

Solved! The greatest art theft in history

The perpetrators of a \$500 million art heist have remained unknown for 25 years. Now, one man thinks he has the answer. He talks to Jake Kerridge

The biggest art heist in history took remarkably little trouble to pull off. At 1.24am on March 18 1990, a security guard at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston admitted two policemen who claimed to have received a report of a disturbance.

The cops were thieves in disguise. They handcuffed the museum's two guards to water pipes in the basement, and plundered the place at their leisure. Their haul included three works by Rembrandt, a Manet, five drawings by Degas, a Shang dynasty drinking vessel, and Vermeer's *The Concert*, reckoned to be the world's most valuable unrecovered stolen painting.

The total worth of the loot is estimated at \$500 million, and in the past quarter of a century there have been no confirmed sightings of the missing artworks – or, to use the FBI's dramatic-sounding favoured phrase, no “proof of life”.

Many sleuths, both professional and amateur, have devoted years to unravelling the circumstances of the heist, but one man who has worn out more shoe leather than most in pursuit of this mystery is Stephen Kurkjian, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter now retired after 40 years at *The Boston Globe*. Kurkjian has talked about the case on and off the record with dozens

of hoods and Feds over the past two decades, and in a compelling new book *Master Thieves* delves into the dark underbelly of Boston's crime scene and names the men he believes carried out the heist.

It is a journey that takes him deep into the world of the Mafia and a cast of characters so colourful they could have come from a Martin Scorsese screenplay. The book also scuttles the pet theories of the FBI, who announced in 2013 that they knew who had carried out the crime, but declined to name names or say where the stolen items were.

The genial, straight-talking Kurkjian is too polite to lambast the bureau. But their glacial progress over a quarter of a century – and the fact that agents have resorted to using a psychic to track down the art works – rather speaks for itself.

Kurkjian, whose reporting is already responsible for some of the biggest breaks in the story, believes the key to

the crime lies in the infamous Boston gang wars. In the mid-Eighties, the Boston underworld suffered what might best be described as a constitutional crisis. Raymond Patriarca, the head of the city's all-powerful Mafia “family”, had died in 1984, and his son Raymond Jnr had proved to be an uninspiring successor, with the result that various *capos* (heads of the different crews that make up a

Mafia family) were jockeying for supremacy. Raymond Jnr famously tried to unite the crews at a Mafia induction ceremony in October 1989, but instead lost any remaining respect from his fellow gangsters when it transpired that the FBI had infiltrated and recorded the meeting. (Inductees were heard pledging to obey “with love and *omerta*” the organisation, while a holy card with the image of a saint burned in one hand and, at the same time, their trigger finger was pricked by an officiant.)

One of the leading *capos* present that day was Vincent “Vinnie” Ferrara, who, as Kurkjian puts it, was unusual among mobsters in being “a voracious reader” and a good enough student to have graduated from Boston College with a degree in finance. Ferrara's main confidante was his driver,

One of the mobsters was a ‘voracious reader’; his driver had a taste for art

Bobby Donati, who also had rather recherché tastes for a gangster, being a frequenter of museums and galleries.

At the time, Ferrara was in a bitter fight with Frank “Cadillac Frank” Salemme, over everything from bookmaking to bank jobs, and more than 12



foot soldiers lost their lives

in tit-for-tat murders and assassination attempts.

"I have access to Vincent Ferrara. I don't want to say how but I have access to him," Kurkjian tells me, the tapping of his nose with his finger almost audible down the line from his home in Boston. "He's no longer in the organised crime world from everything I can see, he lives an absolutely normal low-key life in Boston."

Kurkjian had written to Ferrara in April 2014 after hearing that he had told a lawyer that he was interested in helping solve the Gardner mystery. A month later, Kurkjian received a phone call from an intermediary, revealing that Ferrara was ready to admit that he knew who was responsible for the Gardner heist: Bobby Donati.

Over several conversations with Ferrara's representative, Kurkjian has got the whole story. By the time of the Gardner heist in 1990, Ferrara was in jail, facing indictment for racketeering and murder. (His close friend and best man at his second wedding had turned FBI informant and arranged for agents to tape secret discussions he had held with two ageing bookies.)

