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CHICAGO (AFP)

The daughter-in-law of op art pioneer Viktor Vasarely, Michele Taburno-Vasarely, pictured in 2001, was charged with burglary and theft after being caught removing hundreds of thousands of dollars in art work from a storage facility in Chicago, prosecutors said Wednesday.

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Michele Taburno-Vasarely insists that the paintings she tried to take, some by her famous father-in-law, actually belong to her and said she would be vindicated at trial.

"Being indicted doesn't mean one is guilty – not at all, at all, at all," Taburno-Vasarely told AFP after making a brief court appearance.

"It's the entire affair that's important. It's not the very beginning ... Wait for the next chapter."

A copy of the indictment and details of the charges were not immediately available, a spokesman for the Cook County prosecutor's office told AFP.

The burglary charge carries a maximum penalty of seven years in jail while the theft charge carries a maximum penalty of 15 years.

Taburno-Vasarely will formally enter a plea at an arraignment scheduled for August 6, he added.

Taburno-Vasarely was discovered trying to move the bubble-wrapped paintings into an adjacent storage unit on July 20.

The gallery owner, Thomas Monahan, said he had been storing thousands of pieces for Taburno-Vasarely but became concerned about their provenance when he heard of an inquiry currently under way in France.

His lawyer advised him to hold onto the works until rightful ownership could be established. Taburno-Vasarely's lawyer said he had no right to do so and accused him of trying to sell the work without permission.

Vasarely's family was awarded custody of much of his work in a 1995 decision that a foundation he established in 1971 is currently trying to overturn.

Nearly all of the 1,300 original works and 18,000 silkscreen prints donated to the foundation have disappeared.

Taburno-Vasarely, who led charge against a foundation director who was eventually convicted of embezzlement for pilfering the collection and stealing its funds, insists that she holds the legal title to all the works in question.

While she would not disclose how many pieces she owned, she laughed at the idea that there were thousands.

"Soon I'll have more works than the artist painted!" she said while awaiting the grand jury's decision.

The diminutive Frenchwoman said her collection contains only those pieces which were given to her by her husband and brother-in-law out of gratitude for her work in uncovering the embezzlement at the foundation.

"The word given and the word stolen are not the same word," she said.

"I arrived (in the United States) with what belonged to me and what belonged to me I put in storage."

Taburno-Vasarely said she was confident that the French inquiry will determine she had rightful ownership of the works and plans to donate them to museums in the United States upon her death.

"Now they're accusing me of stealing paintings from the foundation – it's simply not possible," she said.

"It's to make noise, to defame me, it's to make people believe I'm a thief," she said of the inquiry in France.

"I've stolen nothing. It's very simple. I work with the works. I put them in museums and we all know that when you steal you don't put it in a museum because you'd get caught."