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Inside the Mission to Solve the World's Most Famous Art Heist

In this exclusive excerpt from *Thirteen Perfect Fugitives*, the FBI tracks one of the best known suspects in the \$500 million theft from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

BY GEOFFREY KELLY PUBLISHED: MAR 10, 2026



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It's February 2010, and I'm westbound on the Mass Pike, accompanied by Anthony Amore [director of security at the Gardner] and Assistant United States Attorney Brian Kelly. We're heading to Manchester, a small town in the suburbs of a small city. Apparently, it was once home to the world's largest silk mill, although that's not the reason for today's visit. That would have to wait, because today we're planning to interview Bobby

Gentile. Brian has brought with him a signed immunity letter, and Anthony has a giant novelty check balanced on his lap, already made out in Gentile's name. Okay, perhaps that last part is inaccurate, but Anthony does have the authority to offer the reward on behalf of [the Gardner Museum](#), and that's kind of like a metaphorical big check.

It's been a week or two since we interviewed Elene [wife of famed mafioso Bobby Guarente], giving us sufficient time to cobble together all the information we have on Gentile, which isn't much. I have Gentile's phone number, a landline that has been subscribed to him for decades, although I've chosen not to call in advance. The more important the interview, the more loath I am to first make a phone call. And since we're investigating the world's largest art heist, this is one extremely important interview. Investigators basically get one shot to conduct a meaningful interview of a subject; it's the one opportunity to catch someone off guard and lock them into a story. If they have the luxury of time, then they have the opportunity to concoct an alibi, come up with a plausible lie, or call their attorney.



BOSTON GLOBE // GETTY IMAGES

The art stolen from the Gardner Museum on March 18, 1990 include works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Degas. As of today, none have been recovered.

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It is still morning when we pull up to a compact ranch on the bend of Frances Drive. An aging blue Buick and an even older brown one are parked in a driveway that's skewered by an inconveniently planted telephone pole. The house is clad in salmon-tinted shingles with red plastic shutters, and a recessed porch sits in the middle of the facade with an incongruous wall of dark brick to its right. Optimism is high for today's visit, and with good reason: Elene was specific about the events surrounding the handoff of the paintings, including the visit she and Guarente made to the Federal Probation Office in Bangor. A few days ago, I was able to confirm that on September 4, 2002, Guarente had, in fact, visited with his probation officer in Bangor. One of the very few benefits of a life of crime is the ability it gives law enforcement to estimate historical events by a felon's history of incarceration.

The shades are drawn and the porch light is still on. I ring the doorbell and we wait. And wait. Two cars in the driveway and no answer? I press my ear to the window and hear nothing, other than the distant sound of the doorbell. After a few minutes, we finally give up; maybe he took the bus or got a ride somewhere. We decide to wait it out.

