The International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR), established in 1969, is a 501 (c)(3) not-for-profit educational and research organization dedicated to integrity in the visual arts. IFAR offers impartial and authoritative information on authenticity, ownership, theft, and other artistic, legal, and ethical issues concerning art objects. IFAR serves as a bridge between the public and the scholarly and commercial art communities. We publish the quarterly IFAR Journal, organize public programs and conferences, offer an art authentication research service, provide a forum for discussion and serve as an information resource. We invite you to join our organization and help support our activities.
Collecting Antiquities

Collecting antiquities, especially magnificent ones, has always been a dodgy business. Initially the prerogative of victorious armies, as the spoils went to the victor (a concept so ancient you can say it in Latin: *ad victor spolia*), the effort was later taken up by moonlighting diplomats, unrestrained by the governments they served. Luigi Palma di Cesnola, for example, who had served simultaneously as the envoy of several countries to the Ottoman rulers of Cyprus, 1 helped The Metropolitan Museum of Art build its antiquities collection with 4,000 objects from Cyprus. (He later became the Metropolitan’s first director, holding that position from 1879 to 1904.) 2

In the 1960s, Clemency Coggins, a professor of archaeology and art history now with Boston University and Harvard’s Peabody Museum, raised questions about antiquities collecting in American museums by detailing pervasive and destructive looting of architectural monuments in Central America. She tracked the antiquities that had been quite literally hacked from the jungles of Guatemala and Mexico to the collections of prominent American museums in Cleveland, Houston, Minneapolis, New York, and St. Louis. 3

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1 Louis Palma di Cesnola, *Cyprus: Its Ancient Cities, Tombs and Temples* (John Murray 1877; reprinted with foreword by Stuart Swiny, Star Graphics, 1991), Foreword p. 3. Although the truth is difficult to decipher, Cesnola apparently had a firman or permit from the Ottoman rulers to conduct archaeological research on Cyprus (*id.*, p. 65), but not necessarily for the export of antiquities he removed from the ten thousand some odd tombs he opened up. (*Id.*, Foreword pp. 3, 83.)


Archaeologists like Coggins have long been alarmed over the destruction of the historical record caused by looting. The problem, however, is that stripping objects of their historic context still leaves them with aesthetic and monetary value if there are willing buyers. As explained in the late 1990s by then-Director of the Harvard University Art Museums, James Cuno: “Isn’t there . . . enormous value to be gotten from an ancient Greek vase, even if one doesn’t know where it came from?” Hence, the debate has taken shape over the risk and the ethics of museums acquiring antiquities that lack an established provenance or ownership history to show that they were excavated legally and documented.

**CHASING APHRODITE**

Until recently, many museums appear to have ignored these issues, and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles was one of them. In fact, as outlined in *Chasing Aphrodite: The Hunt for Looted Antiquities at the World’s Richest Museum*, the Getty pushed deliberate ignorance about provenance to a whole new level. Rarely has the collecting of antiquities looked as shameless as it does in this book, in which authors Jason Felch and Ralph Frammolino review three decades of collecting policies and practices at the Getty Museum.

As the book describes, the Getty came late to the process of building a collection of antiquities. J. Paul Getty himself created the museum in 1953, but, according to Felch and Frammolino, the museum was something of a backwater for its first two decades. Getty had been parsimonious about collecting (“Getty’s penny-pining over the years had left him with a collection of largely mediocre art . . . .”), to the point where the new and controversial Getty Museum building in Malibu, which was modeled on a Roman villa, overshadowed the collection when the building opened in 1974 (p. 23). Getty’s death in 1976 left the museum well-funded (“the richest art institution in the world”) and driven to become a top-tier antiquities museum. According to the authors, it was also unencumbered by ethical, moral, or financial constraints on collecting (pp. 25-28).

To catch up with the more-established antiquities museums of the world, which, the book suggests (p. 60), did not necessarily practice greater diligence than the Getty, but had been able to build their collections from scientific excavations or, at least, long before modern concerns developed about the impact of looting, the Getty had to launch an ambitious acquisition program. But, to buy eye-catching objects fast enough, Felch and Frammolino say, the museum could not be too picky about the provenance of the objects it acquired (pp. 64-73). So, it learned not to ask too many questions about provenance or pay too much attention when an ancient work of art lacked any real paper trail (p. 197).

