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**Trial is over for ex-Getty curator**

**\* Judges say statute of limitations has expired in the antiquities trafficking case.**

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LOS ANGELES AND ROME -- The trial of former Getty Museum antiquities curator Marion True ended in a bureaucratic whimper Wednesday in Rome when a three-judge panel halted the proceedings, ruling that the statute of limitations had expired on criminal charges that she had conspired to traffic in looted art.

The development is an ambiguous end to a legal saga that has had a profound effect on American museums.

When True was charged by an Italian prosecutor in 2005, it sent shock waves through the art world and was the first time an American museum official had been criminally charged by a foreign government.

The case cast into public view a long history of questionable collecting practices at American museums, which for decades bought ancient art with little regard for its legal status or origins.

A Times investigation found in 2005 that curators at the Getty and other museums often did business with a network of shady middlemen and turned a blind eye to evidence the objects had been recently excavated and smuggled out of their countries of origin.

The Getty, with its enormous wealth and relatively late entry in the art market, was more aggressive than most in its acquisitions. The result was a rise in demand for ancient Greek and Roman art that many archaeologists believe contributed to the mass destruction of archaeological sites across the Mediterranean.

Those practices changed quickly after True's indictment. American museums returned more than 100 prized antiquities to Italy and Greece, tacitly acknowledging that they were the product of illicit excavations. And they adopted policies that limit their purchases to objects with a clear ownership history.

True was a vehicle for those changes and, at the same time, the sole person to be charged in a case the prosecutor has acknowledged was targeting the practices of the entire American museum community.

The three-judge panel led by Judge Gustavo Barbalinardo will not rule on the extensive criminal allegations made by prosecutors during the trial's five years of intermittent hearings. "The True trial ends here," Barbalinardo said.

True's team of high-powered Italian attorneys, paid for by the Getty, did not have an opportunity to present her defense. True has spoken to journalists only once since her indictment, asserting her innocence to a reporter for the New Yorker. In an interview outside the courtroom, one of her attorneys, Francesco Isolabella, said his client was innocent and a victim of "a climate of hostility toward American museums."

"The life of Marion True was ruined by this trial," Isolabella said. "I'm happy that this suffering is over."

Ron Hartwig, vice president of communications for the J. Paul Getty Trust, said Wednesday, "We are pleased charges against Marion True have been dismissed and we wish her the very best as this long and difficult ordeal comes to a close."

True's co-defendant Giacomo Medici, an Italian antiquities dealer, was convicted in 2004 on related charges, a decision upheld on appeal. Her other co-defendant, American dealer Robert Hecht, remains on trial as the head of the alleged conspiracy. The statute of limitations for his charges will expire in July.

Observers said the trial has succeeded in changing American practices and signals the end of an era of unbridled American collecting.

Over the five years that her trial spanned, several of America's most prominent museums -- the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and others -- forged settlements with Italian and Greek authorities, returning more than 100 looted antiquities in exchange for loans and cultural cooperation.

In 2007, the Getty agreed to return 40 objects to Italy, including its heralded statue of Aphrodite, and led the reform effort by adopting one of the strictest acquisition policies in the country. It requires that ancient art considered by the museum have a clear ownership history placing it in the United States in 1970, the year of an international treaty on the protection of cultural property. The association of art museum directors followed suit not long after, marking a dramatic change in the collecting practices of America's leading museums.

On a personal level for True, the conclusion of the trial is far less clear. Soon after her 2005 indictment, The Times revealed that True had accepted personal loans from one of the museum's antiquities dealers and two private collectors who had just sold their collections to the Getty. True was asked to resign, but the Getty continued to pay for her legal defense.

Her trial promised to resolve the two conflicting images of her: the corrupt curator portrayed by the prosecutor and the courageous reformer described by her defense team. In the end, the case ended with no finding of fact by the judges.

"It's a shame the public didn't get a chance to find out if these accusations were true or merely a political maneuver," said Stephen Urice, an expert in cultural property law at the University of Miami.

In interviews with The Times, prosecutor Paolo Ferri has said his goal was not to punish True but to change the collecting practices of American museums. (Ferri retired this year and was replaced by another state prosecutor.)

Wednesday's ruling came in response to a request from True's attorneys to dismiss the case in light of the time elapsed since 2002, when the alleged conspiracy between True, Hecht and Medici ended. The judges agreed, finding that the statute of limitations for the alleged crimes expired in July.

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**Descriptors:** TRUE, MARION; ITALY; TRIALS; J PAUL GETTY MUSEUM; STOLEN PROPERTY; STATUTE OF LIMITATIONS; ANTIQUES

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PHOTO: IN ROME: Former curator Marion True, pictured in 2005. One of her attorneys said she was a victim of a "climate of hostility toward American museums."

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