“This Could be Monumental,” Los Angeles Times, 01/06/05

Motivations get tangled as countries battle over return of art facts. A telling case in point: the Obelisk of Axum. The obelisk is an elaborately inscribed stone monolith, 78 feet from base to tip, that spent most of its history in the middle of a busy Roman piazza.

In the eyes of many an Ethiopian, it’s 180 tons of evidence that 20th-century Italy snatched up treasures in Ethiopia, then resisted their return for half a century with the same lawless zeal that Italian leaders accuse U.S. museums of displaying. Then in 2002, lightning struck.

Amid a Roman storm, a bolt from the sky struck the obelisk, which had no lightning rod attached, breaking off several feet of granite in chunks. This substantially undermined the argument that the Ethiopians could not care for the artifact than the Ethiopians could.

In early 2005, after nearly 60 years of promises deferred, Italian leaders delivered the obelisk back to its homeland, where it awaits reconstruction.

“Statute’s Restorers Hope to Repair Greco-Italian Rift,” The Guardian (UK), 01/27/06

Italian restorers are working to try to repair a priceless ancient Greek statue, and its problems have diplomatic consequences. In an incident that has become the talk of the time, the authorities in Athens last year suspended all further digs by Italian archaeologists in five-year ban on an Italian lecturer.

The sanctions were imposed after officials said it has become the case, or rather, the public might destroy a prize holding.

That has happened at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. According to witnesses, an unfortunate visitor tripped over his shoelace and fell into three Qing dynasty vases, shattering them. The vases had been placed – rather optimistically – perhaps on a window-sill.

“The Guardian” (UK), 01/27/06

It’s not a new development, but increasing interest and growing awareness that the city, once home to 500,000, have been named a historical landmark. The place, which contains 400,000 square tiles, depicts Long Beach in the 1930s and portrays a variety of beach activities. When it was first created in 1936, it was designed to be a place of refuge for the homeless.

“Welcome to the Machine,” The Guardian (UK), 02/06/05

A curatorial team has discovered prehistoric human remains and cave art in western France believed to date back 27,000 years, several thousand years older than the world’s famous paintings at Lascaux. As well as marking an enormous shift in knowledge about the Neanderthals, the discovery revealed for the first time visible evidence for the presence of a monogram with the letters M, F intertwined. It is thought the paintings were probably done by a French ambassador to Rome, and friend of Caravaggio.

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“Boy, 12, Gums Up Pricey DIA Artwork,” Detroit Free Press, 02/28/06

At the Detroit Institute of Arts on Friday, a mischievous 12-year-old boy visiting the museum with a school group took a piece of barely chewed Wrigley’s Extra Polar Ice out of his mouth and stuck it on Helen Frankenthaler’s 1963 abstract painting The Bay, damaging one of the most important modern paintings in the museum’s collection and a landmark picture in the artist’s output.

Completed in 1963, The Bay is a landmark Frankenthaler because it was her first stained picture done with acrylic paint, a new medium at the time. Luckily, the gum stuck to the painting’s lower left-hand corner and had not adhered to the fiber of the canvas. But it did leave a chemical residue about the size of a quarter. The conservation department was researching the exact chemicals in the gum to determine which solvent should be used to clean the painting. Once a solvent is chosen, the picture would be placed on a vacuum table that would pull the solvent through the canvas, removing the stain.

“Valley of the Queens Gets a Getty Assist,” Los Times, 03/08/06

Egypt’s Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Getty Conservation Institute have entered into a six-year partnership for the conservation and management of the Valley of the Queens, one of the world’s most important archeological sites. Building on an earlier collaborative effort — which conserved wall paintings in the tomb of Nefertari — the new project calls for a methodical approach to long-term preservation of a broader area on the west bank of the Nile at Luxor.

“Boy’s Gum is Plucked from Valuable Art,” Detroit Free Press, 03/11/06

The saga of the $1.5-million abstract Helen Frankenthaler painting defaced two weeks ago at the Detroit Institute of Arts by a 12-year-old boy who stuck gum on it during a school outing is heading for a happy ending.

