



Petr Barenboim (with Arthur Heath)

500 YEARS OF THE NEW SACRISTY:

MICHELANGELO IN THE MEDICI CHAPEL

The Moscow Florentine Society

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IN THE MEDICI CHAPEL**

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Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) criticism and interpretation.

San Lorenzo Church (Florence, Italy) — Sagrestia Nuova, Medici.

Dedicated to Professor Edith Balas

In Lieu of a Preface: The Captive Spirit¹ by Pavel Muratov (1881– 1950)

*Un pur esprit s'accroît sous l'écorce des
pierres.*

Gerard de Nerval, *Vers dores*²

In the New Sacristy of San Lorenzo, in front of the Michelangelo tombs, one can experience the most pure and fiery touch of art that a human being ever has the opportunity to experience. All the forces with which art affects the human soul have become united here: the importance and depth of the conception, the genius of imagination, the grandeur of the images, and the perfection of execution. Looking at this work of Michelangelo, one cannot help but think that the meaning contained in it is the true meaning of any art in general. The first impressions one gets here are gravity and silence, and even in the absence of the famous four-line verses of Michelangelo³ hardly anyone would dare to speak loudly. There is something in these tombs

¹ Translation from Pavel Muratov, *Obrazy Italii* (Images of Italy), First edition in 1922, St. Petersburg, (courtesy of Xenia Muratova), 2009.

² *A pure spirit is growing underneath the crust of stones.* Gerard de Nerval, *Gilded Verse* (Fr.).

³ I.e., the verses cited by Michelangelo's younger contemporary Giorgio Vasari:

*Sleep is dear to me and even more so being made of stone,
As long as injury and shamefulness endure;
Not to see, not to hear is my great good fortune;
Therefore do not wake me, lower your voice.*

that firmly commands one to keep silent, and to be similarly buried in thought and hidden emotions as is *Il Pensieroso*⁴ himself on the tomb of Lorenzo.⁵ (Plate 6,7,8) This pure contemplation is prescribed by the mastery of a genius. But the atmosphere surrounding the Michelangelo tombs is not completely transparent; it is tinged with the dark hues of melancholy.⁶

But at the same time, this should not be a place for abstract and dispassionate contemplation. In the sacristy of San Lorenzo one cannot spend an hour without experiencing an ever-increasing acute heartache. Everything here is flooded with melancholy which goes in waves from wall to wall. What can be more decisive than this experience of the world, captured by the greatest of artists? Having this revelation of art before your eyes, can you even doubt that it is sorrow that underlies all things, underlies every destiny, and is the very basis of life?

The sorrow of Michelangelo is the sorrow of awakening. Each of his allegorical figures turns to the viewer with a sigh: *non mi destar*⁷. Tradition has dubbed one of them *Dawn*, the other *Evening*, the third and fourth *Day* and *Night*. But *Dawn* is the name of the best of them, best expressing the main idea of Michelangelo. One should call it Dawn always remembering that at

⁴ The Thinker (It.) *Il Pensieroso* is the nick-name of the statue also called *Lorenzo*.

⁵ The statue of *Pensieroso* stands over the tomb where the grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent, Duke Lorenzo of Urbino, and some other members of the Medici family are buried. That is why many have called the statue by the name of the Duke despite the fact that Michelangelo himself never used his name to refer to the statue. In this book we call this statue either *Pensieroso* or *Lorenzo* or *Pensieroso–Lorenzo*.

⁶ The Russian word “печаль” is used by Muratov in the sense that Alexander Pushkin uses it, as a feeling including love, and generally in a positive sense. And the best English translation may be “melancholy” or “sorrow”, as in Pushkin’s poem:

*The hills of Georgia melt into the hazy night
I see the roaring Aragua (river) in front of me.
I am sorrowful and free, my melancholy’s light.
My melancholy’s overfilled with thee.*

(translation by Sveta Bernard)

⁷ Do not wake me (It.).

the *dawn* of every day there is a minute which pierces one with some pain and anguish, giving birth to a quiet lament deep in the heart. The darkness of the night then dissolves into the pale light of the dawn and the gray veils become thinner and thinner and come off one after another—excruciatingly mysterious—until daybreak finally turns into morning. These gray veils still envelop Michelangelo's *Dawn*, obscure in its unfinished forms.

For Michelangelo, awakening was one of the phenomena of life being born, and the birth of life was, according to Pater, the subject matter of all his works. The artist never tired of watching this miracle in the world. The coexistence of spirit and matter was the eternal theme of his art, and the creation of a spiritual form was his eternal artistic task. Man became the principal subject of all his images because it is in the human form that the most complete union between the spiritual and the material is realized. But it would be wrong to think that Michelangelo saw harmony in this union! The dramatic nature of his creative work is based on the dramatic collision into which spirit and matter enter at every birth of life and on all of its pathways. To encompass the grandeur of this drama, it was necessary to hear the soul of things as sensitively, and at the same time to feel their material significance as keenly, as Michelangelo alone could do.