At the same time the gang wars were at their height, with Salemme, who would eventually become boss of the Patriarca family, proving especially ruthless at dispatching members of rival crews.

Donati thought that his life was in danger without Ferrara

to protect him. And so, according to Ferrara, Donati visited him in jail in March 1990 to tell him that he had just carried out the Gardner Museum heist, and was going to use the paintings as leverage with the authorities, to get Ferrara released. As Kurkjian says, here at last was what had been missing from

the case: a motive.

According to Ferrara, Donati only realised the dizzying value of his haul after the event, at which point he passed the artworks into the safekeeping of his friend Bobby Guarente and lay low. And there is other evidence pointing to Donati: Myles Connor, a police chief's son who became one of America's most legendary art thieves, claims in his memoirs to have alerted Donati to the fact that the Gardner Museum had perfunctory security, and that they cased the museum together as early as 1974.

It wouldn't have been the first time the Mafia had been linked to a major art theft. Breathless television reports on blockbuster auctions in the Sixties made gangsters aware for the first time of the huge sums art could fetch as a commodity that was, as Kurkjian puts it, "highly valuable, highly portable and underprotected".

Because paintings by Picasso and Cézanne were the works most frequently sold at high prices, the *Unione Corse* (the Corsican Mafia) began, with crude logic, a 15-year-long attempt to steal as many works by those two artists as possible, culminating in the

theft of 118 Picassos from the Papal Palace in Avignon in 1976.

The 1969 theft of Caravaggio's *Nativity with Saints Francis and Lawrence* from the Oratory of San Lorenzo in Palermo, was also carried out by mobsters. (The painting is thought to have been hidden in a barn, where it was nibbled by rats and then burned.)

In the case of the Gardner heist, Donati never got the chance to make a move with the paintings: in September 1991, he was beaten to death by unidentified assailants.

The FBI found a fake floor in one suspect's garden shed with a deep pit beneath it

I ask Kurkjian why he thinks Ferrara is speaking up now. "Ferrara is like a bunch of other bad guys who have gone straight in Boston, they're convinced of two things: that they can get the artwork back, and the artwork deserves to be back. And they would like to be able to be in a good position either to get part of the reward, or to be in a good place with the Feds."

The question is: where are the missing artworks?

The investigation seemed to have ground to a halt until 2010, when Bobby Guarente's widow, Elene, offered the FBI some new information in exchange for \$1,000 to fix

her car. She told them that her late husband had been handed some of the paintings for safekeeping, and that, after he'd developed cancer in 2001, she had seen him hand them over to his former cook-cum-security guard Bobby Gentile ("unfortunately everyone in this story is named Bobby," snorts Kurkjian). Gentile, nicknamed "The Cook", is a committed gourmand, and the handover allegedly took place in the car park of a Portland restaurant after a large lunch.

When the FBI raided the 78-year-old's home in Connecticut in 2012 they found a false floor in his garden shed and, beneath it, a deep pit containing a large plastic container. Asked about the container, Gentile's son, Robert Jnr, said he had no idea what his father hid in there but recalled that there had been a storm a few years beforehand and his father had been devastated because the shed had flooded and the contents of the ditch had been destroyed.

Gentile denies ever

Source: The Daily Telegraph {Review}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Saturday 28, March 2015
Page: 12,13
Area: 1039 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 479937 Daily
Ad data: page rate £46,000.00, scc rate £214.00
Phone: 020 7931 2000
Keyword: Public Affairs

handling any of the artworks, but Kurkjian isn't convinced. The FBI has marked the 25th anniversary of the crime by launching a fresh appeal for information and renewing its offer of a \$5million reward. Meanwhile, the empty frames that hang on the walls of the Gardner Museum, as a constant reminder of the absent art, still wait to be refilled.

● *Master Thieves* (Public Affairs, £17.99) by Stephen Kurkjian is out now



Bad guy gone straight: former mobster Vincent Ferrara claims he knows who carried out a heist on Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990

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