As investigative journalists for the *Los Angeles Times*, the authors of *Chasing Aphrodite* amassed piles of internal, and undoubtedly confidential, leaked Getty documents concerning the museum’s

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5 *Chasing Aphrodite*, p. 23. All other citations from *Chasing Aphrodite* will be put in parentheses within the text.
With remarkable assistance from one or more still-unidentified Getty insiders, who leaked these sensitive documents while still very fresh (pp. 261-64), Felch and Frammolino were able to observe the Getty’s collecting policies and practices from a close-in perspective over a period of years, as the *nouveau riche* museum sought to gain international stature through the acquisition of remarkable objects.

“With remarkable assistance from one or more still-unidentified Getty insiders, who leaked these sensitive documents while still very fresh, Felch and Frammolino were able to observe the Getty’s collecting policies . . .”

In *Chasing Aphrodite*, Felch and Frammolino, who were finalists for a Pulitzer Prize in 2006 for their reporting on the Getty for the *LA Times*, have expanded their work into an astonishing narrative of avarice and arrogance throughout the Museum; curators, management, and trustees are all implicated in allegedly criminal behavior. Approaching the international trade in looted antiquities as potential crimes and not merely as charming or endearing idiosyncrasies, Felch and Frammolino give the reader much of contemporary significance to chew on in the Getty’s flawed attempt to launch itself to a position of preeminence as a world-class antiquities museum. In their compelling account, Felch and Frammolino discuss the museum’s period of aggressive collecting, followed by its accounting for alleged misdeeds through the return to Italy and Greece of objects worth many millions of dollars. Likewise, the authors provide a glimpse of similar conduct at other major U.S. museums: flawed acquisition decisions regarding potentially looted antiquities followed by the embarrassing — and costly — return of illegally obtained objects to source countries (pp. 18-19, 69, 182-83, 207, 283, 293, 307).

Many of the misdeeds at the Getty described by Felch and Frammolino predated the tenure of Marion True, the museum’s experienced, Harvard-educated, and, at the time, highly-respected curator of antiquities. True, nonetheless, was indicted in 2005 and tried in Italy for conspiracy to traffic in looted antiquities — the first and only American curator to be so treated — for reasons that have never seemed clear or justified to the museum community and others.

Civil claims that were also brought against True were dropped in 2009 after the Getty agreed to return items sought by Italy, but the criminal proceedings continued. The Italian court, however, eventually dismissed the criminal charges against True in October 2010 on statute of limitations grounds because, after five years, and before True even got a chance to present her defense, the trial had not been finished within the time allotted under Italian law. With that dismissal, Italy’s rationale for its unprecedented indictment of a museum curator from another country has not aged well. Nor has it improved with Felch’s and Frammolino’s frank retelling. Italy’s misconduct does not, however, vindicate the Getty or the individual participants in this drama. The Museum’s collecting practices were countenanced for all those years by a Board of Trustees, auditors, accountants and lawyers.

*Chasing Aphrodite* is a chronicle of alleged museum misbehavior on a historic scale: the inventing of donations of objects, the forging of appraisals, the knowing (or apparently knowing) buying and keeping of looted objects, the covering up of unpleasant documents, and the mismanaging, lying, and self-dealing. In the end, the Getty spent millions of dollars for antiquities it could not keep, and returned numerous objects to their countries of origin to buy legal peace and begin to rebuild its reputation.

Felch and Frammolino’s book is well written and highly readable, a bit of a non-fiction detective story, and, by comparison to publicly available information, a fair and balanced treatment of a controversial subject. The authors, for the most part, resist the urge to descend into gossip and character assassination,

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6 “That the time limit was applied while the trial was under way is a particular peculiarity that made an unfavourable impression on the Americans.” Mauro Lucentini in, “Has peace broken out after the trial of Marion True?,” *The Art Newspaper* (November 2011), p. 44.
focusing instead on the substance of the Getty’s policies and practices. In sum, they address the manner in which greed and arrogance, abetted by lack of leadership and appropriate governance controls, led Marion True and the Getty to the brink of disaster . . . and beyond.

Felch and Frammolino have taken the Getty story a step further, as well, and examined the still-unfolding redemptive process at the museum. Through the authors’ eyes, the reader sees the Getty’s efforts, as a chastened and more sober institution, to right itself and chart a better course. The Getty has reformed its collecting policies to become a model of ethical behavior; it is now pointing the way for other museums to work with source countries in a more collaborative and less contentious environment.