Michelangelo sensed the substance of sculptural forms, the material of his art, with a more than natural force. He often said that he had imbibed his passion for marble and stone with the milk of his wet nurse, a woman from Settignano, a town of stonemasons.... He viewed the work of a sculptor as liberating the forms which were hidden in the marble and which his genius was destined to discover. This was how he saw the inner life of all things, the spirit which lived in the stone, which only appeared to be dead. This liberation of the spirit, taking shape from an inert and formless substance, has always been the main task of sculpture. Sculpture was the predominant art of the Antiquity because its world view rested on a recognition of the inner spirituality of all things. This feeling resurfaced with the Renaissance: at first in the era of French Gothic and

the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi, only as a sensation of a faint fragrance or of a light breathing that permeated everything created in the world, and later it was this feeling that opened to the artists of the Quattrocento both the inexhaustible riches of the world and the full depth of the spiritual experience provided by it. However, for Michelangelo this world had ceased to be the home of the spirit as it had been for the Greek sculptors, or of the new and beautiful country that it had been for the painters of the early Renaissance. In his sonnets Michelangelo speaks of immortal forms, doomed to imprisonment in an earthly jail. His chisel liberates the spirit not for a harmonious and reconciled existence with matter in the style of Antiquity, but rather for a separation from matter.

Both the impossibility of such a separation and the strength of the earthly captivity are attested by the pieces of unworked stone, which penetrate the perfection of its spiritualized forms. A feeling of struggle or exhaustion from vain struggle enters Michelangelo's work. The eternal wrath of his life reflects only the thirst for revolt, which permeates his art. Thanks to this eternal rebellion in his heart, the activities of Michelangelo were titanic not only in their scope and the superhuman forces invested in them, but also in the resurrection in them of the old tragedy of the Titans, struggling against divine will.

. . . .

Throughout his long life Michelangelo did not find faith in the liberation of the spirit. We return to the sacristy of San Lorenzo again in order to collect the last fruits of his wisdom and experience. We enter the sacristy, repeating the words of his sonnet, where he praises the night and glorifies the dream that liberates the soul for heavenly wanderings. "Sleep and death are twins, night is the shadow of death" — this is how Simonds retells the "mysterious mythology" of the tombs of San Lorenzo. The piercing and persistent idea of death hovers here over the heavy awakening of *Dawn* and the deeply inclined brow of the *Pensieroso*. Everyone who enters here, still retaining the merry din and sunlight of the people-filled Florentine

street, feels the sharp prick of this thought, its bitterness and heart-rending melancholy. Michelangelo himself ought not to have been sorrowful, even when he looked directly into the face of death. Death alone was entrusted with the liberation of the spirit from the captivity of life.

. . . .

The name *Quattrocento* refers to the period of the Italian Renaissance encompassed by the fifteenth century. In the vast cemetery of history, which has swallowed entire nations without a trace, amid the intricate labyrinth of graves sheltering transient passions, unfulfilled impulses and unfinished business, the monument of the Quattrocento raises itself, splendid and accomplished, like an artist's creation. This epoch had lived a life of amazing fullness. Other eras pass before our mental gaze as ideological waves of a never-ending historical tide. But the Quattrocento addresses our feelings. We grasp it in the same way that we grasp the state of the world around us: by looking, breathing and touching. To acquire the knowledge of this past, intellectual analysis alone is hardly sufficient, just as it is not enough for close human communication. In both cases the judgment of the mind is not as important as the instantaneous impression of the eye or the unconscious sensation of the body. With each approach to the Quattrocento one can still hear the beating of a great heart filled with the noblest and purest blood. Sometimes it seems to us that history took possession of this era in vain. Its death is more like the captivity of sleep — the captivity that holds the people of Florence in its light fetters, carved by Florentine sculptors on Florentine tombs. A proud smile, barely perceptible on their thin lips, marks the happiest victory achieved by humankind, the victory over death.

Florence was both the cradle of the Quattrocento and its sarcophagus. In other Italian cities the traveler encounters deposits of various historical epochs, either sharply negating one another as in Rome or strangely reconciled as in Venice. On the streets of Florence everything that existed before the beginning of the fifteenth century is like a phantom; we can

only dream of its “exodus” over the pages of Dante’s sacred book. The frescoes of the pupils of Giotto contain a life that is so weak when compared to the works of the artists of the Quattrocento, which radiate all the powers of life. They contain the fate of the wondrous city as a whole, and the “doors of the future”, to use Dante’s expression, turned out to be closed. After one more century of self-destructive struggle, and a few more bright events, tragic disasters, and monumental figures barely capable of covering up the inevitable extinction, Florence ceased to exist. Three centuries of new European history melted in the rays of a single century that swallowed all of her energy. They barely touched her old stones, covering them with gold and niello — the costly attire of time.

