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A TIMES INVESTIGATION

The Getty's troubled goddess

*** Evidence mounts that the centerpiece of its antiquities collection, acquired despite several warnings, was looted.**

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By Ralph Frammolino and Jason Felch, Times Staff Writers

Liberated from its shipping crates, the ancient statue drew a crowd of employees when it arrived in December 1987 at the J. Paul Getty Museum's antiquities conservation lab.

The 7 1/2 -foot figure had a placid marble face and delicately carved limestone gown. It was thought to depict Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. Some who came to see it believed that the sculpture would become the greatest piece in the museum's antiquities collection.

One man, however, saw trouble.

Luis Monreal, director of the Getty Conservation Institute, saw signs that the object had been looted. There was dirt in the folds of the gown, and the torso had what appeared to be new fractures, suggesting that the statue had been recently unearthed and broken apart for easy smuggling.

"Any museum professional looking at an archeological piece in those conditions had to suspect it came from an illicit origin," Monreal recalled in a recent interview.

He said he warned the museum's director not to buy the statue and asked him to test the pollen in the dirt, which might indicate where the work had been found. The test was never done.

Today, the 2,400-year-old Aphrodite, the best-known work in the Getty's antiquities collection, is at the center of a showdown with Italy over looted ancient artworks.

Since buying it in 1988 for a Getty ancient-art record of \$18 million, the museum has defended the statue's legality, relying on the dealer's assertion that it came from a Swiss collector. That collector has said it had been in his family since 1939, the year it became unlawful to excavate and export antiquities from Italy without government permission.

To claim the object, Italian officials would have to establish that the statue had been found in their country and removed sometime after 1939, something the Getty says the officials have never convincingly done.

A Times investigation has found new information that undermines the statue's official history, bolsters claims that it was illicitly excavated in Sicily and shows that the museum bought the Aphrodite despite repeated warnings that it had been looted.

Members of the Swiss collector's family recently told The Times that they had never seen or heard of the Aphrodite before its purchase by the Getty attracted widespread publicity.

Two Italians have said they saw parts of the Aphrodite in Sicily in the late 1970s, decades after it became illegal in Italy to remove antiquities without government permission.

Their accounts also suggest that the goddess now on view at the Getty Villa in Pacific Palisades could be a recent composite -- a possibility the museum's own experts wrestled with soon after the statue arrived.

Today, the Getty has conceded doubts about the statue's origins. The Aphrodite, which once promised to set

the Getty's collection apart, has become an icon of the museum's troubled past.

The goddess surfaces

Marion True, the Getty's antiquities curator at the time, says she first saw the Aphrodite in an art dealer's London warehouse in 1986.

The goddess was a rare example of a relatively intact cult statue, a larger-than-life representation of a deity that once stood in a Greek sanctuary.

The statue combined a marble head, arm and foot with a limestone body. Such "acroliths" have been found in the ruins of Greek colonies in Sicily, the southern Italian mainland and occasionally North Africa, where marble was scarce. True later wrote that the artwork was one of the few surviving monumental sculptures from the 5th century BC -- the pinnacle of Greek culture.

"The proposed statue of Aphrodite would not only become the single greatest piece of ancient art in our collection; it would be the greatest piece of classical sculpture in this country and any country outside of Greece and Great Britain," True wrote in her report to the board.

The statue had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, at an opportune moment.

True had just taken over the antiquities department, with a mandate to build the museum's collection by buying the best on the market. When she saw the statue in the London warehouse of Robin Symes, then considered the world's leading antiquities dealer, she had little doubt it was authentic and had been created on the southern Italian mainland or in Sicily.

As for whether the statue had been legally excavated and exported, True and other Getty officials relied on the word of Symes. The dealer said he had good legal title and had purchased it from the collection of an unnamed "supermarket magnate" in Switzerland.

During negotiations over the statue, True received an anonymous note warning her not to buy it because it had been illegally removed from Italy, possibly Sicily, according to the testimony of Swiss dealer Freida Tchakos Nussberger in an unrelated looting case.

