

Crackdown on Culture Crime: Italy's Proud Carabinieri Art Squad

Judith Harris (January 17, 2010)



The message: it works! Italy's campaign to crack down on thefts of its treasures of art and archaeology has borne fruit, and the proof is in the statistics in the year-end report, released January 14 in Rome by General Giovanni Nistri, head of Italy's crack Carabinieri art squad.

ROME - Cultural heritage thefts were down by 14.5 percent in 2009 over the previous year. In addition, some 60,000 looted artifacts—from ancient to modern paintings, precious inlaid Baroque furniture, archaeological artifacts, fine items of church décor and rare books—were recovered during 2009 for a total estimated value of almost \$240 million. During the three-year period 2007-09 all crime has decreased, with thefts of cultural heritage dropping from 1,031 in 2008 to 882 in 2009.

Two of the most important recovered items—a Roman-era fresco painting hacked out of a wall and a precious black-figure decorated ceremonial Greek pot with handles (krater)—stolen from Italy but turned up recently at the auction house of Christie's in New York.

Most recently the campaign to protect the nation's cultural heritage has showcased the ongoing trial in Rome of two Americans, former Getty Museum curator Marion True and the elderly Paris-based



dealer Robert Hecht. As a result of this highly publicized trial, the Getty Museum, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Cleveland Art Museum have all returned items which the Italians demonstrated were looted from its territory. This three-pronged effort to throttle clandestine looting and sales involved the successful coordination with the Culture Heritage Ministry, the Carabinieri, and prosecutors and magistrates.

The advent of the Internet has both helped and hindered the illicit traffic. Specialized and general-interest web sites frequently sell looted items, but at the same time the Carabinieri-created website showing illustrations of stolen artifacts has been a successful tool. An example is the Pompeian fresco which had been stored for decades in a museum warehouse. No one knew when it was removed from storage, but in 1997 it was declared missing, and, thanks to the Internet, was found at Christie's before it could be stolen.

One disappointing setback: a father-son team Lebanese art restorers working in Switzerland, known as the Burki, were implicated with Robert Hecht. Some 500 archaeological items were seized from them but bureaucratic delays with justice officials in Switzerland meant that the statute of limitations ran out, and all the artifacts had to be returned to them. At present, according to the Carabinieri, of the 500 items, only 137 remain in the Burki possession.

Archaeological theft is particularly important because by definition the looted items have no provenance certification, as would be required for selling, say, master works by Renaissance artists. For this reason independent experts like Prof. Noah Charney estimate archaeological thefts to amount to about three-quarters of the total. To address this, the Carabinieri now patrol the territory in helicopters and low-flying airplanes, which allow them to see, literally, the clandestine digs that would otherwise be invisible. As a result, on two sites looters were caught red-handed, and four arrests made.

Put another way, both supply side and the demand side are under attack. Stolen archaeological items are harder to sell because collectors are frightened, and the more skillful sleuthing means that the number of known clandestine excavations has fallen by a stunning 76% in just one year as a result. Perhaps as a result, the number of counterfeit objects—"and particularly works of modern art," said General Nistri—seized has risen enormously, by 427 percent in just one year.

The problem remains, obviously, and especially in Central Italy (Lazio, Campania Regions), Tuscany and Lombardy.

State-owned museums are better protected today than in the past, as the statistics also show. Museum thefts are down by 29% across the board. Relatively few take place in the larger museums, whereas the smaller, city-owned (and hence less protected by high-tech security) museums account for half of all museum thefts.

Thefts from private collections, religious institutions of all kinds and historic archives remain a major concern. Church thefts dropped by almost 12% over 2008, but that year had seen a small boom in looting, and thefts from religious institutions of all kinds still account for 44.5% of the total. The relatively large number of archival materials recovered suggests that combatting this type of theft remains a priority.

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