

Museum to Get Veeps' Jewels

By Maxine Cheshire

The Smithsonian Institution has been designated by the State Department to take custody of jewels presented by foreign heads of state to former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew and Hubert H. Humphrey and their wives.

But the transfer has raised questions from General Accounting Office investigators who discovered this week that the museum may or may not intend to keep the gems permanently as historic acquisitions.

The GAO, conducting an audit for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on how the Foreign Gifts and Decorations Act of 1966 is administered, learned on Monday that the Smithsonian "bartered" the last such gifts to come under its jurisdiction to private dealers.

The GAO has asked the museum to provide an explanation of its "legal authorization" for such swapping practices and a full report on what foreign gifts were swapped, to whom they were swapped and for what they were swapped.

"We're not sure they have a right to dispose of these things in this way," a GAO spokesman said. "This is a complicated law to interpret. We've got a whole team of lawyers studying it all the way back to the Constitution."

Under the 1966 law, all foreign gifts to U.S. officials and their families that are worth more than \$50 are deemed to be public property and must be turned over to the Chief of Protocol promptly for cataloging and disposition.

He can designate whether a gift is to be returned to the recipient for "official use" until he leaves office, be dispatched to another government agency or a public repository such as a museum, or be sold as surplus.

If gifts are to be sold, the General Services Administration maintains, it is the one designated in the Federal Rules and Regulations to do the selling.

The Smithsonian's gem curator, Paul Desautels, concedes cheerfully that the practice of claiming such gifts and then using them to obtain more desirable items does "sound greedy."

"But we have no money to build up a gem collection and this is one way to do it," he says. "If the GAO says it is okay for us to have these things, I'll take all I can get . . . just scoop up all of it."

He has no plans to swap the Agnew or Humphrey gems, he insists.

The Humphrey diamond has not been picked up yet. The paperwork is still being completed.

Desautels has not asked yet for two other sets of jewels that have been declared "excess property" by the State Department: a set of diamonds and rubies given to the wife of former Secretary of State William P. Rogers and a set of emeralds and diamonds given to the wife of Senator J. William Fulbright.

Both have already been put on a list of items sent to the GSA. Desautels would like to have them, he says, but he is waiting until the GAO settles the question of whether the Smithsonian is legally entitled to them before he makes a request.