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# Los Angeles Times

Friday September 02, 2005

## Getty Kept Items to Itself in Probe

**\* Lawyer's memo advised the trust it did not have to reveal letters and photos that could tie its accused curator to suspected looters.**

*Home Edition, California, Page B-1*

*Metro Desk*

*61 inches; 2007 words*

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

The J. Paul Getty Trust, which has said it was fully cooperating with an Italian investigation into the antiquities trade, did not disclose a series of letters and photographs showing that its chief antiquities curator maintained close relationships with dealers suspected of selling looted art, according to documents and interviews.

The Getty's antiquities curator, Marion True, is facing trial in Rome this fall on charges that she conspired to traffic in ancient artifacts stolen from Italian ruins and smuggled out of the country. Italian authorities have identified 42 objects -- including some of the most prized antiquities in the Getty's collection -- as stolen and have demanded their return. The authorities are also investigating other American museums.

The Getty and True maintain her innocence.

According to a confidential memo written in 2001 by the Getty's criminal defense lawyer to Chief Executive Barry Munitz, an internal review of Getty files had turned up a handful of letters from the suspect dealers and True, as well as Polaroid photographs of artifacts.

The letters indicated that the dealers were offering objects "which appear to be from illegal excavations," and the Polaroids showed the artifacts "in an unrestored state" that suggested they were recently looted, according to the memo from attorney Richard Martin, a copy of which was obtained by The Times.

Martin advised Munitz that the Getty was "not presently under an obligation to provide the attached correspondence or any photographs," because Italian authorities had not specifically asked for them.

"It is obvious we should not offer to produce what has not been asked for," Martin wrote.

He concluded: "We should point out that, while these letters are troublesome, none of them amounts to proof of Dr. True's knowledge that a particular item was illegally excavated or demonstrates her intent to join the conspiracy."

Reached Thursday by telephone, Paolo Ferri, the Italian prosecutor in the True case, said he had not seen the correspondence or photos, despite repeatedly asking Martin for all material in Getty files relating to True's relationship with the dealers.

"It is very surprising to me that they didn't give me these very important documents," Ferri said, adding that, in a face-to-face meeting and subsequent telephone conversations, Martin personally guaranteed the Getty's "full cooperation."

"When Dick Martin said he wanted to cooperate, I thanked him," said Ferri, adding that he now believes the trust acted in bad faith.

Because Ferri's requests were not made formally through the U.S. attorney's office, it is unlikely that the Getty's failure to produce the documents violated any law. The U.S. attorney's office in Los Angeles declined to comment.

The Getty, in a statement, said The Times' article is based on "privileged documents that have been stolen from the Getty."

Trust officials, True and Martin's law firm, Heller Ehrman LLP, "have acted appropriately at all times in their dealings with the Italian prosecutor. Any suggestion that the Getty, Dr. True or their lawyers improperly withheld any documents is untrue," the statement said.

The trust added that the Italian prosecutor never issued a subpoena for all documents and had agreed instead to "voluntary discussions with the Getty to obtain copies of specified documents."

The trust provided all documents requested by the prosecutor, the statement said, adding: "All other documents in the Getty's possession that could in any way be relevant to the Italian investigation have been retained and preserved by the Getty."

In a letter to The Times' lawyers, Martin said Thursday that the Getty and True were "prepared to seek a court order" to prevent publication of the contents of his memo, which he described as "a confidential and privileged memorandum prepared by our firm."

Publication of the memo would interfere with True's "right to unfettered representation by counsel in an ongoing criminal matter," he wrote.

Getty board Chairman John Biggs, former chairman and chief executive of TIAA-CREF, the investment fund for education professionals, said he had viewed relevant documents from the internal review.

"I've seen them myself, and I think there's no merit to what you're trying to write a story about," Biggs said. "It's all part of a systematic effort that the L.A. Times has undertaken to write stories about the Getty."

Two other Getty board members, Barbara Fleischman and Ramon Cortines, said they were unaware of the documents and believed that board members should have been briefed about what the internal review found.

Fleischman said she was "flabbergasted" to learn that the Getty has documents it has not provided to the Italians. "I'm shocked," she said. "My knowledge is that full cooperation has been given to the Italians."

Cortines said, "If there were pictures and if there were damaging documents, as a board member I believe I should have seen that and been informed. There should have been a discussion about how we as a board were going to respond."

