A Tangled

Priceless artifacts return to Italy and Greece, but their histories remain lost.

by Eti Bonn-Muller *and* Eric A. Powell

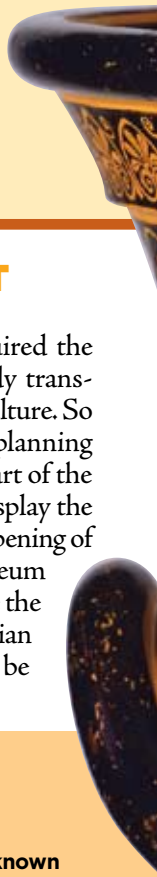
Antiquities dealers Robert Hecht and Giacomo Medici should have tidied up their desks. Raids by the Italian police in 1995 and 2000 yielded a mountain of evidence—from photos of Greek and Roman artifacts still in the ground to Hecht's handwritten memoir—that showed exactly how the two had been trafficking looted antiquities through the international art market for decades ("Raiding the Tomb Raiders," July/August 2006). Their clients included, among others, three preeminent American cultural institutions: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu.

Italy and Greece were simultaneously outraged and delighted with the news. Their long-standing suspicions were confirmed: artifacts recently acquired by major museums had been looted from their soil. And they jumped at the opportunity to get them back. Years of negotiations in the style of a Greek tragedy finally paid off and have resulted in some delicately worded agreements providing for repatriations and reciprocal long-term loans.

The following pages showcase a handful of the 62 artifacts that have been (or are slated to be) repatriated from the Met, the MFA, and the Getty, as well as pieces from the Getty that are still the subject of heated negotiations. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Princeton University Art Museum, and Toledo Museum of Art, among others, have also received official requests to return artifacts.

The recent wave of repatriations has led museums to scale back, if not cease, purchasing artifacts with questionable provenances, or ownership histories. This change in practice is welcome, but as David Gill, an archaeologist at the University of Swansea points out, "There is sadly little to celebrate over the return of these antiquities. [They] represent destroyed archaeological contexts, scientific knowledge lost forever; and even the best scholarship cannot retrieve this information." While the return of these objects may represent a victory of sorts over the illegal antiquities market, Gill insists that "energetic calls for the repatriation of antiquities, however justified, would be better spent in calling for the protection of archaeological sites."

See www.archaeology.org for updates on this story, as well as the ongoing antiquities trafficking trials in Rome of Robert Hecht and former Getty curator Marion True.



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

New York, New York

Although the Met maintains that it acquired the artifacts in good faith, the museum has already transferred title of 21 objects to Italy's Ministry of Culture. So far, the Met has sent back four terracotta vessels and is planning to return the other objects over the next few years. As part of the 2006 agreement, the Ministry is allowing the Met to display the remaining pieces for a while longer to coincide with the opening of the museum's new Greek and Roman galleries. The museum also announced that, in return, the Ministry will provide the Met with future loans of up to four years each, per Italian law. Language in the agreement stipulates that the loans be "works of art of equivalent beauty and importance."

Attic red-figured calyx-krater, ca. 515 B.C., signed by Euphronios as painter and by Euxitheos as potter
18 inches tall

By now, the story of the "Euphronios krater" is so well known that it could be told as an epic poem in hexametric verse. In short, the Met purchased it in the early 1970s from Robert Hecht. Soon after, rumors flew that the piece had been stolen from a tomb in Cerveteri, an Etruscan site north of Rome. For more than 30 years the Met insisted the artifact had a reliable provenance, but evidence gathered in the Italian police raids proved otherwise.

This calyx-krater ("calyx" referring to its flower-like shape and "krater" to its function as a vessel for mixing wine and water) is well preserved and finely crafted, not to mention that it is signed by both its painter and its potter—making it rare and valuable. It is a masterpiece of vase painting from Attica, the region surrounding Athens. On one side is a view of Sleep and Death lifting the body of Sarpedon, a son of Zeus who was allied with the Trojans. In the graphic scene, streams of blood spurt from the slain hero's limp, muscular body which features details as fine as his delicate eyelashes and tiny toenail cuticles.

STATUS: The Met will return the krater to Italy in January 2008; until then, it is on display at the museum.

