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Obituaries

Jiri Frel, 82; Colorful Curator Who Left Getty Under a Cloud

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By Ralph Frammolino, Times Staff Writer

Jiri Frel, a Czechoslovakian refugee whose eccentricities and professional controversies marked his tenure as the J. Paul Getty Museum's first antiquities curator, has died. He was 82.

Frel was buried Thursday in the Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris, according to family friends and Getty officials. Family members could not be reached for details on his death but friends said he had been in failing health for some time.

Frel's determination to collect hundreds of ancient Greek and Roman vases, statues and pottery shards helped transform the Getty from a rich man's boutique into a considerable cultural force during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

But his activities also spawned two of the museum's earliest scandals. He was responsible for acquiring some of the museum's most problematic pieces -- among them the Getty kouros, a statue widely believed to be a fake. Frel was demoted in 1984 after revelations that he engineered a tax manipulation scheme to drastically expand the collection. He resigned two years later.

Frel was also responsible for hiring Marion True, who eventually took over the antiquities department after Frel's messy departure. Now True, who resigned under pressure last year, is on trial in a Rome court on charges that she conspired to traffic in illicit artifacts.

Frel "was the Dr. Strangelove of the antiquities game," said Thomas Hoving, the former director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where Frel worked briefly before coming to the Getty.

Frel kept a relatively low profile since departing the Getty, friends and former colleagues say. He reportedly was a consultant for wealthy European collectors, taught some classes and shuttled between residences in Budapest and Rome.

Yet among a shrinking circle of contemporaries, his legend continued to loom large, in part because of his close identification with the Getty's formative institutional years, when it outgrew its rooms in the late oilman's home and moved into the Romanesque villa in Pacific Palisades overlooking the Pacific.

"Frel was a passionate, extravagant guy, every inch the wily emigre from Cold War Eastern Europe," former Getty Museum Director John Walsh said Friday.

Walsh said Frel "deserves credit for creating the antiquities department."

Considered a brilliant academic with an expertise in ancient Greek tombstones and Attic pottery, Frel was credited with opening the Getty's collection to visiting scholars and taking time to encourage younger students to pursue studies in Greek, Roman and Etruscan antiquities.

A Bohemian figure, Frel wore oversized black-framed glasses and sandals. He was notorious for his continental ways with the ladies. He was married and divorced three times, maybe four -- friends aren't sure -- and left ex-wives and grown children in Czechoslovakia, New York and California.

"He had this incredible effervescence and European charm," Hoving said. "It's the hand-kiss, the funny stories

and the longing look in the eyes. He spoke ... with all sorts of references to French and Italian, Dante, and the right quote out of the New Testament."

Frel could also be intimidating and volatile.

Former London antiquities dealer Robin Symes remembered when Frel stormed into his high-end gallery and, without a word, threw his coat down and began stamping on it.

Recalling Frel's occasional outbursts, one former Getty official said "it was never clear to me that they were entirely authentic. Sometimes they might have been staged to achieve an effect."

"He had a tendency to intimidate those around him and certainly many of those who worked under him," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "He basically was able to browbeat the administration of the Getty Museum."

Born in Czechoslovakia in 1923, Frel went on to study at the Sorbonne in Paris before returning to his homeland after World War II to earn a doctorate from Charles University in Prague. He stayed to teach in the Greek and Roman art department until 1969, when he fled Czechoslovakia a year after the Soviet takeover.

After brief teaching stints at Princeton University and the University of Genoa, Frel was hired as an associate curator of Greek and Roman art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. He set his sights on the Getty and was personally hired by J. Paul Getty as the first antiquities curator in 1973.

Frel quickly made a splash, pointing out several pieces that he declared to be forgeries -- an ironic twist, given what eventually occurred. He also indulged an enormous curatorial appetite for any and all antiquities that would round out and expand Getty's hodgepodge collection.

While eager to snag showpieces for exhibition, he was also intent on building up the museum's less glamorous study collection with less distinguished items and pottery shards for scholars to pore over.

Frustrated that Getty trustees sniffed at anything less than stellar, the anti-authoritarian Frel set out to beat the system by recruiting collectors to donate their own items.

"He cried for them; he whined for them," David Swigler, a prominent local collector, was quoted as saying in a 1987 Los Angeles Times story about Frel.

"He would say, 'Please, we have a Roman villa, we need things to fill it up.' He was constantly asking for knickknacky things for the study collection."

Wanting even more, Frel pushed the curatorial envelope.

At times, he would engage in reverse negotiations -- asking dealers to increase their price on items and have them throw in extras the Getty board wouldn't have approved.

The most brazen scheme was the tax manipulation orchestrated with Bruce McNall, the former owner of the Los Angeles Kings hockey franchise who once had a gallery on Rodeo Drive.

When a piece that Frel liked came into the gallery, McNall went looking for a "donor" among his wealthy clients or friends who needed tax deductions.

A donor paid McNall his cost plus 10%, the antiquity went to the Getty and Frel arranged a third-party appraisal for the donor setting the object's value as much as 10 times the original price.

Many of the "gifts" were essentially paper transactions involving art the donors never saw.

Getty officials learned of the scheme in 1984, and farmed Frel out to Europe as a full-paid researcher.

He resigned two years later about the time Hoving, by then retired from the Met, and a journalist publicly revealed the scam in *Connoisseur* magazine.

Hoving said they confronted Frel as he stepped outside of his Roman apartment and invited him to dine at a restaurant near the Trevi Fountain.

"The last time I saw Jiri Frel he tried to kill me," said Hoving, who added that the curator became enraged at a question of whether he had taken any money personally.

Hoving said that Frel yelled, "They don't know the half of it!" picked up a huge bottle of mineral water and struck him on the shoulder before waiters and patrons intervened.

The tax scheme wasn't the last of the Getty's Frel-related fallout.

In the years after his departure, they discovered the curator had forked over large sums for some embarrassing forgeries, the most problematic being the kouros.

Frel persuaded the museum to buy the remarkably preserved statue of a Greek youth for nearly \$10 million.

After its 1986 unveiling, however, a growing chorus of experts declared the kouros a fraud.

Documents show that an internal Getty investigation by True concluded that Frel had probably fabricated documents pertaining to the object's ownership history.

The Getty now identifies the kouros as either dating to 530 B.C. or a modern fake.

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

[Information on missing images.](#)



PHOTO: JIRI FREL The curator at the Getty, where he was its first antiquities director. He resigned in 1986 after his role in a tax manipulation scheme was revealed. "He was the Dr. Strangelove of the antiquities game," ex-colleague said.

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