Turkish Delight

How the Turks invented the most creative mechanism in the history of collecting to regain their looted heritage

by Thomas Hoving

The cry in the art world today is "Elgin Marbles, ho!" and it's getting louder all the time. Yes, the Greeks are still calling out for the immediate return of the Parthenon pieces. Of course, those old stones aren't moving. The reason is that the Greeks in charge are just yelling, not doing anything seriously constructive. The Greek authorities won't like this unsolicited advice, but they ought to have a chat with some of their traditional enemies, the Turks (who happened to be in charge of Athens when the Parthenon sculptures were allowed out), and find out how they do it. For when it comes to wresting illegally or illicitly ripped away pieces of the national artistic patrimony from the clutches of American museums, private collectors and dealers and finagling them back home, nobody does it better than the Turks. They have invented the most creative incentive in the history of museums and collecting to guarantee the successful regaining of their priceless stolen heritage. This machinery is so neat, it's cute.

The authorities in Turkey's Ministry of Culture have one of the world's biggest headaches when it comes to smuggled antiquities. The country is the world's top supplier of Classical works to Western markets—all illicit. The reason is that Turkey has more ancient Roman towns than Italy, more ancient Greek sites than all of Greece. Turkey is home to an astounding 36 ancient cultures, ranging from Hittite and Assyrian to Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine. The bounty of these art-rich civilizations is spread across the country and buried deep down in its land. Every time a plow digs another half a foot into the soil, more treasure is unearthed. Every time a button starts up a metal detector (not allowed in Turkey, but so what?), chances are that some spectacular antique piece will soon emerge.

When it comes to smuggling antiquities and pushing them into the world market, the Turkish Mafia outshines even its Italian counterpart. The reason is the free-enterprise system itself. At the end of World War II, the Turkish Mafia took control of the passage of all contraband in and out of a country that for centuries had prided itself on smuggling—and which indeed possesses a body of songs and sagas about the hearty and intrepid Robin Hood-type smugglers. Then, in the 1950s and '60s, the silk stockings turned into drugs, especially the fine grades of heroin cooked down from Turkey's famous opium poppy crops. To push the heroin, a vast and exceptionally efficient network of crooked police and customs officials plus well-paid drivers at the wheels of dozens of trans-European trucks was formed. When the drug trade slowed down—America forced the abandonment of the poppy fields—the Turkish Mafia turned to an even higher-profit-margin product to smuggle—and one that carried few, if any, penalties when something went wrong and the traffickers got caught: antiquities. Today a "K" of raw heroin costs about $8,000 on the streets of Istanbul and sells for about $30,000 in Europe and $28,000 in America (cocaine being more popular in the U.S.). The penalty if the purchaser gets caught in Turkey with that "K" makes *Midnight Express* look like kindergarten. But take a Hellenistic statue costing about the same, $7,000—specifically, a marble statue from the 2nd century B.C. of Marsysas about to be flayed by Apollo, which was discovered when it was hit by the tractor of a farmer named Abdurrahmin—and get it via the paid-off cops and truckers and dealers to New York, and the final price tag is $540,000. And it's a bargain. If any of the miscreants in the chain from the farmer to the New York dealer gets nabbed, it's a slap on the wrist. Because of the evident good sense and favorable economics of Turkey's smuggled-antiquities trade, the annual handle amounts to an average $200 million in retail dollars. That's free enterprise for you.

The precise moment when the Turkish government cried out, "Enough! Stop this trade!" isn't known, but sources close to the Ministry of Culture claim that it was when the in-house lawyer of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Ashton Hawkins, spearheaded efforts to get legislation passed in Albany that would restrict the statute of limitations on stolen antiquities to a mere three years from the first public notification of the acquisition of the antiquities, thereby favoring the interests of institutional purchasers. These efforts, in 1985 and again in 1986, were both thwarted by the veto of an alarmed Governor Mario Cuomo, who, alerted by the U.S. State Department, declared, "These acts would have turned New York into a haven for cultural property stolen abroad." The Met's temerity was remarkable. During the bill's second pass through the State Senate and Assembly, in the midst of the process, the legislation was "lost." It reappeared only in the last week of the session, this time identified by a new and hard-to-trace legislation number.

