

# The Symbolism of Time in the Medici Chapel

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The iconography of Michelangelo's unfinished Medici Chapel, begun in 1519, is still not fully understood. Scholars such as Erwin Panofsky, Charles de Tolnay, Creighton Gilbert, and Frederick Hartt have provided various interpretations, yet, from the vantage point of the symbolism of Time, their views are incomplete. This paper approaches the chapel in symbolic terms, an aspect that directly involves the four sculptures known as *Night*, *Day*, *Dawn*, and *Dusk*. In order to achieve this, a basic understanding of *symbol* must be reached, in turn, properly relating visual components to a concept of Time. The ideas upon which I draw are based on ancient, medieval, and Renaissance texts.

Panofsky's interpretation of the chapel involves the intricacies of Neoplatonic thought of the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> He emphasizes the correspondence of elements in the program with important Neoplatonic concepts. Panofsky interprets the figures as suffering from human experience: ". . . they cannot escape from a bondage both invisible and inescapable."<sup>2</sup> He believes that Michelangelo was searching for visual symbols of life and destiny as he experienced them and claims that Michelangelo sought and found answers in Neoplatonism.<sup>3</sup> Since he interpreted the figures as symbolic of the destructive power of Time, in his terms, *Dusk* is "exhausted with ineffable fatigue," *Dawn* is "awakening with deep disgust," *Night* is "not finding real sleep," and *Day* is "convulsed with causeless and ineffective wrath."<sup>4</sup> Panofsky used such strong descriptions in order to fit the statues into a Neoplatonic schema; for him, they illustrate the incurable pain to which the human soul is subjected while in the earthly body.<sup>5</sup> In his perception, the planned four rivers were coessential with the four elements, while the four figures representing times of day are the four humors, constituting the human body and determining human moods.<sup>6</sup> Panofsky covers each of the manifestations of four that he can find, but seems not to recognize that these observations are the result of Michelangelo's program, not the inception of it.

Creighton Gilbert's article, "Texts and Contexts of the Medici Chapel," concentrates on notes Michelangelo wrote on preliminary drawings for the chapel. Gilbert sees the statues of *Night* and *Day* not as a single, specific night and day, but as the concept of the opposing forces of night and day.<sup>7</sup> Condivi affirms that man and woman represent "Day and Night collectively, time which consumes all."<sup>8</sup> Gilbert finds a textual source for these figures in Dante's *Convivio* which was first printed in Florence in 1490. In this work, Dante described life in terms of an arc which rises and falls, has four segments, four ages of man, four seasons, and four times of day. According to Gilbert, "Dante labels the four times of day with their names in the church offices, terce, nones, vespers, and after vespers."<sup>9</sup> Gilbert believes that this is what Michelangelo's four figures represent.

Frederick Hartt reads in the female figures of *Dawn* and *Night*, the opposing qualities of virgin and mother, respectively, which perhaps explains Panofsky's depiction of *Dawn* as "awakening with deep disgust," and *Night* "not finding real sleep." These opposing attitudes are "miraculously united" in Mary, who possesses both qualities.<sup>10</sup> Hartt also mentions the ancient opposition of the womb and the sepulchre, having in common the aspect of holding the body before birth and after death, specifically the body of Christ.<sup>11</sup>

To this researcher, the flaw in all of these approaches is failure to recognize the figures of *Night*, *Day*, *Dawn*, and *Dusk* as symbols, and the incorrect assumption that they are allegories that require interpretation. A simple distinction between allegory and symbol is that allegory requires an interpretation, while symbol does not. (In literary terms, an allegory is a perfectly worked-out scheme; a symbol is an accretion of meaning and connotation.) As Angus Fletcher defines it, allegory is translatable, whereas symbol is a universal language "impervious to local limitations."<sup>12</sup> Another important difference between allegory and symbol is that allegory is always conscious, while there is the possibility that the general truth which underlies a symbol can be unconscious.<sup>13</sup>

