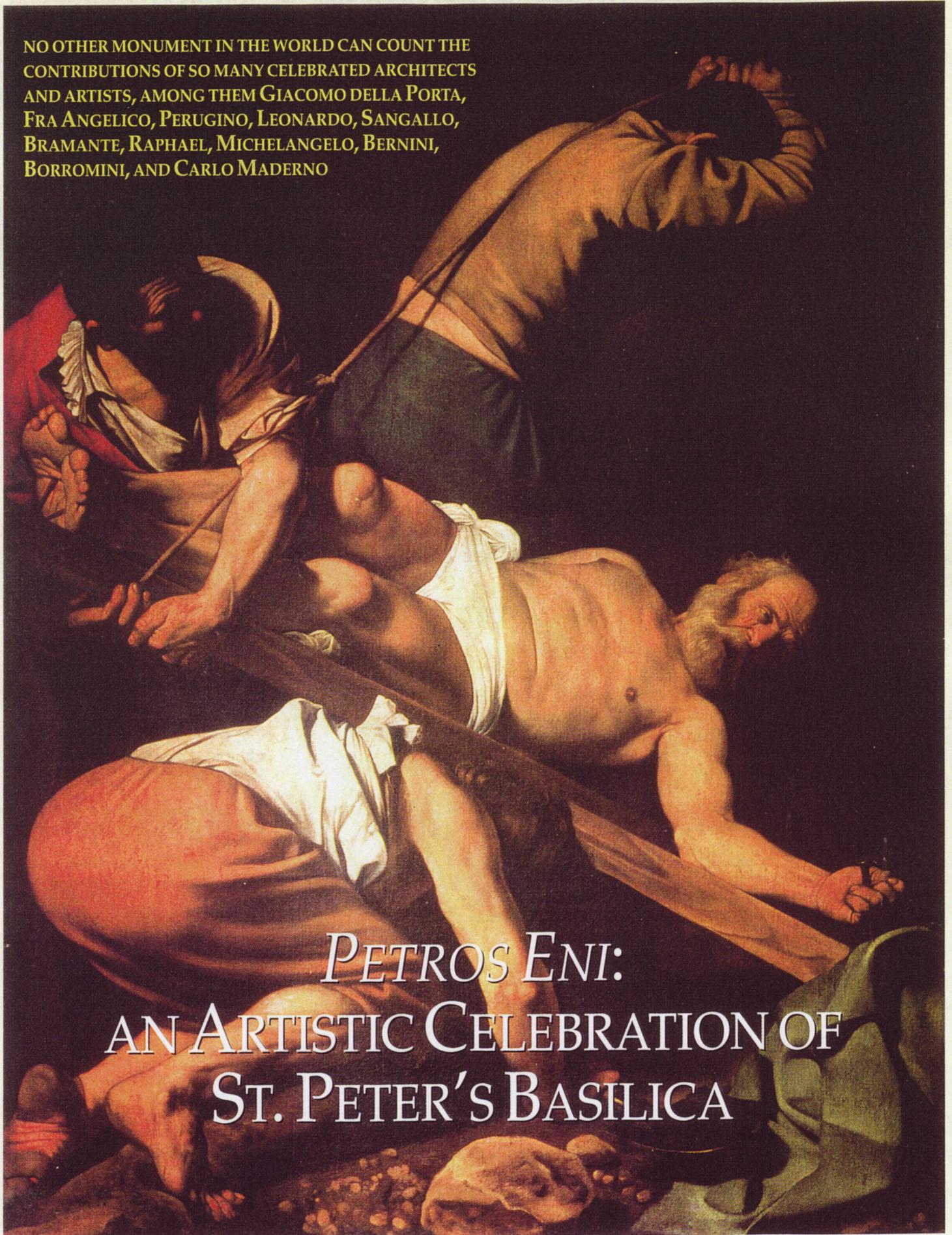


OF BOOKS, ART AND PEOPLE

NO OTHER MONUMENT IN THE WORLD CAN COUNT THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SO MANY CELEBRATED ARCHITECTS AND ARTISTS, AMONG THEM GIACOMO DELLA PORTA, FRA ANGELICO, PERUGINO, LEONARDO, SANGALLO, BRAMANTE, RAPHAEL, MICHELANGELO, BERNINI, BORROMINI, AND CARLO MADERNO



PETROS ENI: AN ARTISTIC CELEBRATION OF ST. PETER'S BASILICA

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

The year 1506 was a busy one for Pope Julius II (1503-13). He founded the Swiss Guards and the Vatican Museums and laid the first stone of the new Basilica of St. Peter on April 18.

