

by Patricia Arrigoni

Italian journalist Cecilia Todeschini became involved in the question of art looting when she was asked to do some research for a television documentary about Peter Watson's work on the subject. Eventually the two co-authored "The Medici Conspiracy: the Illicit Journey of Looted Antiquities From Italy's Tomb Raiders to the World's Great Museums" (Public Affairs).

MEDICI CONSPIRACY - 'The Medici Conspiracy, the Illicit Journey of Looted Antiquities From Italy's Tomb Raiders to the World's Great Museums,' is a true-life thriller. CNS Photo courtesy of Public Affairs.

EXPOSED IT ALL - Cecilia Todeschini, an Italian journalist, became involved in the question of art looting through a television documentary about Peter Watson's research into the subject, when she was asked to do some research. Later, after she met Watson, she began to work with him and co-authored 'The Medici Conspiracy.' CNS Photo courtesy of Public Affairs. In a recent conversation with Todeschini, she talked first about Giacomo Medici, an Italian already convicted in 2004 for smuggling and selling ancient antiquities. He has been sentenced to 10 years in prison plus given a 10 million euro fine, but he is still waiting for his court appeal to be resolved. He declares himself innocent on all charges.

"He served, I believe, six days in 1995 or '96," Todeschini said. "There are some legal problems over a law passed by the former Berlusconi government which shortens the statute of limitations and has been challenged as being unconstitutional if applied unequally. He can't leave the country, though."

She also discussed the ongoing trial in Rome of Marion True, former curator of antiquities of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, Calif., and Robert Hecht Jr., another American who lives in Europe, for conspiracy to traffic in illegal antiquities. In November 2006, the government of Greece added their charges against True of knowingly buying a stolen ancient artifact, a golden wreath, which was sold to the Getty for \$1.15 million in 1993.

"The situation involves me personally," Todeschini said, "because anybody who cares about history and culture and the knowledge that our past can give us finds it unacceptable that curators of great museums have bought objects they could not have not known were looted. They should be the ones to protect archaeology."

"For decades they were the buyers who could pay millions of dollars and by doing so encouraged looters to destroy tomb after tomb. I find this very difficult to forgive, even more than the tomb robbers. I hold them less responsible than a great collector or archaeologist who considers himself a protector of art.

"I have seen dozens of looted tombs in Puglia (Apulia in ancient times), and it makes your hair stand on end. There is total destruction. There are tooth marks of mechanical diggers in the structures. These structures could have told us so much if they had not been brutally emptied of sizable artifacts. Only broken vases are sometimes found.

"Archaeologists know this. How could they have allowed it to happen?"

She credits some museums with doing the right thing, however.

"The Boston Museum of Fine Arts returned 13 objects to Italy, amongst which were three Apulian vases and six magnificent Attic vases. There was also a statue of Vibia Sabina, Emperor Hadrian's wife, over 2 meters high.

"I was there when the artifacts were shown to the press in Rome on Sept. 28, 2006. Malcolm Rogers, director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, who returned them said, 'This is the beginning of a new era.' He meant that looted art would no longer be bought and stolen artifacts would be returned to their origin. I thanked him as an Italian.

"'That era is finished,' he said. Now the Boston Museum has signed an agreement for loans of archaeological artifacts from Italy to be shown in their museum. The Italian minister of culture went to Boston and brought objects for a long-term loan."

Other situations have increased the hope that the selling of looted artifacts has become more difficult.

"A couple of months ago it was made public that 12 slabs of marble from a first century B.C. funerary monument with carvings in bas-relief of gladiators had been discovered," she said. "These were terribly important. It turned out that the slabs had been on the market for four years and had found no buyers. Fifteen years ago there would have been a race to buy them up.

"They were found by chance by an Italian man digging a road in Fiano Romano near Rome. He was not a professional tomb robber, but he did not notify authorities because he thought this could make him a fortune. He photographed and then reburied 11 of the slabs and left one to show to prospective buyers. They turned out to be too important to be sold. The man was caught red-handed and finally took authorities to the site when he had dug them up.

"The fact that there was not a single buyer, I believe, is the result of the court cases now going on. It has become very clear that no museum will buy looted archaeological artifacts from Greece or Italy, but will they still purchase unprovenanced items from places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Peru, Mexico, Egypt or Syria?"

Todeschini is encouraged by current Italian inquiries.

"Gen. Roberto Conforti, when he was the head of the Italian Carabinieri Art Unit, was an extraordinary driving force in these investigations. His suggestion of establishing a legal international market for antiquities in which all items for sale would first be registered with appropriate governments, could be effective. It might not be easy to do this. If we aim sky high, we might reach something halfway up. Each object would be approved by the country of origin."

As to the famous pottery fragments of vases sold to the Getty museum: "They are what the tombaroli (tomb raiders) call 'little orphans.' I can't say if they were deliberately broken. Most vases are found in fragments. If

any are found intact, they would probably be found in Italy in a chamber tomb.

"I grew up in Cape Town, South Africa. When I returned to Italy over 40 years ago, I was in Southern Italy, in Calabria, and working in an entirely different field. One night at a dinner party the conversation turned to plowing fields and sometimes finding artifacts or tombs. A man said, 'We break the vases, then number the pieces. It makes it easier to send them to Switzerland.'

"These pieces that are found may have been deliberately broken or broken during an unscientific dig. Often if they are fragments of a very important vase, when the vase is put together, several pieces are held back. The buyer is then shown a Polaroid photo of a missing piece. There are several known cases of this. The owner of the vase would pay anything to get the missing fragment and complete the vase.

"According to Getty documents, that museum purchased fragments of the priceless Euphronios/Onesimos red-figured Attic kylix depicting scenes of the Trojan War (a drinking vessel that was returned to Italy in 1999) over a period of 10 years. It is difficult to maintain they were not aware that the fragments were looted. The dealer would not put all the fragments onto the market, but they would photograph the missing pieces. They would be used as a hook - 'You buy this vase and I will give you this fragment.'

"The fragments were split among the dealers, such as Robert Hecht, Giacomo Medici and others. Although they were rivals, they worked together. They would say, 'You can sell it on my behalf.'

Todeschini acknowledges that she has not heard back from any of the museum curators or trustees to whom she and co-author Watson sent "The Medici Conspiracy."

"The book has not gone down very well with the museum curators and directors, but we see the beginning of the end to this disgraceful epic. An object is beautiful, it tells a story, but it tells us nothing about the family in whose tomb it was found or about other objects in the tomb.

"Some years ago I visited the Etruscan Museum in Rome to see an exhibit. Among the objects on display was a simple silver earring like kids wear today, one of many on an ear. Because the dig was done scientifically, they went in with a pathologist who examined the bones and found they were male. So it was determined that the earring was worn by a man clear back then. If that dig had been done by a looter, he would have gotten nothing for the earring, so he would probably have discarded it and we would not have known that."

A paperback edition of "The Medici Conspiracy" that will be released June 11 contains a new chapter on Greece written by Nikolas Zirganos, a Greek investigative journalist, that parallels the looting of tombs in Italy, smuggling and selling the stolen ancient artifacts.

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Arts and Leisure: 'The Medici Conspiracy' co-author discusses art looting in Italy by Patricia Arrigoni