In Renaissance thought, *symbol* carried a deeper meaning than it carries today. The writings of Ernst Cassirer, Thomas Merton, and John Dixon provide the basis for the definition of symbol that is incorporated here and is closely connected to the significance it carried in the sixteenth century. Those scholars define the symbol as more than an object. For Cassirer, symbols are "instruments" which are used to pose man's essential questions; his emphasis is on the relation between symbolic forms.<sup>14</sup> Merton treats the symbol like a transitive verb, discussing its "role and function," not even considering a symbol a noun.<sup>15</sup> Dixon is interested in the symbol in terms of relations. While Cassirer emphasizes symbolic forms, Dixon concentrates on symbolic structures.<sup>16</sup>

As symbolic form or symbolic structure, symbols are realizations of universals. The symbol is the base to which all things can be reduced.<sup>17</sup> Symbols provide awareness of the meaning of life and reality.<sup>18</sup> Funerary monuments, such as the Medici Chapel, are by nature involved with questions concerning the meaning of life, and ultimately, of death.

According to Cassirer, the intellect creates symbols or symbolic forms from things which are knowable, namely, natural phenomena.<sup>19</sup> Along with phenomena there are what Dixon terms "primal experiences," which include birth, death, maturation, decay, light, and dark. For Dixon, these are experienced not in isolation, but as part of particular symbolic structures.<sup>20</sup> In this way, *symbol* is arrived at through an intuitive association of relationships: one cannot "know" the true meaning of anything until

something happens in relation to it or is understood as opposing it.<sup>21</sup> Since the act of symbolization may be considered as occurring prior to thought,<sup>22</sup> we can assume unconscious decision-making and symbol formation in the mind of the artist.

While the Medici Cardinal who commissioned the Chapel (Figure 1)<sup>23</sup> desired a Medici iconography relating to the Resurrection, Michelangelo had a free hand in the ancillary figures. His many studies, which show the incorporation and elimination of a number of ideas, demonstrate that such decisions were left to him as long as the effigies of the dukes were included and the Cardinal was provided with his general demands (Figures 2–3). A similar situation exists with the *ignudi* of the Sistine Chapel. While not being figures central to an overall theme dictated by Pope Julius, they continue to emerge as some of the most powerful imagery on the ceiling.

A clear understanding of a concept of Time was important to Renaissance philosophers. According to Cassirer, all conceptions exist under the conditions of Time and Space.<sup>24</sup> Space is the form of our "outer experience," while Time is the form of our "inner experience." As a symbol, Time reaches deep into the human spirit beyond external experience. Cassirer conceives of Time as a process, a continuous stream of events.<sup>25</sup> Succession is critical for an organism's existence in the three dimensions of Time: past, present, and future. No one moment can be taken in isolation without a consideration of its history or a reference to its future.<sup>26</sup>

St. Augustine wrote a number of meditations on the concept of Time. The Renaissance philosophers found sources in Plato and Aristotle on which to build concepts of Time. The writers of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries concentrated on relating their ideas to temporal phenomena they observed, most notably, the movements and configurations of the planets and the stars. The literary attributes given to Time during the Renaissance often lead to association with the divine. Ficino makes an analogy between Time and the movement of the sun. In *De Sole* he gives credit for days, seasons, and the behavior of the planets to the sun.<sup>27</sup> The sun determines days and nights, the hours, the months, and the years, all by virtue of its movement. The sun generates heat and gives life. The sun is Time, and the sun, as Plato believed, was the visible image of God.<sup>28</sup> Ficino goes even further by comparing the sun to Christ in terms of death and resurrection: "Just as we hope Christ . . . will awaken from the earth all human bodies with the splendor of his body, so every year, after the deadly winter, we await the sun, lord of Aries, who recalls to life and to beauty the seeds of all things . . . hidden in the earth as if dead."<sup>29</sup> The sun plays an obvious role in an understanding of life and death. The view an individual has towards death influences his view of Time. If death is viewed as a passage, leading to repeated reincarnation, a cyclical view is appropriate. A serial view is adopted when one accepts death as a passage to a life beyond, not a return to anything.<sup>30</sup> Cyclical and serial views of Time are both present in Michelangelo's planning of the Medici Chapel.

