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### N.Y. Museum to Return Allegedly Looted Vase

\* The Met's offer to Italy could put pressure on the Getty Museum to give up disputed art.

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**By Jason Felch And Ralph Frammolino, Times Staff Writers**

ROME -- The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on Thursday agreed to return the most prized ancient Greek vase in its collection to Italian ownership, reversing three decades of resistance to allegations by Italian authorities that the object was looted.

The Met's proposal comes as Italian officials continue negotiations with representatives of the J. Paul Getty Museum over at least 42 antiquities in the Getty's collection that Italy says are looted. The Getty Museum's new director, Michael Brand, and a handful of museum attorneys met with Italian cultural and legal authorities for eight hours here last Friday to begin negotiations over the 42 objects.

With the board of the Getty Trust scheduled to discuss the issue Saturday, one legal expert predicted that the Getty would soon work out a deal similar to that proposed by the Met.

John Biggs, chairman of the Getty board, said Thursday in an interview that board members wanted the trust's outside law firm to complete an investigation into the origin of "every disputed item we have before coming to a decision."

"When we finish with that, we'll face the same kind of issue as the Met's," Biggs said. "The bulk of it will be finished in the coming months."

The proposal by the Met, set out in a draft agreement sent to the Italian Ministry of Culture, would transfer legal ownership of its prized Euphronios krater and 19 other disputed antiquities to Italy. The krater, a painted urn dating to the 6th century B.C., is widely regarded as one of the jewels of the Met's collection.

In exchange for yielding ownership of the antiquities, the Met would obtain comparable artifacts from the Italians on long-term loans. It is possible that some of the disputed items could remain on display at the Met, on loan from the Italian government.

The museum's surprising shift comes three months after The Times reported that Italian authorities had amassed compelling new evidence that the ancient urn, signed by Euphronios, a master vase painter of ancient Greece, had been illegally excavated from a heavily looted necropolis north of Rome.

Final negotiations on the terms of the agreement are expected to be completed in the coming weeks.

The Met's announcement Thursday marks a major turning point in a growing dispute between American museums and Italian officials over antiquities they have alleged were looted from Italy.

The Cultural Ministry said Thursday that "the agreement should end all the controversies with the Met Museum about the illegal exportation of antiquities." Given the Met's prominence, museum professionals predicted that the Getty and several other prominent art institutions would follow its lead.

"This decision will have major ramifications for all museums and private collectors in the world," said John Papadopoulos, chairman of the classics department at UCLA.

Selma Holo, director of the USC International Museum Institute, said the broader implications of the deal are enormous.

"We've finally reached the point where we're having a deep international discussion about who owns culture," Holo said. "The Met's solution brings us closer to a situation where culture can represent a place but belong to the world in a way that is less about ownership than about shared values."

Questions about the legality of the Euphronios krater have haunted the Met since the museum bought the vase for \$1 million in 1973.

For years, the Met dismissed assertions from Italian officials and others that the krater had been looted from a tomb and illegally taken out of Italy. The museum had insisted that foreign governments provide "irrefutable proof" that objects were removed illegally before considering their return.

On Thursday, Met spokesman Harold Holzer said the Met had conceded that standard "had no basis in legal currency." If Italy brought a civil suit in U.S. court to recover the items, all it would have to prove would be a "preponderance of good evidence" that the items were looted, he noted.

Based on that new definition, he added, "we found the evidence to be convincing," Holzer said.

Thomas Hoving, who was director of the Met at the time of the purchase of the vase and later wrote that he believed it had been looted from Italy, described the turn of events this way: "The Hot Pot is no longer hot."

Italian authorities have identified dozens of objects at museums in the United States, Europe and Asia that were allegedly looted from Italian tombs and ruins. Since 1939, Italian law has required government permission for ancient art to be exported legally.

"It really sets up a sign to the museum world," said Collin Renfrew, author of "Loot, Legitimacy and Ownership," a book on illegal acquisitions of antiquities by museums and collectors.

Patty Gerstenblith, co-chairwoman of the American Bar Assn.'s international Cultural Property Committee, said the Met's agreement "brings the museum world into the world of reality."

"One of the biggest questions is: What will the Getty do?" she said. "One would think the Getty would work out a similar arrangement, at least for the objects for which the Italians have a reasonable amount of evidence."

Asked to comment Thursday on the Met's draft agreement, a Getty spokesman said, "Since we don't know the specifics of the arrangements reached between the Italian government and the Metropolitan museum, it wouldn't be appropriate for us to comment or speculate."

Marion True, the Getty's former antiquities curator, is standing trial in Rome for allegedly trafficking in looted art. Her co-defendant is Robert E. Hecht Jr., the American dealer who sold the Euphronios krater to the Met along with a collection of ancient silver that is also covered by the proposed deal.

One museum professional, who asked not to be named, said the Met was motivated to strike a deal with the Italian government to return the disputed items because it wanted to avoid the sort of "pall" that has hovered over the opening of the Getty Villa. The Met will be opening its own antiquities wing next year named for collectors Leon Levy and Shelby White, whose private collection includes several objects the Italians say were looted.

Reached at his New York home, Hecht said he was disappointed by Thursday's announcement. "In a way I'm sad, in another way, if [Met director Philippe] de Montebello wants to give it back, that's his business," Hecht said. At the same time, he said, "it was no particular surprise."

Times staff writer Mike Boehm in Los Angeles contributed to this report.

**Descriptors:** METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART; ITALY; STOLEN PROPERTY; ANTIQUES; ARTIFACTS

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PHOTO: DEALER: Robert E. Hecht Jr. is pictured next to the Euphronios krater at the Met. He sold the krater to the museum in 1972.

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