

*Photographs by
Alex Majoli*

*Gianni Crea, keeper of the keys, in the Gallery
of Maps at the Vatican Museums*





Night at the Vatican

After the
tourists go
home, a
museum's
collection
tells its
own story.

By Cullen
Murphy

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At the Vatican Museums, the nightly ritual of the keys begins in Room 49A, a tight, windowless chamber, generally referred to as *il bunker*, which I entered one evening last November from a grassy courtyard as rain began to fall. The keeper of the keys—the *clavigero*—is a former member of the carabinieri named Gianni Crea. He has a staff of about a dozen, and keeps nearly 3,000 keys in the bunker. Can he match each one to a lock? At the Vatican, yes, he said; he has trouble at home. Some keys, like No. 401, which weighs a pound and opens the main interior door to the oldest of the museum buildings, were forged centuries ago; others resemble keys you'd find in a hardware store or a kitchen drawer. Many have plastic tags with handwritten labels. They open every utility box, every window, every gate and portal.

The heavy bronze doors at the museums' main entrance are pulled shut every afternoon at 4 p.m. and locked with a key numbered 2,000. Over the next two hours, until the exit doors are also closed, the last visitors proceed through the hallways. Behind them, here and there, lights begin to dim. Metal detectors power down. At the glassed-in security station in the Atrium of the Four Gates, departing guards punch time cards. Behind the glass, alongside a crucifix and a photograph of Pope Francis, a flatscreen presents live images from security cameras. The screen gives the enclosure a quiet glow.

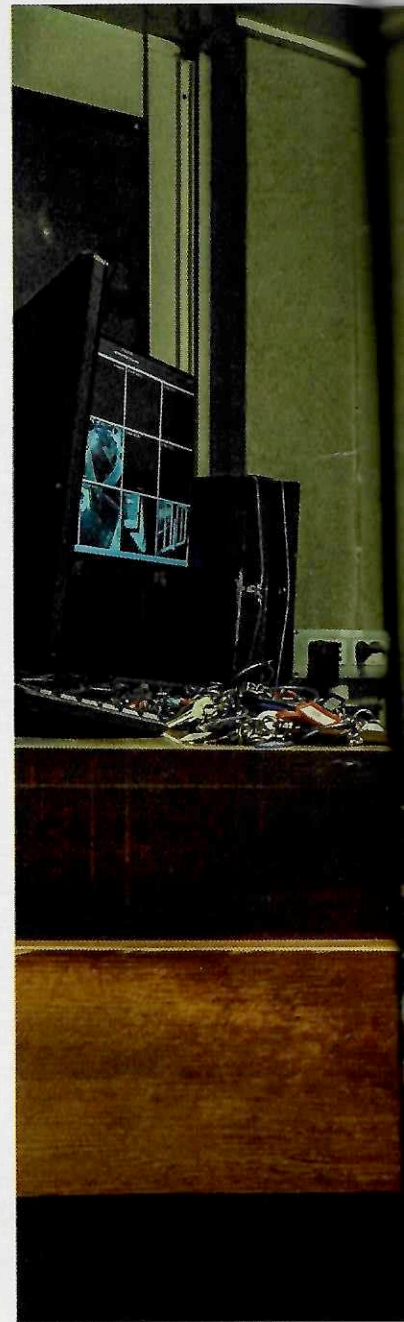
Each sector of the museum has its own large key ring, the kind carried by a jailer. On this night, when the last of the visitors

had gone, Crea piled a tangle of keys on the counter of the security station, then handed out key rings to his staff. The lockdown got under way. He kept a larger set of keys for himself, so that he and I could make our way anywhere.

Before leaving the bunker, Crea had taken a key from an envelope. The flap, now torn, bore his signature and had been stamped with the papal coat of arms. He had picked up the key that morning from a command post at the Porta Sant'Anna, one of the Vatican gateways, and would return it shortly before midnight. He handed the key to me, gesturing to a tiny, unmarked vault in the wall of the bunker. I opened the vault and found another key. If Lewis Carroll had invented a nuclear-launch protocol for the Holy See, this might have been it. The key in the vault was the key to the Sistine Chapel.

I HAD COME OFTEN to the Vatican Museums ever since a first visit when I was in grade school. Over the years I had written about some of the museums' activities, and on several occasions had met with the director, the art historian Barbara Jatta. But I had long wanted to experience the museums in a different way: to wander the four and a half miles of hallways after the doors close and to be there in the early hours before the doors open; to explore the collection—the 20,000 sculptures and paintings and other works on display—as night settles over Rome and the galleries adjust to a quieter state of being. A few months ago, I got my wish: The Vatican Museums agreed to let me spend most of a night inside and to go wherever I wanted. I would always be in the company of the *clavigero* and of another member of the staff, by turns Matteo Alessandrini, the head of the press office, and a colleague, Megan Eckley, both of whom I knew well. Not unusually, Matteo represents a second generation with a Vatican calling. His father, Costanzo, had served Pope John Paul II as a personal bodyguard.

The Vatican Museums—there are many separate units—occupy what is essentially a rectangle. To the north, the Belvedere Palace, which began life as a



15th-century papal villa, lies hard against Vatican City's massive walls. To the south, near St. Peter's Basilica, a quarter of a mile away, is the Sistine Chapel. Two long loggias link north to south and form the rectangle's sides. The space these buildings enclose is divided into courtyards.