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The Wandering Hoard

There seems little doubt that this attempt to make New York's museums "fences" was linked to the Met's efforts to stall the lawsuit brought by the Turks to get back what they call the "Lydian Hoard." The hoard, which the Met dubbed the "East Greek" treasure in what would appear to have been an attempt to push the find toward Greece and away from ancient Turkey, is a unique 225-piece collection of silver, gold and bronze objects dating to the 6th century B.C. It was bought by the museum from the late dealer John J. Klejman in three lots in the mid-1960s for around $1.5 million. Klejman had bought the hoard from Turkish dealer Ali Bayirlar—a.k.a. Ali Baba.

The hoard itself had been originally discovered by a pair of "night diggers," Osman and Durmush by name, from a tomb near Sardis, in west central Turkey. Despite numerous attempts by the Met to disguise the hoard by showing it in small lots and mixing it up in a large vitrine with other vaguely similar Greek implements, the Turks got wind of the material in 1974. The Met, with C. Douglas Dillon as president and, later, chairman (and myself director, until 1977), decided not to help the Turks with their investigation, but agreed that if they could come up with solid proof that the "East Greek Treasure" had come from the tomb near Sardis, they could have it back. But after Dillon's retirement in 1983, the museum bent and ultimately broke that policy, and when the proof was forthcoming, the Met persistently refused even to discuss the return or sharing of the treasure, a third of which still remains in Turkey. So the Turks hired a New York lawyer, Larry Kaye of Herrick, Feinstein, and went to court.

In the face of the Met's stonewalling, the Turks grew angrier and angrier and ever more tenacious, fighting off several motions by the museum to quash the court case. Failing in those ploys and seeing, at last, that the Turks were never going to disappear, a delegation of Met officials led by President William Luers and including Director Philippe de Montebello and lawyer Hawkins traveled to Turkey around Christmas 1992 to talk to Minister of Culture Fikri Saglar and surrender. The plan was to admit—for the first time since 1974—that the treasure *was* Turkish and *did* belong with the pieces left behind and to make a deal to share the objects, khy, five years in New York and five years in Turkey. Angered, the minister refused to talk to the men from the Met, who returned home saying only that inadequate hotel accommodations had forced them to cut short their trip before a meeting could be arranged. When asked if he'd met the minister face-to-face, Luers says that he had "discussions with an official in the ministry."

Minister Saglar was reportedly furious that the museum would try to negotiate a shared loan after its years of silence. And he could afford to spurn the museum's pitifully late advances, since the court case seems to be going well for the Turks—especially as they have held in reserve a key witness, the Met's own former associate curator of Greek and Roman art, Andrew Oliver, Jr.

Oliver made a quiet visit to the Sardis tomb in the early 1970s and spotted fragments of alabaster sphinxes, parts of which are now in the museum's storerooms.

The Surprising Strongman

The dig at the ancient site of Perga is one of the most active in Turkey, with an abundance of beautiful sculpture being found daily. The site was one of the glories of the Hellenistic world, a city in which some of the finest artistic schools of the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. were located. In 1980 a splendid example of Roman sculpture dating to the Late Antonine period (170–192 A.D.), a three-quarter size marble statue of Hercules resting, was discovered and officially inventoried. The piece was broken at the waist but otherwise intact.

Late one evening, "night diggers," who circle archaeological sites in Turkey like jackals in the veldt, made their way into a storeroom and stole the upper part of the statue—the eminently marketable part. The piece was soon spirited out of the country and made its way to America, where, through an unknown antiquities dealer, it fell into the possession of the collectors Leon Levy and Shelby White. The bottom part of the Hercules came to rest in a prominent gallery in the Antalya Museum. Levy and White very graciously gave a 50 percent share of the upper part to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston through the Jerome Levy Foundation in 1981. It was published in a lavish exhibition catalogue entitled *Glories of the Past*, and was seen in a show by the same name that ran at the Met from the fall of 1990 to early 1991. Boston's curator of Classical art, Cornelius Vermeule, wrote the publication entry. It is impressively learned:

> The original version of this statue, which derives from the *Weary Herakles* identified with Lysippos of Sikyon, of about 330 B.C., was created at Pergamon in northwest Asia Minor at the height of that kingdom's artistic prestige, in the years 175 to 130 B.C. The unruly strands of the hair and beard are bunched in masses of curls; the brow is knotted; the eyes are sunken above protruding cheekbones; and the expression of strain is heightened by the depth of the mouth—all, characteristics of the so-called Pergamene baroque style of Greek sculpture. . . .
>
> The Pergamene restyling of the *Weary Herakles* after Lysippos was one of the most popular Greek Imperial statues. Severan coins suggest that this Late Antonine example could have been part of a group: Herakles contemplating his infant son, Telephos, being nursed by a hind in the mountains of Arcadia. Telephos was to grow up to become the legendary founder of Pergamon—a career paralleling that of Romulus in Italy.

