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Getty leaders' ancient issues Leaders' like minds

*** CEO James Cuno and Director Timothy Potts have shared beliefs on antiquities.**

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By Jason Felch,

Over the last five years, the J. Paul Getty Museum has earned a reputation as a leading reformer on a topic that has embroiled American museums in scandal for the past decade: the acquisition of looted antiquities.

After evidence of the museum's participation in the illicit trade was uncovered by Italian and Greek investigators, the Getty agreed to return 49 prized pieces of ancient art, cultivated collaborative relationships with those countries and adopted a strict acquisition policy that has been used as a model by museums across the country.

But when Timothy Potts starts as director of the Getty Museum with Getty Trust CEO James Cuno as his boss, the institution will be led by two men who opposed the adoption of some of those reforms.

Cuno has denounced repatriation claims of looted antiquities as "nationalistic" and argued against placing limits on museum purchases of objects with an uncertain origin. Potts, whose appointment Cuno announced this week, has echoed some of those views. He played a central role in establishing lenient acquisition standards for American museums -- which were eventually abandoned -- as a member of the Assn. of Art Museum Directors, which sets ethical guidelines for art museums.

A highly respected museum director and Oxford-trained archaeologist, Potts was well positioned to wrestle with the looting issue. From 1983 to 1989, he was co-director of the University of Sydney's excavations in Pella, Jordan. Later at Oxford, he conducted research in Iraq and was outspoken about the looting there in 2003.

Participants in the museum directors' group deliberating new ethical standards in 2004 recall Potts as intelligent, persuasive and open to hearing others' arguments. But the positions he advocated often put him at odds with advocates of reform and with fellow archaeologists, who criticized the willingness of museums to purchase objects whose murky ownership histories suggested they were likely the result of looting.

Potts also had brushes with the issue as director of the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, where he was director from 1998 to 2007.

In late 2000, Potts approved the acquisition of a rare Sumerian statuette for \$2.7 million. The 15-inch alabaster figure was from the cradle of civilization, the region Potts had specialized in while studying at Oxford.

But shortly after the statue arrived at the museum, court records show that Potts took the unusual step of returning it to the dealer and asking for a full refund.

Publicly, Potts said that he wanted to free up money for other acquisitions. But he later testified that he had learned the dealer -- Hicham Aboutaam, owner of the New York City antiquities gallery Phoenix Ancient Art -- was under investigation by the IRS and decided against buying from him.

Soon, though, Potts changed his mind about doing business with Aboutaam. After receiving repayment for the Sumerian statuette in November 2001, Potts moved to acquire a \$4-million Roman torso he had admired on an earlier visit to Aboutaam's gallery on East 66th Street in Manhattan.

Five days after the Kimbell board approved the purchase, the museum received a federal grand jury subpoena for museum records related to Aboutaam.

Aboutaam had been targeted in a sweeping investigation of the illicit antiquities trade. Several months earlier, Italian investigators had raided the dealer's Swiss warehouse and seized dozens of antiquities. (All were later returned.)

The Kimbell abruptly abandoned the acquisition of the torso, sparking two breach of contract lawsuits by Aboutaam.

When asked about the two abandoned acquisitions this week, Potts and the Kimbell declined to comment. But in 2002, Potts told *Art & Auction* magazine that he had decided to pursue the Roman torso after learning the IRS investigation of Aboutaam was "benign."

The lawsuits were ultimately dismissed. Aboutaam was arrested in 2003 and charged by U.S. authorities with smuggling a looted antiquity from Iran and making a false customs declaration. He pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor and paid a \$5,000 fine.

While the Kimbell controversy was still unfolding, Potts played a prominent role in formulating a policy on how American museums should handle questions about ancient art with unclear ownership histories.

As a member of a task force of museums directors between 2002 and 2004, Potts allied himself with Philippe de Montebello, then director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who opposed putting limits on collectors and museums. Potts and De Montebello eventually championed a 2004 policy that allowed museums to collect ancient art as long as they could demonstrate it had been out of its country of origin for a decade.

The position struck some on the task force as effectively sanctioning the acquisition of looted antiquities. And it proved out of step with the times when, a year later, Getty antiquities curator Marion True was indicted by Italy for trafficking in looted antiquities, some of which had been acquired under a Getty policy that was stricter than the one Potts and De Montebello supported.

Soon, the antiquities controversy grew into a full-fledged scandal, with Italy and Greece demanding the return of some of the most prized objects in American museum collections. American museums have since returned more than 200 looted objects to Italy and Greece, valued at up to \$1 billion.

Potts first met Cuno while chairing a 2006 AAMD task force on loans of archaeological material. Cuno had recently taken the reins of the Art Institute of Chicago and, like De Montebello, was a critic of attempts to limit the collecting of antiquities. Cuno and Potts became like-minded allies.

The policy resulting from the 2006 task force allowed museums to accept loans of objects even if their ownership histories were clouded "because of their rarity, historical importance and aesthetic merit."

By 2008, the policies Potts had advocated were replaced with a stricter one that required objects to have an ownership history dating back to 1970. It emulated the position of the Getty Museum, which had been hardest hit by the antiquities controversy.

Asked how he felt about operating under a policy he had opposed, Potts said in an email Thursday that he "completely respects the Getty's antiquity policy," which he called "increasingly the national standard."

"I have persistently emphasized the need to do more to protect sites and contexts on the ground before the looting takes place," he said, adding, "Perhaps the nearest thing to a certainty is that whatever policy we have in place today will be seen to have been flawed in the future."

Potts and Cuno have signaled that their priority will be to build the Getty's collection in new directions and shift attention back to the Getty Villa, where the museum's antiquities collection is displayed.

Will the Getty expand its antiquities collection into ancient Near Eastern art, Potts' specialty? Cuno said in an interview Thursday that he "couldn't rule it out."

That could put the Getty back in business with Hicham Aboutaam, who, despite his past legal worries, continues to be a leading dealer of antiquities. .

In an interview this week, Aboutaam praised the selection of Potts and said he held no grudges. "It's rare to find a museum director with such a sophisticated eye for quality," he said.

He has similar praise for Cuno, who acquired antiquities from Aboutaam as recently as 2009 for the Art Institute. That same year, Aboutaam voluntarily returned 251 antiquities to Italy, valued at \$2.7 million, conceding they were likely from illicit excavations.

With Cuno and Potts in charge, the dealer wondered: "Do you think the Getty will now buy more?"

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Descriptors: CUNO, JAMES; POTTS, TIMOTHY; J PAUL GETTY MUSEUM

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PHOTO: TIMOTHY POTTS will start in September.
ID NUMBER:20120218lzegltpd
PHOTOGRAPHER:Ron T. Ennis Fort Worth Star-Telegram



PHOTO: THE GETTY leaders have signaled a desire to shift focus back on the Getty Villa and its collection, above.
ID NUMBER:20120218lzgpvlpd
PHOTOGRAPHER:J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection



PHOTO: JAMES CUNO met his new hire in 2006.
ID NUMBER:20120218lzgpwcpd
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