

---

# Los Angeles Times

Wednesday, March 23, 2011

## Getty ships Aphrodite back to Sicily

**\* After a long dispute the museum acknowledges the statue's true origins.**

*Home Edition, Calendar, Page D-1*

*Entertainment Desk*

*20 inches; 857 words*

**By Jason Felch,**

The J. Paul Getty Museum's iconic statue of Aphrodite was quietly escorted back to Sicily by Italian police last week, ending a decades-long dispute over an object whose craftsmanship, importance and controversial origins have been likened to the Parthenon marbles in the British Museum.

The 7-foot tall, 1,300-pound statue of limestone and marble was painstakingly taken off display at the Getty Villa and disassembled in December. Last week, it was locked in shipping crates with an Italian diplomatic seal and loaded aboard an Alitalia flight to Rome, where it arrived on Thursday. From there it traveled with an armed police escort by ship and truck to the small hilltop town of Aidone, Sicily, where it arrived Saturday to waiting crowds.

It was just outside this town, in the ruins of the ancient Greek colony of Morgantina, that authorities say the cult goddess lay buried for centuries before it was illegally excavated and smuggled out of Italy.

When the Getty bought the Aphrodite for \$18 million in 1988, the statue's importance outweighed the signs of its illicit origins. "The proposed statue of Aphrodite would not only become the single greatest piece of ancient art in our collection; it would be the greatest piece of Classical sculpture in this country and any country outside of Greece and Great Britain," wrote former antiquities curator Marion True in proposing the acquisition.

For years, the museum clung to the implausible story that the statue had been in the family of a former Swiss policeman, Renzo Canavesi, for more than 50 years after being purchased by his father in Paris in the 1930s. It took dramatic evidence of the statue's illicit origins -- and an alleged link to organized crime -- to destroy the credibility of that cover story and persuade the Getty's board to return the statue.

In 2006, private detectives hired by the Getty uncovered more than a dozen photos of the statue. One shows fragments scattered in a pile of dirt on a brown tile floor. In another, pieces of varying sizes were lined up in rows on a plastic sheet. Another photo showed the statue's marble face encrusted with grime.

It is not clear who took the photos or where they were taken. But the fact that the statue had been in fragments and covered in dirt as recently as the early 1980s -- the date on the photographs -- was seen as clear evidence that it had been illegally excavated not long before the Getty bought it.

The investigators' discovery of the photos is described in a forthcoming book about the dispute. "Chasing Aphrodite: The Hunt for Looted Antiquities at the World's Richest Museum" was written by this reporter and former Times staff writer Ralph Frammolino, and will be published May 24 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

The investigators, working under a Getty contract with the corporate investigative firm Kroll, also found evidence connecting Canavesi with an alleged Sicilian antiquities smuggler whom investigators were told had ties to organized crime, the book reveals.

Canavesi told investigators that he was a friend of Orazio di Simone, who in 1989 Italian authorities charged with smuggling the Aphrodite out of Italy. (The case was dismissed for lack of evidence.) When the Getty's investigators tried to interview Di Simone, they were warned against it by Italian authorities, who suggested he had ties to the Mafia. In an interview with the authors, Di Simone denied the charge and any involvement with the statue.

When told of the photographs and Canavesi's ties to "dangerous people" in May 2006, the Getty board

reluctantly agreed to include the statue of Aphrodite on a list of objects it was willing to return to Italian authorities, who had accused the museum of knowingly buying looted art for decades. At the time, True was on trial in Rome on charges of trafficking in looted art.

It was only after a 2007 Times investigation revealed the existence of the photos -- and the fact that Getty officials had turned down an opportunity to see them a decade earlier -- that the Getty sent an attorney and a museum official to Switzerland to secure copies of the photos and confirm they were of the Getty's goddess. The museum has since refused to make the images public, citing a promise made to Canavesi.

"He would not show them without the Getty's agreement that they be kept confidential," said Getty spokesman Ron Hartwig. "We gave him that commitment and we will honor it."

The Getty settled its dispute with Italy in the fall of 2007 by agreeing to return 40 prominent objects in its antiquities collection, including the Aphrodite. In turn, Italy has offered to loan the Getty about 50 comparable antiquities, part of a broader cultural collaboration.

Most of the disputed objects were returned soon after, but both parties agreed to delay the return of the Aphrodite until this year.

In part, the delay was intended to help the Getty as an institution prepare for the loss of an object that helped establish its reputation as a cultural force, recalled former Museum Director Michael Brand in a recent e-mail.

"What was previously regarded as unthinkable, almost the end of the world, became simply a necessarily sad moment," Brand wrote.

--

jason.felch@latimes.com

**Descriptors:** J PAUL GETTY MUSEUM; STATUES; SICILY; ANTIQUES; SMUGGLING

**NOTE: Photos are uncropped archival versions and may differ from published versions.**  
[Information on missing images.](#)



PHOTO: STATUE: Officials say it was smuggled from Italy.  
ID NUMBER:20110323jm44hhnc  
PHOTOGRAPHER:The J. Paul Getty Museum



[D01](#)