Vermeule demonstrated an exceptional knowledge of

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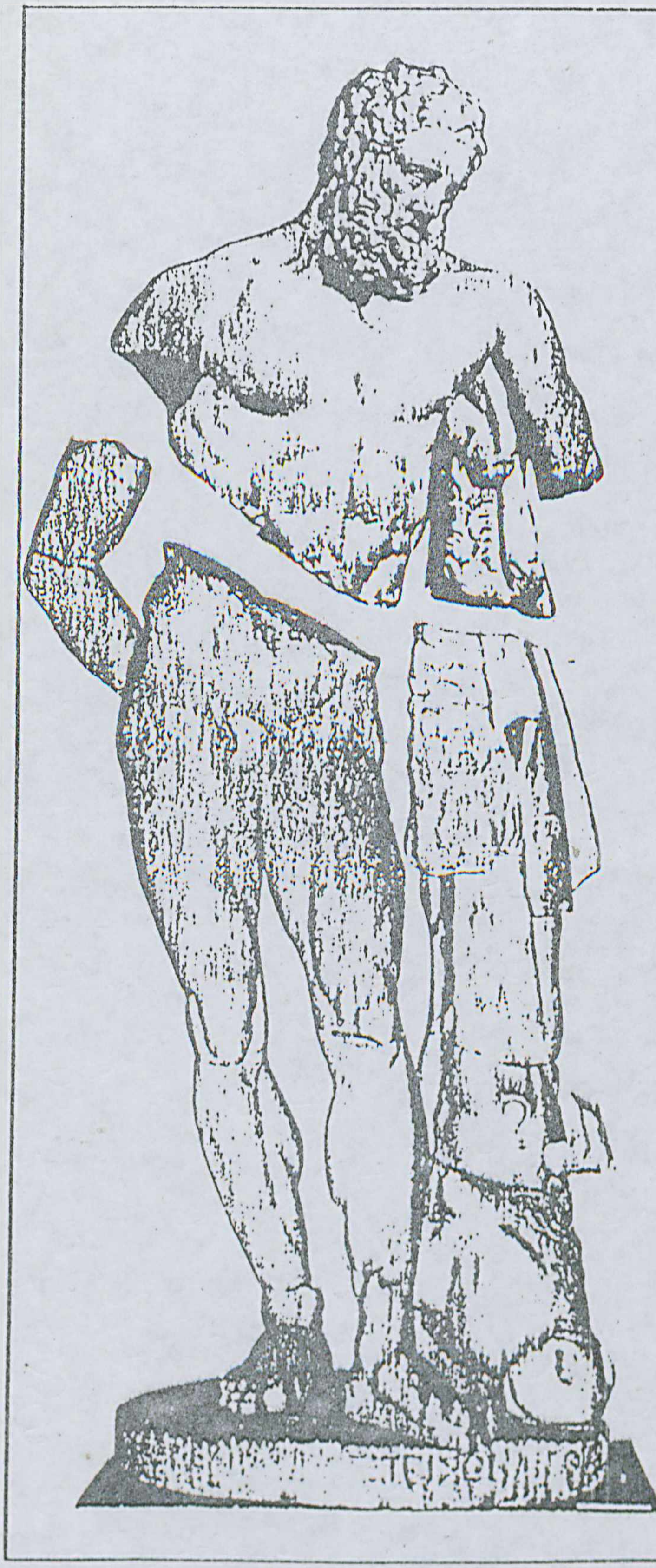

It took a while, but the Turks' persistence paid off when the "jacket" (in Boston) and the "pants" (in the Antalya Museum) of this statue of Hercules were finally proved to belong together.

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comparable works, citing a bevy of sources. He summed up by saying that "the Levy Herakles made a significant contribution to the perpetuation of Greek monumental sculpture in the later Roman Imperial world."

