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COLUMN ONE

The Amazing Catch They Let Slip Away

*** The Greek bronze now at the Getty Villa has a potent allure. Just ask the Italian fishermen who hauled it up in 1964 and sold it for \$5,600.**

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By Jason Felch, Times Staff Writer

FANO, Italy -- On a summer day in 1964, the 60-foot trawler Ferruccio Ferri pushed off from this port before dawn. It motored southeast, cutting through the Adriatic Sea toward a submerged outcropping where fish gathered, 32 nautical miles out.

By dusk, the Ferri had reached the spot. The seven men in the crew cast their nets and fished all night, dozing in shifts.

Early the next morning, the nets caught on a snag. The boat's engine whined. With a jolt, the nets came free. Crewman Igli Rosato watched as a barnacle-encrusted figure emerged from the sea.

"C'e un morto!" cried one of the fishermen, Rosato recalled. "There's a dead man!"

But the figure discernible through the layer of shells was too rigid and heavy to be a man. The fishermen dragged the clunky object to the front of the boat and returned to their chores. Later, when they stopped for a breakfast of roasted fish, one of them scraped a patch of barnacles off the figure and let out a yelp.

"E d'oro!" he cried, pointing at the flash of brilliant yellow underneath the shell. "It's gold!"

Romeo Pirani, the captain of the boat, pushed through the men and examined the exposed metal where the figure's feet should have been, Rosato recalled.

Bronze, not gold, the captain declared.

The Ferri's crew occasionally pulled up Roman urns in their nets but had never seen anything quite like this.

The life-size figure had one hand raised to its head. It had black holes for eyes. Given the thickness of its encrustations, it looked as if it had been on the ocean floor for centuries. It might be worth something.

The crew made a quick decision: Rather than turn the statue over to authorities, as required by Italian law, they would sell it and divvy up the profit.

After the Ferri docked in the predawn darkness at Fano, the crew took the statue ashore on a fish cart, hidden under a pile of nets.

The bronze spent a few days in the house of the trawler's owner, but rumors of its existence started to spread through town, Rosato recalled.

Worried that a jealous neighbor would tell Italy's financial police, the owner's son took the 280-pound statue to a farming village three kilometers inland, where it was buried in a cabbage field.

With the statue safely hidden, the fishermen contacted the Barbetti brothers, Giacomo and Fabio, whose family owned a cement factory in nearby Gubbio. They were antiquarians who occasionally bought ancient objects turned up by farmers or fishermen and sold them to wealthy foreigners.

When Giacomo Barbetti saw the statue in the cabbage field, he suspected it was a major find. Touching the figure's nose, he thought it might even be the work of Lysippos, one of the greatest sculptors of ancient Greece.

The Barbettis bought it for 4 million lire, about \$5,600 at the time and about \$36,000 today. The amount was divided among the two dozen or so people who by then had become involved in the statue's journey.

"Three to four million lire, it was a huge amount," Rosato recalled. "People started sweating when they heard that amount."

As the youngest man aboard the Ferri, Rosato got about \$130. He had hoped to use the money to take a short vacation, but when he returned home from his next voyage, he learned that his mother had used it to pay their debts at the grocery store.

The sale to the Barbettis began the modern odyssey of one of the greatest bronze statues to survive from ancient Greece.

It is a journey like that taken by thousands of ancient objects, spirited across borders and through an often-obscure trail of owners before reaching a new home. In the case of the statue, that would be a humidity-controlled room at the newly reopened Getty Villa in Pacific Palisades.

The bronze proved more slippery than most as it passed through a net of international laws intended to govern the trade in ancient artifacts. Because it was found in international waters, Italy does not have the same ownership claim as it would over a vase or statue found in Italian soil. Nevertheless, Italians say, the statue was illegally exported and should be returned.

The dispute, now playing out in negotiations between the Getty and Italian officials, brings to the surface some of the deeper issues in the debate about who should be the rightful owner of objects from cultures long dead. After all, to whom does a statue made in ancient Greece, stolen by Romans and found by Italian fishermen 2,000 years later, rightfully belong?

