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Greece Vows Legal Action Against Getty

*** Officials say they are tired of waiting for the museum to respond to their requests for the return of four allegedly looted artifacts.**

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By Ralph Frammolino and Jason Felch, Times Staff Writers

Ending their long-standing diplomatic efforts, Greek authorities have decided to launch legal action against the J. Paul Getty Museum to force the return of four antiquities they say were illegally removed from their country.

Greek Ministry of Culture officials said Tuesday that they decided to take the legal route because they were tired of waiting for the Getty to respond to their written requests for the items, which include a gold funerary wreath and two other masterpieces of the antiquities collection. Greece first asked for the items in 1996 and most recently sent a follow-up letter in May.

"It is always our principle to make every possible effort of goodwill negotiation in cases such as the one with the J.P. Getty Museum," said Petros Tatoulis, the Greek deputy minister of culture, in a statement to The Times. "In this particular case, our goodwill negotiations have not been fruitful, as our written communications to museum officials have repeatedly remained unanswered."

A senior official with the Greek police's art squad said authorities will seek assistance from Italian prosecutors, who are pressing a criminal case against former Getty antiquities curator Marion True for allegedly conspiring to traffic in looted antiquities.

The possibility of the Greek government joining with the Italians could raise the stakes for the Getty and other museums. An Italian judicial figure said the Italians had amassed evidence linking prominent antiquities dealers to Greek looters and welcomed judicial cooperation with the Greek authorities.

As part of their new legal offensive announced this week, Greek government officials have tapped a high-profile government prosecutor to investigate the Getty's acquisition of the four contested objects, three of which were purchased by True, according to the senior member of the Greek art squad.

The attorney, Ioannis Diotis, is well known for his successful prosecution of terrorists over the last 15 years. His most recent convictions included members of the November 17 extremist group, which is blamed for the killings of 23 Greek and other diplomats since the 1970s, including the CIA station chief in Athens.

In addition to the gold funerary wreath, the Greeks are asking for the return of an inscribed tombstone and a marble torso of a young woman, which they say could only have come from Greek territory. The Greeks argue that the objects, which date to about 400 BC, could only come from specific areas in the country.

They also want a fourth artifact, an archaic votive relief that J. Paul Getty bought himself in 1955. They say a scholarly journal identified it as having been stolen from an archeological site in Greece.

Any archeological object taken without government permission from that nation after it achieved independence in 1830 is considered illegally removed under Greek law.

In a statement, a Getty representative said the museum had replied to the Greek authorities' May letter last week.

"The Getty is disappointed that the Greek government has resorted to legal action when the Getty has demonstrated a willingness to consider whatever evidence the Greek government has and to discuss this matter

in good faith," the statement said.

News of the Greek legal offensive comes in the midst of a growing debate over illicit antiquities in which Italian authorities have alleged that more than 100 looted artifacts have ended up at museums across the United States and in Europe and Asia.

On Tuesday, Philippe de Montebello, director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, met with Italian officials in Rome for four hours to "discuss possible solutions to the problem of contested antiquities," according to a museum statement released by Met spokesman Harold Holzer.

Like most museums, the Met has said it will return antiquities when presented with "incontrovertible proof" that the items were looted or stolen from known collections.

But in the past, that standard has been nearly impossible to meet for source countries, which are often unable to prove exactly where or when artifacts were first dug up and smuggled.

The Italians have alleged that seven objects at the museum were illegally excavated and exported after a 1939 Italian law prohibited the unauthorized removal of antiquities from the country. The items include a large urn sold by True's co-defendant in the Italian case, American dealer Robert E. Hecht Jr.

Another co-defendant, Giacomo Medici, was convicted last year and is appealing a 10-year sentence.

The Italians have based their allegations on thousands of Polaroids, seized in a 1995 raid on Medici's Geneva warehouse, showing artifacts in unrestored states, presumably freshly unearthed. Investigators have traced at least 42 to the Getty, and dozens more to museums in Toledo, Cleveland, Minneapolis and Boston.

De Montebello's meeting with Italian authorities is being closely watched as a sign of how museums will confront the increasingly aggressive claims of foreign governments for the return of looted artifacts.