Nussberger said she learned of the warning from Symes and his partner, who were her friends. True's attorney said in a statement to The Times that the curator never got such a note.

True asked several outside experts to issue opinions on the statue's significance and authenticity.

One of them, Nikolas Yalouris, former director general of the Greek Archeological Service, said in an interview that he and a colleague who examined the sculpture "had the impression it had been quite recently found."

True assured the Greek experts that the statue was "quite legal," Yalouris said.

She also showed photos to American archeologist Iris Love, who has dug at prominent sites around the Mediterranean.

"I said, 'Do not touch this!' This was really dangerous," Love recalled recently. "I said, 'I beg you, don't buy it. You will only have troubles and problems.'"

True's attorney said neither Yalouris nor his colleague "expressed any concern." The attorney also disputed Love's account, saying the archeologist never warned True against acquiring the Aphrodite.

Getty policy debate

In August 1987, the Getty had an Italian law firm send photos of the Aphrodite to the Italian Ministry of Culture, saying "an important foreign institution" was interested in buying the statue and requesting information about its authenticity and origins.

Meanwhile, the Getty's top officials were debating whether to continue buying antiquities they acknowledged were probably looted. If they purchased them, at least the objects would be available to the public and scholars, they reasoned. "Are we willing to buy stolen property for some higher aim?" Harold Williams, the Getty's chief

executive at the time, asked at a September meeting with the museum's then-director John Walsh, True and a Getty attorney.

The result, according to Walsh's handwritten notes of the meeting, was an acquisition policy that allowed them to continue buying suspect antiquities and put the burden of proving that an object was illicit on foreign governments.

That November, Italy notified the Getty's Italian attorneys that it had no information about the Aphrodite. Three weeks later, Symes agreed to lend the Getty the statue and had it boxed and loaded onto a Pan American flight from London's Heathrow Airport to LAX.

The 1,300-pound delivery arrived in mid-December. Monreal, the Getty's conservation chief at the time, said he saw the Aphrodite within a week.

Besides the dirt and recent breaks, he said, the statue had no documented ownership history and was completely unknown to experts in the field -- more signs it was a recent find.

"You don't have to be a genius to know what this means," said Monreal, now general manager of the Geneva-based Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

After his request for a pollen test went unheeded, Monreal put his broader concerns about the Aphrodite into a memo to Walsh and Williams.

In a statement to The Times, Walsh, who left the Getty in 2000, did not address the pollen test or the memo but said, "I believe we performed every test that the museum's conservators ... thought might possibly be informative."

Williams, who retired in 1998, said in a recent statement that Monreal often sent "alarmist notes" and that Walsh's response about the Aphrodite was "appropriate."

Others had reservations similar to Monreal's but said their concerns weren't serious enough to deter the museum from acquiring the statue.

"American museums and European museums were not digging too deep, not asking too many questions," said Frank Preusser, a former Getty conservation scientist who studied the Aphrodite when it arrived in California. "It was simply the opportunity of getting another super object into the collection."

A history of rejection

Unknown to True, the statue had been offered to several other dealers before Symes bought it. All of them turned it down.

Torkom Demirjian, a New York dealer, said he saw photos of the statue during a dinner in Paris in the early 1980s, but he couldn't recall who offered it. The asking price was \$1.5 million.

One dealer contacted Thomas Hoving, the former director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, who had become the muckraking editor of *Connoisseur* magazine.

The dealer, whom Hoving agreed not to name in print, said the statue had been found at Morgantina, an archeological site in Sicily, and offered to him by a Sicilian for \$1.5 million. Hoving later reported in *Connoisseur* that the Sicilian was Orazio Di Simone.

A report from Interpol's Paris office also named Di Simone as someone who had been shopping the Aphrodite around for up to \$2 million.

Interviews and Italian police records describe Di Simone as a forger of ancient coins and an antiquities smuggler from the Sicilian city of Gela, less than an hour's drive from Morgantina. He has been arrested several times on related charges but never convicted.

Hoving called Walsh and told him what his magazine had learned. The call prompted True to send photographs of the statue to Malcolm Bell III, a University of Virginia archeologist.

