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**The Nation**

**Several Museums May Possess Looted Art**

**\* Italian prosecutors use photos seized from a convicted trafficker of stolen antiquities to identify dozens of suspect objects.**

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

Italian authorities have identified more than 100 allegedly looted antiquities at six leading museums in the United States as well as galleries, private collections and museums in Europe and Asia.

According to Italian court records, prosecutors have used a trove of captured Polaroid photographs to trace objects to Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Toledo Museum of Art and Princeton University Art Museum, in addition to the J. Paul Getty Museum and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Polaroids, seized in a 1995 raid at the warehouse of antiquities dealer Giacomo Medici, show antiquities in pieces, encrusted with dirt and unrestored -- proof, the Italians say, that they had been excavated recently, and therefore illegally. Medici was convicted last year in Rome of trafficking in looted art.

The photographs formed the core of Italy's case against Medici and will be used in this month's trial of his two co-defendants, American art dealer Robert E. Hecht Jr. and former J. Paul Getty Museum antiquities curator Marion True.

The Italians have charged True with conspiracy to traffic in illicit Greek, Roman and Etruscan antiquities after matching 42 pieces shown in the Polaroids to items at the Getty. They are demanding that the antiquities be returned.

They have traced seven objects to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art using photographs and demanded the return of an eighth, the 2,500-year-old Euphronios Krater, one of the museum's most prized antiquities, after gathering new documentary evidence about its origin.

Although the Getty remains the focus of the Italian criminal prosecution, prosecutors said they could use the Polaroids as leverage in negotiations with other museums for the return of objects or as evidence in possible criminal prosecutions or civil actions.

The Italian case against True -- believed to be the first American museum official targeted for prosecution by a foreign government -- has focused attention on antiquities trafficking and renewed debate among museum officials about the ethics of acquiring objects without documented ownership history, or provenance.

Faced with photographic evidence, it also has museums rethinking how best to respond to demands from foreign governments for the return of allegedly stolen items.

Several American museum directors and legal experts said last week in interviews that the Italian case could prove to be a turning point for both the acquisition and return of antiquities.

A 1939 Italian law prohibited the unauthorized removal of antiquities from the country, meaning that any object dug up from tombs or ruins since then and sold without government permission has been illegally excavated and exported.

Although Italy, Greece and other countries have for years sought the return of allegedly looted objects, few of

their claims have been supported by as much evidence as the Italians have now amassed, the museum officials said.

Timothy Rub, director of the Cincinnati's Art Museum, said after a meeting of the American Assn. of Museum Directors last week in San Francisco that the Italian case is "a watershed in terms of the public perception" of museums' acquisition practices.

Melissa Rosengard, executive director of the Western Museums Assn., added: "It's a time for soul-searching" by museums.

True's indictment unnerved many museum officials because she had for years been widely regarded as an ethical leader on antiquities issues. Her sudden resignation last month after revelations that she had bought a Greek vacation home with help from an antiquities dealer also troubled many in the field.

Ironically, it was True who, before her indictment, helped the Italians trace the objects depicted in the Polaroids, records show.

True was shown the Polaroids during a 2001 deposition taken in Los Angeles by the Italians. Prosecutor Paolo Ferri asked her at one point for help finding "the most important and beautiful pieces" depicted.

"If there is anything here at the Getty or in the other museums or at dealers that you may have seen, or even at private collections, if you could give us any information, we would certainly be grateful," Ferri told True.

True cooperated, identifying more than three dozen objects in 13 museums and seven galleries and private collections.

Using True's guidance, as well as the museums' own published catalogs of antiquities in their collections, the Italians said they have matched objects shown in the Polaroids to museums in Denmark, Germany, Japan, Sweden and the United States.

The Times has obtained copies of more than 1,000 of the photographs. Previously, they had been posted on the website of the Italian police unit that tracks illicit antiquities.

Italian officials said that more than 30 antiquities shown in the photos are now at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which houses a large collection of Greek and Roman art.

Among the photos are three showing a large marble statue of a woman in a distinct flowing gown. The statue appears to be resting against a wooden board, largely intact except for slight damage to the left ear.

The Boston museum acquired a virtually identical statue of Sabina, the wife of Roman Emperor Hadrian, in 1979 from Fritz Burki, a Swiss antiquities restorer, according to its website.

The statue was "said to be in an aristocratic family collection in Bavaria," the website says.

Burki has admitted to acting as a "straw man" in the sale of looted art by Hecht and Medici to American museums.

Other objects shown in the Italian photos that authorities claim to have traced to the museum include an ancient gravestone and a water vase depicting the mythological abduction of Hippodameia.

"Based on the photos, it is possible those objects are in our collection," Dawn Griffin, a spokeswoman for the Boston museum, said last week. "We're digging deeper into the provenance of these objects."

Griffin said the museum also is investigating another 116 objects purchased from Hecht.