His choice of location was not arbitrary. He wanted the new church to be built directly above the 4th-century five-apsed church which had been erected by the Emperor Constantine over the place long believed to be the crucifixion and burial site of St. Peter himself. (This belief would make chronological sense because in ancient times this site was Nero's Circus, where many Christians were condemned to death for allegedly having set Rome on fire in 64 AD. That was the same year that St. Peter, at 60 to 70 years old, is thought to have been crucified.)

Julius II was not the first Renaissance Pope to think of rebuilding Constantine's St. Peter's Basilica, which had fallen into very bad disrepair. It had been the brainchild of Nicholas V (1447-1455) who wanted to give back to Rome her past greatness. This intellectual, who also had the inspiration to start a papal library (not officially opened, however, until 1475 by Sixtus IV), went as far as completing the demolition of Constantine's basilica, of which only one column remains *in situ*.



Above, a fragment of a fresco of St. Peter from Constantine's basilica, and the tiny graffiti of "Petros Eni." Left page, Caravaggio's famous painting of St. Peter's crucifixion, on loan from the Santa Maria del Popolo Church in Rome.

Fifty years later the messages Julius II wanted his new basilica to convey were similar and several: 1) Rome, which had been reduced to only a few thousand inhabitants during the Middle Ages, its imperial importance then just a memory, was once again on the world stage with new monuments, worthy of its glorious past, being built; 2) indeed Rome, not Constantinople, not Avignon, was again the center of the world; 3) Christian Rome was more important than pagan Rome; 4) the Church was both a spiritual and temporal power; and 5) this new basilica was the center of Christendom.

To celebrate the 500th anniversary of Julius II's basilica, presented in the Charlemagne Wing until March 8, 2007, is "*Petros Eni*" (Greek for "Peter Is Within" or "Peter Is Here"), an exhibition of some 100 masterpieces from museums and private collections worldwide (open every day but Wednesday from 10 AM-7 PM, and Wednesday from 1-7 PM, with a splendid catalog in Italian only, 36 euros; self-guiding headphones available in many languages, 5 euros). Its title, "Peter is here," refers to a tiny graffiti, on display here, scratched on a fragment of red-tinted wall. Discovered during excavations undertaken by

Pope Pius XII in 1939 and probably dating to 180-200 AD, it confirms the very early presence of pilgrims here to visit the apostle's tomb. Other highlights include a pre-Constantinian sarcophagus, showing a figure of someone praying, that was unearthed in 2003; Bernini's notebook of measurements and sketches for the *baldachin*; a 4th-century pin with a Christian monogram; a 4th-century vase-base decorated in gold leaf with the figure of Christ flanked by Peter and Paul; and Caravaggio's painting *The Crucifixion of St. Peter* (shown on the opposite page).

The exhibition is divided into six sections. The first concerns Michelangelo and his dome. After Bramante and Sangallo had both died, Michelangelo was given the job of chief architect in 1546 at age 71. Realizing at age 83 (fortuitously) that he wouldn't see the project completed, from 1558-61 the artist built a huge two-piece model of his dome out of linden wood, in the hopes that his vision



would be respected after death. This model, based on the Pantheon and on Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, opens the exhibition along with a look-alike bust of Michelangelo by his favorite student Daniele da Volterra, who was present at the artist's deathbed on February 18, 1564, when only the dome's drum had been finished.

The second section displays documents such as a receipt from Maderno, the architect for the facade, to a brick-maker; a letter from Julius II to Henry VIII of England asking for a contribution towards building the basilica; the manuscript of a sarcastic sonnet by Michelangelo in which the artist asks to be paid, with a self-portrait showing him painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; several plans by some of the 10 architects who worked on the basilica; sketches for Michelangelo's sculptures; a self-portrait by Bernini; and an amazing wooden model made by Sangallo in 1539 of "his" St. Peter's. They are on loan from the basilica's archives, which contain more than 3 million items relating to the construction of this "new" basilica.

