

Stubborn Stand-Off Over Stolen Gardner Museum Art Could End With Sentencing Of Hartford Gangster

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

The end may be near in the long, strange standoff between geriatric Hartford gangster Robert "The Cook" Gentile and the investigators who suspect he is concealing information about history's richest art theft, the heist a quarter century ago of \$500 million in paintings and other works from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. If Gentile could put his hands on the art, McGuigan said, he would have traded it years ago for a chance spend the rest his life with his infirm wife in their suburban home, which has been damaged repeatedly by FBI searches for guns, drugs and evidence of stolen art. According to the informant, Gentile said that his pal Guarante "had masterminded the whole thing" and had "flipped" before he died in 2004. When the FBI searched Gentile's house, ostensibly for evidence in the drug case, agents found police hats, badges, \$20,000 in cash stuffed in a grandfather clock, what a judge called "a veritable arsenal" of weaponry and, significantly, a list of the stolen Gardner pieces accompanied by possible black market prices.

FULL TEXT

The end may be near in the long, strange standoff between geriatric Hartford gangster Robert "The Cook" Gentile and the investigators who suspect he is concealing information about history's richest art theft, the heist a quarter century ago of \$500 million in paintings and other works from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

The 81-year old mafia soldier, who for years has been at the center of law enforcement efforts to recover the Gardner art, is scheduled to appear in U.S. District Court in Hartford today for sentencing, yet again. The event could mark a turning point in a frustrating investigation of one of the world's great art mysteries.

Gentile, whose arrest record dates to the Eisenhower administration, has been locked up for 41/2 of the past 51/2 years on a succession of drug and gun cases constructed by FBI agents pressing him - futilely, it has turned out - to cooperate with their Gardner investigation.

He has remained mute. He insists he knows nothing about the heist or the missing art - in spite of old age, dire health, a \$10 million reward, lousy prison food and a growing body of evidence to the contrary, much of it consisting of his admissions recorded by FBI informants.

Whatever happens Tuesday - whether he is released because of age and health or spends years more in prison - authorities could lose any leverage they have over a formerly obscure gangster who many believe once possessed, at least briefly, two of the stolen paintings and is sitting on information that could jump-start an investigation befuddled by a series of dead ends.

The FBI believes it has identified the two Boston hoodlums - both now dead - who broke into the museum early on March 18, 1990. Acting with inexplicable violence, they battered frames from gallery walls and tore away canvases.

They drove off with 13 pieces, including Vermeer's "The Concert" and Rembrandt's only known seascape, "Storm on the Sea of Galilee."

Gentile landed in the Gardner case 20 years later, in February 2010. It happened when investigators interviewed the widow of Robert Guarente, a Boston bank robber, drug dealer and, as it turned out, long-time Gentile associate.

Guarente had moved to Maine after his last prison sentence, for drug dealing, and died in 2004. In 2010, the Gardner investigators suspected that he had, at some point, obtained Gardner art from the gang that stole it. The investigators went to the Maine woods in search of clues.

Guarente's widow, Elene, stunned the investigators when, without being asked, she blurted out that her late husband once had two of the Gardner paintings and that she had been present at a Portland hotel when he passed the paintings to a long-time associate from Connecticut - Gentile.

Gentile, to that point, was hardly known. He had been ignored by organized crime investigators in Connecticut as a knock-around hoodlum, undeserving of a spot on law enforcement's priority list. Elene Guarente changed his life. He became a target of intense investigation. It was learned that, while no one was paying attention in the late 1990s, he and Guarente were inducted into the mafia as soldiers on the Philadelphia mob's Boston crew.

Not long after Elene Guarente's spontaneous declaration, the FBI issued a rare public statement demonstrating, at least obliquely, its interest in Gentile:

"The FBI believes with a high degree of confidence that in the years after the theft, the art was transported to Connecticut and the Philadelphia region, and some of the art was taken to Philadelphia, where it was offered for sale by those responsible for the theft. With that same confidence, we have identified the thieves, who are members of a criminal organization with a base in the mid-Atlantic states and New England."

In court and in interviews with The Courant, Gentile denies everything. He acknowledges that he and Guarente were pals for decades. He said they met at a used car auction in South Windsor. He said he visited Guarente in Maine repeatedly. But Gentile insists that neither he nor Guarente were members of the mafia. He said Guarente never had any Gardner paintings. Gentile said he certainly never had any and he has no idea who stole the art or what became of it.

"It's lies," he told The Courant. "All lies. It's a frame. I don't know nothing about those pictures."

All he did in Boston, Gentile told The Courant, was earn a few hundred dollars a week cooking for a group of guys who played cards. He said the players got off cheaply because he is a gourmet cook. He is a victim, he said, of "rats" pursuing the museum's reward, which was increased recently from \$5 million to \$10 million. He complained that, even if he found the paintings and turned them in, the FBI would figure a way to keep him from collecting the money.

His lawyer, A. Ryan McGuigan, said that if Gentile is guilty of anything, it is of pretending to have possession of the stolen art in order to swindle other criminals trying to buy it. That explains the multiple occasions on which Gentile has been captured by informants or on secret recordings claiming to have access to the art, McGuigan said.

