



# **The Army Museum at Invalides**

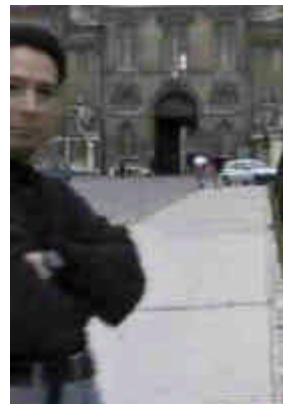
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### The Army Museum at Invalides

The Hotel des Invalides cannot be missed. As one crosses the Pont Alexandre III or approaches Avenue Du Marechal Gallieni along the Quai d'Orsay, the gleaming gilded lead dome of the "Eglise Du Dome" in which Napoleon is buried announces one's having arrived in the precincts of Invalides with unmistakable verve.

In the unlikely event that any doubt still lingers in the visitor's mind, a glance across the spacious greensward of the Esplanade des Invalides toward the sprawling structure in the distance will quickly remove it. Continuing along Gallieni (or, alternatively, the Boulevard de Latour-Maubourg which is reached from the Pont des Invalides) where on this day casual strollers beneath the lime trees in the classic Parisian manner and joggers in American-style sweat suits challenge the gathering storm clouds that have brought drenching rains to Paris since the beginning of September, one reaches the north entrance of the Invalides building complex.

Here, on the ramparts, are seventeenth and eighteenth century artillery pieces bearing a verdigris patina. The canons, removed by the invading Germans in 1940 and restored after the French Liberation, flank Invalides' main gate. The



At Invalides' entrance.

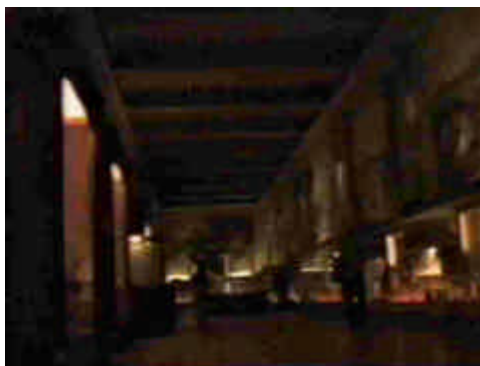
entry point is guarded by a gendarme who lifts and replaces a stop sign mounted on a metal pole from a post hole in the ground when cars need to enter or exit. Pedestrians encounter no such impediments, however.

Once through the gate, a phalanx of topiary marches down the lawn in serried columns as cuirassiers and hussars once might have done in a bygone era. The topiary, it seems, bears a distinct resemblance to the beehive-shaped fur headgear worn by these soldiers. It reinforces the militaristic connotations of this building complex that are manifest at first sight. Invalides, originally founded by Louis XIV in the year 1670 as a hospital for invalid soldiers, houses the Army Museum of France. It also houses an extensive military research library and military administrative offices. However what Invalides is most renowned for is the tomb of Napoleon Bonaparte I, which is located in the domed Church of St. Louis located behind the end pavilion at the south end of the main courtyard as one enters.

Proceeding through the topiary garden and entering through a ponderous pair of doors guarded by a second gendarme, one reaches the spacious main courtyard paved in octagonal cobblestones known as the Cour d'honneur. If one finds the presence

of mind to turn around and glance back through the entranceway, one is rewarded by the sight of a vista along Avenue Du Marechal Gallieni which offers a spectacular view back across the Alexandre III Bridge toward the Champs Elysees in the middle distance. However, one can be pardoned for not taking advantage of this opportunity and proceeding directly into the vast cobblestone courtyard flanked by two of the four refectories of Invalides which house the Army Museum, for the Cour d'honneur has the power to swallow one up.

