



News Release

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The Charge of the Light Brigade and 13th Century Battle of Montaperti Come to Life in an Exquisite Model Soldier Exhibition at Salisbury House

DES MOINES, IA –Salisbury House & Gardens is pleased to announce that it will display a special exhibition of two historic battle scene dioramas created by one of the world’s finest model soldier artists, Mario Venturi of Florence, Italy.

Venturi’s internationally-acclaimed Battle of Montaperti and the Charge of the Light Brigade dioramas were commissioned by Harry Bookey and Pamela Bass-Bookey of Des Moines, who have graciously loaned them to the Salisbury House for a limited public viewing. From July 24th through August 19th, the Salisbury House Library will be open for special viewing hours from 1 pm to 4 pm (closed Mondays) to showcase these exquisite dioramas.

Most people are familiar with “toy soldiers,” which are mass-produced, miniature figures depicting military personnel in a variety of combat situations, both historic and contemporary. Less well known is the emergent field of “model soldiers,” which are high-quality, historically-accurate, perfectly-scaled individual figures and scenes which reflect specific combat events. Judged by the acclamation of model soldier collectors and artists alike, Italy’s Mario Venturi is arguably the world’s finest practitioner within this field, and these two dioramas represent him at the peak of his creative powers.

Mario Venturi’s dioramas and the figurines within them are finely-detailed, reflecting realism and an extraordinary quality of artistry and workmanship. With a dedication to accuracy, Venturi researched, sculpted, painted and produced specific scenes within the battles to create a unique visual narrative of two specific moments in history. The models required hundreds of hours of research and hundreds more to create and mount each of the figures. The realism he depicted in the Montaperti diorama garnered him designation as a Grand Master Designer from the Model Figure Collector’s of America in 2006.

The first diorama to be displayed at Salisbury House represents a scene from the Battle of Montaperti, which was fought in 1260 near Venturi's home in Florence. The battle resulted from a conflict between the Guelphs, who supported Pope Alexander IV, and the Ghibellines, who supported Alfonso X of Castile, the Holy Roman Emperor. The clash culminated on the field of Montaperti, by way of the Florentine army fighting for the Guelphs and Sienese army fighting for the Ghibellines. The battle of Montaperti is remembered for an act of treachery by Bocca degli Abati against the Guelphs which turned the tide of the battle. The conflict of the Guelphs and the Ghibellines inspired at least two great works. Dante Alighieri drew on his Ghibelline heritage, and placed the alleged traitor Bocca degli Abati in the ninth circle of Hell in his work, *The Divine Comedy*. William Shakespeare's modeled the Montague family from the Ghibellines and the Capulets on the Guelphs for his play *Romeo and Juliet*.

The second diorama reflects a scene from the Crimean War's Battle of Balaclava, made famous by Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade." Tennyson wrote the poem after he read a newspaper account describing a cavalry assault led by Sir James Brudenell, the seventh Earl of Cardigan, on Russian troops on October 25, 1854. Lord Cardigan led the Light Brigade, while overall command of the cavalry belonged to Lieutenant General George Bingham, the Earl of Lucan. Cardigan and Lucan were brothers-in-law who held disdain for each other. Lucan ordered Cardigan to lead 673 cavalrymen into the valley between the Fedyukhin Heights and the Causeway Heights. It would be this area that the poet Tennyson would famously call the "Valley of Death." Over half of the men under Cardigan's command were killed or wounded. 118 men were killed, 127 wounded, while 195 escaped unscathed.

Carl and Edith Weeks, who built Salisbury House in the 1920s, acquired a library collection that includes documents and books reflecting these battles in classic literature, and rare items from the Salisbury House Library collection will be displayed as part of this exhibition, along with other representative model soldiers and interpretive panels and printed materials.

Note on Media Availability: Diorama owners Harry Bookey and Pamela Bass-Bookey and Salisbury House Executive Director J. Eric Smith are available for interviews to discuss the exhibition, for both preview and review purposes. Media questions for Mario Venturi may be submitted in writing only, due to language barriers, and will be transmitted via the Salisbury House staff and the Bookeys for his consideration.

Salisbury House & Gardens is a 42-room historic house museum owned and operated by the Salisbury House Foundation. Built by cosmetics magnate Carl Weeks and his wife, Edith, between 1923 and 1928, the estate house was modeled after the King's House in Salisbury, England.

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Battle of Monteperti



The Charge of the Light Brigade