The nightly lockdown begins: Gianni Crea at the central security station, Atrium of the Four Gates

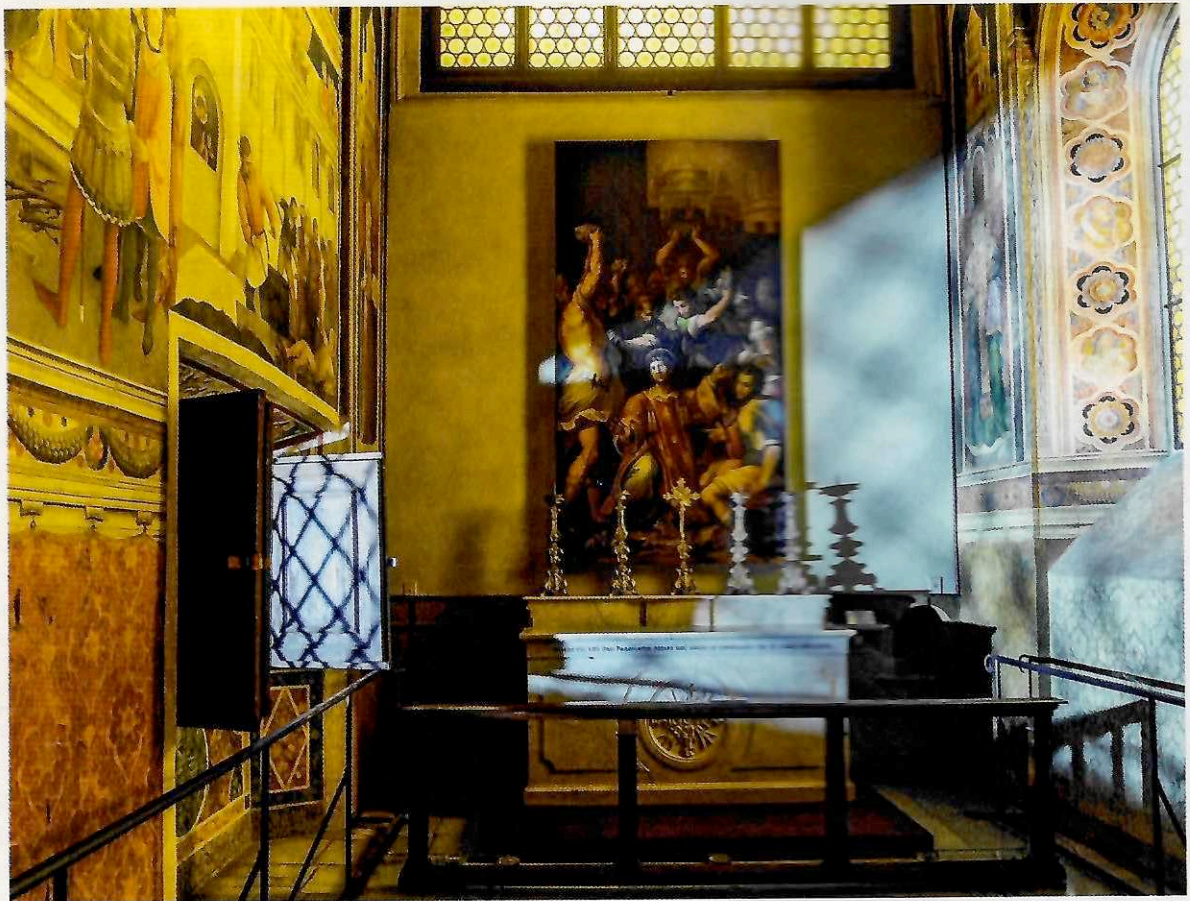


We decided to start the evening where the museums themselves had started, in the Belvedere Palace. The creators of what are now the Vatican Museums, half a millennium ago, were driven by a radical change in perspective. For centuries, the bountiful supply of ancient statuary

unearthed in Rome had been burned for lime to make mortar. With the revival of classical learning, Renaissance popes began to preserve the marble instead, putting the best pieces on display in the Belvedere's Octagonal Courtyard. The collection grew and the mission broadened. In

time, visionaries such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Antonio Canova created something like a modern museum. It remains modern in its scholarship and expertise, and in many of its operations.

But it is also the world's oldest major museum, and, as Jatta emphasizes, a



The Niccoline Chapel, inside the Apostolic Palace, with frescoes by Fra Angelico

spiritual dimension is part of its mission. Some precincts are consecrated space. The gift shops sell more rosaries than anything else. The original buildings were meant for the personal use of the pope, and in places encompass a confusing warren of small rooms and narrow staircases that were never intended to receive 7 million visitors a year. The scale of the Vatican Museums can be hard to comprehend—20 acres of wall space—and the task of renewal and conservation is perpetual. Masonry subsidizes and cracks. Frescoes fade. Roofs leak. Only four spaces have air-conditioning. The museum complex is not a static object. It is an organism, and life flows through it.