After intensive research, experimentation, and surgical work with high-performance tweezers, hand-rolled Q-tips, and a fast-evaporating solvent - - plus some purposeful fooling around with gum - - the quarter-sized residue on Helen Frankenthaler’s The Bay is gone. It’s not often you see a 53-year-old professional play with his gum, but on Friday morning at the Detroit Institute of Arts, paintings conservator Alfred Ackerman picked up a wad of chewed Wrigley’s Extra Polar Ice and stretched it like taffy, flipping it around his finger to create a second disgusting strand.

“I chewed it to get a sense of what this was like in terms of stickiness and tackiness and the amount of moisture we would be dealing with when we lifted it off,” said Ackerman.

“LACMA to Show Klimts,” Los Angeles Times, 03/16/06

Five multimillion-dollar paintings by Austrian artist Gustav Klimt — looted by the Nazis and recently returned by the Austrian government to the family of Maria Altmann in Los Angeles — will go on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art [this April]... The exhibition was initiated by Stephanie Barron, LACMA’s senior curator of modern art, in January after an Austrian arbitration court ordered its government to turn over the paintings to Altmann, whose family fled Vienna in 1938.

“Picasso’s Daughter Says Drawing Is a Fake,” The New York Times, 03/18/06

Maya Widmaier-Picasso, the artist’s daughter, who authenticates his work, says that drawings sold by Costco are not by him. Those two works, photographs of which were shown to her by the dealer with certificates in French saying that Ms. Widmaier-Picasso had authenticated them. Pointing to anomalies in the certificates — grammatical errors, wording that departed from her style, handwriting that did not match hers and the placement of words on the page — the artist’s daughter said both documents were forgeries.

“After the Wisdom Moment, Time to Tape over the Cracks,” The Guardian (UK), 03/30/06

Conservators at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge are working to restore Qing vases that were shattered when a museum visitor tripped and smashed into them. What will happen when they’re glued back together? They’ll go back on display. “These vases were given to us in the 1940s and have been in the same place for 50 years. Some 9 million people have walked past them and this is the first time they have been damaged. We have to look at the risk in perspective.”

“No Flattery Is Found in an Imitation of a Rockwell,” The New York Times, 04/04/06

For years, art experts have noted that the original copy of Norman Rockwell’s painting, Breaking Home Ties, appears to be lighter in color than the prints that appeared in the Saturday Evening Post in 1954. The discrepancy has long been blamed on an overly aggressive cleaning of the work. But now, the truth has come out: cartoonist Don Trachte, who owned the painting for years, apparently made a sophisticated copy in the 1970s and hid the original in a secret compartment in his Vermont home, in an effort to avoid losing the Rockwell in a bitter divorce. It wasn’t until last month that Trachte’s sons discovered the genuine article, right where their father had left it.

“Italy’s Special Carabinieri Unit Fights Art Looting,” OpinionJournal.com (Wall Street Journal), 04/10/06

Italy has a huge antiquities theft problem. In an average week, carabinieri fly helicopters over archaeological sites, taking aerial photographs to reveal illegal diggings. They go on offshore dives to prevent unauthorized underwater excavations. Still other officers in their stylish black-and-red uniforms show up unannounced at antique shops, auction houses, and outdoor markets, to videotape items for sale to match against the more than 2.5 million missing objects cataloged in the art squad’s vast database.

“Babylon Awaits an Iraq Without Fighting,” The New York Times, 04/18/06

Babylon, the mud-brick city with the million-dollar name, has paid the price of war. It has been ransacked, looted, torn up, paved over, neglected, and roughly occupied. Archaeologists said American soldiers even used soil thick with priceless artifacts to stuff sandbags. But Iraqi leaders and United Nations officials are not giving up on it. They are working assiduously to restore Babylon, home to one of the Seven Wonders of the World, and turn it into a cultural center and possibly even an Iraqi theme park.