We must ask how, specifically, the figures in the Medici Chapel are symbols of Time.<sup>31</sup> These sculptures are, first of all, figures in their own right. They have qualities and personalities that four distinct individuals would possess as the stone takes on qualities of live human beings. As Gilbert has described it, the dukes responded to people

coming in the chapel door.<sup>32</sup> In contemporary poetry *Night* (Figure 4) is assumed alive:

The Night, that you see sleeping in so sweet  
attitude  
Was carved by an Angel in this stone;  
And because she sleeps, she lives.  
Wake her, if you do not believe it, and she will  
speak to you.<sup>33</sup>

And Michelangelo has the stone herself reply:

Sleep is dear to me, and being of stone is dearer  
While injury and shame endure.  
Not seeing, not hearing to me is great good  
fortune;  
Therefore, do not awaken me: ah, speak low.<sup>34</sup>

These figures, locked in a permanent cycle with each other, are—while individuals—also part of a whole. Condivi mentions the four statues as such: "Although there was one conception and one form for them all, nevertheless the figures are all different and in different forms and attitudes."<sup>35</sup>

Elliot Jacques, in his essay on Time, points out that all living things are involved in activity, reflection, sleep, and dreaming.<sup>36</sup> These pursuits can be found in the four figures of *Night*, *Day*, *Dawn*, and *Dusk*. Even their names are suggestive of these pursuits: *Day* usually finds one active; *Dusk* is time to reflect upon the day passed; *Night* calls for sleep; and arousal from this sleep is the disturbance or end of dreams, *Dawn*.

Jacques separates Time into memory, perception, anticipation, and desire, which he links to the modes of past, present, and future. These can also be paired with *Dusk*, *Day*, *Dawn*, and *Night*, respectively. This is not to say, however, that Michelangelo set out to represent action, reflection, sleep, dream, memory, perception, anticipation, or desire. The point is merely that these aspects which are exemplary of the condition of Time and of human beings, are found in works which were conceived within the idea of representing Time.

Other natural symbols are integrated with the idea of Time in the Medici Chapel. The consistent use of the symbolic numbers three and four is one example. According to Cassirer, the concept of Number itself holds a position equal to that of Space and Time.<sup>37</sup> Cassirer refers to all three as the "three basic intuitions."<sup>38</sup> Numbering is particularly important as a facile means of expressing relations. Numbering also places opposition in balance.<sup>39</sup> The number three has a fundamental role in human consciousness based on the intuition of I, thou, and he,<sup>40</sup> and the idea of the Trinity is grounded on similar foundations. The number four has a universal cosmic significance: north, south, east, and west are distinguished as the cardinal points of the world. The veneration of the number four is evident in the worship of the form of the cross.<sup>41</sup> In Time, three and four occur in the three modes of past, present, and future, and in the four divisions of the year. Aristotle asserted the importance of these numbers in relation to the universal elements.

An ordered geometry is found in the architectural program of the Medici Chapel. The chapel is divided horizontally into three zones, and the walls divide it

vertically into four. Each wall tomb is set in architecture divided vertically and horizontally into threes (Figure 5).<sup>42</sup> There are four functional doors in the chapel and four non-functional ones.<sup>43</sup> A triangle defines the present disposition of the figures. Each representative of Time forms the corner of the base of a triangle with a duke at the apex. If the intended river gods had been set in place, this triangle would have rested stably on the floor of the chapel (Figure 6). With these extra four figures, the number four would be repeated once again, and the two facing triangles could be seen as two sides of a pyramid, with the four river gods acting as the base.