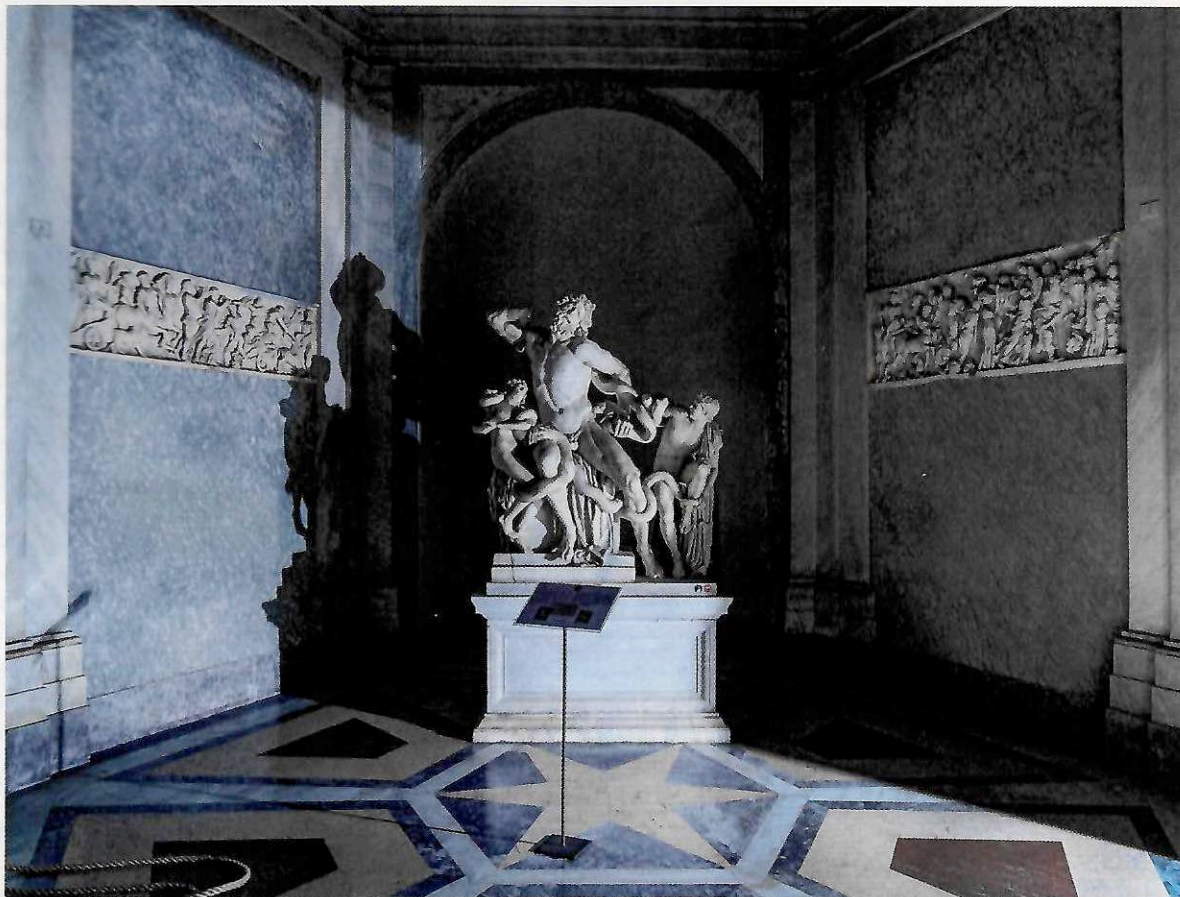
Earlier in the day, I had stopped in to see Marco Maggi, the head of the conservator's office. His job comes with a

pedigree—the first person to hold it was appointed in 1543. The office oversees the various restoration laboratories but its primary responsibility is to keep materials from deteriorating in the first place—statues and paintings, to be sure, but also mummy linens, Roman glass, medieval parchment, Renaissance tapestries, and items made of bronze or bone, feathers or sealskin. Reflecting on the biography of every object—the unique journey each has made to this place across miles and years—Maggi repeated an observation he'd once heard, and that stayed with me all night. "Time," he said, "is an emotion."

THE IDEA THAT A MUSEUM comes alive at night—that works of art themselves might relax and chat when people are not there—animates movies and

novels and children's books. And there is a sort of truth to the idea: After hours, life goes on. As we set out among the galleries, faint noises from the ceiling called attention to a skylight. Workers above could be heard talking as they washed the exterior, their movements backlit like those of puppets in a shadow play. Elsewhere, cleaners with soft brushes in their hands and vacuum cleaners strapped to their backs gently dusted imperial Roman statues—an animal's claws, an athlete's thighs, an emperor's beard. In a conservation laboratory set among exhibits, technicians in white coats worked late, repairing the frayed edge of a woven artifact from Africa.

The museums at night can feel like an elaborate play structure: gilded corridors the length of a football field, rooms



*The statue of Laocoön in the Octagonal Courtyard,
the nucleus of the Vatican Museums*

teeming with a stone zoo of lions and crocodiles and other marble creatures, darkened galleries and countless places to hide. Every door conceals a surprise. In the Belvedere Palace, the *clavigero* unlocked a gate that gave access to a tower encasing the Bramante staircase, a spiral ramp named for the chief architect of Pope Julius II. It is a double helix—people can ascend and descend without crossing paths—and large enough to accommodate a papal carriage, as it once had to do. The staircase links the lofty interior of the palace to an exterior private entrance far below. We stepped outside, at ground level, into a downpour. A fountain in the shape of a galleon sprayed jets of water from masts and cannons, as if trying to fight off the weather. Back upstairs, the Octagonal Courtyard was dimly lit and open to the sky. Rain

glazed a ring of sarcophagi and pelted a central pool. Some of the Vatican's original treasures are still here. One alcove frames the ancient statue known as *Laocoön*. I moved a velvet rope aside and walked behind the statue, and was surprised to find an object affixed to the base: a lone marble arm.

