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## Greek Officials Demand the Return of Getty Antiquities

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

ATHENS -- The J. Paul Getty Museum, embroiled in a fight with the Italian government over allegedly looted antiquities, now faces demands by the Greek government for the return of four objects authorities say were illegally removed from their country.

The Greeks have presented archeological evidence that they say proves the Greek origin of three objects the Getty purchased in 1993: a gold funerary wreath, an inscribed tombstone and a marble torso of a young woman.

The three artifacts, which date from about 400 BC, are ranked among the masterpieces of the Getty's antiquities collection. The fourth object that Greek officials are seeking to recover is an archaic votive relief bought in 1955 by J. Paul Getty himself.

The Greeks first lodged their claim nine years ago and formally renewed it in May through diplomatic channels. Officials here say that they informed the Getty before it purchased the funerary wreath and the marble torso that they almost certainly had been looted and smuggled out of Greece.

In renewing their demand, Greek officials acknowledge that they lack the kind of hard evidence that their Italian counterparts have used to launch a far-reaching criminal case aimed at stopping the international traffic in smuggled antiquities.

The story of the Getty's acquisition of the funerary wreath -- drawn from interviews and Greek, German and American law enforcement records -- provides a rare look inside the shadowy trade in antiquities.

The Getty's former chief antiquities curator, Marion True, acquired the wreath from a Swiss art dealer, Christoph Leon, for \$1.15 million. Leon guaranteed that it came from a private Swiss collection. But a German police investigation later determined that Leon had acted as an intermediary for a Yugoslav and two Greeks, who had shopped the wreath around Europe in a cardboard box.

True first viewed it in a Zurich bank vault but walked away after she realized the men she was dealing with were impostors, according to internal Getty documents obtained by The Times. She went ahead with the deal anyway six months later, Getty records show.

When the Getty paid for the wreath, it forwarded funds to a Swiss bank account controlled by Leon and his partners, records show.

In an unrelated case, True went to see a bronze statue that days later was seized by Greek authorities in a sting operation targeting Greek smugglers. Police records show the Greeks initiated the sting after they were told by an informant that the Getty was considering buying the object, which was taken illegally from the Ionian Sea.

True's attorney referred questions to Getty officials, who declined to comment. In the past, they have said that the museum never knowingly purchased looted art.

The Italian government is scheduled in November to resume its criminal prosecution of True on allegations that she conspired with a network of dealers to traffic in looted art.

True resigned this month after The Times raised questions about her purchase of a vacation home in the Greek Islands, financed with a \$400,000 loan that she obtained with help from one of the museum's main suppliers of ancient art. The Getty said True's conduct violated its conflict of interest policy.

After she became curator in 1986, True worked to build closer ties with Greek cultural officials, archeologists and members of the country's elite. But those efforts were undermined by the 1993 acquisitions, records show.

True was first offered the funerary wreath in 1992 for \$1.6 million by someone identified as Dr. Preis, a man she had never heard of.

Two months later, Preis sent True a cable saying Leon, a dealer she knew in Basel, Switzerland, would act as a middleman in negotiations. Preis arranged to show True the golden wreath in a Zurich bank.

What transpired at that Zurich meeting isn't clear. In a letter to True, Leon apologized for the "disaster" and the "misbehavior" of the two men who met her at the bank. True replied that "whoever was impersonating Dr. Preis" had done "tremendous damage to a great object."

"I hope you will find a possible buyer for it," True wrote, "but I am afraid that in our case it is something that is too dangerous for us to be involved with."

Subsequent investigations revealed more details. In 1994, Athansios Seliachas, a Greek citizen living in Germany, told German police that two Greeks and a Yugoslav, L.J. Kovacevic, had asked him to be an intermediary "because I was credible."

Seliachas said one of the men told him the wreath had come from Greece.

He said he referred the men to Leon, who offered about \$120,000 for it on the spot. When the smugglers rejected the offer, Seliachas said, he suggested they call True. He knew her name through his brother, an archeologist, he told German police.

Seliachas said he arranged for the men to have access to two friends' telephones to use in negotiating the deal. "Pries" later told True to contact him at the same numbers, records show.

Seliachas told German authorities that he heard Kovacevic talking to True on the phone "like they were good friends."

Leon said in an interview that the police reports were "in a minor fashion correct" and that he had discovered there was no Dr. Preis. German authorities came to the same conclusion, records show.

True, despite her earlier conclusion that the object was "too dangerous," notified Leon four months after viewing the wreath that the museum wanted to buy it for \$1.15 million.

The Getty sent an inquiry to the Greek government informing it of the museum's intent to purchase the wreath, the tombstone and the torso of the young woman and requesting any information about the origin of the objects that might cause the museum to reconsider.

In response, Greek authorities asked the Getty to identify the owner of the tombstone. The museum did not respond, Greek officials said, and the Greeks later concluded that the object had been looted.

