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Greek Officials Raid House of Ex-Getty Curator

*** Art squad seizes artifacts said to be of modest value from Marion True's vacation home. Their discovery could add to her legal woes.**

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Foreign Desk

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By Nikolas Zirganos and Jason Felch, Special to The Times

PAROS, Greece -- In a surprise search Wednesday, Greek authorities seized 17 unregistered artifacts and a Byzantine icon from the vacation house of Marion True, the former J. Paul Getty Museum antiquities curator on trial in Rome on charges she trafficked in looted art.

Among the objects seized, only a Hellenistic marble torso is thought to be archeologically significant.

The 17 artifacts, which also include fragments of ancient buildings, are believed to have a total value of less than \$12,000, said an archeologist who accompanied police on the search.

But their discovery could lead to criminal charges, further complicating matters for True, whose purchases of ancient art for the Getty are the subject of an ongoing criminal investigation by Greece, in addition to the Italian prosecution.

In Greece, where ruins have been plundered for generations, possession of ancient art is allowed if the objects are registered with local archeological authorities, and it is not uncommon for rural homes to have archeological trinkets.

Possessing unregistered objects such as those found in True's home is a crime, authorities said. If their value is found to be less than \$70,000, as expected, True could be charged with a misdemeanor punishable by fines, judicial officials said. The case has been referred to prosecutors, who will decide whether to press charges in the coming days.

Harry Stang, True's attorney in Los Angeles, said the artifacts were in the house when she bought the property. "She immediately asked the head of antiquities for the island to review the objects and was advised by him that they were of no value," Stang said.

Iannis Andreopoulos, True's attorney in Paros, added that "half of this town would go to prison" if authorities searched homes for unregistered and insignificant antiquities. "No one declares them," he said. "That means Marion was investigated only because of Italy."

Yannos Kourayos, the head archeologist on Paros and a close friend of True's who has visited her property here, said that "there is nothing of value" among the artifacts.

But he and Andreopoulos both acknowledged that, given True's legal problems, she should have registered the objects with the local authorities.

Even a light sentence could have a significant effect on True's standing in Greece, which long has been a second home for her.

In November, Greek officials opened a criminal investigation of True and the Getty after diplomatic efforts to recover four allegedly looted antiquities failed.

At the center of the inquiry is the Getty's purchase in 1993 of an ancient gold funerary wreath, which is on display at the Getty Villa near Malibu. Records obtained by The Times showed that True had concluded that the wreath was "too dangerous" for the museum to purchase because she thought the man claiming to be the owner

was an impostor. Six months later, she won approval from the Getty to acquire the piece, paying \$1.15 million to a Swiss intermediary and two men of Greek background.

In February, Greek investigators traveled to Rome to meet with Italian prosecutors and exchange information on stolen antiquities. Italian officials are expected to travel to Athens in the coming months to continue the collaboration, the first of its kind on antiquity matters between the two countries.

Meanwhile, the Getty Museum's director, Michael Brand, has exchanged letters with the Greek Ministry of Culture, expressing a willingness to discuss the disputed items.

The raid on True's house was carried out Wednesday afternoon on this Cycladic island that is popular with foreign tourists after art police received an anonymous tip. Five members of the Greek art squad and a local prosecutor served a search warrant on True's walled compound, which contains a traditional whitewashed stone house and several smaller buildings perched on a hill amid rolling green fields overlooking the Aegean Sea.

The police were let in by workers who said they were preparing the house for True, expecting her to arrive shortly to spend the next six months in Greece. In Italian trials, defendants are not required to be present.

On Wednesday, True, 57, was in Rome, meeting with Getty attorneys to discuss the provenance, or ownership history, of about 100 objects the museum is investigating in relation to the Italian case. At the same time, Italian prosecutors were hearing testimony in her trial from a witness who detailed how she had acquired the Greek house in 1995 with the help of one of the Getty's principal antiquities dealers.

As The Times reported in October, Christo Michailidis arranged for his family's attorney to give True a \$400,000 loan to buy the property, said Michailidis' nephew. The nephew said he was told about the details of the transaction by the attorney. The loan was provided by an offshore corporation controlled by the family to disguise its origins, the nephew said.

True repaid the loan with money borrowed from Lawrence Fleischman, the now-deceased antiquities collector who days earlier had agreed to sell 32 pieces of his collection to the Getty for \$20 million and donate the rest of the 300 artifacts, a tax-deductible gift worth \$40 million.

True's acceptance of the two loans, which the Getty described as undisclosed conflict of interests, led to her sudden resignation in October.

The Getty did not pay True a severance but agreed to pay for her legal expenses in the Rome trial.

Barbara Fleischman, Lawrence's widow and a Getty trustee since 2000, left the board in January.

*

Times special correspondent Zirganos reported from Paros and staff writer Felch from Los Angeles.

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PHOTO: UNDER SCRUTINY: Former Getty curator Marion True in November in Rome, where she has been on trial for trafficking in looted antiquities.

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