High above the courtyard a third gendarme guards the approaches to the south portal of the end pavilion which leads to the dome church. It is a statue by Seurre of Napoleon garbed in his familiar cocked hat and frock coat and known as The Little Corporal. The statue, which originally stood at the top of the column in the Place Vendome, seems to gaze down on those below, and as one comes under the vigilance of the Emperor, one feels that he is present in some form, however incorporeal. Later, after some time has been



Dimly lit Colors and Standards Hall  
(Turenne Hall.)

spent in the environs of Invalides, it becomes clear that this is no trick of the light, or chimera of the imagination, for the spirit of Napoleon does very certainly pervade the precincts of Invalides.

While many visitors to the complex opt to go directly to Napoleon's Tomb, I have come here today with the chief goal of inspecting the somewhat less popular collection of military artifacts housed in the outstanding Army Museum collection. The collection is vast, and while the presence of the Emperor's remains overshadows the museum as Napoleon's personage did to so many things in life, it is nonetheless a remarkable point of interest in its own right. The exhibition area occupies some seven thousand square feet and encompasses roughly sixty thousand individual display articles. Included here is one of the most comprehensive assortment of artillery pieces and uniforms in the world, and indisputably the most complete collection of French



Vauban Hall, also called Detaille Hall.

infantry weapons from the early seventeenth century to the present day.

Entering the museum lobby from the Cour d'honneur, an impressive collection of swords, helmets and other military paraphernalia immediately captures the attention while a small museum shop offers a selection of publications (mostly in French) including a magazine for military

enthusiasts published by the museum. To the right and left are galleries containing the exhibits on the ground floor level of the east wing.

To the right of the entranceway, in the Colors and Standards Hall (also called Turenne Hall), a series of wall paintings depicts scenes from Louis XIV's campaign in Flanders of 1672. The paintings, executed by Martin des Batailles, have only recently been restored during an extensive renovation of the hall. Housed in glass display cases below the paintings are trophies, regimental colors and standards dating from several periods, particularly from World War I. Notable among these are a series known as the Fontainebleau Farewell Colors, which were kissed by Napoleon on April 20, 1814 just prior to his departure into exile on the isle of Elba. Occupying a table in the center of the hall is a glass-encased scale model plan of Invalides.

On the left wall of the chamber, softly illuminated, hangs a large portrait of Napoleon I in coronation dress seated on the Imperial Throne of France in 1804 and rendered by Dominique Ingres in 1806. Resplendent in robes of state, his head wreathed with the laurels of a Caesar, the newly crowned Emperor has here assumed the trappings of a demigod, perhaps not yet suspecting that he would in time suffer a fate similar to that of his counterparts of Imperial Rome. Walking back through the lobby occupied with such somber thoughts, one crosses into the left wing of the former



Detaille Hall. One of many mounted cavalry

refectory known as Vauban Hall or Detaille Hall, because it was originally intended to house the collection of militaria bequeathed to the museum by Edouard Detaille, a founder. Here too, the walls are decorated by large paintings by des Batailles depicting territories conquered by Louis XIV during the War of Devolution (1667-1668).

Within large display cases are eighteen full-sized equestrian

figures which depict the evolution of French cavalry uniforms from the Consulate period (1800) up to World War II. As spectacular as these displays are, the smaller exhibits on the walls show something equally deserving of observation and reflection. This is an extensive collection -- complete but for a few pieces for which no extant examples survive -- of French small arms employed by regular army units since 1717.

Among this assortment of weaponry are several genuine curiosities. In a display of pistols and revolvers dating from 1780-1860, there is a 20-shot revolver called the Model Lefoucheaux which was produced circa 1855 and 1857, proving, if nothing else, that exotic weaponry is not merely an obsession of our own bellicose epoch. Another pistol of 1837 vintage bears a remarkable six individually functioning barrels. An 1816 pistol boasts an enormous bore; it is really more like a sawed-off rifle than a hand-piece. Bayoneted pistols, such as an assortment made between 1845-1850, are also found here in several versions, presumably for use in close-quarter combat after the gun's limited ammunition supply was exhausted. Small canon too are on display as are gunsmithing implements circa 1777 which are

of special interest as well as bullets and bullet manufacturing displays showing the evolution of ammunition from 1863 through to the present day.