Laocoön was the man who tried to warn his fellow Trojans about that gift of a wooden horse. Angry, one of the gods sent serpents to strangle Laocoön and his sons—the moment captured in marble. The sculpture, from the first century B.C., had been unearthed in a vineyard near the Colosseum in 1506—Michelangelo was present for the excavation—and became the nucleus of the Vatican collection. But bits were missing, including the father's right arm. Could the arm be restored?

Restoration was once standard practice; along with fig leaves, classical statues gained hands, noses, and entire limbs made from plaster or marble. As recently as a few decades ago, souvenir-seekers might snap off a plaster finger, leaving a trace of white dust on the floor.

To restore *Laocoön*, the pope's architect held a competition, appointing Raphael as judge. Eventually an arm was added, slightly bent but reaching upward—the version preserved in countless copies. Michelangelo was skeptical; an experienced anatomist, he inferred that Laocoön's arm must have been angled sharply behind his head. Four hundred years later, a big piece of the missing limb was discovered. Michelangelo had been right. The original arm was reattached. The discarded arm was left

There was not a living soul in the gleaming
straightaway of the Chiaramonti loggia,
and yet it was full of life.

behind the statue, where on a rainy night the beam of a flashlight picked it out.

A MUSEUM LOSES SOMETHING when visitors are gone: People are part of the display. But it gains something in return. In the emptiness of night, you become acutely aware of your physical senses. Eyes adjust to changing gradations of light. Black windows become mirrors. Shadows dance at light's command: Projected on a wall, marble stallions pulling a Roman chariot seem to rear in anger; an unfinished angel by Bernini in clay and wire becomes even larger and hovers protectively over a Caravaggio. Faint smells come into their own. A whiff of paint lingers in a room that has been newly restored. A scent of candle wax pervades a papal chapel. The acoustic environment is unexpected. Every sound creates an echo—voices, footsteps, keys, raindrops. The high-low wail of a siren from the city outside seems impossibly remote. There is an urge to touch, to run a hand across surfaces like the underside of a Raphael tapestry, whose filaments of golden thread give the appearance of a circuit board.

Without the bustle, I was aware of another sense too, a kind of sixth sense: a consciousness of actual lives bound up with whatever I was looking at. In the Pinacoteca, the picture gallery, we passed Leonardo da Vinci's *Saint Jerome*; Leonardo's fingerprint was clearly visible in a patch of blue-green sky. A few rooms away, lit up and richly colored in an otherwise darkened space, Raphael's *The Transfiguration* might have been a stained-glass window.

It was easy to see why this place had been chosen for a memorial Mass, a few weeks earlier, recognizing staff members who had died or suffered loss in the previous year. On the same floor, in the older rooms of the Belvedere Palace, the presence of Michelangelo was inescapable: A visitor sees what he would have seen. Michelangelo came to this place to study the *Belvedere Torso*, a marble dating to the first century B.C. He thought of the torso—its arms missing, its legs cut off at the knees—as his “teacher” and used the taut anatomy in his portrayal of Adam on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling. In an adjacent room stands a basin, carved from a single slab of imperial porphyry, that may once have graced Emperor Nero's Golden House. It is said that Nero and his wife used to bathe in it, a detail I pass along understanding that *It is said*, a staple phrase in Rome, generally means “Don't look too closely.” But ordinary people are also reflected in the basin's history. The porphyry, weighing half a ton, had been quarried in Egypt. Hundreds of lives were invested in hauling and floating it to Rome. It would not have been an easy task.

There was not a living soul in the gleaming straightaway of the Chiaramonti loggia, which extends south from the Belvedere Palace, and yet it was full of life. Marble heads of ancient Romans are arranged side by side on tiers of shelves that stretch for 100 yards. Some are idealized renderings of gods and emperors. Some are busts of people one might actually have known. They capture receding hairlines, double chins, unfortunate fads

in coiffure; they capture pride, love, vanity, sadness. The names of many of these men and women have been lost. In some cases, all that is certain is a place of origin and a date, along the lines of SYRIA, 1ST CENTURY B.C. or DACIA, 3RD CENTURY A.D. But the individuality of the features, the imprint of personality, is too strong to ignore. I could imagine these people suddenly alive, marble becoming flesh, eyes blinking in surprise. Their expressive faces send a message that recalls an inscription in Rome's Capuchin ossuary: WHAT YOU ARE NOW, WE ONCE WERE.