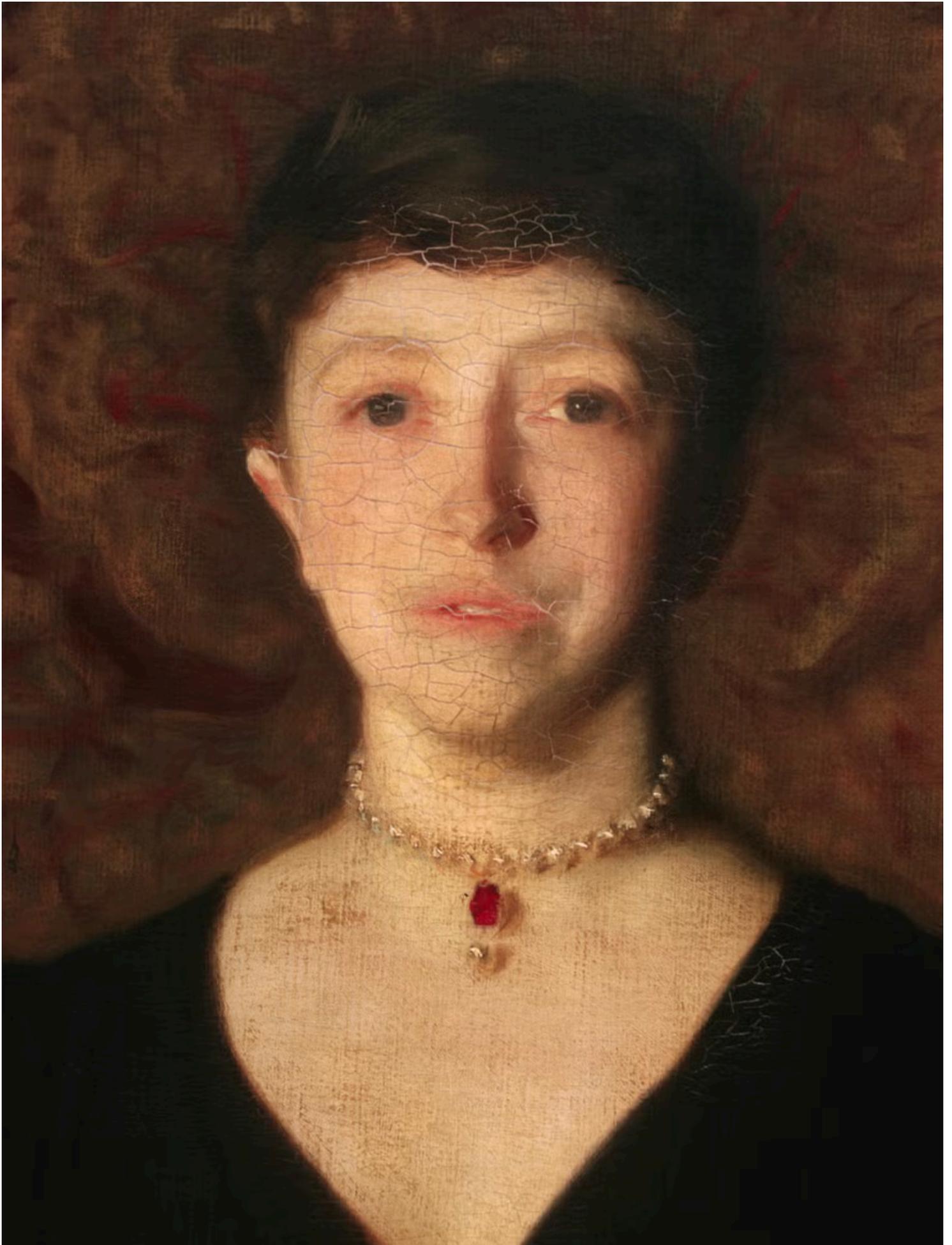


BETTMANN // GETTY IMAGES

FBI sketches of two suspects in the 1990 robbery at Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

And we waited a long time. Like a month. In fact, we made at least a dozen trips to Manchester and struck out every time. We tried early mornings, mid-afternoons, late nights; sitting in a coffee shop down the street from his house, giving it an hour. Or two. Knocking and knocking on his front door and ringing the bell, one ear always cocked to the window, listening for movement. We would then park at the end of his street, waiting for any sign of life. During one late-night surveillance, a neighbor called the cops on a suspicious Ford Taurus with Massachusetts plates and tinted windows, and as the cruiser rolled up behind us, I briefly flashed the rear blues concealed in the taillights before approaching the officer with my creds out.

On the twentieth anniversary of the heist, Anthony, Brian, and I participated in a panel discussion on the Gardner heist at the International Foundation for Art Research in New York City. It was during this event when Brian unequivocally stated to the gathered attendees that Whitey Bulger had not been involved in the heist. During the event, we were asked many questions about the status of the Gardner investigation, and I had to suppress the overwhelming urge to tell the gathered audience all about Guarente and Gentile.



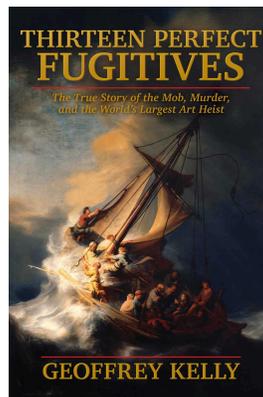


BARNEY BURSTEIN // GETTY IMAGES

A portrait of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's founder and namesake by her friend John Singer Sargent.

This overnight trip to New York gave us two shots at the Cook [Robert Gentile's nickname]—we stopped by his house on the way down and then lingered there for a few hours on the way back. We were becoming regulars at the Cosmic Omelet, a neighborhood breakfast spot chosen for its good coffee and proximity to Frances Drive. But these jaunts to Manchester were a time-suck, since a round-trip visit from the Boston FBI office to Gentile's front porch encompassed half a workday and nearly 250 miles in the Bucar (bureau car). I appreciated the forbearance of my supervisor, Dave Donahue, the former “fucking gambling degenerate,” who allowed me to make these drives rather than pawing off this crucial interview on a New Haven agent who knew nothing about the case.

Thirteen Perfect Fugitives: The True Story of the Mob, Murder, and the World's Largest Art Heist



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Our last nocturnal visit culminated in the slightest movement of the living room curtain, a barely perceptible rustle that quickly stilled. It was at this point when we realized that not only was Gentile home, he'd probably been home all month, ducking our visits. I resigned myself to the dreaded phone call, knowing full well that I'd be leaving a message on his answering machine (and yes, as expected, it was an answering machine, not voicemail). The following day, I received a much-anticipated call from a Hartford attorney who claimed to represent Gentile. And while I was disappointed that we never had the opportunity to interview Gentile cold, I was hopeful that with the guidance of an attorney, Gentile would tell us everything he knew about the Gardner paintings.

I could not have been more wrong.

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