"We're all going back and revisiting what we did in the past and challenging and questioning it," said John Biggs, chairman of the Getty board. He is also head of the board's new committee charged with an internal investigation of antiquities and governance issues.

Before Tuesday's meeting, De Montebello and other Met officials had engaged in two years of fruitless negotiations with Italian officials about another of the museum's contested acquisitions from Hecht -- a collection of 15 ancient silver vessels the Met bought in 1981 and 1982 for \$2.74 million.

The Met had dismissed Italian claims about the silver collection, saying the evidence was inconclusive. The museum has taken a similar stance with allegations about the Euphronios krater -- the Met's most famous ancient urn, also purchased from Hecht -- over the last 30 years.

But Italian authorities, who have continued to gather evidence during those years, say they have amassed their most convincing proof against the Met's objections.

Hecht's explanation about the appearance of the silver collection was similar to the one he gave the Met a decade before for the krater, considered to be the best surviving work of the Greek master painter Euphronios.

Hecht maintained that the krater was owned by a Lebanese antiquities dealer who had inherited it from his father before World War II, suggesting the object had been out of Italy before that country's 1939 patrimony law was instituted. But in his journal, which was confiscated by police in 2001, Hecht wrote that he bought the krater from Medici.

When he sold the Met the silver collection, Hecht again maintained that the items came from a Lebanese antiques dealer whose father had bought them sometime during or after World War II.

In court filings for their current case, Italian officials noted the "highly suspicious" coincidence with the Euphronios story, and called the museum's statements about the origin of the silver "contradictory." Interpol attempts to find the Lebanese dealer were unsuccessful, records show.

Princeton archeologist Malcolm Bell has since said the silver pieces were almost certainly looted from the Sicilian ruin of Morgantina.

The Italians sought to bolster that claim by citing the testimony of a convicted looter from southern Italy who said he had unsuccessfully tried to sell the silver pieces. The Met dismissed the testimony as not credible.

Records obtained by The Times show that at least two other men have since come forward and said they saw the silver pieces in southern Italy.

Vincenzo Cammarata, a well-known Sicilian antiquities collector, told Italian authorities in 2000 that he was asked to appraise the silver objects and was told they had come from Morgantina. Another Sicilian, Vincenzo Arcuri, also identified the objects from photos and said he had been shown them in the early 1980s when they were still covered in mud.

The Met would not comment on the new evidence. Hecht said he stands by his account.

Copies of correspondence from the Met show that museum officials proposed a settlement over the silver pieces to Italian authorities two years ago. The Met offered to return the controversial collection to Italy in 25 years, or let the Italian government take half immediately, if authorities agreed to drop their other claims against the museum's objects.

"Such an agreement would release the Metropolitan from any claims by Italy to other presently owned objects," De Montebello wrote in 2003.

A year later, he reiterated the offer, but the Italians have not accepted it.

In an analysis of the negotiations written earlier this year, the Italian Ministry of Culture said it was "not considering the proposal" of sharing the objects, or leaving them with the Met for 25 years. Rather, the analysis suggested that Italy would let the Met exhibit the silver for four years if the museum recognized the country's ownership of the objects.

"This could as well be a useful example to the current controversy with the Getty Museum," the analysis states.

Holzer, the Met spokesman, declined to discuss the details of De Montebello's meetings, which included a one-hour session with Italian Culture Minister Rocco Buttiglione.

"No agreement was reached about any object today," he said. "The one agreement that was reached was that there would be more discussions."

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Special correspondent Nikolas Zirganos in Athens contributed to this report.

Descriptors: J PAUL GETTY MUSEUM; GREECE; ART; STOLEN PROPERTY; PROPERTY RIGHTS

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[Information on missing images.](#)



PHOTO: DISPUTE: Italian officials say these ancient silver plates in the Met collection were illegally excavated from Morgantina, Sicily.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: Italian Carabinieri

PHOTO: Philippe de Montebello, director of New York's Met museum.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: Associated Press



PHOTO: ARTIFACT: Greek officials have taken legal action to force the J. Paul Getty Museum to return this gold funerary wreath.
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PHOTOGRAPHER: J. Paul Getty Museum



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