At the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, officials confirmed that one of its six Greek vases appears to match another Polaroid obtained by The Times.

William M. Griswold, the former assistant director of the Getty who took the helm of the Minneapolis museum last month, said he intends to investigate the acquisition of the vase and confer with colleagues at other museums "who have received similar calls."

"We want to respond in a responsible way," he said.

The Italians traced an ancient Greek water jar, or kalpis, with scenes of swimmers and dolphins, to the Toledo Museum of Art, court records show.

Officials of the Ohio museum said last week that an inquiry from The Times was the first they heard of the matter. "It would be irresponsible for us to speculate whether the kalpis that's in the photo is the same as the one in our collection," said spokeswoman Holly Taylor, adding that it takes "an extensive amount of time and a physical examination" to make sure.

The Italians tracked objects to the Princeton University Art Museum based on evidence other than photos.

In his handwritten memoir, Hecht describes buying an ancient vase, painted with a banquet scene, from a man in Cerveteri, a well-known looting site north of Rome and later selling it to the university's museum, court records show.

Italian authorities seized the memoir from Hecht's Paris apartment in 2001, and traced that vase and another to the museum.

The museum's website shows a similar vase to the one described in Hecht's journal, also depicting a scene of men at a banquet. The museum would not comment on whether the two are the same, nor identify the second vase.

Cultural institutions have struggled for decades over when it is appropriate to buy antiquities without documented ownership histories, and whether to give them back when faced by claims from foreign governments.

In 1970, a UNESCO convention called on governments to make it illegal to "import, export or transfer ownership" of cultural property without permission from the country of origin. Italy ratified the convention in 1979. The U.S. Congress passed implementing legislation in 1983.

Even after U.S. ratification, many museum directors saw it as part of their public mission to take chances and sometimes buy artifacts of questionable origin, as long as there was no proof that they had been illegally excavated and imported. They believed such pieces were better off in museum display cases, available for experts to study and the public to appreciate, than locked away in private collections.

Attitudes began shifting, however, in the 1990s with the passage of federal legislation calling for museums to return certain Native American artifacts, and the surging attention given to art looted from victims of the Holocaust.

But even as museums acted quickly on claims from Holocaust victims, they often dug in their heels with countries bringing patrimony claims for the return of antiquities, demanding irrefutable proof of looting.

Directors and curators worried that giving back some archeological items would bolster demands for the return of such iconic pieces as the Elgin marbles, taken two centuries ago from the Parthenon in Athens and now in the British Museum.

Jennifer Neils, a professor of art history at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, said this differing approach smacked of being a "bit two-faced," as museums returned art seized during World War II while "on the other hand they are bringing in the backdoor all these unprovenanced [undocumented] antiquities."

In 2002, a federal court in New York dealt what many consider to be a decisive legal blow against the prove-it approach to antiquities followed by some museums and dealers.

Frederick Shultz, a New York art dealer, was convicted of buying a pharaoh's head sculpture looted from Egypt after a judge instructed the jury to consider Schultz's failure to aggressively investigate the background of the piece as evidence he knew it was looted.

The conviction, upheld on appeal, shifted the burden to prove an object's good standing onto museums and collectors, legal experts said.

"What in the '80s was called adventurous is today being called criminal," said Maxwell Anderson, former head of the American Assn. of Museum Directors.

The association reacted to the legal shift by issuing new guidelines last year calling for greater documentation of ancient artifacts, but still left open what some critics say is a major loophole, allowing museums to continue purchasing undocumented antiquities "because of their rarity, importance, and aesthetic merit."

Now with the Italian case taking aim at the Getty and other cultural institutions, the museum profession is facing a peculiarly tricky dilemma: Having pledged to be more careful about acquiring antiquities in the future, museums are being haunted by acquisitions made under the old rules in their past.

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Ancient art at center of probe

Several prominent U.S. art museums, as well as galleries, private collections and museums in Europe and Asia, are suspected of possessing antiquities that were removed illegally from Italy, according to Italian court records.

J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles)...42 objects

Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York)...Seven objects, including the Euphronios Krater

Minneapolis Institute of Arts...One Greek vase

Museum of Fine Arts (Boston)...More than 30 objects

Princeton University Art Museum (New Jersey)...Two vases

Toledo Museum of Art...A Greek water jar (kalpis)

Source: Times reporting

**Descriptors:** ITALY; UNITED STATES; MUSEUMS; ART; STOLEN PROPERTY; EUROPE; ASIA

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

[Information on missing images.](#)



PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE: Italian authorities traced a marble statue of Sabina, left, the wife of Roman Emperor Hadrian, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston through a Polaroid, above, seized from the warehouse of a convicted Italian antiquities dealer.

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PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE: Italian authorities traced a marble statue of Sabina, left, the wife of Roman Emperor Hadrian, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston through a Polaroid, above, seized from the warehouse of a convicted Italian antiquities dealer.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



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