“Italy’s rationale for its unprecedented indictment of a museum curator from another country has not aged well.”

Chasing Aphrodite is, therefore, a cautionary tale for us all and especially for collectors and collecting institutions. The fall and rise of the Getty, and its now infamous curator Marion True, is one of the most significant museum histories of the current era. The Getty’s resurrection is, nevertheless, a work-in-progress that is still eclipsed by the dramatic tale of alleged crime and scandal told by Felch and Frammolino. In this review, I try to put their authoritative account in the context of antiquities collecting at museums over the past few decades as I have seen it in court, in court decisions and in following the evolution of museum practices.

THE APTLY NAMED DR. TRUE

I first met Marion True in 1989, when she was already antiquities curator at the Getty Museum, respected for her expertise in ancient art. As the lawyer representing the Autocephalous Greek-Orthodox Church of Cyprus, I took her deposition in a lawsuit to recover four mosaic fragments that had been stolen from a church in the Turkish-occupied area of that embattled island nation, mosaics which had been acquired by Indianapolis art dealer Peg Goldberg. A dealer friend of Goldberg’s had then offered the mosaics to True for $20 million.

True had dropped a proverbial dime on Goldberg, who had allowed herself to be talked into spending over a million dollars for fragments of the Kanakariá mosaic, not knowing they were about as hot as art objects could possibly be. As a dealer in contemporary art produced in the suburbs of Indianapolis, Goldberg learned far too late that the mosaics described to her as having been rescued by an archaeologist from an unidentified, defunct church in northern Cyprus and being sold by dealers she knew to be questionable, had, in fact, been looted after Turkish troops occupied that part of the island.

The mosaics had been studied by Harvard University’s Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Studies program just before the 1974 Turkish invasion and partition of Cyprus. In a publication that was known to Byzantine scholars worldwide, Dumbarton Oaks thoroughly documented the mosaics in situ at the church of the Panaghia Kanakariá in Lythrankomi, high up in the mountainous Karpasse Peninsula in what became and remains occupied Cyprus. In that 1977 book,7 pre-invasion photographs taken in the nave of the church show a beatific adolescent Christ sitting on Mary’s lap, attended by two archangels and encircled by a frieze of apostles, all portrayed in tiny tesserae or tiles of stone and glass, the work of one or more sixth century masters. The mosaics had been ripped crudely from the wall’s surface sometime in the years following the Turkish invasion. They languished in Munich or elsewhere for a decade, while the smuggler and his colleagues searched for a buyer willing to ask few questions.

True was appointed the Getty Museum’s antiquities curator in 1986. By late 1988, when she first became aware of the mosaics’ appearance on the market,

she was already avidly pursuing the magnificent limestone and marble, larger-than-life-size, statue of Aphrodite (recently identified as Persephone) of Felch and Frammolino’s title, for which the Getty ultimately paid $18 million (FIG. 1). The Getty did not collect Byzantine art (p. 116) and, without hesitation, True called Dr. Vassos Karageorghis, then Cyprus’s Director of Antiquities, to alert him to the sudden emergence of the Kanakariá mosaics. Karageorghis, a friend and colleague of True’s, had asked the Getty curator to alert him if she ever became aware of any significant objects coming out of Turkish-occupied Cyprus, which had suffered pervasive looting of churches, museums and private collections.

True’s tipoff triggered a valiant effort by the government of Cyprus and the Church to recover the Kanakariá mosaics. The Cyprus Embassy in Washington, D.C. asked U.S. Customs to seize the mosaics. When Customs refused to act (a bellwether of the low priority U.S. law enforcement was then giving to antiquities looting), Cyprus brought suit, obtaining an injunction against sale and later — with Goldberg resisting to the last — prevailing at all levels of the federal courts in the lawsuit over ownership (p. 117). The mosaics now reside in the Church’s Byzantine Museum in Nicosia, Cyprus, awaiting the moment when they may return to their former home, the ravaged Kanakariá church.