Journey Home

Emblem from a 16-piece Hellenistic silver collection, late 3rd century B.C.
About 4 inches in diameter

This emblem is part of a hoard of 16 pieces of Hellenistic silver—some of the finest to survive from the Greek colonies in southern Italy and Sicily. After the Met purchased the collection in the early 1980s, Malcolm Bell III, professor of art history at the University of Virginia and co-director of excavations at Morgantina in eastern Sicily, called their provenance into question. Bell seized the unique opportunity to excavate the area of the site from which he believed the pieces were illegally unearthed. He discovered coins that provided the hoard with a specific date, allowing archaeologists to re-create the context in which they were buried. Eventually he also linked inscriptions on the artifacts to a Morgantina family.

This piece is decorated with a relief of Scylla, a Homeric female sea monster, hurling a boulder. In Greek mythology, she worked with Charybdis, a whirlpool, to trap sailors. Bell told ARCHAEOLOGY the emblem was once mounted in a cup and that it was "intended to be read as an amusing admonitory message to a drinker." It would have held wine, which when swirled against the imagery (and consumed too quickly) symbolically left the reveler caught between a rock and a hard place.

STATUS: On display at the Met. The museum will return the entire hoard to Italy in 2010. Then the collection will travel between Italy and the Met 10 times over the next 40 years.

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Boston, Massachusetts

In 2005, Italian authorities submitted to the MFA a dossier of 42 artifacts in the museum's collection, 16 of which were linked with Robert Hecht. The dealer is thought to have sold or given the MFA more than 1,000 objects during his career (all of which are suspected of being looted). A year later, the MFA transferred title of 13 of the antiquities to Italy, which dispersed them to regional museums after a special exhibition in Rome.

Unlike the Met, the MFA sent all 13 artifacts back right away. The Italian Ministry of Culture has pledged to develop future partnerships with the museum, including the loan of significant objects to the MFA. The first of those pieces, a spectacular marble statue of Eirene, goddess of peace, is now on display in Boston.

Laconian black-figured kylix, 6th century B.C.
Almost 8 inches in diameter

The Met returned this kylix, or drinking cup, soon after the museum reached its agreement with Italy. The piece was especially rare in the Met's collection of artifacts from Laconia, the region of southern Greece dominated by Sparta until the second century B.C. In the vessel's central scene, a hoplite (infantryman) stands opposite a figure putting on shin guards. The piece shows that while Laconia was known for its martial prowess, the region also produced skilled artists.

STATUS: The Met returned this kylix to Italy. In exchange, the Italians lent the museum another Laconian kylix in November 2006. The loan piece, from a tomb in Cerveteri (where the "Euphronios krater" was unearthed), will be on display in the museum until November 2010.

Marble statue of Sabina, ca. A.D. 136
6 feet tall

This statue depicts Sabina, wife of the Roman emperor Hadrian, who reigned from A.D. 117 to 138. The piece is modeled on a Greek statue from the fourth century B.C. Its precise find spot will never be known, but it's likely that the statue was looted from a temple where the Imperial family was worshipped. It would also have contained a statue of Hadrian.

The MFA purchased the statue in 1979 from Swiss dealer Fritz Bürki, who claimed to have bought the piece from an aristocratic family in Bavaria. Robert Hecht acted as agent for the transaction.

STATUS: Returned to Italy

Apulian vase, 320–310 B.C.
31 inches tall

This Early Hellenistic vase, from Apulia, in southern Italy, depicts the abduction of the princess Hippodameia by Pelops. According to myth, her father King Oenomaus promised Hippodameia's hand in marriage to anyone who could best him in a chariot race, though a second-place finish would mean decapitation. The hero Pelops bribed the royal retinue to sabotage the king's chariot, and rode off with his new bride (and his head).

The scene was painted by an artist known today as the "White Sakkos Painter," who often depicted women wearing white *sakkoi*, or headdresses. Boston University archaeologist Ricardo Elia has shown that about 96 percent of Apulian vases have no known find spot, and probably came from thousands of plundered tombs. Some of the larger vessels such as this one may have been used as grave markers, but without knowing their archaeological contexts, it's impossible to determine how they were used in antiquity.

