

Former Warden Acquitted in Dalí Theft at Rikers

By ALAN FEUER

An assistant deputy warden at Rikers Island was found not guilty yesterday of charges he masterminded the theft of a Salvador Dalí drawing from one of the jails at the large city complex.

The assistant deputy warden, Benny Nuzzo, 51, of Brooklyn, had denied any role in the theft of the drawing in March 2003. A senior warden pleaded guilty last year to grand larceny for his role in the theft.

The \$250,000 drawing, which depicts Christ's crucifixion, was signed and dedicated in an inscription by the artist to Rikers inmates in 1965, and was displayed in a case near the entrance of the Eric M. Taylor Center. The artwork has not been recovered.

During a monthlong trial in State Supreme Court in the Bronx, Mr. Nuzzo's lawyer, Joseph Tacopina, laid seeds of doubt about the contents of an undercover tape in which Mr. Nuzzo was heard discussing the painting. He also raised questions about the testimony of Greg Sokol, a Rikers officer who is cooperating with prosecutors and is one of two correction officers still facing charges in the case.

A \$250,000 drawing stolen at a jail has yet to be recovered.

"I'm thrilled with the speed of this verdict," Mr. Tacopina said, adding that the jury had deliberated for only four hours — "including lunch."

Mr. Tacopina also said that the verdict "sends a message about the community's distaste for people who try to get out of crimes by merely pointing to someone else."

Mitchell Hochhauser, a former senior warden at Rikers Island, has testified that Mr. Nuzzo planned the theft and arranged to replace the drawing during a fire drill. Mr. Hochhauser was sentenced to one to three years in prison in November after pleading guilty.

Steve Reed, a spokesman for the Bronx district attorney's office, which prosecuted the case, said he had no immediate comment on Mr. Nuzzo's acquittal.

Mr. Nuzzo, who worked for the Correction Department for 19 years, was dismissed after his arrest but is taking legal steps to get his job back, Mr. Tacopina said.

Thomas Antenen, the department spokesman, declined to comment on Mr. Nuzzo's acquittal.