"Stonewalling is not handling an issue," added Cortines, a former superintendent of Los Angeles schools.

Other board members declined to comment or did not return calls.

The letters in question were written by True and two leading antiquities dealers: Robert E. Hecht Jr., 87, an American expatriate living in Paris, and Giacomo Medici, an Italian dealer specializing in ancient vases.

The men are True's co-defendants in the Rome proceedings. Medici was convicted in December in a fast-track trial and sentenced to 10 years in prison for selling looted art.

In his 2001 memo, Martin gave Munitz his preliminary observations about the Italian investigation and told the Getty chief that "the letters do support the conclusion that Medici and Hecht were involved in dealing objects which appeared to be from illegal excavations in Italy."

"Moreover," Martin wrote, "the tone of the letters conveys a familiarity with the subject discussed, in which Dr. True is clearly included. None of Dr. True's responses directly addresses the questionable provenance of the items, but neither does she raise any objections to the plain suggestion that the Getty would be interested in such items."

Martin said that the Polaroids in the Getty's museum files "unfortunately" were nearly identical to those seized during a raid of Medici's warehouses in 1995.

Some photos confiscated in the raid were posted on the website of the Italian Carabinieri, or paramilitary police, labeled as "important looted objects" that needed to be recovered.

"To the extent they show objects in a state of disrepair or in a location from which they may have been excavated, they would provide additional evidence that the dealers were trafficking in illegal objects," Martin wrote.

It is unknown whether the objects depicted in the Polaroids were bought by the Getty.

Martin told Munitz that the Italian prosecutor's theory appeared to be that someone with True's experience must have known that antiquities lacking clear documentation of ownership, or provenance, were likely to have been looted.

In fact, Martin pointed out in a footnote, True had said much the same in a June 2000 speech to the American Assn. of Museum Directors: "Experience has taught me that in reality, if serious efforts to establish a clear pedigree for the object's recent past prove futile, it is most likely -- if not certain -- that it is the product of the illicit trade, and we must accept responsibility for this fact."

The Italians believed that the curator's purchases of such objects "made her a willing participant" in the illicit antiquities trade, Martin said.

He said that the Italians' case was largely circumstantial and that there was insufficient evidence to charge True with receiving stolen property.

"While it is true that over the preceding 15 years Dr. True was directly involved in the acquisition of articles which may have been stolen or illegally exported, the Getty paid market price for the objects, and published and exhibited them promptly after their purchase," he wrote.

In purchasing antiquities, the Getty immediately makes its acquisitions publicly known to ensure transparency and enable possible countries of origin and other experts to come forward if they have evidence that an object might have been illegally excavated.

But the charge that she participated in a conspiracy could be more problematic, Martin concluded.

"We believe that the Italian prosecutor has ample evidence to establish that a network of persons illegally trafficked in Italian antiquities," Martin wrote.

If prosecutors established that, the law would require "very little" to connect someone like True to that conspiracy, he added.

Martin suggested that the Getty could avoid being forced to provide the letters and photographs by "voluntarily providing documents on a reasonable basis." The trust could then "proceed under our own interpretation of the prosecutor's request."

"Not only is it useful to gain some benefit from evidencing our willingness to cooperate, the documents which we will produce show nothing which is harmful to the Getty or Dr. True," Martin wrote.

By working voluntarily with the prosecutors, the Getty could avoid the risk of having the Italians turn to the U.S. attorney's office for help, he wrote.

A subpoena "prepared by a competent U.S. attorney's office, would almost certainly be more detailed and specific" than the requests from the Italian prosecutors "and could well require the production of documents which we would rather not provide," Martin wrote.

The strategy worked, to a point.

Ferri said Thursday that he had abandoned his effort to subpoena Getty records through formal channels when Martin promised full cooperation. In doing so, the prosecutor said he avoided a six- to 12-month delay.

In 2001, Ferri spent two days at a deposition in Los Angeles asking True about her relationship with the dealers.

Records show that by 2003, the Getty had shifted to a "defensive strategy," which Martin had suggested two years earlier, suspecting that the Italians were seeking "an arrangement."

He suggested "discussions at the diplomatic level as well as attempting to reach Italian authorities above the level of those with whom we have spoken to date."

Getty Museum Director Deborah Gribbon traveled to Italy in June 2003 for a meeting with Giuseppe Proietti, a senior Ministry of Culture official, and the commander of the Carabinieri's art squad.