Even someone as unmotivated in finding the truth as Peg Goldberg (who just recently died) did not have to end up on the receiving end of the wrath of a wounded country. It would have been easy enough for Goldberg to have learned the true origin of the mosaics, had she but tried; she was told they were from northern Cyprus and had come from a church, not out of the ground. Cyprus’s Byzantine art expert in the case, Dr. Gary Vikan, now Director of the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, testified at trial that Cyprus “stands apart” from other Mediterra-

nean countries in its efforts to publicize its losses. As recounted in Chasing Aphrodite, True’s testimony in the Kanakariá litigation implied that she would have been far more careful than Goldberg, since she saw herself as “always very concerned about being offered objects that come from countries which objects are known to be removed from illicitly . . . .” (p. 115). The Getty Museum, she also said, “would not want to be buying art against the wishes of the country of origin” (p. 116). If only True’s statement had been . . . well, more accurate. As Felch and Frammolino detail, True was sometimes diligent and sometimes blind to obvious problems with the beautiful and hugely expensive antiquities she was acquiring for the Getty. Unlike Peg Goldberg, the naïf, True, who played the collecting game at the highest level, had every reason to know there would eventually be a day of reckoning.

Goldberg appeared to have stumbled into the landscape of antiquities looting — she picked up the mosaics in the Freeport section of the Geneva airport — without a compass or a clue. Somehow, though, she came to understand what was required of her, and dutifully performed a caricature of a due diligence effort: contacting the wrong entities (UNESCO in Geneva instead of the Paris headquarters) and asking the wrong questions (about treaties, not the mosaics). Although she was aware of many suspicious circumstances (objects coming from a war zone, an archaeologist supposedly functioning as a dealer in objects removed from a church, other suspect intermediaries, haste, low price), Goldberg never took the fundamental steps one would take to establish that the mosaics were lawfully on the market: contacting Cyprus or the Church, for example; a disinterested expert; Interpol; or IFAR. (She claimed she had contacted IFAR, but IFAR, which kept detailed accounts of such inquiries, had no record because, according to Goldberg, she had seen no reason to pay the $25 charge for a formal

8 Autocephalous Greek-Orthodox Church of Cyprus v. Goldberg, 717 F. Supp. 13794 (SM.D. Ind. 1989), aff’d, Autocephalous Greek-Orthodox Church of Cyprus v. Goldberg and Feldman Fine Arts, Inc., 917 F.2d 278 (7th Cir. 1990).

9 Ibid. p. 1389.

10 Ibid. pp. 1400-01.

11 Ibid. pp. 1403-04.
search). The court found that Goldberg had failed to act in good faith, in contrast to the steadfast True, always pointing in the right direction; the Court of Appeals praised her as “the aptly named Dr. True.”

MUSEUMS SEEKING BEAUTY BUT NOT TRUTH

At the time, I was impressed by True, whose testimony I accepted at face value. I had also been surprised, but not quite appalled, when Customs flatly refused to seize well-documented cultural objects that had disappeared from a church in a military occupation zone and were being offered for sale in the United States for mega-millions. I did not realize that looting of antiquities and ancient art was then recognized by most as something akin to a sport to be engaged in by local illegal excavators and then by dealers and various other middlemen, who served as a supply chain to collectors and museums.

Felch and Frammolino report that Getty officials at the time assumed that 90-95 percent of antiquities available on the market had been recently looted (pp. 58, 61). In 1987, Getty Trust Director Harold Williams asked John Walsh, then Director of the Getty Museum: “How can we be good-faith buyers if we knowingly buy stolen goods, accept warranties from dealers we know to be liars, and choose not to investigate their claims?” (p. 90). Yet, the charade went on with looted objects finding their way into the Getty’s collection, and other museums as well.

As discussed by Felch and Frammolino, some buyers, like the Met’s former Director, the late Thomas Hoving, were even proud of their adroitness at circumventing layers of law and ethical practice. Hoving, who led the Met from 1967 to 1977, boasted of his exploits in Making the Mummies Dance: Inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He quotes himself saying at the time of the Met’s late 1960s acquisition of the Lydian Hoard, a 7th century B.C. group of gold, silver and other valuable objects (which the Met returned to Turkey in 1993): “We all believe the stuff was illegally dug up.” A bit later, Hoving orchestrated the Met’s purchase of the far more valuable and notorious Euphronios krater, in 1972 (Hoving called it “one of the 10 greatest works created in the Western world”), with a provenance he understood at the time of purchase to be suspicious, if not entirely fabricated. Hoving said that he approached the acquisition of what he came to call the “Hot Pot” (which the Met eventually repatriated to Italy in 2008) with the attitude that he “would consciously avoid knowledge of the history of the vase.” (p. 27).

