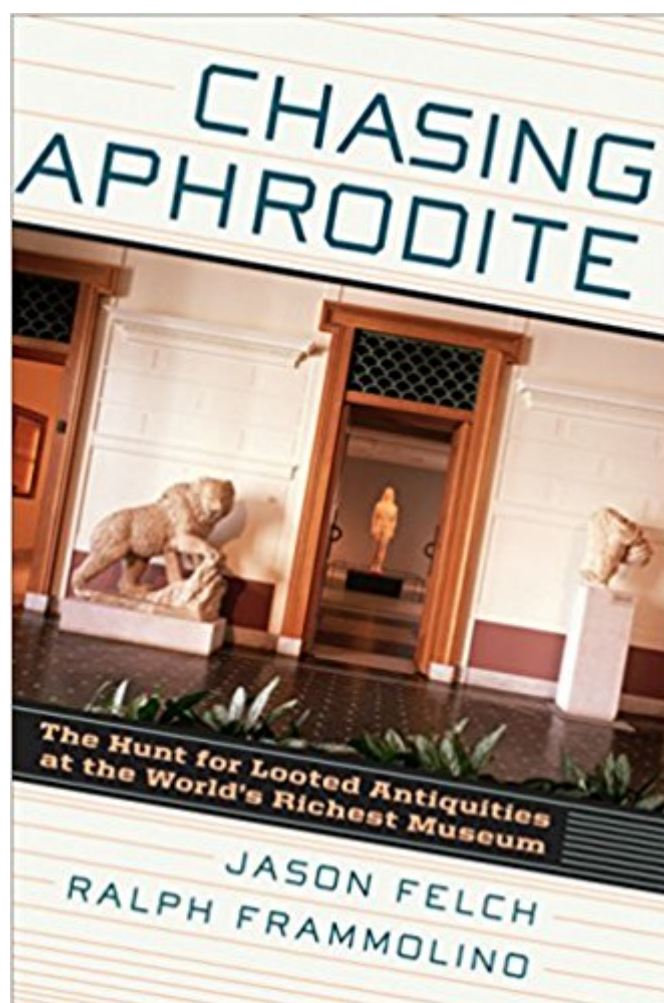


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# Chasing Aphrodite: The Hunt For Looted Antiquities At The World's Richest Museum



## Synopsis

In recent years, several of America's leading art museums have voluntarily given up their finest pieces of classical art to the governments of Italy and Greece. The monetary value is estimated at over half a billion dollars. Why would they be moved to such unheard-of generosity? The answer lies at the Getty, one of the world's richest and most troubled museums, and scandalous revelations that it had been buying looted antiquities for decades. Drawing on a trove of confidential museum records and frank interviews, Felch and Frammolino give us a fly-on-the-wall account of the inner workings of a world-class museum and tell the story of the Getty's dealings in the illegal antiquities trade. The outlandish characters and bad behavior could come straight from the pages of a thriller—the wealthy recluse founder, the cagey Italian art investigator, the playboy curator, the narcissist CEO—but their chilling effects on the rest of the art world have been all too real, as the authors show in novelistic detail. Fast-paced and compelling, *Chasing Aphrodite* exposes the layer of dirt beneath the polished façade of the museum business.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In an authoritative account, two reporters who led a Los Angeles Times investigation, reveal the details of the Getty Museum's illicit purchases, from smugglers and fences, of looted Greek and Roman antiquities. In 2005, the Italians indicted former Getty curator Marion True for trafficking in looted antiquities, and by 2007, after protracted negotiations, the Getty agreed to return 40 of 46 artifacts demanded by the Italian government; Italy in turn agreed to loan the Getty comparable objects. One of the major pieces lost by the Getty was an Aphrodite statue

purchased by True to put the Getty on the map. But still eluding the Italians is the Getty Bronze, a statue of an athlete hauled out of international waters in 1964 by Italian fishermen; it was the prized acquisition of the Getty's first antiquities curator, Jiri Frel, who brought thousands more looted antiquities into the museum through a tax-fraud scheme. The authors offer an excellent recap of the museum's misdeeds, brimming with tasty details of the scandal that motivated several of America's leading art museums to voluntarily return to Italy and Greece some 100 classical antiquities worth more than half a billion dollars. 8 pages of b&w photos. (May) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved.

"America's great art museums are the last sacred cows of our culture. It takes a special sort of intrepid investigator backed by a courageous organization to uncover the secrets and lies of these quasi-public institutions and the private agendas of their wealthy and influential patrons. Chasing Aphrodite is the result of one such rare convergence. A scary, true tale of the blinding allure of great art and the power of the wealth that covets it, it is also an inspiring example of the only greater power: the truth." - Michael Gross, author of *Rogues' Gallery: The Secret History of the Moguls and the Money That Made the Metropolitan Museum*"A thrilling, well-researched book that offers readers a glimpse into the back-room dealings of a world-class museum--and the illegal trade of looted antiquities. Chasing Aphrodite should not be missed." - Ulrich Boser, author of *THE GARDNER HEIST: The True Story of the World's Largest Unsolved Art Theft*"Chasing Aphrodite is an epic story that, from the first page, grabs you by the lapels and won't let go. Jason Felch and Ralph Frammolino have penetrated the inner sanctum of one of the world's most powerful museums, exposing how its caretakers "blinded by greed, arrogance and self-deception" eagerly tapped international networks of criminals in pursuit of the next great masterpiece. It is a breathtaking tale that I guarantee will keep you reading late into the night. - Kurt Eichenwald, author of *CONSPIRACY OF FOOLS: A True Story*"Chasing Aphrodite is a brilliantly told, richly detailed, and vitally important account of how one of America's top cultural institutions spent millions buying treasures stolen from ancient graves and then spent millions more trying to deny it. In the hands of Felch and Frammolino, the story gathers a riveting momentum as the Getty moves from one ethical smashup to another. The authors present an astonishing array of evidence, yet they are scrupulously balanced and keenly sensitive to the nuances of the cultural-property debate. Even if you think you know the story of the Getty, read this book. You won't know whether to laugh or to cry, but you will be enthralled." - Roger Atwood, author of *Stealing History: Tomb Raiders, Smugglers, and the Looting of the Ancient World*

