

---

# Los Angeles Times

Thursday November 10, 2005

## The Getty Returns 3 Ancient Artifacts to Italy

**\* A 2,300-year-old vase was sent back as part of a settlement. A candelabrum and a gravestone went back after informal talks.**

*Home Edition, Main News, Page A-31*

*Metro Desk*

*28 inches; 969 words*

**By Jason Felch, Times Staff Writer**

The J. Paul Getty Museum returned three ancient artifacts to the Italian government this week, marking the end of a legal battle over allegedly looted art that could serve as a test case for future claims by Italy against the Getty and other American museums.

The Getty agreed to turn over a large vase, known as a krater, painted more than 2,300 years ago by the Greek painter Asteas, after settling a claim filed by the U.S. attorney's office in Los Angeles on behalf of the Italian government.

The other two objects, a bronze candelabrum and an inscribed gravestone, were returned based on evidence presented in informal negotiations with the Getty, U.S. officials said.

The transfer of the three objects took place Monday morning at the Getty. Four Italian officials, who were accompanied by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, watched as the artifacts were carefully packed with foam in crates and sealed.

They were sent to New York on Tuesday night and were scheduled to arrive Wednesday in Rome, where they will be displayed in a museum.

Their return was part of a strategy by the museum to build goodwill with the Italian government, Getty records show.

In a statement, the Getty said it believed that it had "valid defenses" to oppose the Italian claim but had agreed to return the Asteas krater "in the interest of settling the litigation and demonstrating the Getty's interest in a productive relationship with Italy."

"The Getty based its decision to return the other two objects -- a bronze Etruscan candelabrum and stone inscription -- on its own evaluation of evidence presented by the Italian government," the Getty statement said.

The Getty's return of the objects comes on the eve of a larger battle with Italian authorities, whose criminal prosecution of the museum's former antiquities curator, Marion True, resumes next week.

True faces charges of conspiring to traffic in looted art with American antiquities dealer Robert E. Hecht Jr. Their co-defendant, Italian dealer Giacomo Medici, was convicted last year and is appealing a 10-year sentence.

In the case, Italian prosecutors are seeking the return of at least 42 objects in the Getty's collection they say were illegally removed from the country.

One of those objects is the bronze candelabrum that was returned this week.

Italian authorities intensified their efforts to repatriate the Asteas krater earlier this year, saying it was a crucial piece of evidence in their trial of True and Hecht.

U.S. and Italian officials said the objects' return resulted from the strength of the evidence the Italians had presented.

"The act of giving it back speaks volumes, regardless of whether or not they admit guilt," Assistant U.S. Atty.

John E. Lee, who filed the forfeiture complaint last year, said of Getty officials.

David Nehls, assistant special agent in charge for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Los Angeles, said the Asteas krater was "a piece of Italian culture, and everyone believes it should be in a museum -- an Italian museum."

During negotiations with Italian authorities, the Getty initially offered to return the objects in exchange for a promise that the Italians drop any future claims against objects in the museum's collection.

The Italians rejected the condition. In pursuing seizure of the Asteas krater through a claim in the U.S. courts, Italian authorities have demonstrated the effectiveness of a legal strategy that could be used to claim additional artifacts from the Getty and other American museums, Italian and U.S. officials said.

In addition to the 42 objects at the Getty, Italian authorities have used photographs that were seized at Medici's warehouse to track dozens of allegedly looted objects to six other museums across the country, as well as to private collections and galleries, court records show.

"A picture is worth a thousand words," Lee said. "If you can link the photograph to other evidence, the photos are strong evidence there's some violation of the laws in those foreign countries."

To seize an allegedly looted artifact from a U.S. museum on the Italians' behalf, Lee said, U.S. authorities need establish only that there was probable cause to believe that a customs law had been violated when the object was brought into the country.

That the Italians have photos, seized in a raid on Medici's Swiss warehouse, showing objects in an unrestored state "adds to the collage of evidence that could meet the standard for a forfeiture action," Lee said.

The evidence against the three Getty objects that were returned this week went beyond that, U.S. and Italian court records show.

Italian authorities first presented evidence in 1999 that the Asteas krater was looted and smuggled out of Italy.

After years of fruitless negotiations between the Getty and the Italians, the U.S. attorney's office filed a forfeiture complaint on behalf of the Italians last year.

According to the complaint, the Italian evidence includes an interview with an Italian man who admitted digging up the vase, taking Polaroid photographs of it in his backyard and selling it to a smuggler for a pig.

Italian police found the photographs after the death of a well-known trafficker in Italian antiquities, the complaint says.

The inscribed tombstone was donated to the Getty in the 1980s.

When Italian authorities interrogated the man who Getty records named as the donor, he said he had never seen the object before and denied having donated it.

Both objects were acquired by True's predecessor, Jiri Frel, who left the museum in the mid-1980s amid allegations that he had purchased fakes and accepted donations from private collectors and other museum patrons in exchange for inflated tax write-offs.

The candelabrum had apparently been stolen from a documented Italian collection belonging to a Roman aristocrat.

True first saw the object in Medici's warehouse and later purchased it from a business associate of Hecht, her co-defendant.

**Descriptors:** J PAUL GETTY MUSEUM; ITALY; ART; STOLEN PROPERTY

---



A31

© Copyright 2005 Los Angeles Times