International law generally recognizes as owner the country where an antiquity is discovered in modern times, not where it was created. Greece has not claimed the object, and Italian officials say cultural justice demands repatriation to the country whose citizens found it and brought it home.

Critics of such claims -- American museums and private collectors among them -- cite their own sense of justice, saying that objects of such importance and rarity should belong to humanity, not one nation.

Who will prevail, and whether there will be one more stop in the bronze's long journey, will probably be decided in the coming months.

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The statue depicts a young athlete. Remnants of flax found in its core suggest that it was made in the ancient Greek city of Olympia, where the grain grew abundantly, said Carol Mattusch, an expert in Greek bronzes at George Mason University in Virginia.

Several experts have concluded that the statue is perhaps one of dozens depicting Olympic victors that Lysippos, the personal sculptor of Alexander the Great, created to line the pathways of the birthplace of the games. But proving that Lysippos was the artist may not be possible, Mattusch and others say. If Lysippos did sculpt the statue, it is the only one of his 1,500 works thought to have survived. His craftsmanship is known today only through several Roman copies of his work.

The bronze was probably hauled from its site to a Roman transport ship around the time of Christ, when the wealthy of Rome were stealing the best art in the known world to decorate their homes and temples. But the Adriatic is fickle, and storms still whip up without warning. Before the voyage was completed the bronze sank to the sea floor, where it would lie for nearly two millenniums.

The statue's watery grave is probably what saved it. Most Greek bronzes were melted down or destroyed by the elements. Of the handful of complete bronzes to survive antiquity, virtually all have been found in the sea.

According to court records, the Barbettis temporarily entrusted their new purchase to a local priest, Giovanni Nanni, who stored it in his church's sacristy. Fearing discovery, Nanni later moved it to the space under his

wooden staircase. Neighbors noticed a string of foreign cars arriving at the priest's house and informed local authorities. By the time Italian investigators showed up, however, the statue had disappeared, authorities said.

The government decided to prosecute the Barbetti brothers for trafficking in stolen goods, arguing that they had disposed of a statue that properly belonged to the state. The fishermen were not charged.

In 1966, the Barbettis were sentenced to four months in jail, and Nanni was given two months as an accessory. The convictions were overturned five years later on the grounds that a discovery in international waters could not be considered stolen property.

The Barbettis, perhaps fearful of also being charged with export violations, would not say to whom they sold the statue.

When Rosato met Giacomo Barbetti later while trying to sell another find, the antiquarian told him the statue had brought him nothing but legal problems.

"I didn't make anything," a crying Barbetti said, according to Rosato. Barbetti opened his coin purse and pulled out a small piece of shell: "This is all I have left of it."

In 1971, soon after the reversal of the Barbettis' conviction, the statue resurfaced in London. Artemis, a European art consortium, announced that it had bought the piece from unnamed Italians in Brazil. Artemis did not reveal the price.

One of the partners in the consortium was Heinz Herzer, a prominent German antiquities dealer who had studied Egyptology and archeology. Herzer said he remembered the moment he first saw the statue in London.

"It sent a chill down my back," he said. The statue's pose, with its hand poised centimeters away from its head, moments after donning the victor's wreath, "indicated an incredible technical skill," Herzer said.

His concerns about the statue's legal status were assuaged by the outcome of the Barbettis' court case in Italy, he said.

"I thought to myself, 'This is one of the most spectacular purchases that cannot be claimed by a country of origin,'" he recalled.

Herzer moved the statue to Munich, Germany, and began months of painstaking restoration with a German expert, who carefully removed layer after layer of encrustation with a scalpel.

What emerged was the lithe figure of a young athlete. Herzer was convinced he had a work of Lysippos.

His conclusion was supported by Bernard Ashmole, a renowned British expert in Greek and Roman art. Ashmole was also a personal advisor to oil baron and antiquities collector J. Paul Getty, and urged him to consider buying it. Getty, who was building his museum in Malibu, fell in love with the bronze after seeing photos.

He concluded that it would become "the museum's prized piece and probably the best work of ancient art not only in his beloved California but in the whole country," according to his first antiquities curator, Jiri Frel, who wrote a short history of the bronze.

