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The World Italians Say Photos Show 6 Met Items Were Looted

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SEE CORRECTION APPENDED

--- START OF CORRECTION ---

For The Record

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Home Edition Main News Part A Page 2 National Desk
1 inches; 57 words
Type of Material: Correction

Looted antiquities -- Photographs published in Saturday's Section A with a story about looted antiquities were incorrectly identified in the caption as showing an object in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The object, a bronze statue of a Greek youth, is in the private collection of Leon Levy and Shelby White.

--- END OF CORRECTION ---

By Ralph Frammolino and Jason Felch, Times Staff Writers

ROME -- Extending their reach beyond the J. Paul Getty Museum, Italian authorities have used confiscated photographs to trace six pieces of allegedly looted ancient Greek pottery to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

According to Italian court records, prosecutors also have photographs showing eight other allegedly looted objects that are part of the private collection of Shelby White, a Met board member, and her late husband, financier Leon Levy.

The couple donated \$20 million to the Met to build a Roman and Greek court in their name. Museum experts have speculated that the space is most likely being built to house the Levy-White collection.

If the Met eventually acquires the collection, one of the most significant still in private hands, the Italian photographs could become a complicating factor, the experts said.

Both the Met and White declined to comment this week.

Italian authorities allege that the objects identified at the Met and in the Levy-White collection were among thousands illegally excavated from tombs and ruins and smuggled out of the country long after a 1939 Italian law prohibited the unauthorized export of antiquities.

The objects represent only a small fraction of both collections, but are cited in Italian court records as proof that Giacomo Medici, an Italian dealer based in Switzerland, sold objects that ended up in the collections. The photographs -- neatly cataloged Polaroids -- were confiscated during a 1995 raid on his Geneva warehouse.

As such, the Italian evidence widens the controversy regarding allegedly looted antiquities far beyond the Getty, which so far has been the only institution publicly singled out by Italian prosecutors.

Medici was convicted last year of trafficking in looted antiquities and is appealing a 10-year prison sentence. His co-defendants, Robert E. Hecht Jr., an American antiquities dealer, and Marion True, the Getty's former antiquities curator, face trial next month.

The Italians charged True with conspiracy to traffic in stolen artifacts after identifying 42 antiquities at the Getty that they believe were looted. They are demanding that the antiquities be returned.

Italian officials said in Rome in recent interviews that they will continue to gather evidence against the Met and other museums but are undecided whether to press charges or use the information as leverage in negotiations for the return of some items.

The Times reported Friday that the Italians are demanding that the Met return one of its prized antiquities, the 2,500-year-old Euphronios krater, after gathering new information about the object's origin.

Hecht, the American dealer and close associate of Medici, sold the terracotta bowl to the Met in 1972. At the time, he told museum officials that he had acquired it from a Lebanese man whose family purchased it before Italian law prohibited its removal.

The Italians' new information includes a personal memoir seized from Hecht's Paris apartment. In it, Hecht writes that Medici showed him a Polaroid photograph of the object and sold the bowl to him for about \$380,000.

Reached Thursday, Hecht said the story was a fiction designed to market the memoir. Medici also denied the account.

The Polaroids used to identify the allegedly looted objects at the Met and in the Levy-White collection show antiquities encrusted with dirt and unrestored -- proof, the Italians say, that they had been excavated recently, therefore illegally.

David Gill, an archeologist at the University of Wales, said the photos were close to "smoking gun" documentary evidence of looting.

In acquiring antiquities, museums can demand proof that objects were legally excavated and exported. Or they can take a chance on items without documented ownership history, or provenance. Although it is difficult to prove that such items have been looted, the consensus among archeologists and legal experts is that most were probably removed without the source country's permission.

"Anything in that condition," Gill said of the unrestored objects in the Polaroids, "is probably fresh out of the ground."

Records show that the six items tracked to the Met collection include a Greek jug, or amphora, covered with dirt in one of the Polaroids. Another object, an ancient mixing bowl, was shown in pieces, on sheets of bubble wrap.

"It can be stated with absolute certainty that all eight pieces examined were smuggled by Medici, who sold them -- directly or through a third party -- to the Levy-White collection," the court records say.

Gill said the Italian investigation "endorses" a study that he and a colleague did of the Levy-White collection when portions of it were exhibited by the Met in 1990. He said the study found that 84% of the collection lacked ownership documentation, indicating that it was probably looted.

In 1996, the Getty acquired more than 300 antiquities from Lawrence and Barbara Fleischman, New York art patrons whose collection was considered one of the finest private holdings in the world.

Most of the objects had no documented ownership history. Many had been acquired from Medici, Hecht and a British dealer, Robin Symes. Based on the Polaroid photographs seized from Medici's warehouse, the Italians have identified 11 objects from the Fleischman collection as having been looted and are seeking their return.

Thomas Hoving, the Met's director from 1967 to 1977 who has become an outspoken critic of acquisition practices at both the Getty and the Met, said Friday that the new Italian evidence has put the New York museum on notice that the eight identified items in the Levy-White collection could be tainted.

If the Met acquires the collection with the eight objects, Hoving said, it could anger Italian prosecutors as they continue their criminal investigation. But if the Met questions the objects' origins, he said, it risks offending

White, one of its most important benefactors.

"They're in a bind," said Hoving. "Now they've got to hunker down and hope for the best."

Descriptors: ITALY; INVESTIGATIONS; STOLEN PROPERTY; ARTIFACTS; METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

NOTE: Photos are uncropped archival versions and may differ from published versions.

[Information on missing images.](#)



PHOTO: STATUETTE: Italian authorities say the fact that the figure in the Polaroid, left, is unrestored shows it was illegally excavated and smuggled out of Italy before ending up at the Met in New York.

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PHOTO: STATUETTE: Italian authorities say the fact that the figure in the Polaroid, left, is unrestored shows it was illegally excavated and smuggled out of Italy before ending up at the Met in New York.

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