Regarding the wreath and the statue, Greek officials said they lodged an immediate protest with the Getty, saying the objects were almost certainly looted.

European governments have become more aggressive in prosecuting antiquities smugglers over the last 20 years as new laws and court opinions have tightened restrictions on the sale, export and import of ancient objects. Artifacts that lack a documented ownership history are presumed to have been illegally excavated.

Despite the initial Greek protests, the Getty acquired the three artworks for a total of \$5.2 million.

In 1996, three years after the purchases, Yannis Tzedakis, then the director of antiquities for the Greek Ministry of Culture, made his government's first formal request for their return.

The inscribed tombstone could have come only from the region of Boeotia, based on the distinctive lettering, he wrote. The Getty paid \$750,000 for the object.

The marble torso of a young woman, Tzedakis wrote, was stylistically similar to those in ancient Athens and even today is rarely found outside of Greece. The Getty paid \$3.3 million for the statue.

The gold funerary wreath, he said, is similar to those made in ancient Macedonia, a part of modern Greece.

Tzedakis closed his request with a veiled threat, saying the Ministry of Culture would be "forced to follow legal procedures" if negotiations proved fruitless.

The fourth object sought by the Greeks, the votive relief bought by Getty in 1955, had earlier been identified in an archeological article as having been stolen from the Greek archeological site of Thasos.

Since the Greeks' original demand, additional information has surfaced about the origins of the objects.

Getty documents show the museum purchased the sculpted torso of the young woman from Robin Symes, a London dealer who has been implicated in the Italian criminal case against True.

In addition, Polaroid photographs of the sculpture were seized during a raid on the Geneva warehouse of a dealer who was convicted last year in the Italian investigation.

The Polaroid photos show antiquities encrusted with dirt and unrestored -- proof, the Italians say, that they had been excavated recently, therefore illegally.

After the sale of the funerary wreath, True's name came up again in a second police investigation. It grew out of the Greek art squad's surveillance of a network that smuggled looted items out of the country in container ships and vegetable trucks to the European antiquities market operating in Switzerland, Germany and Holland, officials said.

Waiting in those countries were Greek nationals who helped sell the objects. They worked through well-established vendors who would often launder looted objects by providing invented ownership histories, or provenance, to create the necessary cover required by museums and other high-end buyers, officials said.

In the mid-1990s, the squad tracked reports that an ancient bronze recovered from the Ionian Sea was working its way through the network. Repeated attempts to seize the statue as it moved through Europe had failed.

In May 1998, the art squad sent an undercover officer to Germany to participate in a sting aimed at recovering the bronze. In requesting money and a plane ticket for the officer, the art squad said speed was of the essence because True had flown to Germany to see the statue and might buy it.

"If you don't issue a ticket and give him the money, then there's a possibility ... this object is going to be bought by the curator of the Paul Getty Museum," the request said. "She is now in Germany to see the object."

Records show True arranged to see the bronze in Leon's apartment in Basel, in May 1998. It was unrestored, oxidized and barnacle-encrusted, police photos show.

Leon confirmed that True saw the piece but said her visit was "based on archeological interest" and that she never intended to buy it.

Days after True saw the object, the Greek art squad arrested Michail Kotsaridis, a Greek citizen, and three accomplices and retrieved the statue from the trunk of a car.

Kotsaridis and another man were convicted of smuggling the statue and are in prison, Greek authorities said.

The art squad passed information about the Getty's interest in the statue to the public prosecutor of Athens.

A July 1998 cable from the squad said that True and Leon had exchanged faxes about the deal and that Leon had demanded a \$1-million commission. The cable said the Getty was interested in buying the piece for \$6 million.

Three months after the smugglers' arrest, the FBI questioned True.

"Dr. True insisted that the Getty was not going to buy this object, but she wanted very much and was very interested to personally see it," according to an FBI report to Greek authorities. The report said True was "suspicious in regard to the provenance of the object."

Special correspondent Nikolas Zirganos contributed to this report.

**Descriptors:** J PAUL GETTY MUSEUM; GREECE; ART; STOLEN PROPERTY; MUSEUMS

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

[Information on missing images.](#)



**PHOTO: IONIAN SEA SCULPTURE:** Greek authorities said they needed to move quickly to retrieve this unrestored ancient bronze after they learned in 1998 that True was interested in seeing it.

ID NUMBER:20051024ios46jkn

PHOTOGRAPHER: Greek Ministry of Culture



**PHOTO: COLLECTOR:** The conspiracy trial of Marion True, who resigned this month as the Getty's chief antiquities curator, is to resume next month in Italy. True has denied wrongdoing.

ID NUMBER:20051024eohqpjgy

PHOTOGRAPHER: Wally Skaliy Los Angeles Times



**PHOTO: ARTIFACT:** The Getty acquired this gold funerary wreath in 1993 for \$1.15 million. Greek officials want it back.

ID NUMBER:20051024ios47mkn

PHOTOGRAPHER: J. Paul Getty Museum



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