



## ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS

On from March 29-July 31 in the Charlemagne Wing at the left colonnade of St. Peter's Square is the multi-media exhibition entitled *The Papal Swiss Guard, 500 Years of History, Art, and Life*. It opened just a week before the start of a month-long historical march from Bellizona to Rome along the Via Francigena, the route of medieval pilgrims from the north, to retrace the steps of the Guards' first march to Rome 500 years ago. Scheduled arrival time: two days before May 6, the annual swearing-in ceremony of the new recruits, to take place this year for the first time ever in St. Peter's Square with 1,600 ex-Guards in attendance.

### THE POPES' ARMY ILLUSTRATES ITS 500 YEARS OF SERVICE

The Swiss Guards have included a multi-media exhibition in the celebrations of their 500th anniversary. Many items have never been on public display before

On the left wall of the Charlemagne Wing's entrance are portraits of the Guards' 33 commanders to date including the very first, Kaspar von Silenen (1506-1517), nephew of the Bishop of Sion and Grenoble; Kaspar Röist (1524-27), who perished with 146 members of his troops during the Sack of Rome in 1527; Alois Estermann, who was murdered the night before his first swearing-in ceremony as Commander; and Elmar Theodor Maeder, the present-day Kommandant since 2002.

My interview with Colonel Maeder was published in the March 2005 issue of *ITV* and an interview with his portraitist Natalia Tsarkova, who'd been the official portraitist of Pope John Paul II, a month later.





Left, a view into the Vatican's exhibition *The Pontifical Swiss Guards. 500 Years of History, Art and Life*. Above, a fresco by Raphael in the Raphael Rooms of the Vatican Museums shows Julius II, the founder of the Swiss Guards. The figure in the lower left corner is supposed to be a self-portrait of Raphael. Below, a portrait of Pietro Banchieri in a Swiss Guard costume, attributed to Pierre Bouche, 1667-1669, on permanent display in the Palazzo Braschi in Rome. Pietro Banchieri was the son of Pope Clement IX's nephew.

In his welcoming speech at the press preview, Colonel Maeder mentioned that this year the Guards were also commemorating a mini-celebration of now having served 50 Popes in their 500 years of service.

On the entrance's opposite side are the flags of Switzerland's 26 cantons. The flag of Schwyz with its all-red background and tiny white cross in the upper lefthand corner is a precursor to Switzerland's present-day flag with its red background and large white central cross.