The plan to include river gods in the final program involves incorporation of yet another symbol, water. Michelangelo referred to them as the "fiumi," stressing not their individual identification with particular rivers, or river gods, but simply rivers, which provide a complimentary element to the flow of Time. Martin Weinberger says there is no stronger symbol for the "even, unchanging flow of time than the eternal sameness of the flowing river that rolls its waters forever into the infinity of the sea."<sup>44</sup>

Also in the Medici Chapel we find natural symbols of opposition in the four times of day. *Day* and *Night* are in opposition as male and female, as consciousness and unconsciousness, and as wakefulness and sleep. The ultimate opposition is that between life and death.<sup>45</sup> The figures which comprise the 'times of day' do not stand for specifics. Michelangelo noted that he wanted them to show ephemerality, "veloce corso."<sup>46</sup> The motion through Time,

the cycle, and the endless round of Time are also themes from Dante's writings and we have seen Gilbert's attempts to show a connection between Dante's literary allusions to Time and Michelangelo's statues. The fact that Michelangelo used such imagery may suggest he was introduced to the idea through Dante. He came into contact with Dante's works early in his career when he was involved with the discussions of the Renaissance scholars who gathered around Lorenzo the Magnificent. It is probably incorrect, however, to assume that Michelangelo planned to set into stone an exact quotation of Dante. The individual expressions are particular to each. If Dante, in the *Convivio*, described life as an arc that rises and falls, as having four segments, seasons, ages, and times of the day, and gave it four distinctions, Michelangelo chose to incarnate Time in human forms. The divisions of the year and of the day are in one sense man-made, yet these divisions spring from givens: the seasons, the rising and setting of the sun, and birth and death.

While the figures in the Medici Chapel are concrete symbols of the notion of Time, it is incorrect to assume only one basis for their meaning. They reveal that the choices, conscious or unconscious, which Michelangelo made about image and number were based on postulates so universal that they lent themselves to the insertion of multiple answers. It would be impossible to explain exactly how Michelangelo was able to instill the concept of Time into four symbolic figures unless we describe his powers in the way his contemporaries did—divine.

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1 Erwin Panofsky, "The Neoplatonic Movement and Michelangelo," in *Studies in Iconology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 171–230.

2 Panofsky, p. 177.

3 Panofsky, p. 182.

4 Panofsky, pp. 205–206.

5 Panofsky, p. 207.

6 Panofsky, p. 206.

7 Creighton Gilbert, "Texts and Contexts of the Medici Chapel," *Art Quarterly*, 34 (1971), p. 402.

8 Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, trans. A.S. Wohl, ed. Hellmut Wohl (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), p. 67.

9 Gilbert, p. 403. Gilbert does not document the passage he finds in Dante denoting "terce, nones, vespers, and after vespers." In church offices, 'compline' is the equivalent to Gilbert's 'after vespers.' In *Convivio* III, chapter VI (according to the 1934 edition of G. Bushnelli and G. Vandelli) Dante states, "E queste ore usa la chiesa, quando dice Prima, Terza, Sesta, e None, e chiamoansi ore temporali."

10 Frederick Hartt, "The Meaning of Michelangelo's Medici Chapel," in *Essays in Honor of George Swarzenski* (Berlin: Verlag Gebr. Mann, 1951), p. 149.

11 Hartt, p. 152.

12 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory, the Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), p. 17, n. 30.

13 Fletcher, p. 16. Another mistake is in assuming *Night*, *Day*, *Dawn*, and *Dusk* to be personifications. If they were personifications of four humors, or of the church offices as Panofsky and Gilbert suggest, they would be clearly recognizable as such. Michelangelo himself gave names in writing only to *Night* and *Day*: the titles of *Dusk* and *Dawn* were imposed by other sixteenth-century writers. See Gilbert, p. 407.

14 Ernst Cassirer, *Language*, Vol. I of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 75.

15 Thomas Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion," *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*, 20 (1908), p. 10.

