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Book Reviews: Popular Books Section



...GRIPPING, HIGH VOLTAGE DRAMA ...The whole book reads like an unputdownable thriller. Once I picked up the book, it became almost impossible for me to keep it down. If you love thrillers and true crime - like I do - pick up your copy today and read it. You would thank me, I recommended such a beauty to you...

The Medici Conspiracy: The Illicit Journey of Looted Antiquities, From Italy's Tomb Raiders to the World's Greatest Museums *by* Peter Watson and Cecelia Todeschini. Paperback, 8.2" x 5.4" x 1.3". Public Affairs, 1094 Flex Dr., Jackson, TN 38301. . . International Customers . Email: PublicAffairsOrders@perseusbooks.com. Publication Date, June 11, 2007. 384 pages, 16 pp. b/w photos. ISBN-10: 1586484389. ISBN-13: 978-1586484385. Price $15.95 US/$19.50 Canada

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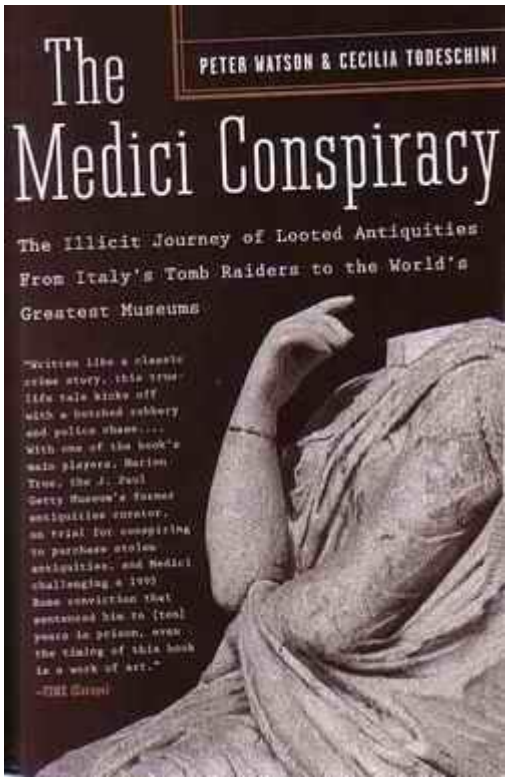

Theft of priceless art objects, antiques, artifacts have become a major profession of modern high profile, while collar criminal. India, which has had one of the richest cultural heritages, is a long time sufferer of this phenomenon, although France and Italy also have suffered a lot too. As recently as 10 October 2006, the police in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh recovered one of the 18 priceless antique idols which had earlier been stolen from the Patna Museum in the state of Bihar. Police arrested five suspects who were allegedly trying to sell the idol in the city of Benares. This became possible because a police officer was disguised as a dealer to trap the suspects. The priceless antiques dated from the Pala dynasty, which ruled the Bihar and Bengal regions of South Asia from the eighth to the 12th centuries. The Pala empire is noted for its art and architecture, and in particular for its distinctive Buddhist sculptures. The bronze statues are estimated to cost millions of dollars. Innumerable priceless statues are still being looted daily from the temples of Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh; Khajuraho is now a very pale shadow of what it used to be. Among other notable incidents is the one in which in April 2004, the 1913 Nobel prize medal for literature (awarded to poet Rabindranath Tagore) was stolen from a museum in Baruipara.

Why would one want to steal such a thing as a Nobel Prize Medal? Well, the truth is that there is a constant demand from collectors for such artifacts, and this sustains the theft and subsequent illicit trade in cultural objects. The opening up of national borders, the improvement in transport systems and the political instability of certain countries, has not helped matters. It is difficult to gauge the extent of the trade for two reasons (i) the theft is very often not discovered until the stolen objects are found on the official arts market (ii) countries send very little information to Interpol and many do not keep statistics on this type of criminality.

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For those of us, keeping a tab on high profile, white collar crime, Giacomo Medici's name is not unfamiliar. He is one of the most notorious Italian art dealer who was convicted in 2004 of dealing in stolen ancient artifacts. His operation was thought to be "one of the largest and most

sophisticated antiquities networks in the world, responsible for illegally digging up and spiriting away thousands of top-drawer pieces and passing them on to the most elite end of the international art market".

...On September 13, 1995, Swiss police raided four bonded warehouses in Geneva, seizing a large number of artifacts allegedly smuggled from Italy. They found "hundreds of pieces of ancient Greek, Roman, and Etruscan art - including a set of Etruscan dinner plates valued at $2 million, voluminous sales records and correspondence between Medici and dealers in London and New York, and binders and boxes containing thousands of photographs of ancient objects. The book under review is a high voltage drama starting from this point onwards...

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The premises were registered to a Swiss company called Editions Services, which the police traced to Giacomo Medici. In January 1997, the Carabinieri, Italy's national police force, arrested Medici, whom was the real 'mastermind' of much of Italy's illegal traffic in archaeological objects. Medici claimed that he acquired all of the artifacts legally and that he was not the culprit he had been portrayed as. He also claimed that the search was conducted without his presence or that of a representative of Editions Services, and that the police did not find documents, that would have shown the legal provenience of the artifacts.

In 2004, Medici was sentenced by a Rome court to ten years in prison and a fine of 10 million Euros, "the largest penalty ever meted out for antiquities crime in Italy".

The whole story reads like a Hollywood thriller. The book under review tells the details of this story as well the whole racket behind Medici's criminal ring. Big names like Marion True, the former curator of antiquities of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, California, and Robert Hecht Jr., a scholar, connoisseur and an adventurer are involved.

...The authors begin their account with a botched robbery and a police chase. Eight Apuleian vases of the fourth century B.C. are discovered in the swimming pool of a German-based art smuggler. More valuable than the recovery of the vases, however, is the discovery of the smuggler's card index detailing his deals and dealers. What happens next? Well, to tell you the full story would be spoiling fun for you...

From the abovementioned, 1995 raid of the Geneva warehouse, enough evidence came out, which enabled authorities to indict both Marion True and Robert Hecht Jr. The book details the little known facts related to these stories.

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