

How an Italian — and a man from Frensham — won the hearts of Spain

IT will be with a sense of pride that Peter Power attends the celebrations in Spain next year to mark the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus discovering America.

Peter, who lives in Frensham, was commissioned by a top Spanish museum to paint six images chronicling the 30-day voyage from the Canary Islands to San Salvador. Now the paintings are hung in the Maritime Museum in Madrid and form the centerpiece to the anniversary display.

It was a major achievement to be chosen but particularly so for Peter, who was selected in preference to several Spanish painters.

It was only in 1977, at the age of 39, that he decided he couldn't stand being employed any longer. Peter had been with Ordnance Survey.

"I knew I had the ability so I devoted myself to painting."

It wasn't easy at first, however, and Peter was forced to travel up to Green Park every day and lay his pictures out over the railings. It was a difficult time but it more than paid off.

After just 18 months, he had 172 commissions and a waiting list of over two years.

One of his early clients was the Mary Rose Trust for whom he painted a scene of the ill-fated ship's final voyage. It was this piece of work that led to him being asked to paint Columbus.

Art dealer Rafael Pedrosa saw the picture and decided that he was the perfect artist to commemorate the voyage to America.

Mr. Pedrosa arranged regular visits to Spanish museums to make the landscapes as accurate as possible. The two men went to the Monastery of La Rabida where Columbus's three ships set sail.

Peter recalled: "It took hours of research in libraries and several months travelling between the two countries. Some of my main points

of reference were Columbus's diaries. He wrote about the boats and their design so I could piece together the information."

There were no pictures of the three ships — the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria — so Peter had to work out what they would have looked like by studying records of other ships built at around the same time.

The thing that had really impressed Mr. Pedrosa was the attention to detail in every picture. The painstaking research showed in the design, the type of wood used and the way the sails were rigged. Earlier when Peter had painted the Battle of Trafalgar, he included 28 ships and all were named.

The first of the six pictures of Columbus's voyage shows the three ships near the outlet of the River Tinto having just set out from the port of Palos. Columbus was convinced that he could reach Japan by sailing west.

His notion that the world was round, however, was not shared by many. Even the crews were far from convinced.

The next scene is in Gomera in the Canary Islands where the three ships stayed for about a month before setting out into the unknown.

Almost the entire voyage was in perfect weather conditions. The third painting shows the three boats sailing through the calm waters of the North Atlantic. The ships managed between 60 and 174 miles each day.

When they left the trade winds,



Peter Power puts the finishing touches to another work of art.

the seas became rough, as reflected in the next painting, and after three weeks the sailors started to fight among themselves and discontent turned to mutiny. Columbus established order by promising that if they failed to reach land in three days, they would abandon the trip

and turn back.

It was at 2 a.m. on October 12th that land was finally sighted. The penultimate scene is of the ships in moonlight with land only just visible in the distance.

The next day, the ships found their way through the Gardiner Reef and finally dropped anchor. The final picture, with amazing attention to detail, shows the landing boats going ashore with the bemused natives watching from the bushes.

Columbus was Italian — but only the Spanish government were prepared to finance his voyage, in the hope that he would return laden with gold. Many of the celebrations next year will therefore be in Spain.

Peter Power will be a VIP guest but said that he still doesn't see the pictures for the brilliant works they are.

"When I look at them. I see three hard years of working 80 hour weeks to get them done. It was extremely hard work to get up each morning and to get started. There were times when I couldn't face them but I just had to force myself."

The paintings will hang in the Maritime Museum until the end of

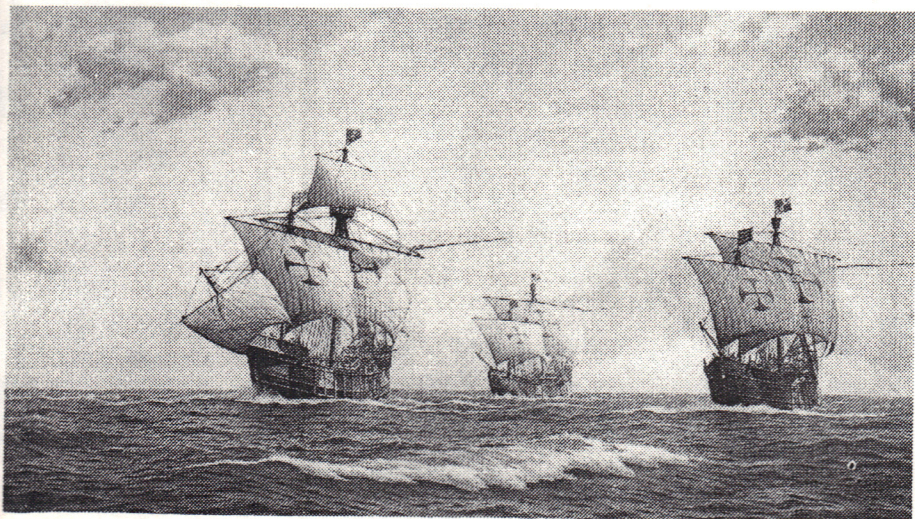
next year and Peter has just been offered a full exhibition in Madrid. He has also been commissioned to paint the Battle of Pensacola.

All his work is done in a studio which adjoins his house. In fact, he had a lucky escape five weeks ago when a car ploughed into one of the walls while he and his wife slept upstairs. Fortunately, the studio was being plastered at the time, otherwise Peter would have been standing exactly where the car struck the wall.

He didn't hear the bang and came downstairs to find out why disco music was blaring out . . . thought there must be squatters in the studio holding a party or something. When I walked into the room, there were people everywhere and one of the walls had been demolished!"

Looking ahead, there's lots of work to be done . . . "About two years' work," he said. "It's tiring but at the end of the day it's very satisfying."

— Paul Merrill.



One of Peter Power's paintings of Columbus's three ships heading for the Americas.