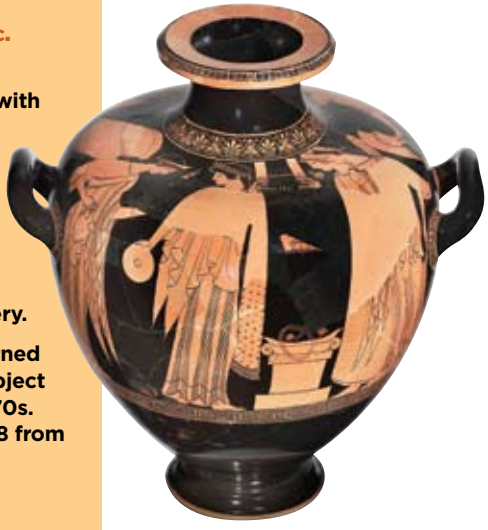
STATUS: Returned to Italy

Water jar depicting Apollo, ca. 485 B.C.
16 inches tall

This vase shows Apollo filling a bowl with wine, an offering to the goddesses Leto, his mother, and Artemis, his sister, who stand on either side of him. The scene was created by an artist known today as the "Berlin Painter," an important classical Greek vase painter who contributed to the development of Attic red-figure pottery.

Like many of the pieces recently returned to Italy by American museums, this object first surfaced in Switzerland in the 1970s. The museum acquired the vase in 1978 from Fritz Bürki.

STATUS: Returned to Italy



J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM

Malibu, California

A relatively young institution, the Getty has amassed an extensive collection in the past few decades by aggressively buying ancient art, a practice that left it with many objects of dubious provenance.

In 2005 the Italian government challenged the Getty on 52 objects in its collection, while Greek authorities renewed their campaign to repatriate four Getty acquisitions. The museum reached an agreement with Greece and returned the four objects last spring. However, negotiations between the Getty and Italy have broken down, despite the museum's agreement to repatriate 26 antiquities. At issue is the Getty's refusal to recognize Italy's claim to the bronze statue of a victorious youth (opposite page) found off the country's Adriatic coast. At press time, negotiations with Italy remained suspended.

Limestone and marble statue of a cult goddess, ca. 400 B.C.
7.5 feet tall

Reports of a large statue being looted from the ancient Greek city of Morgantina in Sicily in 1979 may refer to this piece, a depiction of a goddess. Her head and arms were fashioned of marble and set on a limestone body, typical of statues made in Sicily during this period.

When the Getty bought the statue in 1988 for $18 million, museum employees noticed that dirt was still present in its folds, a clue that the goddess had been recently unearthed—and likely looted. The statue's fine condition means it may have been taken from inside the remains of a temple, which if identified would be a clue to which goddess the statue depicts. She might represent Aphrodite, Hera, Demeter, or still another deity, but because the piece was illegally unearthed we will never know.

STATUS: The Getty is studying the statue's provenance and has pledged to make a decision on whether or not to return the statue to Italy by the end of this year.

Marble table support in the form of griffins attacking a doe, 325–300 B.C.
About 3 feet tall

This sculpture depicts two griffins devouring a fallen deer, symbolizing the victory of the civilized world over barbarians. Carved from a single block of marble, the artifact still retains some paint on its surface.

Italian authorities suspect the sculpture, a signature piece of the Getty's collection, was looted from the countryside near the southeastern Italian town of Foggia. Photographs seized in the raid of Medici's warehouse office show the sculpture in the trunk of a car. One of the objects that the Getty has agreed in principle to return, it remains in California, pending the outcome of negotiations.