If Gentile could put his hands on the art, McGuigan said, he would have traded it years ago for a chance spend the rest his life with his infirm wife in their suburban home, which has been damaged repeatedly by FBI searches for

guns, drugs and evidence of stolen art.

McGuigan said Gentile may not survive another prison stretch. He collapsed in a Rhode Island jail and nearly died a year ago. He spent months recuperating in prison hospitals and is confined now in a Connecticut jail with hospital access.

Notwithstanding the denials and explanations, Gentile is his own worst enemy when it comes to credibility. For seven years, the FBI has been wiring informants and undercover agents with recording equipment and running them at Gentile. Between disquisitions on veal or sauce, he has implicated himself repeatedly.

One of the first occasions occurred within weeks of Elene Guarente's disclosure. Gentile was at Clean Country Motors, a dilapidated car lot on Franklin Avenue in Hartford. He installed a stove in a service bay and, once or twice a week, fed macaroni to a Who's Who of local, 70-something gangsters.

Federal prosecutors disclosed in court that, in April 2010, the FBI "tasked" a mob informant to visit the car lot and "pay particular attention to anything Gentile might say about the Gardner Museum theft." He said plenty.

According to the informant, Gentile said that his pal Guarente "had masterminded the whole thing" and had "flipped" before he died in 2004. By "flipped," Gentile meant Guarente cooperated with authorities, which was true to a degree. A law enforcement source said Guarente flirted with the idea of cooperating with drug agents after his last drug arrest, but changed his mind and went to prison.

When the FBI confronted Gentile about the Gardner heist in 2010, he agreed to cooperate himself. Before the year was out, prosecutors had torn up the agreement and Gentile had become the subject of investigation. Prosecutors concluded that he had lied to the Gardner grand jury. What's more, a polygraph examination showed a likelihood of greater than 99 percent that he was lying when he denied knowledge of the heist or the stolen art.

Gentile and his lawyer said the polygraph was improperly administered.

In 2012, the FBI instructed an informant to persuade Gentile to sell him drugs. He did - four times. When the FBI searched Gentile's house, ostensibly for evidence in the drug case, agents found police hats, badges, \$20,000 in cash stuffed in a grandfather clock, what a judge called "a veritable arsenal" of weaponry and, significantly, a list of the stolen Gardner pieces accompanied by possible black market prices.

Gentile told The Courant he probably obtained the list in connection with a plan to swindle someone who was trying to buy the art.

He was sentenced to 30 months on drug and gun charges. When he got out in April 2014, the FBI had him met by two more, longtime associates. They were cousins and had known Gentile all their lives. One was an accused extortionist and the other a convicted, three-time murderer.

The cousins were told they had a chance at the then-\$5 million reward if they could persuade Gentile to lead them to stolen art. The plan was to target Gentile with a sting. The two would claim they knew a rich marijuana dealer who had a foolproof plan to profit from the Gardner art - twice.

Gentile was told that the pot dealer would pay \$500,000 per painting. Any recovered paintings would be delivered to an out-of-state lawyer, who would return them to the museum anonymously, under its no-questions-asked offer,

and collect a reward. Gentile was promised "two ends" - the \$500,000 up-front and a piece of whatever reward the museum paid per painting.

One of the cousins, in a series of interviews with The Courant, said Gentile agreed immediately, then hesitated, then began concocting reasons to delay. After weeks of waffling, the cousin said, the FBI inserted an undercover agent into the sting to prod Gentile.

Instead, Gentile demanded a piece of the marijuana action and threatened the undercover agent when he refused, according to a disclosure in court by federal prosecutors.

"Mr. Gentile specifically stated to the FBI undercover operative that he, Mr. Gentile, is a made member of La Cosa Nostra," the prosecution said. "Mr. Gentile had specifically suggested that he had two particular paintings that had been stolen in the Gardner incident many years ago. Mr. Gentile became furious with the FBI undercover person because he wouldn't engage in the marijuana deal with Mr. Gentile, at which point Mr. Gentile told the undercover agent, 'Do you know who I am?' and stated that he could have people killed and make them disappear."

Gentile continued to delay and the cousins offered him an out, in case he really didn't have the paintings and simply wanted to steal \$500,000.

"Bobby says, 'No. No. No. I'd never do that,'" one of the cousins said. "And then he goes, 'Let's do it. The deal sounds good. We can all use the money.'"

After still more delay, the FBI cranked up the pressure. Agents had one of the cousins, the three-time murderer, buy a gun from Gentile, who was prohibited by law as a convicted felon from possessing a gun.

Gentile was arrested and back in jail a year to the day of his release. Facing more time in prison, he continued to insist he knew nothing about the heist of the art. Investigators searched his home again recently and discovered still more weapons, one of them, a machine gun. The new guns were added to the charges he faces at sentencing Tuesday.

No one was predicting last week what Gentile's sentence will be. The prosecution and defense filed memos with U.S. District Judge Robert N. Chatigny outlining their respective positions. Such memos are routine and are often filed in public. They are sealed from public view, without explanation, like many other filings in the Gentile case.

A public legal filing shows that, under the advisory sentencing guidelines in federal court, Gentile faces as much as 89 more months in prison for the gun charges and for committing crimes while on supervised release from his previous conviction. However, the court has discretion to sentence Gentile beneath the guidelines if there is a strong argument about his age and declining health.

Credit: EDMUND H. MAHONY

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