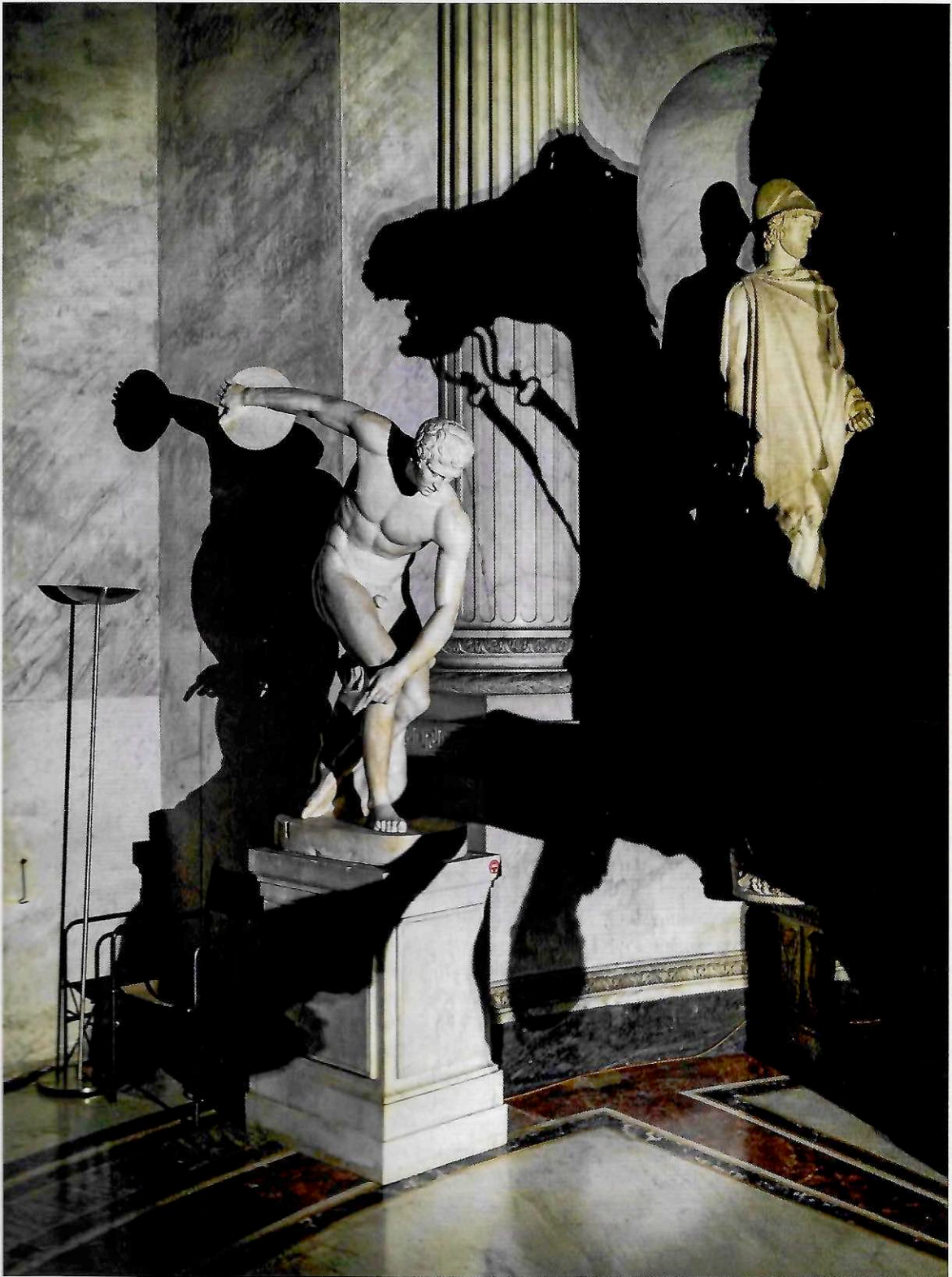
Among the 1,000 pieces of sculpture in the loggia, two busts were gone, their absence as obvious as missing teeth; all that remained were ragged circles marking where the bases had been fixed to a shelf. A few weeks earlier, an American tourist had told a guard that he needed to see the pope. Informed that a meeting was not possible, he had knocked the two busts to the floor. One of them—*Veiled Head of an Old Man*—lost part of his nose and an ear. The bust is being repaired, but this old Roman, whoever he was, will forever bear the marks of an encounter in 2022.