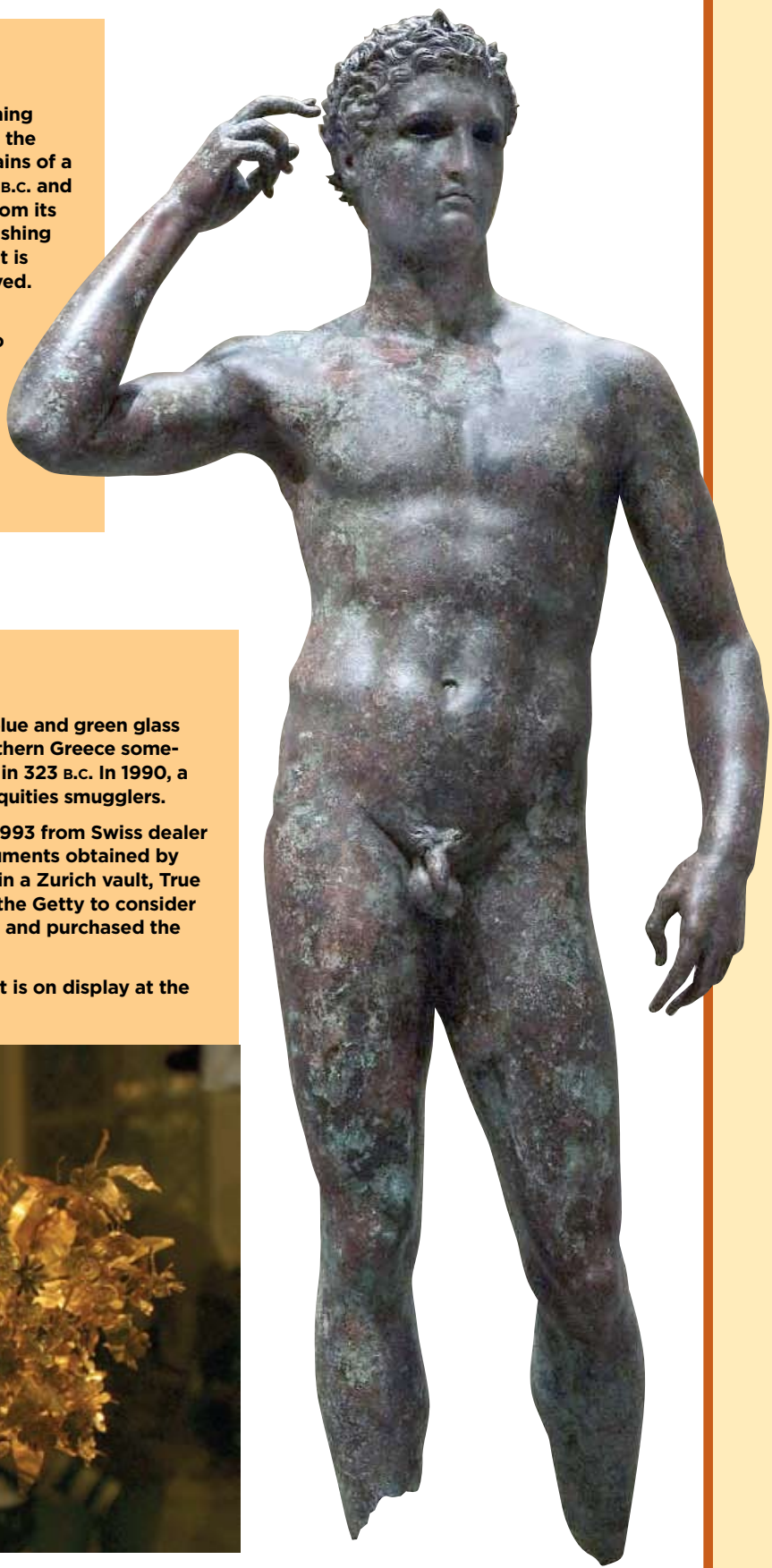
STATUS: On display at the Getty Villa

Statue of a victorious youth, 300–100 B.C.
5 feet tall

This bronze sculpture depicts a young athlete crowning himself with an olive wreath, the prize for a victor in the Olympic Games. The sculpture comes from the remains of a Roman shipwreck dating to sometime between 100 B.C. and A.D. 100. The vessel sank while carrying the statue from its original location in Greece. Caught in the nets of a fishing trawler in the Adriatic off the coast of Italy in 1964, it is one of the few life-size Greek bronzes to have survived.

The Getty maintains that because the sculpture was discovered in international waters it is not subject to Italian claims, while Italy insists that the bronze came under its jurisdiction when it was brought ashore. The stalemate over this statue is the biggest obstacle to the Getty and Italy reaching a comprehensive repatriation agreement.

STATUS: On display at the Getty Villa



Gold wreath, 4th century B.C.
About 10 inches in diameter

This funerary wreath of gold leaves decorated with blue and green glass paste was buried in an elite Macedonian tomb in northern Greece sometime not long after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. In 1990, a farmer excavated the grave and sold his finds to antiquities smugglers.

Getty curator Marion True purchased the wreath in 1993 from Swiss dealer Christoph Leon. According to internal museum documents obtained by the *Los Angeles Times*, after first seeing the wreath in a Zurich vault, True wrote Leon that the piece was "too dangerous" for the Getty to consider buying. Six months later, True had a change of heart and purchased the rare artifact.

STATUS: The Getty returned this wreath to Greece. It is on display at the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.