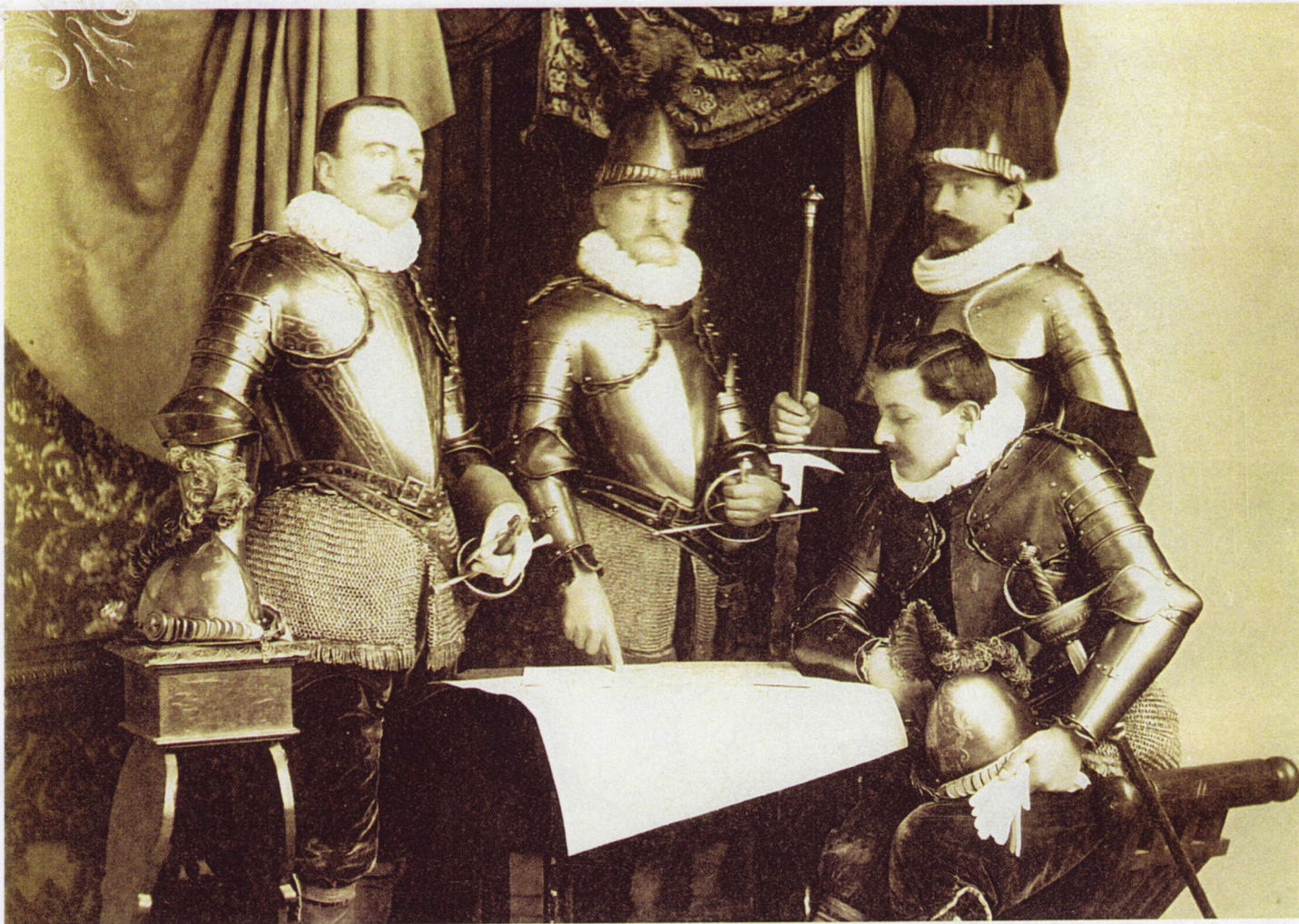
The first of the exhibition's six sections concerns the founding and arrival in Rome of the world's smallest, oldest and, with the Guards of Buckingham Palace, the most photographed army corps. Appropriately the first item on display is Pope Julius II's *breve* (a papal document which always begins with



the Latin greeting "*salutatem et apostolicam benedictionem*"). It's a request, dated June 21, 1505, asking the Swiss Confederation to provide him with 200 mercenaries for his personal protection in the Vatican. On loan from the Vatican's Secret Archives, it has never been displayed to the public before.

Also here are diaries about the Guards' arrival, one by a recruit and the other by Julius II's Master of Ceremonies, Johannes Burckhard, who later became Bishop of Orte. In the same cases are three charming miniatures: one of 16th-century Rome, a second of Julius II blessing his Swiss soldiers on their arrival in Rome, and the third of the triumphal entrance of Julius II with Kommandant von Silenen in March 1507 after the Guards' first military victory over





A photograph of a group of Swiss Guards at the beginning of the 1900s

Giovanni Bentivoglio, the tyrant of Bologna. For it must not be forgotten that Julius II's nickname was "warrior Pope" and that the Guards requested a bit euphemistically for his "personal protection" also served as his army to protect his territories against several European sovereigns.

For example, another little-known episode of history is the Battle of Ravenna in May 1512 when the Swiss Guards were instrumental in Julius II's victory there over the French commanded by King Louis XII. On display is the Pope's letter of thanks to the Guards and the four surviving banners (out of 12) he bestowed on their cantons of origin, as well as a magnificent gold-plated silver sword made in Rome by the goldsmith Domenico da Sutri. During his short nine-year reign Julius II bestowed 10 such "blessed" swords on his allies whom he called "*Defensores Ecclesiae Libertatis*" or "Defenders of the Freedom of the Church." His gift of one to the Guards, conserved in Zurich's *Schweizerisches Landesmuseum*, has never left Switzerland since its arrival in 1512 until now. "Of the 10 'blessed swords,'" explained Colonel Maeder, "it's the only one given to an institution and not an individual ruling allied sovereign."

