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Getty lets her take fall, ex-curator says

*** The trust's silence in the art looting case is taken as a sign of her guilt, Marion True asserts.**

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By Jason Felch And Ralph Frammolino, Times Staff Writers

In a bitter letter to the J. Paul Getty Trust, former antiquities curator Marion True complained last week that the institution has left her to "carry the burden" for its purchase of apparently looted ancient art.

True, on trial in Rome on charges of trafficking looted objects, wrote Dec. 18 that her superiors at the Getty Museum were "fully aware of the risks" of buying antiquities and had approved the acquisitions.

Yet the Getty has not publicly defended her innocence or explained her role at the museum, she said.

The press and foreign prosecutors make it seem as if "I was in charge of the Getty, made the decisions, wrote the checks and swanned around Europe looking for archeological sites to plunder," she said. "No Getty colleague, supervisor, officer or legal representative has stepped forward to challenge publicly this distorted scenario."

The Getty's "calculated silence ... has been acknowledged universally, especially in the archeological countries, as a tacit acceptance of my guilt," True said in the two-page letter. It was addressed to acting Getty Chief Executive Deborah Marrow, Museum Director Michael Brand and Getty spokesman Ron Hartwig.

The letter, a copy of which was obtained by The Times, sheds light on long-standing tension between True and the Getty.

That tension began soon after the curator was implicated in an Italian investigation into the looted antiquities trade in 2000. Since then, the board has been torn between defending True and returning a number of contested objects to Italy to end an escalating dispute, according to records and interviews.

Some Getty officials believed that returning the objects would be seen as an admission of the curator's guilt, an argument that paralyzed the Getty while Italy's demands grew for the return of items Italian prosecutors say were illegally excavated from ruins in recent years and smuggled out of the country.

In recent months the Getty has agreed to return 30 contested antiquities to both Italy and Greece, which has recently begun legal action against True for alleged antiquities trafficking. Many of the returned items bear directly in the charges against True. The Getty is paying for her defense in Greece and Italy, and has said that True is being unfairly singled out by foreign prosecutors. But in recent public statements, the Getty has stopped short of saying she is innocent and has been wrongfully charged.

"We certainly hope that she will be exonerated, but with her at trial, I don't want to be any more specific than that," Hartwig said.

Hartwig acknowledged that in the past, True's criminal woes have complicated the negotiations with cultural officials in Italy and Greece over the return of allegedly looted antiquities.

He said that current Getty officials hope the returns will build a rapport with the governments and have a "therapeutic impact" on her legal situation.

But True said in her letter that giving items back without any public statement in her support has not helped. She described being presented with criminal charges in Athens by a judge in mid-December, days after the Getty's return of a golden funerary wreath, the focus of the Greek case.

Although the Getty suggested at the time the return may prompt Greek officials to reconsider their criminal charges against True, the curator said that "any openness to discussion was not apparent" when she sat before the judge, who gave her three weeks to answer the charges.

"Once again you have chosen to announce the return of objects that are directly related to criminal charges filed against me by a foreign government ... without a word of support for me, without any explanation of my role in the institution, and without reference to my innocence," True wrote of the episode.

As the Getty's antiquities curator from 1986 to 2005, True was responsible for recommending what objects the museum should buy from private dealers and at public auctions. The decision to approve her recommendations rested with the museum director, the Getty Trust's chief executive and members of the board of trustees.

During those years, True frequently raised concerns about acquisitions with her superiors and pushed to toughen the museum's acquisition standards in 1987 and in 1996, according to the testimony of John Walsh, the director of the Getty Museum during much of True's career.

"From the beginning, we knew that there was the potential of being offered material that had been illegally excavated, or illegally removed from Greece or Turkey or Italy," Walsh told True's Italian prosecutor in a 2004 deposition. "This was a common problem. Everybody knew it in 1983; everybody knows it now."

Contacted by The Times this week, Walsh declined to comment, as did his deputy, Deborah Gribbon, who succeeded him as director in 2000 and resigned from the museum in late 2004.

True was asked to retire in October 2005 after The Times reported that she had accepted a \$400,000 loan from one of the museum's major antiquities dealers. She repaid the money in 1996 with a second loan from Lawrence and Barbara Fleischman, who days earlier had sold part of their collection to the Getty for \$20 million.

Barbara Fleischman became a board member in 2000, and was a vocal advocate for True. When Fleischman stepped down last year, she complained about the Getty's treatment of True in a departing letter to the board.

Getty officials managed the crisis incompetently, Fleischman said, and True was isolated internally and had to fight to get legal representation in Los Angeles. "Shockingly, True became the prosecutor's stand-in for John Walsh, her superior, and the Trust. She was been wrongly accused and endured almost five years of battering," Fleischman said.

Fleischman said she could understand the motives of the Italian prosecutor and journalists covering the story. "What I cannot understand and accept is the malice, the attempt to bend the truth, and the injustice within the Trust itself," she added.

True said in her letter last week that she had hoped "the Getty's entrenched position of offering no public defense for me" would change with the departure of former Getty Trust Chief Executive Barry Munitz, who was forced to resign in February for financial improprieties.

"The continuation of this policy of isolation, however, suggests that those who are now making or advising the adoption of such decisions lack the courage or integrity to change it," True said.

Harry Stang, True's Los Angeles attorney, would not comment on the letter, saying that "it was a document intended to be private."

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Descriptors: J PAUL GETTY TRUST; STOLEN PROPERTY; LOOTING; ART THEFTS; LETTERS; TRUE, MARION

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PHOTO: COMPLAINT: Marion True, shown at a Rome courthouse last year, said in her



letter that the Getty is not helping her defense by returning possibly looted items without any statement in her support.

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B01



B07

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