

ARTS & BOOKS

[Christie's, Sotheby's and Getty in antiquity smuggling row](#)

By Anne Claire NAYROLLES & Morgane ZUCCHI

The recent discovery of a cache of looted antiquities in a luxury villa on a tiny Greek island has opened yet another chapter in the now heavy volume on antiquity trafficking.



Photography released by Greece's Culture ministry

On April 12 2006, the Greek authorities found an illicit collection in the antiquities-rich Cyclades island chain, Schoinoussa. The cache was composed of around 300 artefacts, like marble busts, statues, and granite sphinx dating from the Classical, Hellenistic and Byzantine periods. The country's culture minister described the haul as "one of the most important ever".

Many of the finds appeared to have been bought at the Christie's and Sotheby's auction houses between 2001 and 2005, without national authorities having been previously informed (as Greek law requires). A Sotheby's spokesman said : "We are aware only that boxes were apparently found with Sotheby's and Christie's names on them"* and "We have not been contacted by any authorities in Greece, but of course if we are contacted we will cooperate"*. The Greek police and judiciary have to inquire and investigate whether these great auction houses were actually involved in illegal artefacts trafficking.

The J. Paul Getty Museum of Los Angeles is also a suspect, even if the Greek authorities do not want to rush to conclusions. It's not the first time that the Getty finds itself at the center of such scandals. Officials in Italy and Greece already identified scores of allegedly looted artefacts in the collection of the museum. Now a villa situated near Schoinoussa and owned by the Getty's former antiquities curator, Marion True, was raided by the police. More than a dozen illegal artefacts were found. Ms True is currently on trial in Rome where she is accused of having bought looted objects on behalf of the museum. The Italian government wants 52 artifacts returned.

Tensions between Greece and the Getty started a decade ago when Greece laid claim to four ancient treasures, allegedly smuggled out of the country as part of a booming illicit trade. The museum has long acknowledged having assembled its collection with the help of private collectors, from material on the open market with little archaeological information. But in the wake of this recent discovery on Schoinoussa, Michael Brand, the new director of the Getty Museum, has just travelled to Athens to meet Culture minister Giorgos Voulgarakis in Athens. Mr Brand pledged he would "recommend to the board of trustees of the museum the return of some of the claimed antiquities in the near future."**

So these latest finds are probably but the beginning of a long treasure hunt involving other villas in Europe and other institutions in America and elsewhere.

Sources: *« Illegal Antiquities Cache Prompts Greek Inquiry, » *The New York Times* 19 April 2006.

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« Priceless Relics Found at Greek Villa linked to Smuggling Ring, » *The Guardian* 19 April 2006.

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