Bell had spent years excavating the ruins at Morgantina, a Greek city-state founded in the 5th century BC that prospered until it was sacked in 211 BC by Romans.

"Recently a rumor has reached us that [the Aphrodite] may have come from Aidone [a nearby town] or Morgantina," True wrote in a letter that accompanied the photos. "Although we do not wish to be at the mercy of every journalist's unfounded attack, we also do not wish to pursue the acquisition in obvious disregard for the laws of Italy."

Bell replied that he knew that several important objects had been found at Morgantina by looters, known locally as clandestini.

"I would therefore not rule out a possible provenance for the piece at Morgantina," he wrote, using the technical word for an object's history. "At the same time I can say that, at the time of writing, I know of no reason to argue that it was found at Morgantina."

Bell also gave copies of the photographs to Graziela Fiorentini, the Italian government's local archeological director, who recalled reports that clandestini had spirited a large statue out of Morgantina in 1979.

She asked the art squad of the Carabinieri, the Italian national police, to investigate and notified the Getty of the inquiry.

Her warning arrived July 22, 1988 -- the same day Williams signed paperwork finalizing the purchase for \$18 million, more than the museum had ever paid for a work of ancient art or has since.

Brouhaha over acquisition

The Getty announced the acquisition less than a week later. The revelation provoked awe, then controversy as newspapers reported the Italian investigation into whether the Aphrodite had been looted.

One of investigators' key sources was Giuseppe Mascara, the self-described boss of Morgantina's clandestini. Mascara confirmed what other tomb raiders had reported: that a large stone statue was found at the site in the late 1970s, according to Fausto Guarnieri, the lead Carabinieri investigator.

Shown a photo of the Aphrodite, Mascara said it was the same statue he had seen, without the head, in a looter's house in Gela, said Guarnieri, who is retired.

Mascara, 78, who lives near Milan, declined to comment through family members, who said he was recovering from a recent stroke. They referred The Times to journalist Enzo Basso, to whom Mascara had given a more detailed account about the Aphrodite in 1989 for La Repubblica, a newspaper.

Mascara told Basso that he had seen the statue's body in the Gela house. He said the looters told him it had been found in Morgantina, broken into three pieces for easier handling and driven across the Swiss border in the back of a Fiat truck filled with carrots.

As for the head, Mascara said it had been found at the same time as two other marble heads in Morgantina. Mascara said he heard that Di Simone had joined it with the statue's body in Switzerland.

Parts of Mascara's account echo one given by Sicilian art collector Vincenzo Cammarata, who in a recent interview told The Times that the Aphrodite's head was one of three marble heads he had been offered in the late 1970s by local tomb raiders.

"The head was found in the 1970s with the other acrolithic heads. The three heads were found by the Campanella brothers," Cammarata said, referring to two aging shepherds who still live next to the archeological site. "I can tell you this because they showed me the things."

He said he later heard that the Campanella brothers had sold the heads to middlemen who sold them to Di Simone.

Shown a photo of the Aphrodite's head, he identified it as one of the three heads he had seen years earlier. "That's the one," he said. "I'm sure of it."

His account matched what he told American archeologist Ross Holloway of Brown University in 1983, before the

Aphrodite's discovery had been published.

"Cammarata told me he'd seen in Gela three heads: one big one -- a very beautiful 5th century marble head -- and two little ones," said Holloway, who had the conversation with Cammarata at a conference in Naples.

Cammarata's story about the heads has changed over the years. In 1988, he testified about seeing only two heads. A day after his interview with The Times, he said he was no longer sure whether he had seen two heads or three.

Records show that Cammarata has been accused of trafficking in looted art several times but never convicted.

One of the Campanella brothers declined to comment on the statue. "Here, if you talk, they shut your mouth and cut your throat," he said.

Based on the Carabinieri's inquiry, the Campanella brothers and Di Simone were accused of looting and smuggling the Aphrodite but the charges were eventually dropped in 1992 for lack of proof.

But Italian authorities have recently used the statements of Mascara and Cammarata, along with other evidence, to persuade the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and a New York collector to voluntarily return two other groups of artifacts believed to have been looted from Morgantina.