With the affable and prominent Hoving and a few others of like mind setting the tone, it is scarcely surprising that heedless collecting remained the order of the day for American museums well into the 1990s. The Getty, as the authors detail, has now been joined by numerous fine institutions and a museum trustee, in returning antiquities to source countries. Most recently, the MFA, Boston, responding to a claim it had long brushed off, returned to Turkey the top half of a statue known as the “Weary Herakles.”

“The anticlimactic end of True’s criminal prosecution — much more with a whimper than a bang — left the art trade and museums wondering what the Italians had ever really been about . . .”

How did it come to this, Felch and Frammolino invite us to consider? Our most distinguished muse-

12 Ibid. p. 1403.
13 Autocephalous Greek-Orthodox Church of Cyprus v. Goldberg and Feldman Fine Arts, Inc., 917 E.2d 278 (7th Cir. 1990), p. 283.
ums and the collectors who fund them and furnish them with valuable collectibles are now scrambling to reverse direction, clean up their legacy issues, avoid further legal problems, and project themselves as behaving ethically, as well as legally. At some point decades ago, perhaps around the time Peru lost a major antiquities lawsuit in 1989, many American museums and collectors came to believe that U.S. law and a “mish mash of international laws” (p. 185) were largely ineffectual in preventing or penalizing the illegal movement of antiquities (pp. 60-62), a point True herself made publicly.

“Felch and Frammolino make clear: True and the Getty were not alone in heedless collecting and True’s recklessness was accepted and validated by an institution with deeply flawed governance structures and procedures.”

ARE OBJECTS INNOCENT UNTIL PROVEN GUILTY?

With little or no fear of the law, museums and collectors were, for decades, freely acquiring undocumented objects from dealers. These antiquities, sometimes flying a flag of convenience, such as Lebanon (p.182), Switzerland (pp. 57, 86-87, 122, 165, 220), or even Great Britain (pp. 93, 201, 203), were viewed as “innocent until proven guilty” and museums feigned a studied lack of concern about the possible looting of an object unless the source country could definitely establish an ownership claim (pp. 60-62). James Cuno explained: “[A]s in the case of Greek vases, [a particular undocumented object] could have been produced for export in the first place, purchased by a southern Italian, and buried by natural circumstances more than two thousand years ago, rediscovered years later, moved, buried again, rediscovered again, moved and buried again, until it was finally unearthed thirty years ago, sold in the trade, and acquired by a museum from a private collector with no documentation as to when it was unearthed and exported from its so-called ‘country of origin’.”

Dealer Robert Hecht, who was indicted by Italy along with True, articulated this perspective perfectly: “Until someone proves this Euphronios vase or this silver treasure was excavated clandestinely and shows us the hole it came out of, it’s as innocent as the Virgin Mary.” (p. 182). Like True, Hecht escaped jail; his case, too, was ended on statute of limitations grounds (in January 2012, only weeks before his death, at the age of 92), but it was clear from the beginning that, because of his advanced age, he would never be imprisoned, whatever the outcome of the trial in Rome. Accepting this innocent-until-proven-guilty perspective, when he was former director of the Metropolitan Museum, Philippe de Montebello would say that he wanted to see “irrefutable proof” of the origin of an antiquity (a standard unheard of in civil or criminal law which only require, respectively, a preponderance of the evidence or proof of guilt beyond a reasonable doubt) before he would view a claim as viable (p. 229).

Before 1987, the Getty called its variation on the innocent-until-proven-guilty theme “optical due diligence” (p. 61). According to Felch and Frammolino, this is how it went: the Getty would refrain from asking “the specific question that would elicit the specific answer about provenance that made the material unbuyable” (p. 61). By following this approach, one is not acting in good faith, as Dr. Vikan said more than fifteen years ago, “We are virtuous to the extent that we do not know.”