Also on display here are portraits of four patron Popes: "warrior-Pope" Julius II (1503-1513) by Titian, on loan

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from the Pitti Palace in Florence; Leo X (1513-1521) by Raphael, on loan from the Uffizi in Florence; Paul III (1534-1549) by Titian, on loan from the Capodimonte Museum in Naples; and Sixtus V (1585-1590) from the Vatican Museums.

We can date Julius II's worried, bearded likeness to between June 1511 and March 1512 because, when he lost a large part of his territories in Northern Italy to the French, he vowed not to shave his beard until they retreated.

As I mentioned in "Eyeglasses: Made to Magnify the Word of God" (April 2006), the magnifying glass in Leo X's portrait, painted in 1517, is the first artistic rendition of a concave lens used for correcting nearsightedness.

On the self-guide tape, the world-famous art historian Antonio Paolucci, chief co-ordinator of this exhibition, tells us that Titian's very realistic portrayal of Paul III (the Pope who commissioned Michelangelo's dome) tightly clutching a purse reflects the severe financial troubles of the papacy during his reign. Paolucci goes on to point out that St. Peter's Basilica, seen through the window behind Sixtus V, Rome's revolutionary city planner, is correctly painted, showing the obelisk in the square (erected by this same pontiff in St. Peter's Square in 1586), but not showing Maderno's facade (which was not completed until 1614).

The most special objects in the third section, which jumps back in time to Constantine's basilica (c. 320 AD), are the head of a colossal statue (probably 13 feet tall) of this first Christian emperor, unearthed in 2005 during excavations in Trajan's Forum, and a 5th-century chest made in Pola in Croatia with an ivory carving showing a very early rendition of the basilica and the saint's votive chapel.

On display upstairs in the fourth section are objects from the pagan and Christian necropolis (cemetery), which, according to Archbishop Angelo Comastri, president of the Fabbrica di San Pietro, in charge of the basilica's daily upkeep, can accommodate up to 50,000 visitors a year and where the "Petros Eni" graffiti fragment was found. Although there are 40 catacombs in Rome, this once above-ground necropolis was never a catacomb. Of particular interest here are the heads of a man and his wife from an early Christian tomb.



What St. Peter's Basilica would look like today if the architect Antonio da Sangallo had not died before it could be constructed.

A 5th-century AD chest with an ivory carving showing one of the earliest artistic representations of Constantine's Basilica.



A painting by Domenico Cresti (Passignano) which depicts Michelangelo presenting the model for his dome to Pope Pius IV.



On the ivory plaques in the fifth section are carved the first images of St. Peter and St. Paul together. St. Peter is commonly depicted as heavy-set with a low forehead framed by lots of curly hair; St. Paul is usually thin, tall, and balding, but sporting a long wispy beard. St. Peter is the fisherman; St. Paul the intellectual, the philosopher. He was decapitated on Via Ostiense, not crucified (considered a much greater punishment because of its long agony before death), because, unlike Peter, Paul was a Roman citizen.

The last section concerns the devotion to St. Peter of later saints who visited the basilica. On display are the sandals of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, pages of the diary of Pope Pius X's favorite saint, St. Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897), on loan from the private collection of Archbishop Angelo Comastri, and the robe and hood St. Francis of Assisi was wearing when he received the stigmata.

Speaking of St. Francis of Assisi, Federico Motta Editore has just published a splendid book, *The Walk of Francis*, with text in English as well as Italian. Divided into two parts: "Journeying with St. Francis in the Valle Reatina" and "Green Solitudes of Francis and His Companions," it is illustrated with breathtaking images by the American photographer Steve McCurry, who collaborates with *National Geographic* and is a member of *Magnum*. For more information: www.camminodifrancesco.it.

After nearly 130 years, St. Peter's Basilica was inaugurated in 1627 during the papacy of Urban VIII (1623-44), the Barberini Pope and patron of Bernini. It still houses the largest concentration of art in one building in the world. This probably inspired Pope John Paul II's remark during the Jubilee 2000: "To transmit the message entrusted to her by Christ, the Church needs art. In fact, art has to render the world of the Spirit, of the invisible, of God, palpable and fascinating." ●

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