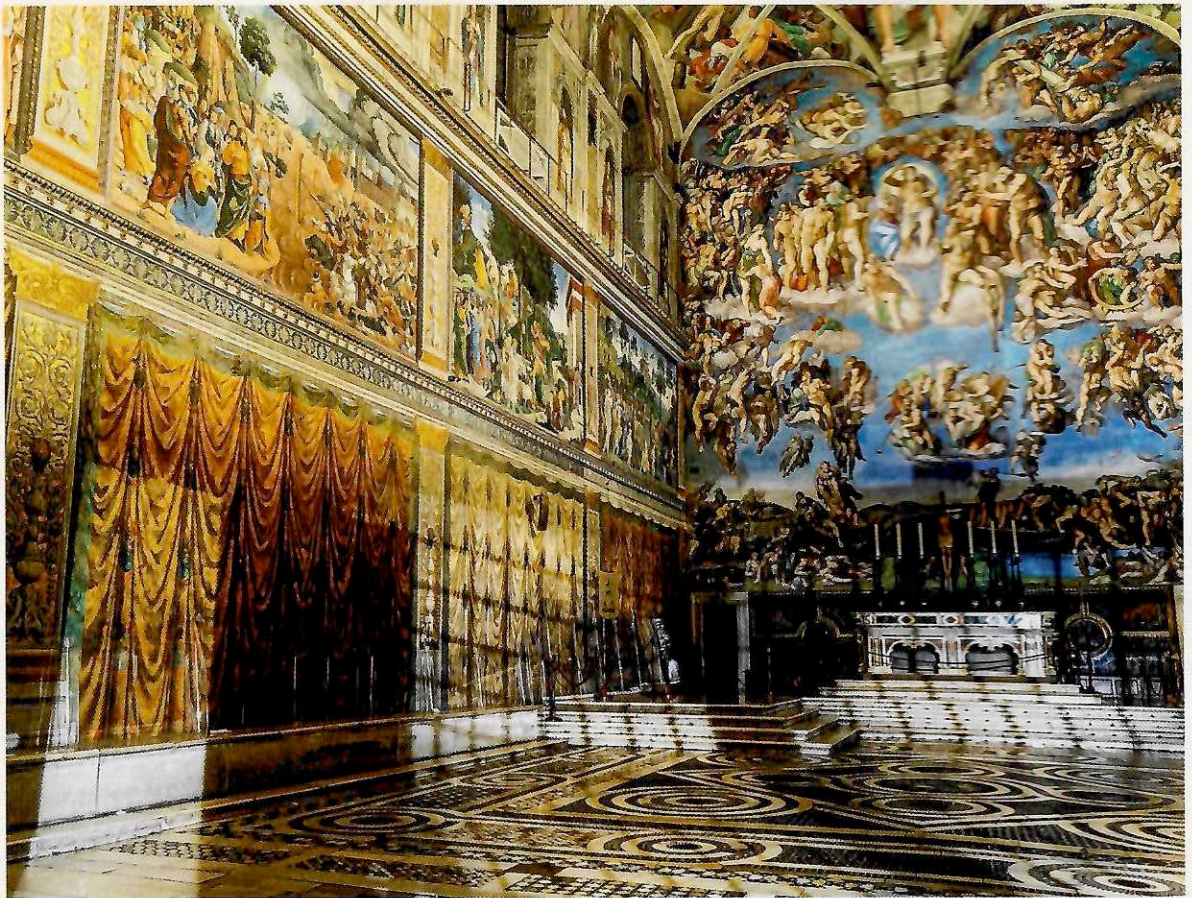
The Vatican Museums employ undercover personnel known as *volanti*, who walk among the crowds. But incidents still occur. In August, climate protesters from an organization called Last Generation glued their hands to the base of *Lao-cöön*. (A few weeks earlier, the same group had splashed pea soup on Van Gogh's *The Sower*, also in Rome.) The Vatican has a court system but few jail cells. The *Lao-cöön* perpetrators were remanded to Italy, a few yards away.

The American tourist who knocked over the busts likewise found himself in Italian custody. Word of the incident spread quickly. When Barbara Jatta saw Pope Francis at an event not long afterward, his first words to the museums' director were “Who was that poor man?”

WE LEFT ANCIENT ROME behind and headed for the newest part of the museums—the Anima Mundi gallery, devoted to works from beyond the Western world. The route to the gallery led past a terrace that looked out across the Vatican

The shadow of a stallion comes between a discus thrower and the god Hermes in the Hall of the Chariot.





The Sistine Chapel. To the left of the altar, under Michelangelo's The Last Judgment, stands the door to the Room of Tears.

gardens to the dome of St. Peter's and the misty silhouettes of umbrella pines. The dome was lit gently, except for the blazing lantern atop its crown. Antonio Paolucci, a former director of the museums, used to say that the best time to view the dome at night would have been centuries ago, when only the moon gave illumination. Electric lighting, he felt, made the lantern look like a birthday cake. Tonight, in the wet air, it wore a halo.

I was not prepared for the beauty of the Anima Mundi gallery—a sleek, modern space the size of a small warehouse. The gallery was dark but the collection was revealed in illuminated vitrines that arose like glass meeting rooms in an open-plan office. Many of the objects had been gifts to popes. Father Nicola Mapelli, the director of the gallery, walked among objects

he especially loves: funerary poles and *wandjina* rock art from Australia; a ritual mask from Tierra del Fuego; a red-eyed, black-skinned Madonna and Child from New Guinea.

Museum officials sometimes speak of Anima Mundi as “the next Sistine Chapel,” and a big part of the museums’ future. Most of the Church’s growth is outside Europe and North America. Of course, the existing Sistine Chapel remains a big part of the future too. We made our way toward the chapel and the Raphael Rooms, at the far end of the rectangle. Pausing by a window, Matteo Alessandrini pointed to the Mater Ecclesiae Monastery, on the Vatican grounds. The time was about 10 o’clock, and a single room was lit—the *salone* of the pope emeritus, Benedict XVI. He had only a month to live.

A few moments later, Matteo indicated a small handle in a frescoed wall and pulled out a thin rectangle of masonry. Behind it was a pane of glass, embedded in the wall centuries ago as an early-warning system: Cracked glass would mean the building had begun to subside. I reached in with a finger. We were okay for now.

In the Raphael Rooms—four chambers that Raphael covered with frescoes in what were once a suite of papal apartments—heavy wooden shutters had been closed against the night, but an open window was still reflected in the polished shield of a figure on an opposite wall: a *trompe l’oeil* joke by the artist. Gouges in the walls are still visible, the work of soldiers with pikes during the Sack of Rome in 1527. Raphael had been painting the last of these four rooms, the Room of



Father Nicola Mapelli and lab technicians working after hours at the conservation laboratory in the Anima Mundi gallery

Constantine, when a fever carried him off. Graffiti, centuries old, has been scratched into its lower walls: *FU FATTO PAPA PIO IV*, someone wrote, noting the election of a new pontiff. That was in 1559.

FROM THE RAPHAEL ROOMS, the Sistine Chapel was only a few staircases away. Its most striking aspect, when you enter alone and in weak light, is not the frescoed ceiling but the sheer expanse of floor. During the day, when the room is packed with people, all looking up, the floor disappears. Once, years ago, lifted toward the chapel's ceiling in the basket of a cherry picker, I had the chance of a bird's-eye view. But I naturally looked up, and not at the five-story drop.