If Mascara's and Cammarata's accounts are true, the Aphrodite's head and body were found in separate excavations, suggesting that the statue could be a composite -- put together by smugglers -- of two ancient artworks.

The museum's experts also had a lengthy debate over whether the body and the head belonged together, noting that the head appeared to be of slightly smaller proportion and did not fit snugly onto the limestone torso.

"It is difficult to determine if this head was actually part of the original composition," True wrote in her 1988 curator's report to the Getty board. She added that studies indicated the pieces had been found together and theorized the statue may have been assembled in ancient times from different artworks.

At the time, True was not aware of Cammarata's and Mascara's accounts.

Suspicious coincidence

The Italian inquiry into the Aphrodite stalled until 1994, when investigators discovered that they had overlooked a receipt identifying the statue's previous owner.

Dated March 1986, the receipt showed that Symes had purchased the Aphrodite for \$400,000 from a Swiss citizen, who in the same document provided the only known written ownership history for the world-class antiquity.

"I am the sole owner of this statue which has belonged to my family since 1939," wrote Renzo Canavesi, who ran a tobacco shop and money exchange outlet in Chiasso, just across from Italy's northern border.

His assertion, hand-printed on stationery from his money exchange, immediately aroused suspicions.

Swiss collections were a frequent cover story in the antiquities trade, and his reference to 1939 seemed too convenient, since that was the year Italy passed the law prohibiting the unauthorized removal of antiquities from Italian soil.

The receipt gave the Carabinieri enough reason to investigate Canavesi, but Italy's statute of limitations left them just two years to build a trafficking case and win a conviction. When an Italian judge flew to Switzerland to question Canavesi, the shopkeeper refused to say anything.

As it turned out, Canavesi was willing to talk about the statue -- with the Getty. In 1996, he sent a letter to Williams, the Getty chief executive, asking for a meeting to discuss the statue. He included photos of the Aphrodite in pieces and offered to provide missing fragments.

True was suspicious of Canavesi's motives, knowing some dealers held back fragments to wring high prices from museums eager to complete an object.

"If Canavesi provided additional 'information' about the statue's provenance, how was the Getty going to confirm or disprove the information?" True reasoned, according to a recent statement she gave to an Italian prosecutor.

She turned down his offer.

The case against Canavesi went to trial in 2001. After a 33-minute hearing, a Sicilian judge ruled that Canavesi knew the statue was illicit, because he sold it for far less than it was worth and gave an official story that "perfectly coincides" with the passage of Italy's patrimony law.

Canavesi was convicted of trafficking the statue, but his two-year prison sentence was later overturned because the statute of limitations had expired.

Canavesi, 85, declined to comment for this article. "It's too delicate of an issue," he called down from the second-floor balcony of his home in Sagno, a village in the foothills of the Alps.

His relatives, however, questioned his claim that the Aphrodite had been in their family.

"I never heard of it," said his brother, Ivo Canavesi, 71. Shown a picture of the statue and a copy of the receipt, he laughed: "Who knows? Maybe it was in the cellar and no one spoke of it."

Canavesi's niece, Cinzia, also chuckled at the idea.

"If there had been an expensive statue in my family, I wouldn't be working here right now," she said from behind the counter of Canavesi's old tobacco shop, which she now owns. "I'd be home with my children."

A cultural tug of war

Getty officials have occasionally said there is nothing to prove that the statue was found in Italy, citing the fact that acrolithic Greek sculptures have also been found in North Africa. In 1997, Italian officials tried to demonstrate scientifically that the statue came from the Sicilian site of Morgantina, as they had long believed.

Officials received a sample of the statue's limestone from the Getty in 1997, hoping that tiny fossils in the stone could be used as a geological fingerprint.

Geologists at Sicily's University of Palermo found a close correspondence between the Aphrodite's limestone and that of a statue found in Morgantina in the 1950s. Further studies matched the Aphrodite's limestone to a geological formation that surfaces near Ragusa, about 50 miles south of Morgantina.