The stories of illegally excavated art investigated in this book span decades of smuggling, legal battles, and near constant prevarication on the part of museums. It's a fascinating look at corruption and hypocrisies in museums, all the more interesting and surprising (to me, at least) because I wasn't familiar with these pieces of art or the Getty's legal woes before picking up this book. When one thinks about it, it's not remotely surprising that many of the antiquities displayed around the world in museums are looted or illegally exported, given the historical plunder of source countries. What's surprising is the complicity of museums, and the lengths to which the world's leading museums went to protect their acquisitions' veneer of legitimacy. The Getty and other museums used their missions of public education as an excuse to build prestige by acquiring looted antiquities, all the while declaring their devotion to legitimizing the antiquities trade. It's an amazingly well researched book. Complicated import/export laws, museum policies, and foreign legal proceedings are explained in a way that is easy for someone completely unfamiliar, such as myself, can easily follow.

I NEVER knew museums were into such skulduggery ! I always assumed that with their cultured airs they were cultured people of cultured tastes and impeccable standards. This book was an amazing education on how museums come by their valuable collections. This book centers on a particular scandal however, it is hard to imagine that this does not continue to some degree today. The looting of antiquities to fill the worlds' leading museums and the originating countries' fights to get the items back is a riveting read. Most museums required "incontrovertible " absolute proof of an item's being looted and sold through the black market before they would give it back to the requesting country. It was noted that this is tougher proof than is required for a murder trial ! Acquiring the treasured item....not so much proof needed. Giving it back.....more proof needed than to convict a murderer ! Amazing. It's a great read. Highly recommend it even if you're not a museum buff and familiar with all the antiquities being discussed.

Wow - reads like a thriller and packed full of information. Not only does the author expose the ugly history of looted antiquities, but he skillfully sets forth the historical conundrum. If some of the antiquities had not been preserved in American and European museums they might not have survived war and destruction. But shouldn't countries have a right to their patrimony? Even now, archeological and cultural items are being destroyed in Iraq and Syria. The brilliance of "Chasing Aphrodite" is that it puts the issues in historical context and doesn't settle for an easy answer. He

tells the story through the characters and highlights moral failures of the characters. Bravo for telling the story, weaving a thrilling tale, and focusing on the broader issues. Thank you! I will never visit a museum again without thinking of this book.

Just as money can tempt the integrity of most anyone, so can people be enamored by the beauty and mystique of centuries old artifacts. If money is no object, a museum can pursue multiple opportunities in the effort to curate important works for their galleries. How this was done, and the international efforts to prosecute illegal buying and selling, led to even more complex strategies to influence the false valuation of artifacts that fed the world market for antiquities. By the end of the first chapter you may think you have heard it all, but by then of the book, you are baffled by the depth of denial and arrogance some people possess. This is a non-fiction suitable for a box-office hit drama screenplay.

Fascinating blow by blow of the misadventures at the Getty Museum, its poor management & how one curator ultimately took a dive for the affair. I know personally one of the key actors in the drama who has confirmed to me that the books description is basically accurate. As a collector of art from a different area & period of the past, the problems of provenance and evidence of when a given piece left its country of origin is very familiar

I once lived in Los Angeles and was somewhat familiar with some of the places where this all happened. It's a great discussion of the ethics of acquisition of antiquities. It also takes the reader from an old fashioned concept of collecting to modern thinking on the topic. In the "old days" if someone dug up ancient artifacts, they could take keep it, but Italy, Greece, and other ancient birthplaces of culture eventually came to the conclusion that foreigners were stealing their heritage. Treaties among nations even wrestled the issue. It's written on the level of a "thriller." I highly recommend this book for those interested in the subject.

This book is a masterly arrangement of a huge mass of varied material into a readable book. The authors describe the once accepted view that it was better for antiques to be kept in atmosphere controlled galleries/museums rather than be allowed to deteriorate in the places where they were found, or kept in the country where they were discovered. It describes how wealthy collectors vied with each other to acquire such pieces even where the authenticity was unproven or suspect and despite the damage that occurred during looting. The sites were often found by accident and then

dug up without care for the object. Furthermore the looters did not hesitate to break large items into smaller pieces in order to ship them more easily. A collateral was of course that the piece was worth a whole lot less than the complete statue, vase or whatever. This book is a real 'page turner' and I thoroughly recommend it to anyone interested in collecting, museums or preserving the past.

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