

Pair charged with theft of \$500,000

worth of art

By Robert Mitchum | Tribune reporter

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An argument about the ownership of art worth over \$500,000 led to the arrest of two women after they allegedly attempted to steal the artwork from a Chicago storage facility Friday, law enforcement authorities said.

Michele Vasarhelyi, 61, and Vera Mamalat, 31, both of Chicago, appeared in bond court Sunday afternoon at the Cook County Criminal Courts Building facing felony theft charges. The two women were ordered held on \$125,000 bond by Judge Israel Desierto.

Vasarhelyi, Mamalat and two unidentified co-offenders allegedly arranged to steal several pieces of artwork, worth about \$586,000, from a storage facility in the 1000 block of North Halsted Street, Assistant State's Atty. Bonnie Greenstein said. The art was being stored in a locker belonging to a former business partner of Vasarhelyi, Greenstein said.

The women bought the storage locker across from where the artwork was being stored, Greenstein said. On Friday, the two women and the co-offenders reportedly cut the lock of the locker containing the artwork and moved it across the hall to Mamalat's locker. The defendants then replaced the cut lock with a new lock and left the facility, the prosecutor said.

Police arrested Vasarhelyi and Mamalat later on Friday, and found Vasarhelyi in possession of the new lock's key, Greenstein said.

Neither defendant has a criminal background in the United States, Greenstein said. Vasarhelyi is a citizen of France, while Mamalat is a citizen of the Ukraine. Gabriel De Matteo, Vasarhelyi's defense attorney, said that his client had been involved in an ongoing dispute over artwork belonging to Vasarhelyi's deceased husband and father. At the hearing, he described the owner of the storage locker as an art dealer who had custody of the artwork. Some of the pieces taken were part of this dispute, De Matteo said.