The Getty conducted its own study of quarries in Greece, North Africa and six places on the Italian mainland and Sicily. The results found that the statue's limestone was closest to the Sicilian sample.

For Italy, this was powerful confirmation that the statue had come from near Morgantina.

But according to an internal Getty review, True considered the Getty's limestone tests an exercise to "keep the Carabinieri happy we were doing something." In a recent statement, her attorney said that "any limestone analysis was done for bona fide scientific reasons."

Neither Canavesi's legal case nor the limestone studies convinced the Getty to return the statue.

The museum's behavior was a sore point for Paolo Ferri, a Roman prosecutor who had been building a criminal case against True for allegedly trafficking in looted art.

His evidence on the Aphrodite was not nearly as strong as what he had gathered on dozens of lesser-known antiquities at the Getty. Yet he decided to include the statue in his case against True to give the case greater impact.

"It was a symbol of the Getty's past looting," the prosecutor said.

During his investigation, Ferri had developed additional evidence that pointed back to Di Simone, who had relocated to Switzerland in 1985.

Then, in 2002, Di Simone's name surfaced in an unrelated case, in which he was accused of being the

mastermind of a network of looters in southern Italy. In a bid for leniency, he offered to lead Italian officials to fragments of the Aphrodite.

In a recent interview at his attorney's office in Rome, Di Simone denied smuggling the statue. He said he saw "two little pieces" from what he believed was the Aphrodite's nose about 15 years ago at the home of a Swiss friend: Renzo Canavesi.

Di Simone's case is pending, and authorities have yet to take him up on his offer to recover the Aphrodite's nose.

Ferri, who charged True in 2005 with trafficking in looted art, has argued in the ongoing trial that Canavesi posed as a frontman for Di Simone, who the prosecutor says smuggled the Aphrodite out of Sicily and sold it to Symes.

Starting to wobble

Earlier this year, a decade after the museum refused to meet with Canavesi, the Getty hired private investigators to interview him in Switzerland. He stood by his story that it had been in his family for decades.

This summer, the investigators presented their findings to the Getty Board of Trustees. The artistic and scientific evidence overwhelmingly indicated that the object had come from Sicily, they concluded. The probe also concluded that the official story of the Aphrodite's ownership history was no longer credible. The Getty would not elaborate.

One Getty trustee, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the briefing was confidential, said the board was told that "dangerous people" had been involved with the statue. Getty investigators never interviewed Di Simone, who they were told had ties to the Mafia. Through his attorney, Di Simone denied the claim.

The trustee said he concluded that the Aphrodite had been illegally excavated, although precisely where from was still unclear.

Even before that report, the Getty's hard-line position on the Aphrodite had been softening.

In the fall of 2005, the Getty's then-chief executive, Barry Munitz, expressed a willingness to return the statue to Sicilian cultural officials, who claimed the authority to negotiate without Rome's approval. The secret negotiations were near an agreement when Munitz was forced out in February, according to Flavia Zisa, Sicily's envoy and a consultant to the Getty.

In November, the Getty offered to transfer full title for the Aphrodite to cultural officials in Rome -- as long as the object stayed in California during a joint study of the statue. The Italians rejected the offer. The Getty broke off talks.

The Getty will now embark upon its own study of the statue and then decide its fate.

"The idea is to cover anything that might be unforeseen," said Louise Bryson, chairwoman of the Getty board. "The intent is to give it back, give it back totally and physically."

If that happens, a spokesman said, the museum will lose its investment.

As part of the study, the Getty will do what Monreal once urged and test the pollen in the statue's soil.

It's been sitting in a row of glass vials in the museum's conservation laboratory for 19 years.

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About this story

Ralph Frammolino and Jason Felch spent four months unraveling the history of the Aphrodite. They conducted

more than 70 interviews; reviewed more than a thousand pages of internal Getty records, Italian investigative files and other documents; and traveled to Rome; Milan, Italy; Sicily; Athens; and Switzerland. Times special correspondents Livia Borghese in Rome and Nikolas Zirganos in Athens contributed to this report.