Gibbon turned down an Italian offer to loan antiquities to the Getty in exchange for a promise to stop buying from the suspect dealers, Proietti said. Gibbon, who resigned from the Getty last October, declined to comment about the meeting.

"They said they felt they were free to continue buying," Proietti recalled. "She said the board of trustees of the Getty said that the Getty Museum was free to continue expanding their collection of antiquities, and not just from Italy.

"I stopped the meeting," he said, explaining that he saw no reason to continue.

In September 2004, the Getty's general counsel, Peter Erichsen, wrote to a superior of Proietti's, offering to return three of the museum's antiquities, records show.

Two of the objects offered were already the subject of inquiries by the Italians.

One of them was a large urn signed by Asteas, a painter of vases in antiquity, that the Italians had identified earlier as looted. The U.S. attorney's office in Los Angeles told the Getty that Italian authorities had testimony from the looter, who admitted digging up the object, taking photos of it in his backyard and receiving a pig as payment for it from a smuggler.

The second object, a candelabrum, was the companion piece to an ancient tripod that the Getty had returned to Italy when proof emerged that it had been stolen from an established Italian collection.

Erichsen insisted to Italian authorities in follow-up letters this year that the museum "is in no way legally obligated to return any of these objects" and described the offer as "an extraordinary effort to demonstrate its goodwill to the Italian government."

Further, he suggested that the return of the three objects should preclude future Italian requests for any other items from the Getty. He said the Italian government would have to pay the costs of returning the objects to Italy.

The Italians have yet to take up the offer.

True's trial is scheduled to start in November.

**Descriptors:** J PAUL GETTY TRUST; ITALY; ROBBERIES; ARTIFACTS; INVESTIGATIONS; DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION; TRUE, MARION

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

[Information on missing images.](#)



PHOTO: ACCUSED: Marion True is charged with conspiring to traffic in stolen artifacts. She has denied any wrongdoing.

ID NUMBER:20050902eohqpjgy

PHOTOGRAPHER: Wally Skalij Los Angeles Times



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[B10](#)

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# Los Angeles Times

Monday October 03, 2005

## Getty Curator Resigns in Loan Flap

**\* Marion True bought a Greek home with help arranged by a major supplier to the museum.**

*Home Edition, Main News, Page A-1*

*Metro Desk*

*32 inches; 1117 words*

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

The curator of antiquities for the J. Paul Getty Museum bought a vacation home in the Greek islands after one of the museum's main suppliers of ancient art introduced her to a lawyer who arranged a nearly \$400,000 loan.

The Getty said in a statement Saturday evening that the curator, Marion True, had resigned after museum officials confronted her about the loan, which she obtained in 1995.

The statement, released in response to questions from The Times, said the loan breached museum policy, which requires employees to report even the appearance of a conflict of interest.

"The Getty has determined through its own investigation that Marion True failed to report certain aspects of her Greek house purchase transaction in violation of Getty policy," the statement said. "In the course of the Getty's discussions with Ms. True on this matter, she chose voluntarily to retire."

True, 56, faces trial in an Italian court on charges that she conspired with dealers who were trafficking in looted antiquities. In its statement, the Getty said she was retiring to devote her full energies to her defense.

Internal Getty records obtained by The Times show that museum officials knew three years ago about the loan True obtained for the vacation home. The Getty declined comment on the documents.

Italian authorities say Interpol in Greece is investigating the loan.

True bought the property in 1995, paying about \$400,000 for the white villa in a walled compound covering an acre of land on Paros, a picturesque island that is a popular vacation destination.

In purchasing the property, True had trouble finding financing. American banks wouldn't lend money on Greek property, and Greek banks refused to give loans to foreigners.

True discussed her desire to purchase the home with Christos Michailidis, an art dealer based in London. He and his partner, Robin Symes, were at the time among the Getty's biggest suppliers of Greek, Roman and Etruscan antiquities.

Michailidis put her in touch with Dimitri Peppas, a lawyer with offices in the port of Athens. Peppas then arranged a loan for True. The loan was made through an entity called the Sea Star Corp. and deposited into a Swiss bank account, records show. The records do not identify the original source of the funds.

Harry Stang, True's attorney, said last month that Michailidis had done nothing more than introduce True to Peppas.