16 John Dixon, *The Physiology of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 78–79.

17 Cassirer, I, p. 88.

18 Merton, p. 1.

19 Cassirer, I, p. 78.

20 Dixon, p. 132.

21 Cassirer, I, p. 88.

22 Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

23 Cardinal Giulio de' Medici commissioned the chapel which was to provide tombs for four members of his family: Lorenzo, il Magnifico; Lorenzo's brother, Giuliano; Giuliano, Duke of Nemours; and Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino. Michelangelo was involved with the tombs during the papacies of Leo X, Hadrian VI, and Clement VII.

- 24 Cassirer, I, p. 42.
- 25 Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 49.
- 26 Cassirer, *Essay*, p. 50.
- 27 Marsilio Ficino, *De Sole*, trans. Arturo B. Fallico and Herman Shapiro, in *The Italian Philosophers*, Vol. I of *Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. A.B. Fallico and H. Shapiro (New York, Random House, 1967), p. 122.
- 28 Fallico and Shapiro, p. 129.
- 29 Ficino, p. 131.
- 30 Elliott Jacques, *The Form of Time* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1982), p. 35.
- 31 The interaction and relation between many primary symbols in the Medici Chapel become evident in the organization and arrangement of the entire structure (see Figure 1). Every individual element relates to a totality of meaning while at the same time possessing an individual nature. Similarly, Time has its own particular nature and also has a relation to particular structures of the aesthetic consciousness. It is itself as well as a contributing factor to a larger totality. See Ernst Cassirer, *Language*, p. 98.
- 32 Gilbert, p. 397.
- 33 David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 470, n. 17. This epigram was written by Giovanni di Carlo Strozzi.
- 34 Summers, pp. 470–471, n. 17.
- 35 Condivi, p. 67.
- 36 Jacques, p. 4.
- 37 Ernst Cassirer, *Mythical Thought*, Vol. II of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 140.
- 38 Cassirer, I, p. 226.
- 39 Cassirer, I, p. 228.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 Cassirer, II, p. 147.
- 42 Charles de Tolnay, *The Medici Chapel*, Vol. III of *Michelangelo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p. 64.
- 43 Gilbert, p. 401.
- 44 Martin Weinberger, *Michelangelo, the Sculptor* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 2 vols., p. 391.
- 45 In the Sistine Chapel we also find male and female oppositions, primarily in the prophets and sybils. In the stories of creation, the subject matter includes references to the separation of light and dark, another opposition. Earth and water are also recurring themes.
- 46 de Tolnay, p. 67, n. 72.