Now, late in the evening, after Gianni Crea turned the key and pulled the knob,

an expanding trapezoid of light from the hallway behind us illuminated the intricate marble inlay ahead.

An axis of braided circles ran down the length to the altar, the effect dynamic and yet placid. This is the tessellated floor that Michelangelo would have known—the one that received any droppings of paint that missed the scaffolding or his face. It's the floor Raphael would have walked on when (it is said) he took advantage of Michelangelo's absence from Rome to sneak a look at the work in progress. The chapel would not be cleaned until morning, but as lights came on I saw little in the way of litter—unusual in a room that as many as 25,000 people walk through every day. The explanation may simply be the power of this place, its sacral nature. People do leave prayers. I found a folded slip of paper

on the masonry bench that runs along the walls, saw what it was, and put it back.

Free of distraction, you have a chance to notice details—for instance, the spots high on the walls where Michelangelo was unable to paint, because his scaffolding got in the way. Or how the plane of *The Last Judgment* leans forward, as if to convey active urgency; the slant is obvious at the join, where the front wall meets the sidewalls. Digital sensors, visible once you look for them, collect data from all parts of the chapel. They monitor temperature, humidity, carbon dioxide, and particulates, as well as the size of the crowd. The data are tracked on screens in the conservator's office; we likely produced a blip just by opening the door and turning on a light. The Sistine Chapel is one of those few air-conditioned spaces in the

A door opened, near the Sistine Chapel's altar, and a man stood silhouetted in a bright rectangle: He was standing at the entrance to the Room of Tears.

Vatican Museums. The air in the room can be exchanged as often as 60 times a day. If need be, the volume of traffic can be reduced by controllers upstream. They can close doors and loop throngs into a detour, or encourage exploration. People should know about Etruscan art anyway. But the chapel never fully shakes off its millions of annual visitors—their dust, their heat, their coughs and sneezes.

Those visitors arrive through a single entrance and leave through a single exit. But there are additional doors—another thing you notice when the room stands empty. The Sistine Chapel is part of the Apostolic Palace, the official papal residence, and some doors, usually locked, lead directly into private areas. Late in the evening, an elderly priest came through the double doors in the wall farthest from the altar, perhaps drawn by light seeping underneath them at an odd hour. We were invited into the Sala Regia, an ornate hall in the Apostolic Palace where popes once received royalty, and then into the Pauline Chapel, where cardinals celebrate Mass before a papal conclave begins. It is also a private chapel for the pope. There was to be a funeral here the next morning for a dignitary identified only as *un diplomatico*. Michelangelo's last paintings dominate the sidewalls of the chapel—*The Conversion of Saul* and *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter*. Peter is shown being crucified upside down, as tradition says he was. But the head is torqued, lifting off the cross so that Peter can see into the room. His dark eyes followed me all the way down the center aisle, and all the way back.

Later, another door opened, near the Sistine Chapel's altar, and a man stood silhouetted in a bright rectangle: He was standing at the entrance to the Room of Tears. Immediately upon election, a new pope takes refuge here in order to reflect on the weight thrust upon him, and to change into a white cassock. The man in the doorway, its custodian, allowed us in.

It is a suite, not a single room. The vestibule holds a red plush Victorian love seat. White cassocks in various sizes hang on a rack in the room beyond; one of them should fit any newly elected pontiff well enough. A final room contains a small wooden desk bearing a nameplate from the most recent conclave: BERGOGLIO, the surname of Pope Francis. On a shelf nearby sit boxes labeled *BIANCA* and *NERA*—chemical additives used to produce white or black smoke during a conclave, after each vote. In the vestibule, the custodian pointed to an alcove sheltering a waist-high antique cabinet. Did we know what it was? With a flourish, he opened the cabinet to reveal a commode, the oval seat upholstered in rich red leather.

The Vatican Museums go dark for everyone before midnight. It was 11 p.m., and time to leave. The lights in the Sistine Chapel were extinguished, and the door swung shut. A quarter of a mile later, Crea returned the chapel's key to its vault. Alarms were set. Outside, Crea locked the museums' back entrance and put the key to the vault (in a freshly sealed envelope, signed and stamped) and the key to the back door into a zippered pouch. This he deposited at a command post on his way

out of the city-state. Until about 5 a.m., no one would be inside.

I WOULD SEE the Sistine Chapel once more. Two hours before dawn, as the rain tapered off, the gates of the Porta Sant'Anna swung open for Crea's BMW.



On a wall in the Pinacoteca, the picture gallery, Caravaggio's Deposition and the specter of a Bernini angel



One of the Swiss guards at the gate saluted and then bent to the window. The guardsmen wore not the ceremonial uniform of red, blue, and yellow but the deep-blue service uniform, still with a Renaissance flair—breeches, knee socks, tunic, beret. Instead of swords, the guards carried

sidearms. They were young and fit, and looked capable of a kinetic response to Stalin's mocking question "How many divisions has the pope?" The car was waved through.