"To Ms. True's knowledge, neither Mr. Symes nor any member of the Michailidis family was involved in obtaining the loan for her, save for Mr. Michailidis' introduction to Mr. Peppas," Stang said.

He said Michailidis, now deceased, described Peppas to True as a "financier for Greek shipping companies."

Stang released a letter True wrote to Peppas in June 1996 in which she informed him that she had arranged a

20-year mortgage from a New York bank affiliated with the National Bank of Greece. She discussed repayment of the loan Peppas had arranged.

"You must know how grateful I am to you for helping me to purchase the house in Greece, but as you can imagine, the longer period of time will make the repayment process much easier for me," she wrote to Peppas. True added she would be on Paros for the summer and "I hope to lure you and Lia to visit me!"

Stang also released a check for \$386,286 to the Sea Star Corp., showing that True repaid the loan in July 1996.

In announcing True's resignation, Getty officials declined to say what aspects of the museum's ethics policy True might have violated. However, the museum's conflict-of-interest rules require employees to disclose "any transaction that would create even the appearance of favoritism." The policy also prohibits "owing money to or borrowing money from any supplier or dealer or from an individual or firm ... with whom the trust does business of any kind."

A nephew of Michailidis, Dimitri Papadimitriou, said he discussed the loan with his uncle and Peppas, whom he described as a lawyer for Michailidis.

Papadimitriou, president of Liquimar Tanker Management, a Greek oil tanker company owned by his family, said his uncle told him about the transaction in 1995 while the two were on vacation.

He said he understood from his conversations with Michailidis and Peppas that the source of the loan "wasn't supposed to be known" and for that reason the money was provided through a corporation.

Reached in Greece, Peppas' son and legal partner declined to comment.

Asked if he played a role in the loan to True, Symes said in a recent interview: "That's rubbish." He suggested, however, that it was possible Michailidis offered it on his own.

In 1999, Michailidis died after falling down some stairs in an Italian villa.

A year later, Italian authorities notified the Getty that True was under investigation for allegedly conspiring to buy looted art.

The Italians interrogated True about her relationship with Symes. Since True became curator in 1986, he and Michailidis had sold the Getty \$30 million worth of objects, many of which Italy now says were stolen from ancient graves and ruins.

Getty attorneys in Los Angeles first learned of True's loan in 2002, when Ludovic de Walden, the Getty's London counsel, informed them of the transaction, records show.

De Walden said the transaction was carried out through a lawyer who worked for Symes and Michailidis in Athens. De Walden didn't name the attorney. He said he doubted the Italians would find out about the loan. That information was conveyed to Getty General Counsel Peter Erichsen and then-museum Director Deborah Gribbon, who questioned True about the transaction, records show. Getty officials declined to say what True told them at the time about the loan. Efforts to seek comment from Erichsen were unsuccessful. Gribbon declined Sunday to talk to a reporter.

Before her retirement, the Getty had retained a team of attorneys to defend both True and the museum in the Italian case. It is not clear whether the museum will continue to defend her, or whether she will now be responsible for her own defense.

As antiquities curator, True led the museum's \$275 million renovation of the Getty Villa in Malibu, which will showcase the museum's antiquities collection when it reopens this winter.

In response to the Italian investigation, an internal review by Getty attorneys found that True and other museum officials continued doing business with a handful of dealers, including Symes and Michailidis, despite signs that they were trafficking in possibly looted antiquities, The Times reported last month. In one case, documents show, True purchased an object after the dealer informed her it was being sought by Italian police.

Times special correspondent Maria Panaritis contributed to this article with reporting from Athens and Paros.

**Descriptors:** J PAUL GETTY MUSEUM; EMPLOYEE MISCONDUCT; LOANS; CONFLICT OF INTEREST; TRUE, MARION

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

[Information on missing images.](#)



PHOTO: AT THE GETTY: Marion True, curator of antiquities for the J. Paul Getty Museum, resigned to devote her full energies to her defense against Italian charges that she conspired with dealers trafficking in looted antiquities, the museum said.

ID NUMBER:20051003inegcync

PHOTOGRAPHER: Wally Skalij Los Angeles Times



PHOTO: IN GREECE: True eventually obtained a nearly \$400,000 loan to buy this home, center, on the island of Paros. She was unable to finance the purchase through U.S. or Greek banks.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: Maria Panaritis For The Times



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