolen finial displayed on a shelf at Gentile's auto repair shop, Kelly wrote.

Bowes was not the first person to implicate Gentile, whose name first surfaced in the investigation in 2010.

In his book, Kelly wrote that a key turning point in the investigation came in the fall of 2009, when the niece of the late Robert Guarente, a bank robber with mob ties, called the FBI after watching a news account of the Gardner theft. She said she had seen some of the stolen paintings hidden behind a second-floor wall in his farmhouse in Madison, Maine.

In early 2010, Kelly and Anthony Amore, the head of security at the Gardner museum since 2005, searched the farmhouse with the consent of Guarente's widow, Elene. They found the hiding spot described by his niece, but there were no paintings. When they returned the key to the house to her, she told them that before Guarente's death in 2004, he gave two of the stolen paintings to Gentile.

A FBI evidence response team at the back of the home of Robert Gentile in 2012. THE BOSTON GLOBE/BOSTON GLOBE

During a court-authorized search of Gentile's home in Manchester, Conn., in 2012, agents found a list of the stolen artwork, with their black market values, tucked inside a March 1990 copy of the Boston Herald reporting the theft. They also found weapons, police hats, handcuffs, drugs, and explosives. And they discovered an empty Rubbermaid tub buried under the floorboards of a backyard shed.

"What was so important that he needed to bury it underground?" Kelly said during a recent interview. Opening that tub and discovering it was empty "sucked the life right out of me," he said.

While cooperating with the FBI, Bowes and his cousin cozied up to Gentile and introduced him to an undercover FBI agent posing as a drug dealer who was interested in purchasing the stolen paintings for \$500,000 apiece. Gentile initially claimed he could produce them, according to court filings, but never did.

Gentile insisted to FBI investigators and federal prosecutors that he never had access to the paintings and didn't know where they were, even after he was offered freedom on gun and drug

charges if he could produce the artwork. He died in 2021.

Robert Gentile was brought into the federal courthouse in a wheelchair for a hearing in Hartford on April 20, 2015. CLOE  
POISSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS/FILE

The FBI remained convinced he was lying. Kelly wrote that agents searched numerous locations where they believed he may have hidden the artwork, including neighbors' garages, vacant lots, vast tracts of woodlands around hunting lodges in Vermont, a decrepit barn in the Hartford suburbs, and the homes of some of his mob associates.

In his book, Kelly expands on his theory, previously reported by the Globe, that the mastermind of the theft was Carmello Merlino, a mob associate who ran a repair shop in Dorchester and likely sent the thieves inside the museum with a "shopping list." He died in prison in 2005.

Kelly believes the two thieves who went inside were George Reissfelder, a petty thief, and Leonard DiMuzio, an associate implicated in home invasions, and that others served as lookouts and helped haul the stolen artwork away.

Reissfelder, 51, was found dead inside his apartment in March 1991 of a cocaine overdose that was deemed suspicious by his family. Two weeks later, DiMuzio, 43, of Rockland, disappeared. His body was found in the trunk of a car in East Boston in June 1991. No one has been charged with his death.

Kelly's theory is that the guard who let the thieves inside, Richard Abath, was a willing accomplice who knew it was a robbery. Abath, [who died in 2024](#), steadfastly maintained he had nothing to do with the heist.

Kelly, who inherited the investigation in December 2002 after the agent assigned to the case was killed in a car crash, maintains that the FBI solved the "whodunit" part of the crime, based on solid evidence gathered over decades. He wrote that he "was perpetually amused and equally bemused by armchair detectives who conducted their own investigations, searching for the missing artwork while simultaneously castigating and excoriating the FBI — and me personally — for not making recovery."

He added, "If it's so [expletive] easy, you go find them."

Although nearly every person identified by the FBI as a person of interest in the investigation has died, Kelly remains convinced the paintings will be recovered some day.

“Someone will attempt to monetize them, and the FBI will be there, posing as a crooked art broker or a New Jersey mobster,” Kelly wrote. “Or perhaps the recovery will be more organic, and a distant relative cleaning out a decedent’s attic will stumble across *The Storm*. Maybe *The Concert* will make its way into an auction house in Miami, or the Flinck will make a grand appearance at an antiques mall in Topeka. Be patient. It will happen.”

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