When the Levy-White holdings were shown at the Met, though, an amateur archaeologist spotted the handsome hunk and came to the immediate conclusion that, stylistically, the piece had to be Turkish. He faxed a Xerox of the reproduction in the catalogue to the curator at the Antalya Museum and was amused, but not at all surprised, to receive by return fax the image of the legs, the arm, the rest of the hero's great club and the lion's skin. The two seemingly complementary pieces were soon published in several art magazines and the *New York Times*.

Vermeule was asked about the curious happenstance but dismissed the possibility of the perfect fit of "jacket to pants" as inconclusive. "The ancient world abounds in fragments of the *Weary Herakles*," he was heard to say. When asked if any of them fit the top of the hero so well he claimed he didn't know. Interestingly, Vermeule had spent much of the summer of 1989 in Turkey, in Perga, and regularly visited the Antalya Museum, where the legs were prominently on display. When queried whether the similarity in style, measurements, marble type and fit with the MFA's Hercules hadn't struck his acute eye, Vermeule replied, "I really didn't notice." He shrugged when it was pointed out to him that it did seem a bit odd that when he wrote the detailed and scholarly entry for the Levy catalogue, he had failed to notice the obvious connection.

The Turkish authorities were steamed up about Vermeule's bland rejection and through lawyer Kaye had a plaster cast—in the shape of a large pancake about an inch thick—made of the section of the split trunk of the Antalya Hercules. The plaster was sent to the Met, where two experts hired by the Turks fitted the plaster pancake to the bottom of the Hercules. Vermeule was in attendance.

The "happening" was entertaining. The experts and lawyer Kaye cried out, "See, it fits—admirably!" Vermeule, a balding, stern-looking academic, pursed his lips for a long while, studying what was going on, and would later tell a reporter from the *New York Times*, "The bottom half of the Turkish cast is about two inches too big on one side, and an inch on the other. Besides, it has a hernialike bulge in front that has nothing to do with the Levy-White version."

Vermeule would go on to muse that his own research indicated that the group of statues in Antalya "were all much bigger than our piece, which is visibly smaller than life-size." He added that the Turkish half "seemed to have a navel. . . . Would one statue have two belly buttons?" Nothing the other side could say would convince the obdurate Vermeule that the cast happened to be larger on its bottom because, for the sake of time and convenience, the plaster had not been cut back to the exact measurements of the statue.

Turkey threatened a lawsuit, pointing out that a trial was in progress over the Met's so-called "East Greek" treasure. Vermeule shrugged. And that seemed the end of the matter.

But when it comes to a spurned antiquity, the Turks are dogged. At considerable expense, the curators at the Antalya Museum made another cast. This time it was the complete lower section of the Hercules in all its details, with no ragged edges. In 1992 the cast was sent to the Boston museum, attention Cornelius Vermeule, who expressed extreme interest in the project to try to fit it together with the Hercules torso, now back in the MFA from the loan show. When the dramatic moment came in one of the museum's storerooms and the marble torso was gingerly placed on top of the cast and the two pieces virtually clicked into place—perfectly, almost as if they had been magnetized—Vermeule looked up in utter astonishment. "I'm shocked," he said. "I'm so surprised! Well, I never . . ." He gazed placidly at the experts representing Turkey's interests and suddenly asked, "Say, would you be willing to discuss a shared loan?"

No.

The piece is still in Boston right now, but with Turkey threatening lawsuits, and Boston unlikely to mount a last-ditch defense, don't be surprised to see the "jacket" rejoining the "pants" in the grand gallery in the Antalya Museum before too long.

Persistence pays off.

A Neat Piece of Machinery

The Antalya Museum is host to another superb yet fragmentary Roman work—a huge "garland" sarcophagus, dating to around 150 A.D., with a hipped roof and a body decorated in deep relief, masterfully crafted with female personifications and stocky little naked putti holding up a giant garland. The bearers are interspersed with theatrical-looking masks of penetrating gaze and formidable strength. The museum officials are delighted to possess the magnificent work, but until recently their delight was muted by the suspicion that another garland sarcophagus, totally intact, had been spirited away from southern Anatolia by the ubiquitous "night diggers," who pride themselves on being able to spirit anything—even a three-ton sarcophagus—out of the country. They waited, hopeful that the rumored piece would turn up.

And, of course, it did, taking a year or two to make its way through the underground railroad of stolen antiquities to New York. It was around Christmas 1987, and the place of honor was the Brooklyn Museum. The garland sarcophagus was exhibited in the center of a reconditioned gallery in the ambulatory surrounding the court on the muse-

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