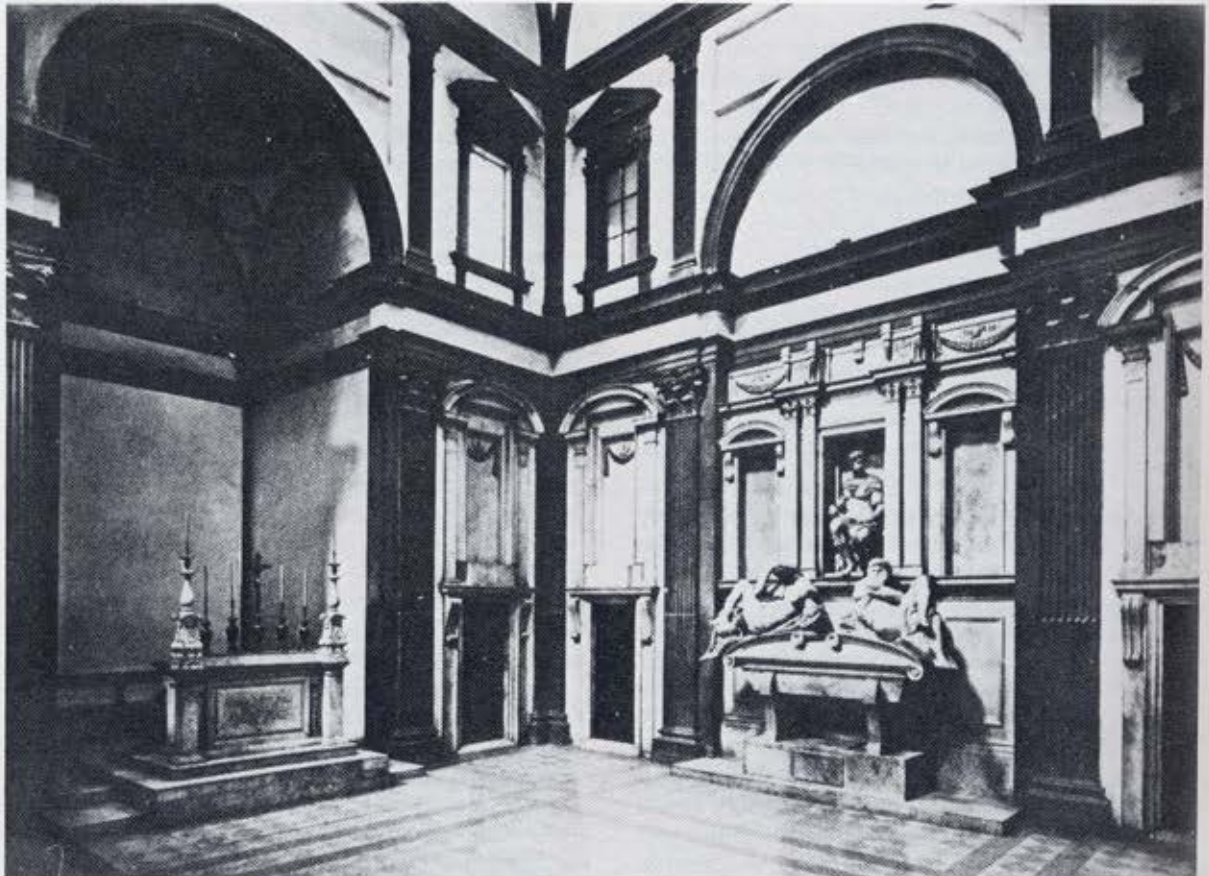


Figure 1, Michelangelo, *Medici Chapel*, 1519–34, San Lorenzo, Florence. (Hibbard, H. *Michelangelo*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974, p. 179, figure 120.)

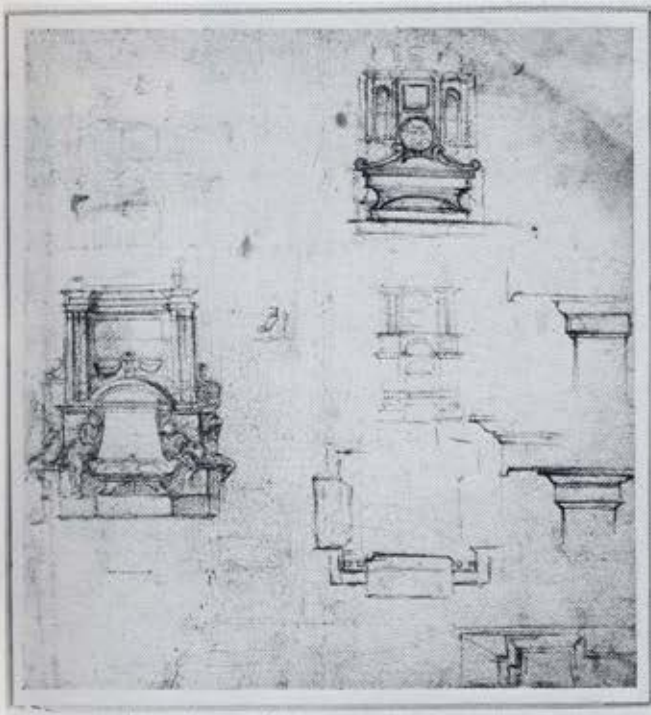


Figure 2, Michelangelo, *Design for middle tomb of the Sacristy of San Lorenzo*. British Museum, London. Drawing 1859-6-25-545, recto. (Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.)