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The cast of characters

People who played major roles in the story of the J. Paul Getty Museum's Aphrodite.

Marion True -- Former Getty antiquities director who said she first saw the Aphrodite in 1986. She said the statue would become "the single greatest piece of classical art in our collection." She is on trial in Rome for trafficking in looted art.

Robin Symes -- London dealer who sold the Aphrodite, assuring the Getty that it had come from a Swiss collector.

Luis Monreal -- Former Getty executive who saw the statue soon after it arrived at the museum and warned it was likely looted. His advice to test pollen on the artwork went unheeded.

Iris Love -- American archeologist who told True not to buy the statue because it was "really dangerous."

Thomas Hoving -- Arts journalist who alerted the Getty to allegations that the Aphrodite had been looted from the ruins of the ancient Greek city-state of Morgantina in Sicily.

Malcolm Bell III -- Archeologist in charge of the U.S. dig at Morgantina who told the Getty he couldn't say whether the Aphrodite was found there.

Graziela Fiorentini -- Italian archeological official who informed the Getty the Aphrodite was under investigation by Italian art police. Her warning arrived the same day the museum completed the purchase.

Giuseppe Mascara -- Self-described former boss of Morgantina tomb-raiders who said he saw the body of the Aphrodite -- without the head -- soon after it was dug up in the late 1970s.

Vincenzo Cammarata -- Sicilian art collector who identified the head of the Aphrodite as one of three marble pieces he saw in a city near Morgantina in the late 1970s. He later said he could not be sure if he had seen two or three heads.

Paolo Ferri -- Roman prosecutor who charged Marion True with trafficking in the Aphrodite and other Getty antiquities. His criminal charges form the basis for Italy's demand that the statue be returned.

Orazio Di Simone -- The alleged smuggler of the Aphrodite, he recently offered to lead authorities to fragments of it.

Renzo Canavesi -- Swiss tobacco shop owner who signed a receipt saying his family had owned the Aphrodite from 1939 until 1986. Canavesi's relatives contradict his claim.

Descriptors: J PAUL GETTY MUSEUM; PROVENANCE; STATUES; LOOTING

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

[Information on missing images.](#)

GRAPHIC: Who owns Aphrodite?
ID NUMBER:20070103jba76cnc
CREDIT: Los Angeles Times



PHOTO: ANCIENT LAND: Piazza Armerina, Sicily, is a village near the ruins of the Greek city-state of Morgantina, a rich site from which some experts believe the Getty Villa's \$18-million Aphrodite was looted.

ID NUMBER:20070103jajgi7nc

PHOTOGRAPHER: Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times



PHOTO: CONTRASTS: Boys play in the Piazza San Domenico in Palermo, Sicily. Rich in history but crippled by corruption and a weak economy, Sicily has been ravaged by looters.

ID NUMBER:20070103jajgnbnc

PHOTOGRAPHER: Photographs by Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times



PHOTO: EXPERT: American archeologist Malcolm Bell, shown at Morgantina, has been lead excavator there since 1980. He is skeptical that the statue was looted from the site.

ID NUMBER:20070103jajglznc

PHOTOGRAPHER: Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times



PHOTO: UNBURIED TREASURE: A looted old grave near Castelvetrano, Sicily, where remnants of ancient Greek settlements dot the land, providing fodder for looters.

ID NUMBER:20070103jajgkdnc

PHOTOGRAPHER: Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times



PHOTO: PIECE OF THE PUZZLE: Sicilian art collector Vincenzo Cammarata, at his home in Enna, told The Times that the Aphrodite's head was one of three marble heads he was offered in the late 1970s by local tomb raiders. He later said he was no longer sure if there were two heads or three. His account and others suggest that the statute could be a modern composite cobbled together by smugglers from separate works.

ID NUMBER:20070103jajgknc

PHOTOGRAPHER: Photographs by Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times



PHOTO: TARNISHED PAST? The Getty paid \$18 million for this Aphrodite in 1988, but questions persist about whether it was illegally excavated and sold to the museum.
ID NUMBER:20070103jajghunc
PHOTOGRAPHER: Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times



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[A08](#)



[A09](#)

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