The second section concerns the Sack of Rome—the only time the Guards saw combat and when 147, out of 189, of its members lost their lives. On this blackest of days in

the Guards' history thousands of Romans were also killed churches destroyed and Pope Clement VII had to escape from the Vatican along a secret passageway and take refuge in his nearby fortress, Castel Sant' Angelo.

Not-to-be-missed here are three important items: the helmet worn by Carlo III, Duke of Bourbon, who led the Spanish troops against Pope Clement VII; an anonymous Flemish triptych showing an "*Ecce Homo*" flanked by the Madonna and Child with St. Anne and by St. Margaret and the dragon; and a portrait of Clement VII by Sebastiano da Piombo.

The triptych was stolen from the papal apartments during the Sack of Rome by the Spanish soldier, Juan Barsena who abandoned his booty in the Church of St. Augustine in Cagliari, in Sardinia. When the local Bishop Girolamo da Villanova notified the Pope of its recovery, Clement VII donated it to this local church. This is its first return trip.

After the Sack of Rome, as a sign of mourning and penitence, Clement VII vowed never to shave again. In fact, in his portrait here, on loan from Vienna's *Kunsthistorisches Museum*, the sad-looking pontiff is depicted with a long grey beard. Instead, in an earlier portrait also by Sebastiano da Piombo, today in Naples's *Capodimonte Museum*, Clement VII is clean-shaven.

The artworks in the third section depict the Guards' par-





Russian artist Natalia Tsarkova, who lives in Rome, completing her portrait of Commandant Maider

ticipation in papal processions and religious festivities in Rome over the centuries. Here it is possible to trace the many stylistic changes of their uniforms before moving on to the fourth section with its displays of several real uniforms and halberds as well as ceremonial musical instruments, particularly drums.

After section five's documentary, mostly in Italian, the highlight of the exhibition's last section is a bronze globe. It was once atop the obelisk that the Emperor Caligula had brought to Rome from Alexandria in Egypt to decorate the chariot-racing circus he was building near the present-day site of St. Peter's Basilica. Ironically, 1,500 years later this was the site of the Swiss Guards' massacre during the Sack of Rome. The globe could also have been displayed in Section Two because it is dented with bullet holes from 1527.

As for the obelisk, which all visitors to this exhibition and thus to St. Peter's pass by, it is the oldest monument in St. Peter's Square and the first of Rome's 13 ancient obelisks to be re-erected in "modern times."

According to legend, unlike all the other obelisks in Rome, St. Peter's was never broken or overturned; only moved. That's undoubtedly because under the Emperor Nero (37-68 AD), Caligula's circus was the site of early Christian martyrdoms, probably including St. Peter's—and

thus this "eyewitness obelisk" was revered.

When it comes to real-life eyewitnesses, several describe the difficulties of moving this obelisk the short distance to the center of the piazza in 1586. Because it weighs 312 tons and is all in one piece, the unsuccessful attempts to raise it went on for several months and required 44 winches, 900 men and 140 horses. Pope Sixtus V decreed that anyone who spoke and distracted his fellow-workers would be punished by death. But then one day, as the men were tugging away, a sailor from San Remo (near Genoa) passed by. His nautically-trained eye saw that the ropes were so taut they were in danger of snapping. "Put some water on the ropes," he shouted in his Genoese dialect. His advice was taken and, since he saved the day and probably the obelisk as well, he was not punished. Moreover, the grateful Pope ordered that henceforth all the Vatican's Palm Sunday fronds should come from Bordighera near San Remo and they still do!

In order to "Christianize" this pagan symbol, Sixtus V also ordered the bronze globe at the obelisk's top to be removed and replaced by a cross. Like the "blessed sword" and the triptych, this is the globe's first return trip back to the Vatican. ●

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