

talks continue in Boston

► Officials meet with convicts who say they can help recover masterpieces.

**By Judy Rakowsky
and Stephen Kurkjian**
The Boston Globe

BOSTON — The negotiations for the return of stolen masterpieces from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum have reached a critical juncture with a meeting scheduled today between the two convicts who say they can arrange the art's return.

Martin K. Leppo, lawyer for imprisoned art thief Myles J. Connor Jr., said he plans to meet today with his client and antiques dealer William P. Youngworth III.

"I have to make sure both sides are able to follow through on what they propose to do," said Leppo. "I have to be clear in my mind I'm negotiating in good faith."

There are no plans for federal authorities to join the meeting, but several observers said it is high time that the two men show they can get the works of art stolen in 1990.

"It's getting to be put-up-or-shut-up time," said one source close to the negotiations.

"They can authenticate it without the police or the museum people being there," said a former federal investigator. "They could take a picture or answer a specific question posed by the bureau or the Gardner."

Connor and Youngworth need to iron out details of their negotiation strategy with federal authorities, observers said.

"Nobody needs to trust each other," said Edward Clark, a retired FBI art-theft investigator. "They just have to put it all in writing what everyone can offer," he said.

Youngworth has said he wants the \$5 million reward offered by the museum, immunity from prosecution in connection with the stolen artwork, amnesty on pending criminal charges in Norfolk County, and the release of Connor, who still has three years left on his sentence. Both Youngworth and Connor were in prison at the time of the theft.

The sticky issue for Connor is that no matter how helpful he is to federal prosecutors here, it is up to a judge in Illinois to drop the remaining three years of Connor's federal prison term. In July 1990 in Springfield, Ill., U.S. District Judge Richard Mills more than doubled the prison sentence requested by a government prosecutor for art theft and drug charges, stating that Connor's criminal past demanded it.

The judge called Connor "rotten to the core," and added, "We don't need you, and we are society."

"The judge can say, 'You can do a deal with the FBI, but you're not going to do a deal with me,'" said Clark.

Youngworth is facing a sentence of 15 years in prison if convicted of Norfolk County charges of possession of a stolen van and of being a habitual criminal.