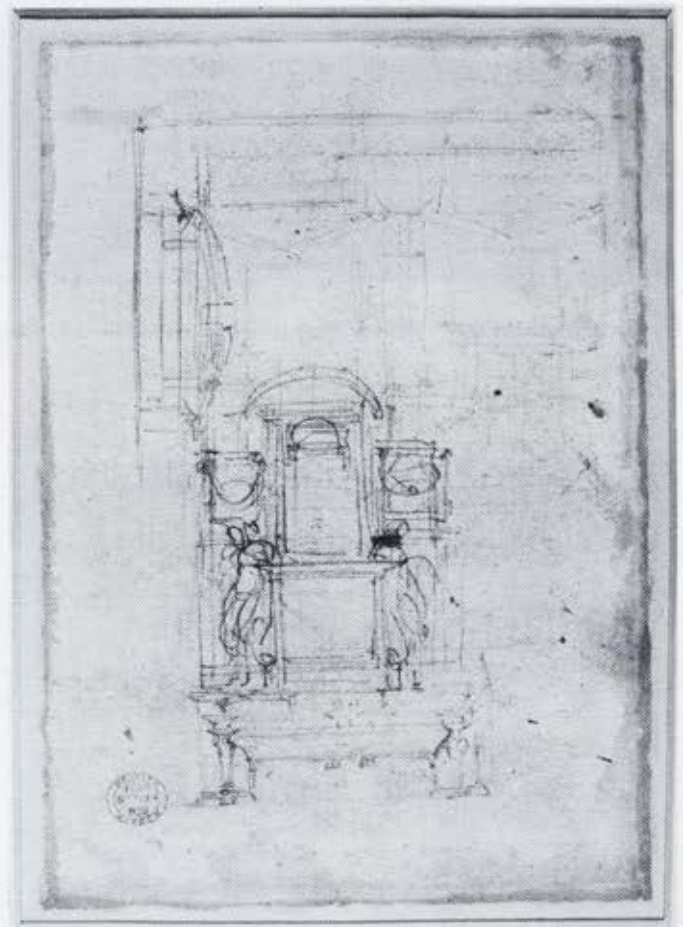


Figure 3, Michelangelo, *Design for a double tomb of the Sacristy of San Lorenzo*. British Museum, London. Drawing 1859-5-14-822, verso. (Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.)



Figure 4, Michelangelo, *Night*, *Tomb of Giuliano*, 1519–34, San Lorenzo, Florence. (Fratelli Alinari, Florence No. 44273)



Figure 5, Michelangelo, *Tomb of Lorenzo*, 1519–34, San Lorenzo, Florence. (Fratelli Alinari, Florence No. 2249)

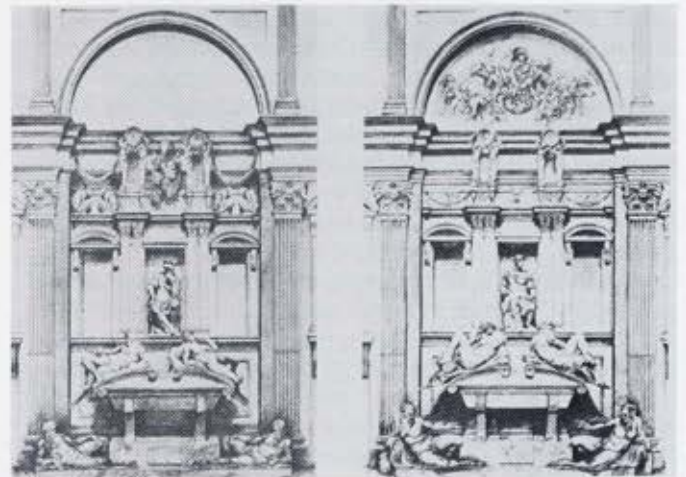


Figure 6, Michelangelo, *Tombs of Lorenzo de' Medici and Giuliano de' Medici*, 1519–34, San Lorenzo, Florence; reintegration by A.E. Popp Showing the tombs including the River Gods. (Panofsky, Erwin. *Studies in Iconology*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972, Plate LXXVII, Figures 144–145.)