At the same time, Getty was determined not to spend a penny more than necessary to get the statue.

In 1974, he joined forces with New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art to bid on the bronze. Thomas Hoving, the Met's director at the time, remembers the agreement he brokered with Getty at the billionaire's estate outside London: The Met would loan Getty a set of 17 frescoes spirited out of Italy by Mussolini's son-in-law in exchange for joint ownership of the bronze, funded by Getty. Hoving urged Getty to jump at the opportunity, comparing the piece's artistic value to that of the Mona Lisa if all of Leonardo da Vinci's other works had been destroyed.

Complicating the negotiation were renewed attempts by Italy to recover the statue on the grounds of export violations. Herzer refused to reveal whom he purchased it from, and the case languished for lack of a suspect.

The battle for cultural objects was a hot topic at the time, thanks to the controversy over the Euphronios krater, a Greek vase looted from Italy that Hoving had purchased a few years earlier.

Getty wanted to avoid such trouble and insisted that several legal conditions be met before the purchase proceed, Hoving recalled: written permission from the Italian minister of culture and the head of the country's art squad, and proof that the statue had received permission to leave the country.

But before those conditions were met, negotiations stalled, Hoving said. Getty died in 1976, leaving instructions to acquire the statue. A year later, the trustees of the young museum voted to pay Herzer and Artemis \$3.98 million for it. It was among the first purchases they made.

After a brief stop at museums in Boston and Denver, the bronze youth arrived in Malibu, greeted by staff with a champagne toast. The Getty's trustees announced that, to honor the museum's founder and in the interest of "simple justice," they would rename the object the Getty Bronze.

Whether curator Frel or the trustees required that Getty's legal conditions be met is unclear. The Getty will not comment. Frel left the museum in the 1980s after allegations of forgery, tax fraud and other misdeeds surfaced.

Efforts to reach him were unsuccessful. Herzer said he doesn't know if the bronze had an export license.

By the time word of the record-breaking sale reached the fishing community of Fano, about 90 miles east of Florence, a deep sense of seller's remorse had set in.

Regional papers have bemoaned its loss in headlines over the last three decades: "Fano Cries for the Lysippos," "A City Mobilized for Its Treasure," "Fano Asks That Statue Be Renamed the Athlete of Fano."

The Fano Archeological Club gathered 8,000 signatures for a petition saying it should be returned. The Fig Tree Fraternity, a group of retired fishermen who gather under a fig tree by the port, still debate what they would have done had they been the ones to find it. A theater company recently retold the Lysippos' tragicomic tale in the local dialect, filling a 600-seat theater for a week. The statue's name adorns a local travel agency and the town's monthly magazine.

In the late 1990s, Pirani, the captain of the Ferruccio Ferri who years ago had received about \$250 for his share of the statue, took up a collection in town for airfare to Los Angeles to see the bronze. He announced the purpose of his visit in a letter to the Getty before his departure, and was dismayed to find no one waiting for him when he arrived, a friend said. He was not allowed to see the statue, which was in storage while the Villa was being renovated.

"He realized what a treasure he had had in his hands," recalled the friend, who gave a framed picture of the Lysippos to Pirani's widow when the captain died a few years ago. "It was one of the biggest disappointments of his life."

Giancarlo D'Anna, a 51-year-old Fano resident and member of the regional government, remembers hearing about the statue as a boy.

"It is a symbol of getting something back from the sea, which has taken so much from us," D'Anna said. "People need to dream about a goal. This is a polestar for us."

And the fact that it was the people of Fano who sold it?

"At the time, they needed money to survive, and didn't really realize the value," he said with a shrug.

Last September, D'Anna also made the pilgrimage to Los Angeles, taking advantage of a cousin's wedding to seek out the statue.

"I've come from Italy," he recalled telling security guards in dark glasses outside the Getty Villa, still closed for restoration. "I'd like some information about this statue."

They referred him to the Getty Center, where a woman at the information desk knew nothing about the statue. Eventually, D'Anna said, he was told that the bronze had been off public display for the last six years during the Getty Villa's renovation.