Detail of pistol display showing bayonet gun.



Derringer and multibarrel (five barrel) pistol.

The second and third floors of the museum's east wing are reached by ascending a flight of stairs; there is no elevator service at Invalides. On the second floor are found the Old Monarchy Rooms, housing a collection of militaria from 1600-1792. The collection includes suits of armor circa 1609-1641 replete with boots, helmet, mail coat, greaves, sword, spear and other accessories for the well-equipped knight. A pair of boots manufactured circa 1715 displays huge knee protectors; they are truly seven-leaguers. A magnificent saddle and sedan chair belonging to Comte de Fontaine-Roc Roy who commanded Spanish regiments in the wars of 1643 are



Detaille Hall. Rifle and swords

also among the mementos open to view. The sedan chair was used to carry the Comte who suffered from gout, and it was in this very chair that he was killed in battle. Cavalry artifacts dating from 1715-1774 are also on display here, including uniforms, saddles, swords and some ornate bridles. The grips of two flintlock pistols jut from holsters on a brocade saddle from 1750. A leather version from the same period is also on display in the next room.

Continuing into the Lafayette Gallery, one finds military arcana of the First Republic (1793-1804) on display. Here, easily overlooked among the many portraits on the wall is one of a young Napoleon. Keys taken in the Italian campaign of 1796-97 show the huge "clefs" turned over by the defenders of the Chateau of Milan by General Despinay on the 29th of June



1796. The Restoration gallery, next, contains Empire period artifacts (1804-1814). Of special interest here is the stuffed Arabian stallion kept by Napoleon Bonaparte and given to him as a gift in 1806 by the Sultan of Turkey. The white horse, named Vizir, went to Longwood with the exiled Emperor and after his death in 1829 was taxidermically preserved. Its flank still bears the Emperor's brand: an "N" topped by a crown.

Nearby, hangs a portrait of Napoleon at Fontainebleau very different



Swords behind glass display case in Detaille Hall.

from the one hanging in Turenne Hall. Painted after his abdication of 1814, it depicts a tired man, worn out by years of protracted struggle against his implacable foes. Surgeon's tools used by military field doctors circa 1807 are also displayed in this room. Around a corner is another stuffed animal, this one a dog who kept Napoleon company at Elba. Unlike the case with Vizir, the name of the dog is not given. A few paces away is a reconstruction of the room at Longwood House where Napoleon died on 5 May, 1821. The two camp beds he used, with clothes laid out, are here preserved for posterity's aloof gaze. A death mask of the former emperor is also on display and should not be missed. It was Napoleon himself who expressed the wish that his features be modeled after death in 1821 after a second exile dating from the end of his ill-starred Hundred Days.

Artifacts from the conquest of Algeria are to be seen in the Bugeaud Gallery, dating from 1830-1852, the final one on this floor. On the third floor, the Pelissier Gallery chronicles military history from the first part of the Second Empire of Napoleon III (1852-1870). Standards of the resurgent empire are on display here, while the Chanzy Gallery follows with the final half of the Second Empire which includes the Franco-Prussian war.

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Multibarrel pistol. Detail of barrel

From the east side of the museum, one can now proceed to the museum's west wing. Beginning on the ground floor is the Francois I Hall, and here too another series of Bataille wall paintings depict the campaign of Louis XIV in the Netherlands War of 1672-1678. Housed in this gallery is armor and arms used from the time of the Battle of Hastings (1066) until the Wars of Religion (1562-1598). Of particular interest here is the immense suit of equestrian armor which belonged to Otto Heinrich Count Palatine of the Rhine, otherwise known as Otto the Fat. Several other important collections are also found on the ground floor. One collection is of primitive weapons contained in the Prehistoric and Antiquity Room, from the caves of Lescaux to the time of Charlemagne.