We stopped at the command post to pick up the pouch, then drove farther into

Vatican City. The car crossed a courtyard, passed under a building, made some sharp turns, and came out amid the Vatican gardens alongside a road that leads to the back entrance of the museums. This is the route typically taken by guests of the Holy See's secretary of state and by certain

The recently restored Room of Constantine, the chamber Raphael was working on when he died

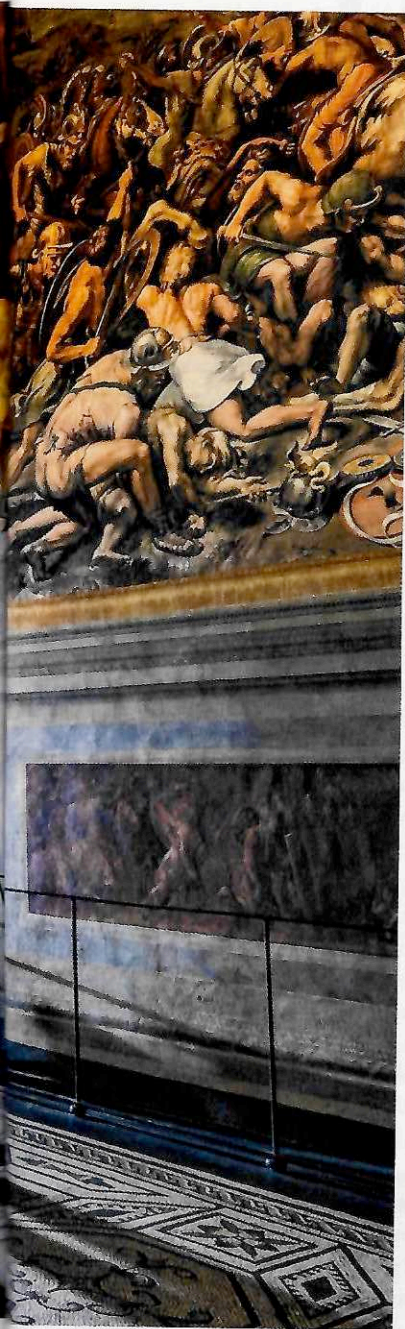


other visitors. French President Emmanuel Macron had recently come this way. A year earlier, Kim Kardashian, arriving with Kate Moss, had created a stir, wearing what appeared to be a spray-on white doily; she had to put on a long coat before being allowed to enter the Sistine Chapel.

Members of the staff still spoke about that visit. (Moss, they said, had been lovely.)

When other guards arrived, Crea unlocked the entrance. Inside, switches were flicked. The security station glowed once more. *Tutto okay?* one of the men said into a phone—a routine call to the central

office of the *governatorato*, the Vatican's city hall, which manages the alarm system. Yes, everything was okay. Crea began handing out rings of keys. He himself took No. 401 and proceeded to the double doors that give entry to the Belvedere Palace. Using both arms, he pulled them open.



The museums' doors would soon be opening. The hallways had begun to awaken.

uniforms, helmets catching the light—an honor guard for the diplomat's funeral. The counterpoint in the chapel was a red-haired woman in a white smock, armed with a bucket, a broom, and a mop.

She worked with propulsive energy, first wiping down the altar and then sweeping 6,000 square feet of marble floor. I introduced myself; her name was Barbara and her grip was strong. She said she cleaned not only the chapel but also the stairs leading to and from it, and the toilets nearby and some of the laboratories. The chapel took her an hour; some of her supplies were kept behind the altar. She liked starting every day like this, and explained why with an arc of her arm that took in the ceiling. The contents of her dustpan confirmed the scarcity of litter: six small museum tickets, a handful of tissues, a couple of candy wrappers, a scrunchie. When her sweeping was done, Barbara opened a wooden cabinet against a wall and wheeled out a machine resembling a small Zamboni. Pushing it by hand, she polished the entire floor. The triumphant figure of Christ in *The Last Judgment* seemed protective, watching over Barbara as she worked. I knew that the figure's torso had been based on that of *Laocoön*, but saw now that the right arm was angled over his head, as Michelangelo knew it should be, not raised above. He had made his point.

The museums' doors would soon be opening. The hallways had begun to awaken. Guards passed by in twos and threes. Salespeople unloaded boxes from carts: fresh supplies of guidebooks and rosaries, key chains and plush toys. An aroma of espresso trailed from a break

room. Near the gates, metal detectors blinked on. Outside, below the Vatican's high walls, the colored flags of tour guides poked above the crowd.

We sought higher ground, climbing to a terrace that overlooks the Cortile della Pigna, the Pinecone Courtyard. The view, Barbara Jatta told me, had made this terrace a favorite spot: It offers a panorama of the Vatican and all of Rome. The storm had passed. A thin haze lay over the city, pierced by domes and towers. The sun, low above the Alban Hills, was on the verge of breaking through.

I was conscious of the way the various cogs of a museum's life turn at different rates. The slow, unending process of accretion over centuries. The biography, sometimes tortuous, of every object. The cyclical flood of visitors. The start-and-stop progress through a gallery. And the sudden spark of provocation, when something you see triggers a thought or a memory—a long-ago visit here with a parent, a moment of love or friendship, an inexplicable vibration of the spirit. In that instant, a museum exists for the visitor alone. I had been carrying around Marco Maggi's words like a riddle—"Time is an emotion"—even as the meaning fell into place. *A*

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We meandered along the Gallery of the Tapestries. The hall was dark, but a flash-light framed the risen Christ in a bright circle. We arrived once more at the Sistine Chapel. The door to the Sala Regia opened briefly, revealing a flash of color: Swiss guards stood smartly in ceremonial