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A Museum Display of Galileo Has a Saintly Feel



Kathryn Cook for The New York Times Times

A bust of Galileo at the Galileo Museum in Florence, Italy. The museum is displaying recovered parts of his body.

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FLORENCE, Italy — The [Galileo](#) case is often seen starkly as science's first decisive blow against not only faith but also the power of the [Roman Catholic Church](#). It has never been quite that simple, though. Galileo was a believer, devastated at being convicted, in 1633, of heresy for upending the biblical view of the universe.

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Now a particularly enduring Catholic practice is on prominent display in, of all places, Florence's history of science museum, recently renovated and renamed to honor Galileo: Modern-day supporters of the famous heretic are exhibiting newly recovered bits of his body — three fingers and a gnarly molar sliced from his corpse nearly a century after he died — as if they were the relics of an actual saint.

"He's a secular saint, and relics are an important symbol of his fight for freedom of thought," said Paolo Galluzzi, the director of the [Galileo Museum](#), which put the tooth, thumb and index finger on view last month, uniting them with another of the scientist's digits already in its collection.

"He's a hero and martyr to science," he added.

How the relics returned makes for an appropriate new chapter in the life and legacy of Galileo, which is still under debate. In 1992, the church came around to acknowledging

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One of Galileo's fingers.

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Visitors at the museum studying a collection of watches and clocks, most made between the late 16th and 19th centuries.

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The museum has a model of the universe according to the Ptolemaic geocentric system that Galileo largely rejected.

that the judges who had convicted him of heresy had erred, but it did not quite clear Galileo either. And the relics' return underscores, yet again, continuing tensions between the church and secular culture in Italy.

The scientist's troubles did not end with his death in 1642.

As a heretic he could not be given a proper church burial. But for years after his death, his followers in the circle of the grand dukes of Tuscany pushed to give him an honorable resting place.

Nearly a century later, in 1737, members of Florence's cultural and scientific elite unearthed the scientist's remains in a peculiar Masonic rite. Freemasonry was growing as a counterweight to church power in those years and even today looms large in the Italian popular imagination as an anticlerical force.

According to a notary who recorded the strange proceedings, the historian and naturalist Giovanni Targioni Tozzetti used a knife to slice off several fingers, a tooth and a vertebra from Galileo's body as souvenirs but refrained, it appears, from taking his brain. The scientist was then reburied in a ceremony, "symmetrical to a beatification," said Mr. Galluzzi.

After taking their macabre souvenirs, the group placed Galileo's remains in an elegant marble tomb in Florence's Santa Croce church, a pointed statement from Tuscany's powers that they were outside the Vatican's control. The church has long been a shrine to humanism as much as to religion, and Galileo's permanent neighbors include Michelangelo, Machiavelli and Rossini.

Galileo's vertebra wound up at the University of Padua, famous for its medical school, while his middle finger wound up in the collection that formed the basis for the Galileo Museum. But the thumb, index finger and tooth disappeared in 1905, only to re-emerge last October, in an auction of reliquaries in Florence.

Alberto Bruschi, a Florence collector, bought what turned out to be Galileo's digits and tooth at the urging of his daughter Candida, who collects reliquaries. She also happened to be writing her senior thesis on Galileo's tomb.

After she observed that the figure on top of the reliquary resembled Galileo, the family called an expert who contacted Mr. Galluzzi, and the match was made.

A spokeswoman for the Pandolfini auction house, which sold the reliquaries, said it could not reveal their

provenance but said it had no idea they were Galileo's.

Mr. Bruschi credits providence with the find. "More than by chance, things are also helped along a bit by the souls of the dead," he said in a telephone interview. "I think they could not have wound up in better hands."

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(A dentist who examined the tooth for the museum said it showed signs of gastric reflux and indicated that Galileo ground his teeth in his sleep.)

But although the relics may be the museum's sexiest draw, they are a small part of the museum, which reopened last month after a high-tech renovation that transformed it into one of Italy's best boutique collections, a veritable curiosity cabinet of beautifully wrought scientific instruments.

On a sunny recent morning, visitors seemed captivated by gems including telescopes, painted globes, clocks, and a nearly room-size model of the universe according to the Ptolemaic geocentric system that Galileo largely rejected for the Copernican one, commissioned by Ferdinando de Medici in 1588.

Even today, centuries after Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, the pope's theological watchdog, had Galileo arrested for preaching Copernicanism, the church has never quite managed to acknowledge that his heliocentric theory is correct. (For his part, Cardinal Bellarmine was made a saint in 1930.)

[Pope John Paul II](#) reopened the Galileo case in 1981, and in 1992 [issued his committee's findings](#): that the judges who condemned Galileo had erred but that the scientist had also erred in his arrogance in thinking that his theory would be accepted with no physical evidence. "The fragility of this explanation is rather transparent," Mr. Galluzzi said dryly.

(The museum director also dismissed as a "myth" the idea that Galileo uttered "eppur si muove" — "and yet it moves" — to his inquisitors after his conviction.)

In 1992, John Paul praised Galileo for inventing the scientific method and said that the theologians of the day had erred in thinking that they should read sacred Scripture literally. He called the Galileo case one in which "a tragic, reciprocal incomprehension was interpreted as the reflection of a fundamental opposition between science and faith."

For centuries, the Vatican has operated a serious [astronomical observatory in Castel Gandolfo](#), outside Rome, which is linked to the observatory at the [University of Arizona](#) and run by a Jesuit astronomer with no doubts about heliocentrism. But as recently as last fall, at a news conference introducing an [exhibition of historic telescopic instruments at the Vatican Museums](#), the director of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture, Monsignor Gianfranco Ravasi, referred without blinking to "the errors committed by both sides" — indicating both the church and Galileo.

Asked by a reporter how he might explain the errors committed by Galileo, the genial monsignor, a former director of Milan's Biblioteca Ambrosiana who is widely seen as a rising star in the Vatican firmament, beamed, and with great gusto said only that he hoped one day to organize a conference on the didactic challenges presented by Galileo's science. Case closed.

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