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Getty Will Return 2 Greek Artifacts

*** Greece applauds the move. But two items of greater significance and value remain in dispute**

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By Jason Felch and Ralph Frammolino, Times Staff Writers

The J. Paul Getty Trust agreed Monday to return two antiquities that Greek authorities say were taken illegally from their country.

The move to repatriate a 4th century BC inscribed tombstone and a 5th century BC marble relief, both on display at the Getty Villa, comes two months after museum director Michael Brand visited Athens and promised to address a decade-old request by the Greek government for the return of four disputed objects in the Getty's collection.

Monday's announcement, made in a joint statement released by the museum and Greek officials, marks an important step in addressing Greece's claim, but leaves unresolved the fate of the other two artifacts, which are of greater archeological significance and value.

A Greek law enforcement source said Monday that a criminal investigation of the Getty's acquisition of one of them, a gold funerary wreath, could lead to criminal charges in the coming weeks. Targets could include Marion True, the Getty's former antiquities curator who recommended acquiring the artifact, as well as board members who approved the acquisition, the source said. True is being tried in Italy on charges of conspiracy to traffic in looted art.

Getty spokesman Ron Hartwig dismissed as speculation the possibility of criminal charges being filed in Greece.

"We don't think the Greek government -- and certainly not the Getty -- would find it productive to do anything that would dampen the positive relationship we've begun to build," he said.

But as in Italy, police and prosecutors in Greece are independent of the Cultural Ministry officials with whom the Getty has been negotiating.

In the spring, agents twice raided True's vacation home on the island of Paros, seizing several unregistered antiquities of little value. Greek authorities said they were still weighing whether to charge the curator for possession of the artifacts.

In April, agents also raided an Athens residence and the former Greek island summer home of London antiquities dealer Robin Symes, a major supplier to the Getty. In that search, about 300 unregistered antiquities were confiscated -- reportedly the largest seizure in recent Greek history.

The raid also netted photos of dozens more objects handled by Symes, including several now at the Getty, Greek law enforcement sources said Monday. Those at the Getty may be added to the list of objects the Greeks want from the museum.

A similar seizure of photographs from a Geneva warehouse in 1995 launched Italian authorities on a decade-long investigation of the illicit antiquities trade and ultimately led to the criminal charges against True in Rome. Paolo Ferri, the prosecutor in True's trial, said Monday he will travel to Athens next week to exchange evidence with Greek investigators.

Among the evidence Italy has already shared with Greece is a photograph of a gold funerary wreath very similar

to the one at the Getty, records show. The photo was sent to a Swiss dealer targeted by the Italians, and came in an envelope with a return address in Thessaloniki, Greece, not far from the site of ancient Macedonia, where the Getty's funerary wreath is believed to have come from.

Italian authorities believe that the Swiss dealer turned down the object before it was offered to True.

The curator first viewed the wreath in 1992, when she met two men who showed her the 2,500-year-old piece in a Zurich bank vault, according to internal Getty documents. True walked away when she determined that one of the men was an "impostor" and wrote in a letter that the wreath was "too dangerous for [the Getty] to be involved with," the documents show.

Four months later, however, True notified an intermediary in the deal that she had changed her mind and would purchase the artifact.

Prior to the purchase, the Getty sent a letter informing the Greek Culture Ministry that the Getty intended to buy the wreath and two other objects, the tombstone that the museum has agreed to return and a partial statue of a young woman, or "kore," that is still in dispute. At the time of the purchase, the museum asked for any information that would put the works' provenance in doubt.

Culture officials said they immediately replied that the wreath and kore were almost certainly looted because such objects were rarely found outside of Greece, which claims legal ownership of all antiquities found in the country after the nation's independence in 1830. Officials asked for more information on the tombstone, which contained distinctive writing from Boeotia, a region of Greece.

Despite the warnings, the Getty went ahead with the purchase of the objects, paying \$5.2 million for the three, which are now considered masterpieces of the Getty's collection.

In 1996, the Greek government made its first formal request for the return of the tombstone, the kore, the wreath and a votive relief purchased by J. Paul Getty in 1955, which had since been identified as stolen from a storage room at the archeological site of Thassos.

True responded for the museum by saying there was insufficient evidence of looting, records show. The Greeks renewed the request in early 2005 and then announced a criminal investigation.

Negotiations over the two remaining objects -- the funerary wreath and the kore -- could be more complicated. Both are important pieces in the Getty collection and are subject to ongoing criminal investigations by Italian and Greek prosecutors.

The joint statement Monday said Greece and the Getty will continue conversations about the two objects and hope to reach a cooperative agreement by the end of August. Such an agreement is likely to include long-term loans of Greek antiquities to the Getty, following the model of Italian agreements forged during the last year over disputed artifacts.

"The Greeks have been very generous with the range of possibilities they are offering," Brand said in a statement from Canberra, Australia, where he is vacationing with his family.

Getty spokesman Ron Hartwig would not say what led the Getty to return the tombstone and votive relief after 10 years. He said the board voted unanimously June 12 to send them back after "an internal scholarly review ... concluded it was appropriate."

"With the arrival of Michael Brand, one of his top priorities was to move negotiations forward with both the Greek and Italian governments," Hartwig said. "We're now moving quickly to resolve the dispute."

Greek Culture Minister Giorgo Voulgarakis said he was "extremely satisfied" with the decision and hoped it would be followed by similar moves by the Getty and other museums.

Last month, the Getty announced an agreement with Italian officials to return an unidentified number of major antiquities to Italian authorities. Neither side has divulged details of the agreement, and Italian authorities have disputed that a specific agreement was reached.

Special correspondent Nikolas Zirganos and the Associated Press contributed to this report.

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Back story

The J. Paul Getty Trust's agreement to return to Greece two artifacts from its collection comes just weeks after an agreement with the Italian government to return an unspecified number of major antiquities to that country. But other pieces from the Getty collection remain in dispute in both countries. Increasingly, the world's museums have found themselves at the center of a debate about the ethics of the antiquities trade. The negotiations in Italy and Greece also follow a period of turmoil at the Getty. Former chief executive Barry Munitz was forced out in February after allegations that he misused trust assets for personal benefit. The previous October, former curator Marion True, now facing charges in Italy that she conspired to traffic in looted antiquities, resigned from the trust after revelations that an antiquities dealer helped her secure a loan to purchase a vacation home in Greece.

Descriptors: J PAUL GETTY TRUST; GREECE; PROPERTY RIGHTS; ART

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

[Information on missing images.](#)



PHOTO: CARVED IN STONE: This 4th century BC tombstone, shown with a drawing of the incised decoration, is being returned to Greece.

ID NUMBER:20060711j26rs9nc

PHOTOGRAPHER: Greek Culture Ministry



PHOTO: REPATRIATION: This 5th century BC marble relief from the island of Thassos is one of the items that the Getty will send back to Greece. It was allegedly stolen from an excavation storeroom.

ID NUMBER:20060711j26rucnc

PHOTOGRAPHER: Greek Culture Ministry



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