20 This perception began to change with the 2002 criminal conviction of Frederick Schultz, who was then President of the National Association of Dealers of Ancient, Oriental and Primitive Art, for conspiracy to trade in stolen Egyptian antiquities. United States v. Schultz, 178 F. Supp. 2d 445 (S.D.N.Y. 2002) (The trial judge said: “A defendant may not purposefully remain ignorant of either the facts or the law in order to escape the consequences of the law.”) (pp. 227-28, 301).
21 Back in 1987, Getty Trust Director Williams noted that the institution faced a moral dilemma – not a legal one – in acquiring potentially looted antiquities, saying: “Are we willing to buy stolen property for some higher aim?” (p. 90).
22 Hoving, p. 315 (“Beirut was the cliché provenance for any smuggled antiquity out of Italy or Turkey.”).
23 Cuno, “Building Collections.”
Just in time for its purchase of the Aphrodite, in 1987, the Getty, established acquisition guidelines under which it would not even ask the marginal questions, but would only request warranties from dealers, even if they were known to be liars carrying fake documents (pp. 90-91, 218). Only for important objects, would the Getty approach the likely country of origin for information, even though these countries often lack resources to conduct the research needed to respond and, should they try, would rarely be able to identify an object looted out of the ground, since the only witnesses to its excavation will likely be the looters and smugglers themselves (p. 92).

It was obvious, even at the Getty, that finding antiquities acceptable to acquire because one has deliberately avoided asking the most important question — or stopped asking questions completely — was always a fool’s paradise (pp. 72, 92). The documents leaked to Felch and Frammolino show that Luis Monreal, director of the Getty Conservation Institute, warned museum director John Walsh: “You’re putting the Getty on a road to future disaster with foreign governments and public opinion.” (p. 92). True, herself, nailed the point at a meeting of the Association of Art Museum Directors in June 2000: “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.” (p. 190). Later, True went even further in her communications with the Italian prosecutors, telling them: “[t]he market in antiquities is perhaps the most corrupt and problematic aspect of the international art trade. Accepting the premise that the majority of antiquities on the market were likely to have been removed from their countries of origin illegally, can we justify collecting these objects at all?”  

Messrs. Felch and Frammolino present us with a series of critical decisions, as the Getty slid into apparent criminality — or close to it — and flailed about. While the authors underline moments of drama and irony — Getty lawyers concealing unpleasant documents (pp. 202, 263); Getty lawyers asking Greece about a statue rather than asking “the suspected source country,” Italy (p. 64); the Getty director defending the acquisition of a statue with documents he “believed were suspect” (p. 70); True challenging Italians for evidence that her prized statue of Aphrodite came from Italy, when she was already virtually certain that it did (pp. 88, 178) — they mostly leave the readers free to draw their own conclusions.

“True seems to have paid by far the heavier price and, some say, a disproportionate one.”

TRUE DIVided AGAINST HERSELF

It is remarkably odd, and yet central to Chasing Aphrodite, that True falls squarely on both sides of this divide. She publicly called for diligence and transparency in museum acquisitions and supported the concerns of source countries, just as she did with Cyprus (pp. 164, 185). At the same time, True was secretly examining looted art works in the possession of a questionable dealer (pp. 166-68). Most telling, True privately supported the Getty’s “do not ask the specific question” approach to diligence that was dangerously close to Peg Goldberg’s and later operated under the 1987 change that dropped asking questions altogether in favor of dealer warranties and letters to source countries. For example, concerning the documentation of the famous Getty Kouros, a possibly fake Greek 5th century B.C. statue of undetermined origin, which the museum bought for $9.5 million, Felch and Frammolino quote her as saying: “I do not think we should find out whether these letters were forged,” even though she believed the letters to be fraudulent (pp. 68, 71). Yet, she cited these same documents publicly in defending the Kouros acquisition (p. 79). Concerning a valuable funerary wreath purchased for $1.2 million, True told the Italians it had probably come from Greece and the Greeks that the Italians had claimed it as coming from Italy, but had


26 Concerning the Kouros documents, Arthur Houghton who was Interim Antiquities Director before True took over, warned: “While self-imposed ignorance of the facts in this case may offer some comfort in the short term, it lays the basis for profound embarrassment later” (p. 72).
found “nothing amiss” (p. 123). Both countries claimed it, and in spite of True’s twisting and turning, the Getty ultimately returned the wreath to Greece (p. 290).

Like the Kanakariá mosaics, the fifth century B.C. Aphrodite was always “too hot,” as an unnamed dealer is reported to have told Hoving at one point (p. 96). At the time that True was considering the acquisition, for example, Luis Monreal of the Getty Conservation Institute warned a colleague it was “a hot, hot potato” (pp. 91, 93), and, Felch and Frammolino show (presumably from leaked documents), that Monreal even took his fears to the museum director and then on to the Getty Trust CEO (p. 94).