A visitor now continues on to the Paulilhac Gallery (named for the Georges Paulilhac collection acquired by the museum in 1965) in which a superb collection of Renaissance swords and daggers is on display. Aside from a fine collection of Spanish armor, of special interest here are rare and ornately decorated wheel lock pistols circa 1580, an arquebus and a gun belonging to King Philippe V. Walking on, one comes to the Louis XIII Gallery which is itself divided into four smaller chambers. On display here is armor worn by French kings from



Mounted cavalry display. Detaille hall.

Francois II to Louis IV. Several splendidly chased royal harnesses are also exhibited, as is Louis XIII's personal arms collection. In the Arsenal gallery a truly remarkable collection of combat armor is to be found. Approximately forty complete suits of armor, 1,000 helmets and half-suits, 400 pikes and spears, 500 swords and rapiers and 250 projectiles and firearms are displayed in glass-encased racks. Perhaps of greatest interest in the museum's west wing is the Oriental Collections Hall. This gallery houses a magnificent assortment of Turkish, Persian, Circassian, Balkan and Indian arms, Chinese, Persian and Indian shields, and individual pieces such as a



Voivode helmet and battle dress belonging to the Ottoman Sultan Bajazet II (1447-1512).

Dominating the center of this gallery is a spectacular group of Japanese armor circa 1662. However, the centerpiece of the collection is found in two showcases set off from the rest. These contain the richly ornamented costume of a Chinese Mandarin as well as the Emperor of China's war dress. Both were captured during France's short-lived Peking campaign of 1860 and donated to Invalides by Napoleon III.

Ascending the stairs to the second floor of the west refectory building, one enters quite another era; an historical epoch much closer to the one in which we live. Here in space originally used as dormitories for aging invalid war veterans, are collections of military artifacts from the two World Wars. The first of these collections is the 1914-1918 War Gallery. The gallery's three sections each display artifacts from different phases of the conflict. Not to be missed in this gallery is the bugle used to sound the Armistice which officially

ended the First World War in 1918.



Close-up of mounted cavalry display. Detaille hall.

The second gallery, the 1939-1945 War Gallery, departs somewhat from displaying the implements of mass destruction featured throughout the other chambers and halls of the museum, and instead relates the events of the Second World War by means of dioramas, documents, photographs, drawings and audiovisuals such

as lighted maps and taped accounts of the Battle of France and of the French Liberation. Of principal interest here is a surviving example of a small, remote-controlled robot tank known, by a curious naming inversion, as a "Goliath." Such mini-tanks were principally used by German combat engineers to breach mine fields. The third floor, where the Gribeuval Gallery contains a collection of models of ancient artillery, is currently closed for restoration, while a new gallery intended to display militaria from the period between 1872 to 1914, is still currently under construction.

Once the galleries have been visited, one should not miss the artillery pieces which are also on display along the pavilion walls fronting the main

courtyard. These weapons are uniquely ornamented with such odd details as the face of a growling lion and high-jumping fish, and many bear special nicknames such as "Furious," "Surprising," "Physician," "Alarm Clock," and "Maniac" and even eccentric inscriptions such as one in French translated as "I am here to repel my enemies, fall back!"

Especially noteworthy is a cannon known as the Wurttemberg Culverin which dates back to the sixteenth century and is famed for its elaborate decorations. In addition to the culverin's chiseled octagonal breech-block are the two naked couples embracing passionately upon leaping dolphins that form handles for the field piece. The culverin's barrel is also entwined by the serpentine coils of a snake portrayed in the act of twisting about it. Also worth more than a passing glance is a Renault FT pocket tank dating back to 1917 which is tucked away at the foot of a stairwell to one side of the end pavilion; on the other side stands a 1914 taxi cab. Two other open-air collections do exist but are presently closed to the public. These are in the Victory and Angouleme Courts respectively. The Victory Court can only be seen from the Pauilhac, Louvois and 1939-1945 rooms, while the Angouleme Court can only be viewed from the Pauilhac, Louis XIII and 1914-1918 rooms. Both are worth taking the trouble to view from the vantage points accessible from the galleries of the museum.