"If you're not showing it, give it to us for six years and we'll show it!" D'Anna said over dinner in Fano. "At least lend it to us! It's better than nothing."

The feeling is not unique to Fano.

"In an enfeebled way, what is true of Fano is true of Italy," said Italian Minister of Culture Rocco Buttiglioni, who has made it a personal mission to repatriate the Getty Bronze. "He may be happy to visit the United States, but sooner or later he will feel nostalgia for his real home, and his real home is Italy."

The Getty, and its many American supporters, thinks otherwise.

When, in March 1989, Italian authorities requested that the bronze be returned, Getty Museum director John Walsh replied that the request was an "unwelcome surprise." The statue has "little possibility of being related to Italian cultural heritage," he wrote, and only a "tenuous relation" to Italy's patrimony.

When Italy renewed its demand in 1996, Getty antiquities curator Marion True said it was "not realistic" for Italy to think the bronze would be returned, noting that the statute of limitations for a claim had expired.

In February, the bronze reappeared publicly when the Getty Villa reopened. An afternoon at the museum suggests that Angelenos have come to feel that, after three decades here, the Getty Bronze is now part of their own cultural heritage.

Sam and Harriett Trueblood stood transfixed in the room dedicated to the bronze, admiring how the athlete's distant gaze appears to ponder what his victory will mean for the future.

"It would break our hearts to see these things leave here," said Sam, 81, motioning to the bronze. "We've come to see it many times. This is the most important thing for us to see."

"His beauty lies in the energy he brings out in people," said Tobey Wheeler, a Getty security guard standing nearby. "It's what it inspires more than what it is."

As the Villa was celebrating its grand opening, Getty officials were meeting with Italian authorities around a large wooden table in the Italian Cultural Ministry. The statue is one of 52 Getty objects that Italy wants returned, part of an expanding debate about the ownership of cultural objects.

The Met recently agreed to return the Euphronios krater and 20 other artifacts to Italy. Similar demands against American museums have recently come from Greece, Peru and Egypt.

Behind the legalisms lies something more profound: the mysterious relationship that a beautiful piece of art can forge with the people who come into contact with it.

"The people of Fano, although they never had the piece, they believe they have a stake in it," said Walsh, now retired. "They're in love with an ideal, an idea that they're somehow personally connected to this pure and wonderful expression of human potential."

"The motive for people in an obscure corner of Italy is to make a connection with greatness," he said. "You could say the same of us."

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Hidden treasure

1964: Italian fishermen find the statue and sell it for \$5,600; it soon disappears.

1971: It resurfaces in London and is later painstakingly restored.

1977: Getty Museum trustees vote to pay \$3.98 million for the bronze.

1989: Italian authorities initiate their efforts to get the bronze back from the Getty.

2006: The bronze is a star in the

rollout of the newly renovated Getty Villa.

Descriptors: ARTIFACTS; STATUES; ITALY; J PAUL GETTY MUSEUM; FEUDS

NOTE: Photos are uncropped archival versions and may differ from published versions.
[Information on missing images.](#)



GRAPHIC: Map:Ancient traveler
ID NUMBER:20060511iz3anxnc
CREDIT: Los Angeles Times



PHOTO: MYSTERY: Some believe this statue may be by the Greek master Lysippos. It could be the only remaining example of his 1,500 works.
ID NUMBER:20060511iz2i2onc
PHOTOGRAPHER: J. Paul Getty Museum



PHOTO: GOAL: Giancarlo D'Anna, a 51-year-old resident of Fano, Italy, calls the bronze "a symbol of getting something back from the sea, which has taken so much from us."
ID NUMBER:20060511iz2mpgnc



PHOTO: MEMORIES: Igli Rosato in Fano, home of the trawler that snagged the statue in the Adriatic in 1964. When the work was first sold, his share of the take was \$130.
ID NUMBER:20060511iz2i31nc
PHOTOGRAPHER: Photographs by Livia Borghese For The Times



PHOTO: (no caption)
ID NUMBER:20060511iz2i2anc
PHOTOGRAPHER: J. Paul Getty Museum



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