The Aphrodite (Persephone) is a larger than life-size figure, elegantly carved in sandstone and marble with a flowing gown. Such statues usually come from southern Italy or Sicily (pp. 85, 87-88, 202). Given its size, distinctiveness and importance, Italy was certain to complain (p. 88). Before purchase, True inquired about the Aphrodite to archaeologist Malcolm Bell of the University of Virginia, who has devoted many years to excavating the Greek settlement at Morgantina in Sicily, saying the Getty does “not wish to pursue the acquisition in obvious disregard for the laws of Italy” (p. 99). Bell told True that he had never heard of the statue and had no proof of a connection to Morgantina. Given the style and material, however, it could have come from the vicinity, and Bell warned True to be careful (p. 100). Nevertheless, True sponsored the Board’s 1988 decision to acquire the Aphrodite, which, it turned out, occurred at the very same time that Italy was opening an investigation into the statue’s origins (p. 101). Almost immediately, news of Italy’s investigation ensnared the Getty in a highly public controversy that would last until it returned the Aphrodite to Italy in 2011 (pp. 105-06).

**TRUE AND THE GETTY HIT BOTTOM**

Felch and Frammolino report that the Getty’s practices were getting worse in the late 1980s and 1990s, just as other museums were becoming more aware of the need to be careful (pp. 164-65). In particular, the Getty established another, supposedly more ethical and self-protective, acquisitions policy in November 1995, under which the museum could acquire objects that had been documented as out of their country of origin before 1995, the date of adoption of the policy. That policy seemed to be a sham, however, when the Getty used it to justify acquiring the collection of Lawrence and Barbara Fleischman, whose poorly documented antiquities — including what many people thought were potentially hot items (pp. 132, 204) — had been published by the Getty itself just one year earlier in 1994 (p. 145).

According to Felch and Frammolino, Italian prosecutors came to believe that collectors Lawrence and Barbara Fleischman, whom True had wooed to the Getty, coordinated their antiquities purchases with True in the early 1990s (pp. 225-27, 248). The Fleischmans ultimately transferred much of their collection to the Getty, as part sale and part donation. Felch and Frammolino also suggest that True had shaped the transaction so that the Getty would purchase the better documented and therefore less risky objects from the Fleischmans for $20 million, while the Fleischmans would donate the more suspect pieces to the museum (without giving standard warranties) for a potential tax deduction of double that amount (p. 204).27

The undoing of True, the Getty, and others came with the rude discovery that many seemingly undocument-ed antiquities had, in fact, been carefully documented as looted (pp. 175-76). In 1995, Italian authorities raided a warehouse leased by Italian art dealer Giacomo Medici in the Freeport section of the Geneva airport and related locations. They uncovered boxes of documents, including Polaroid pictures of apparently looted objects — some showing the progression from dirt-covered and broken to modest reconstruction to masterful restoration (p. 175). There was even an organizational chart showing American dealer Robert Hecht at the top and Medici as one of the middlemen (p. 151).

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It was the ultimate collection of smoking guns, discussed in detail by Peter Watson and Cecilia Todeschini in *The Medici Conspiracy: The Illicit Journey of Looted Antiquities — From Italy’s Tomb Raiders to the World’s Greatest Museums*. The documents also play a major role in the unfolding Getty Museum / Marion True affair, as told by Felch and Frammolino. Square in the Italians’ crosshairs, the Getty found itself nearly defenseless, Felch and Frammolino suggest, since it had based its “optical due diligence” and “ask no questions” policies on the belief that undocumented antiquities would stay undocumented and, so, chickens of this particular kind would never come home to roost (pp. 89-90).

Before long, True was sued civilly and also indicted in Italy and Greece, the Greek criminal case being quickly dismissed on statute of limitations grounds. The Italians indicted Hecht and Medici in addition to True for conspiracy to traffic in looted antiquities. All denied the charges. After requesting an expedited trial, Medici was convicted (pp. 252-53). He appealed, but his final appeal was rejected by the Italian court. True’s trial in Italy, proceeding generally one day a month, dragged on, as noted above, for five years. It was well covered in 2007 by Hugh Eakin in *The New Yorker*; and was ultimately dismissed, as was the companion case against Hecht, both, as noted, on statute of limitations grounds.

