CRACKING A SMUGGLING RING

Ferdinando Musella, the head of Italy’s art police and a seasoned Mafia investigator, is leading the search for looted antiquities in American museums—while still on the trail of an elusive Caravaggio

BY KELLY DEVINE THOMAS

In his inquiries, Musella says, “It is easier to ask which museums are not involved.”

The day before his visit to ARTnews, Musella met with Jane A. Levine, assistant U.S. attorney for the southern district of New York, with whom Italy has worked closely for years. Initially Musella had thought his work in the United States could be wrapped up by October. But now, he says, “based on our successful meeting yesterday, we will need more time.” Asked if the investigation might lead to prosecutions in the United States, Musella nods affirmatively. “Yes.”

Investigations carried out under Musella’s watch so far have led to Italy’s prosecution of Italian dealer Giacomo Medici. American dealer Robert E. Hecht Jr., and Marion True, the former antiquities curator at the Getty Museum. Medici was convicted in Italy of trafficking in looted artifacts after a 1995 raid on his Swiss warehouse turned up a vast archive of information on the antiquities trade; he is currently appealing a ten-year prison sentence. Hecht and True are standing trial in Italy on charges of receiving stolen antiquities and conspiring to traffic in illegally acquired artifacts. (Both deny any wrongdoing.) Musella says the 86-year-old Hecht, an alleged ringleader of the illicit antiquities trade, is “for us one of the ten most wanted.”

Evidence seized during raids in 2002 and 2005 on Basel warehouses used by Sicilian dealer Gianfranco Becchina, meanwhile, is providing additional information about acquisitions of allegedly looted objects, Musella says. (Becchina is currently under investigation for his part in the smuggling operation.) Most of the material found in the warehouse raids has led Italian investigators to the United States. “Here we have found the majority of the objects stolen from Italy,” says Musella. “We will finish our investigations here and then start in Europe and in other countries.”

The divorced father of one child, Musella was born in 1962 in Salerno in southern Italy. When he was 16 he followed his father’s footsteps into the army, enrolling in a training school for the Carabinieri, a national military police network organized under the Italian armed forces. Beginning as a horse patrolman, Musella rose through the ranks to eventually work drug trafficking, terrorism, and Mafia-related cases, beginning in 1993. During this period he was instrumental in helping apprehend Raffaele Pernacelli, one of Italy’s most wanted fugitives and a member of Rome’s notorious Magliana crime syndicate. In 1996 Musella joined the art squad, known as the Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale (Command for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage), and was promoted to operations chief within a year.

In addition to its status as a division of the military, the

J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Princeton University Art Museum, and the Cleveland Museum of Art, among others.

In the wake of a precedent-setting accord reached earlier this year with the Met, which agreed to restitute six antiquities, including a 16-piece set of Hellenistic silver, to Italy in exchange for long-term loans of comparable artifacts, it appears that other American museums “are going to be more cooperative than in the past,” Musella says. Still, he warns, “if they are not going to be cooperative with us, we will still go forward with the investigation.” Asked which museums are involved in his inquiries, Musella responds.

Lieutenant Colonel Ferdinando Musella, tall and tan with jet-black hair and dark eyes, strides into the ARTnews offices with a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses pushed back on top of his head. The operations chief of Italy’s art police, Musella speaks Italian and French but little English and is therefore accompanied by Angelo Ragusa, a warrant officer in his unit who acts as his translator.

The chief has an hour to spare before attending a press conference at which New York City police commissioner Raymond Kelly will return to Italian representatives a marble head that thieves hacked off an ancient statue of Dionysus in 1983, which resurfaced recently at Christie’s.

Musella, a central figure in Italy’s widening investigation into the trade in antiquities looted from Italian soil, is in the United States to further press his country’s claims against American museums. A tough negotiator with a steely gaze, Musella has been working with his unit for the past decade to crack a smuggling ring that allegedly sold objects to top collectors and museums around the world, including the

“it is easier to ask which museums are not involved,” Musella says of his investigation.
Carabinieri art unit is a branch of Italy's ministry of culture. Since its founding in 1969, the unit has recovered some 185,295 artworks and 455,771 archeological objects, and has brought criminal charges against more than 16,000 individuals.

Musella and the 70 people under his command, 45 of whom are active investigators, scored a major coup when they were able to recover what the Italian government deemed the world's rarest and most valuable looted antiquity: an ivory head of Apollo dating from the first century B.C., reportedly worth $50 million. Illegally excavated and smuggled out of Italy in 1995, the head was discovered in the possession of London dealer Robin Symes, an alleged coconspirator of Medici's and Hecht's who, according to Musella, had lined up an American collector willing to pay $10 million for it. The head was returned to Rome in 2003 and is now displayed in its own room in the National Museum of Rome. Musella speaks of writing a book—part romance, part thriller—about its recovery. Perhaps, he suggests, the book will be made into a movie.

Among Musella's priorities is recovering Caravaggio's Nativity with Saints Francis and Lawrence (1609), whose theft from a Sicilian church more than 35 years ago was detailed in Peter Watson's 1984 book The Caravaggio Conspiracy. In terms of importance, Musella considers the painting to be the "numero uno" object stolen from Italy that is still at large. While it is believed to be in the possession of the Mafia, Musella says, "we don't know where it is." At one point, Gerlando "The Rug" Albati, the chief of a famous Sicilian crime family in Palermo, buried the painting in a box along with drugs and millions in cash in case he "needed to leave the country or needed it for negotiations," Musella says. A witness tipped off investigators to its location, but by the time the police arrived, the box had been moved.

As for his own collecting, the only objects Musella has acquired over the years are law enforcement pins from colleagues around the world. Regarding those collectors and institutions that prefer to collect antiquities removed illegally from Italian soil, Musella says their actions are not only harmful but unnecessary. "You don't need to acquire stolen art," he says. "You can ask for a loan. We have enough cultural artifacts to loan to the U.S."

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