



IN DEFENCE OF THE POPE

A COLLECTION OF HELMETS FROM THE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES

As part of the cultural initiatives of the Jubilee 2025, the exhibition presents a selection of pontifical helmets from the 16th and 17th centuries, kept in the storerooms of the Historical Collections of the Vatican Museums. Unique specimens: morions, cabasset helmets, horseman's helmets, burgonets and lobster-tailed pot helmets, from a collection commissioned by Urban VIII Barberini (1623-1644), now on display for the first time.

In the Renaissance, the helmet was a symbol. Object of defence, yes, but also of representation, allegory and power. The papal court armoured itself to build a new state image. In every crest and scratch lives the tale of men, battles, ideals. The helmet combines art and technique, theology and doctrine, militancy and ceremony.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the defence of the Pope was not the responsibility of a regular army, but of composite forces: mercenaries, armed citizens, nobles, knights, arquebusiers. After the Peace of Lodi (1454), the papacy attempted a more stable defence, but only in times of crisis did it mobilise real armies. In this context, special corps such as the Cavalrymen or the Lance Spezzate represented the highest loyalty to the pope, with light armour and ceremonial use of the lance and pistol.

The Papal Swiss Guard, founded in 1506 and still in service, is the only corps in the world to wear a Renaissance helmet: the crested morion. A living symbol of a Church that defended itself with spirit and steel.

Vatican helmets speak with their own voice. The morion (fig. 1-2), used by the Papal Guard and escorts from the second quarter of the 16th century, is crested or pointed, adorned with symbolic decorations. Its "papal" variants differ from the European ones in iconography and style.

The cabasset helmet (fig. 3), in use between the mid-16th and early 17th century, served musketeers and arquebusiers. Compact, blackened, etched, it recalls Medici models decorated with emblems of Mars later replaced by St. John the Baptist.

The Swiss pikeman's pot helmet (fig. 4), a heavy variant of the morion, was used in the 17th century by Swiss troops in the service of the Pope. Its impressiveness evoked strength and dignity.

The horseman's helmet (fig. 5), closed and compact, was in vogue in the 16th century. Used by Lance Spezzate and the Papal Guard, it appears in a painting by Girolamo Siciolante with Francesco II Colonna. Another example bears the Barberini coat of arms.

The light, bare-faced burgonets (fig. 7-8) were in use between 1520 and 1580. With a "Brescian" or pointed cap and hinged cheekpieces, they were used in the ceremonies of the Papal Guard. Similar models are in Bologna and in the Odescalchi collection.

The lobster-tailed pot helmet (fig. 9), of oriental style and datable to around 1650, was worn

by cuirassiers. Its overlapping blades, the brim with sliding nose piece and the rounded cap make it a masterpiece of protection.

Many helmets are decorated with heroic or naturalistic motifs, evocations of moral and martial virtues. The engravings are not mere ornaments: they are narratives etched into the metal. The helmet becomes an instrument of Christian ideology, a political and theological symbol.

Each helmet is a life. They speak of nameless soldiers who lived in the shadows of the Vatican palaces and fortresses. Their stories are intertwined with dramatic events: the Sack of Rome in 1527, when the Lansquenets devastated the city, or the Second Castro War, which saw the papacy mobilise 20,000 men.

Between that tragic 1527 and the Peace of Westphalia (1648), the Holy See experienced the tension between spiritual mission and political defence. In those years, the helmet reached its symbolic peak. Then, the advent of firearms decreed its demise. But its evocative power remains: the helmet continues to represent dignity, duty, mission.

The Swiss Guard is today the only corps to wear a Renaissance helmet in the liturgy of protection. What was once a shield is now a guardian of memory. The exhibition *In Defence of the Pope* pays homage to this past: a gallery of metal and silence, inviting us to reflect on what it means to defend what can only be touched by faith.



— Fig. 1 —

COMB MORION FOR PAPAL GUARD

Northern Italy
Second quarter 16th - first decade 17th century
Vatican Museums

— Fig. 2 —

POINTED MORION FOR PAPAL GUARD

Northern Italy
Mid-16th-early 17th century
Vatican Museums



— Fig. 3 —

CABASSET HELMET FOR PAPAL ARMY

Northern Italy
Mid-16th-early 17th century
Vatican Museums





— Fig. 4 —

PIKEMAN'S POT HELMET FOR SWISS GUARD

Northern Italy
17th century
Vatican Museums

— Fig. 5 —

HORSEMAN'S CLOSE-HELMET FOR PAPAL GUARD AND
"LANCE SPEZZATE"

Northern Italy
Late 16th century
Vatican Museums



— Fig. 7 —

"BRESCIANA" COMB BURGONET FOR PAPAL GUARD

Northern Italy
C. 1580
Vatican Museums



— Fig. 8 —

POINTED BURGONET FOR PAPAL GUARD

Northern Italy
Last third of the 16th century
Vatican Museums



— Fig. 9 —

LOBSTER-TAILED POT HELMET FOR PAPAL ARMY

Northern Italy
C. 1650
Vatican Museums