True, however, had already seen her reputation severely damaged, thanks in large part to the reporting of Felch and Frammolino in the *Los Angeles Times*. As if her troubles weren’t enough, while True’s criminal case was pending, it came to light that she had earlier obtained a loan that may have come from an antiquities dealer to allow her to buy a home in the Greek isles (pp. 137-38, 264). *Chasing Aphrodite* relates that the Fleischmans agreed to take over True’s $400,000 debt, and funded their own loan to her at the same time that they were selling their antiquities to the Getty for millions (p. 146). True was forced to resign when the loans came to light.

**THE WAY HOME**

In 2007, without admitting guilt or wrongdoing, the Getty Museum agreed to return about forty valuable antiquities to Italy, including the Aphrodite (Persephone), but the Getty settlement did not get True off the hook on the criminal charges. That step was accomplished by the clock, which the Italians had not seemed to be watching — if they had ever intended to. The anti-climatic end of True’s criminal prosecution — much more with a whimper than a bang — left the art trade and museums wondering what the Italians had ever really been about, other than making an example of True and getting back as many objects as they could, rather than seeking to hold her responsible for her alleged actions or asserting some matter of principle (pp. 226, 231-32, 312).

True’s indictment and trial shocked American museums, opening up, as it did, the possibility that other curators could be prosecuted in foreign countries. To address this threat, in 2006, the Getty revised its acquisitions guidelines again, joining only a handful of institutions, including Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, that required, for ancient and archaeological materials, a documented provenance back to 1970, the date of signing of the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (p. 296). The Getty’s adoption of this much stricter acquisition policy was extremely influential say Felch and Frammolino (p. 298). Since 2008, the Getty’s policy became codified in the antiquities acquisition guidelines of the two major U.S. museum associations: the Association of Art Museum Directors and the American Association of Museums.

According to Felch and Frammolino, True and the Getty have paid for their misdeeds, and the museum world is a better place because they have. True seems to have paid by far the heavier price and, some say, a disproportionate one. The authors conclude: “True, at once the greatest sinner and the greatest champion of reform, has been made to pay for the crimes of American museums.” (p. 312). In his own review of *Chasing Aphrodite*, Malcolm Bell
concludes that True’s “contributions outweigh her mistakes,” and that if he were “today to be asked to recommend someone to fill a major museum position, she would be the first person to come to [his] mind.” The authors leave it to us to make our own judgments on the impact of True’s highly visible double-talking combined with her now-revealed secret-dealing may have had on museum reputations generally, but some points Felch and Frammolino make clear: True and the Getty were not alone in heedless collecting and True’s recklessness was accepted and validated by an institution with deeply flawed governance structures and procedures (pp. 71-73, 198-99, 205, 215-16, 218, 240-242, 247-51, 263, 268-71, 305).

“The Getty has reformed its collecting policies to become a model of ethical behavior.”

In another twist to this tale, Cuno, who remains one of the most vocal critics of “nationalist retentionist cultural property laws” of source countries and an outspoken advocate of the right of museums to acquire unprovenanced antiquities, became Director of the Getty Trust, parent of the Getty Museum in 2011. Led by the Getty, the Metropolitan and the MFA, Boston, the shift of the American museum community to more cooperative and collaborative dealings with source countries seems well-rooted, and Cuno says he intends to abide fully by the Getty’s highly restrictive new acquisition policy, even though he has long maligned the rule that would require museums to restrict themselves to acquiring only objects that can be documented back to 1970. Cuno explains his position by saying that the Getty’s 1970-based policy helps the institution preserve its relationships with source countries and continue its conservation work around the world.

Cuno also made clear that in filling the vacancy for the position of director of the Getty Museum, he sought someone with “an appetite for risk in acquiring extraordinary works of art.” He has selected Timothy Potts, a former archaeologist who has served as director of the Kimbell Art Museum in Ft. Worth, Texas, and, since then, at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Pro-collecting, highly experienced and respected, Potts has been involved in formulating museum association antiquities policies and has weathered at least one matter involving antiquities of questionable provenance while at the Kimbell. There can be little doubt that Felch and Frammolino, who have set up a website — chasingaphrodite.com — to monitor issues covered in their book, will be watching the Getty’s next steps closely; the rest of us will be awaiting further developments as this continuing saga unfolds.


34 Ibid.