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Getty risks 'embargo,' Italy warns

*** Officials in Rome threaten to suspend 'all cultural cooperation' with the museum as talks on the return of antiquities stall.**

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ROME -- Frustrated by the J. Paul Getty Trust's refusal to return a prized statue of Aphrodite and a score of other antiquities, Italian officials are threatening to impose an unprecedented "cultural embargo" on the Los Angeles museum that would prevent its borrowing any artwork from or conducting research in their country.

The impasse in talks came as new evidence was submitted Friday in the criminal trial of the Getty's former antiquities curator that the museum chose not to pursue information about the Aphrodite statue's origins when presented with an opportunity a decade ago.

Marion True told prosecutors in a statement entered into evidence that in 1996 the statue's former owner provided the Getty with photos of the 7 1/2 -foot depiction of the goddess and offered several fragments still in his possession.

But True said she was "highly skeptical" of the man's motives and decided it was "inappropriate" to accept his invitation to meet in Switzerland, according to a copy of the statement obtained by The Times.

That decision looms large today for both True and the Getty, because the marble and limestone figure has come to play the starring role in the dispute between Italy and the trust.

To Italian authorities, the statue symbolizes what they see as the museum's brazen exploitation of the illicit trade in ancient art. Getty officials say there is insufficient evidence to determine exactly where the statue comes from, and they have so far refused to return it.

Four months ago both sides announced an agreement in principle for the museum to return "a number of very significant" artworks in exchange for loans from Italy.

Since then, the Getty has quietly offered 26 objects, including masterpieces such as a marble statue of Apollo and a sculpture of mythical griffins devouring a fallen deer. Italy, in turn, agreed to withdraw its claim for six objects that it conceded may have been found outside its borders.

But deciding the fate of the 21 remaining disputed objects, dominated by the Aphrodite and a bronze statue of a young athlete, has proved difficult.

"Basta!" said Giuseppe Proietti, a senior cultural official, in a recent interview, using the Italian word for "enough."

"The negotiations haven't made a single step forward," he said. "We will not accept partial solutions. I will suggest the Italian government take cultural sanctions against the Getty, suspending all cultural cooperation."

Francesco Rutelli, Italy's minister of culture and vice president, was awaiting the latest response from the Getty before deciding whether to go ahead with an embargo, but he warned Friday that time was running out.

"I tried to explain it amicably to the people responsible for the Getty for the last six months," Rutelli said in a statement to The Times. "If they still haven't understood it, I'm afraid the process of conciliation will end and a serious conflict will begin."

According to another Italian official familiar with the Getty negotiations, the embargo would mean "no

excavations, no exhibitions, no cultural studies.... The Getty is out of order in Italy."

Several museum experts said such an embargo would have symbolic effect but might otherwise be limited because Italy has not been generous with loans in the past.

"It's a fight for world opinion," said Ruth Weisberg, dean of the USC Roski School of Fine Arts. "It's certainly an attempt to embarrass and isolate the Getty."

Getty officials acknowledged the impasse but said they were still hopeful an agreement could be reached soon.

"My sense is that wisdom and reason will reign here, and the two sides, Italy and the Getty, will find a way to get past whatever problems exist in the short term," said Getty spokesman Ron Hartwig, adding that the museum continues to evaluate information about the Aphrodite statue.

Since talks started with the Getty in January, Italy has forged cultural agreements with New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Boston's Museum of Fine Art, which both agreed to return objects in exchange for loans of antiquities from Italy.

The Getty's negotiations are complicated by the criminal case against True, who is accused of conspiring to traffic in looted art. Although she was forced to resign last year for unrelated reasons, the Getty continues to pay for her defense, and museum officials have been worried that giving back objects might further implicate the former curator.

In addition to the dispute over the Aphrodite statue, Italian authorities cite several causes for the recent breakdown in talks.

Unlike the other museums, the Getty has sent attorneys to negotiate rather than its museum director, Michael Brand, who has participated sporadically, Italian officials say.

"With the Boston MFA and the Met, our counterparts were the directors," said Proietti. "With the Getty, it is lawyers. This is an obstacle to realizing a cultural agreement."

Italian authorities also say the Getty's negotiator, Ron Olson of the Los Angeles firm Munger Tolles & Olson, has approached the negotiations as a "commercial" deal, concerned more about how giving back valuable artwork would affect the inventory of the \$5.5-billion trust than about cultural issues.

For example, they say, Olson has stressed repeatedly that if the Getty returned all the disputed objects it might trigger an investigation by the California attorney general into whether the trust's board was adequately safeguarding the nonprofit's assets.

A spokesman for Atty. Gen. Bill Lockyer, whose office regulates nonprofits in California, said, however, that any potential investigation would focus on whether the Getty board was negligent in purchasing the antiquities in the first place -- not on whether any or all of the art should be given back.

Italian cultural officials were also offended by Olson's inclusion of the U.S. ambassador in a recent round of talks, something they interpreted as a clear attempt to politicize the cultural negotiations.

Olson would not comment on the negotiations.

Records show that his firm has hired private investigators to investigate the origin of the Aphrodite, something the museum chose not to do in 1996, according to True's statement.

True said Harold Williams, then-chief executive of the trust, received a letter from a Swiss man who claimed to be the previous owner of the statue. The letter included several photos of the figure, including one of its marble head.

According to the statement, Williams passed the letter to then-museum Director John Walsh, who forwarded it to True with a note, "What do you make of this?"

"We both agreed it was strange and suspicious," True said in the statement.

True wrote that she was able to confirm with the dealer who had sold the statue to the Getty that Renzo

Canavesi was indeed the former owner, but declined the man's invitation to meet in Switzerland because she was "highly suspicious about his motives" and did not "deem it appropriate" to meet.

"If Canavesi provided additional information about the statue's provenance, how was the Getty going to confirm or disprove the information?" True wrote. "If Canavesi did know where the piece came from, why had he not simply provided his information?"

In other cases, True has said that antiquities dealers held back fragments of objects sold to the Getty so they could later try to sell the missing pieces to the museum for large sums of money.

Walsh, Williams and True's attorneys did not return calls seeking comment.

Hartwig, the Getty spokesman, would not disclose what the trust's recent investigation had uncovered.

"We are continuing to look at certain pieces of evidence," he said. "This is a very complex object. There is a lot of information about it that needs to be carefully looked at and deciphered."

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Descriptors: J PAUL GETTY TRUST; ITALY; STOLEN PROPERTY; ANTIQUES; ARTIFACTS

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[Information on missing images.](#)



PHOTO: APHRODITE: The statue is at the heart of the dispute with the Italian government. Evidence was submitted in court Friday that the trust passed up a chance to learn more about the figure's origin.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: Los Angeles Times



PHOTO: FLYING AWAY: This sculpture depicting two mythical griffins is also among the objects the Getty has offered to return to Italy.

ID NUMBER:20061111j0x55cnc

PHOTOGRAPHER: "Masterpieces of the J. Paul Getty Museum: Antiquities"



PHOTO: TREASURE: This statue of Apollo is among 26 objects the Getty has offered to return. Italy relinquished claims to six other objects.

ID NUMBER:20061111j0x563nc

PHOTOGRAPHER: "Masterpieces of the J. Paul Getty Museum: Antiquities"



[B01](#)



[B08](#)



[B09](#)

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