To this day the Quattrocento remains the real living environment of Florence. The cognition of this past hardly requires any searching in the archives or abstract work on restoration in accordance with the laws of historical logic. To penetrate the spirit of the Quattrocento, it suffices just to live in Florence, to wander through her streets crowned with protruding cornices, to enter her churches, which retain on their walls frescoes whose color recalls wine and honey, and to let your gaze to follow after the retreating arcades of its monastery courtyards. The story of Florentine genius can be read in the curve of a drawn line, in the subtlety of a bas-relief, and in the pattern of a column. The object of our search here is always the work of human hands, and we, like doubting Thomas, can by a touch of our hand be assured of this posthumous existence, of this triumph over death. As in the events of the Gospels it is not only the ethereal spirit that has been immortalized here, but also its bodily incarnation, preserving the voice, the smile, the warmth of the body and the freshness of the still open wounds.

The Quattrocento expresses all of its content in the material images accumulated by it. This era has no desire for depth; it may even seem poor in ideas and insights. Dante lures our imagination into the underground abysses or carries it away into the celestial spheres. Even purgatory is shaped like a mountain. Dante’s thought knows only descent or ascent,

digging deeper or soaring higher; it always leaves the surface of the earth. But it is most of all the land that the Quattrocento loved, having conquered and served it, spreading widely and freely across its surface. When its Platonists contemplated the sky, how far away did they think, in essence, were the shining stars! And when the sharp ear of its heroes came to discern the roar of underground emptiness, with what a light heart did they return after a momentary meditation to the interrupted work of their splendid day!

The content of the Quattrocento is comprised in full by such a simple concept as Life in the World. The fulfilment of this simplest of all human purposes led to the full and rapid flowering of art, which seems like a miracle to us, faithful to another Commandment, doomed to a life contained in ourselves and separated from the world. The attitude of a fifteenth-century Florentine towards nature and life was poorer in shades of color than ours; it could not include all the subtleties of our spiritualization. But it was stronger, more sincere and more accurate. Where we feel as if we are in a hotel that we have distrustfully checked into for a few days and grumble at the uncaring owner, a Quattrocento Florentine felt as if he were in his ancestral estate. Everything around him was either the work of his own hands or those of his ancestors. He knew every tree in his garden of life and patiently believed that each tree would surely bear fruit — if not for him, then for his children. We are struck by the feeling of eternity that permeates the art of the Quattrocento; we fail to understand its persistent concern about the future. But this wisdom-surprising at first sight — isn't it essentially the unconscious wisdom of every proprietor of his land and every master of his affairs? To survey the world around you, to hear the call of its objects, and to stretch out your hand to them, to give them your heart, sparing none of the abilities given to you — at such a moment you cease to be just a guest on the earth and plant in it a full-bodied seed of the future.

For a Quattrocento Florentine to be able to survey his domains, they must be finite. The world in which he lived was

not huge, and its horizon was closed off by the bald Apennines of Pistoia on the one hand and the hills of Chianti, dotted with vineyards, on the other. The time of restless and selfish individuals who considered the whole world to be their homeland but, in essence, were strangers to everything and superfluous everywhere — had not yet come. For a Florentine, the homeland is Florence, a new Rome and a new Athens; it is a temple, a workshop and a place, protected by God and loved by the gods. Everything in it must be understandable, everything is sanctified by history and adorned with art. Every new life devoted to its good and every talent absorbed in its service is directed by the hand of its artistic genius.

Art seems to be the main occupation of fifteenth century Florence. To create what has survived through the ages and what has long disappeared required the efforts of a whole race of artists. It was necessary that the artistic, as the basis of life, would penetrate everything. Historians of culture know how the Quattrocento made almost everything an art — love, education, trade, even politics, even war. Never had humanity been so unconcerned in relation to the cause of things and never had it been so sensitive to their manifestations. The world is given to man, and since this is a small world, everything in it is precious: every movement of a naked body, every curl of a vine leaf, every pearl on a woman's outfit. For the eye of a Florentine artist, there was nothing too small or too insignificant in the spectacle of life. For him, everything was an object of cognition.

But the knowledge of things, to which the man of the Quattrocento aspired, does not at all resemble the knowledge that constitutes the pride of our age. Our position in the world always resembles the position of a scientist who, walking through a garden, does not recognize a single tree in it even though he knows the general laws of tree growth. In comparison a Florentine of the fifteenth century appears to be a gardener, who with a keen eye or the touch of a loving hand recognizes every tree and its separate destiny. Where we see the commonality, which therefore is always alien to us, an art-

ist of the Quattrocento always saw something particular and his own. This made possible the triumph of individualism in Florentine art and Florentine history. This story can hardly be approached with an impersonal collective notion of the people. Perhaps the only true story about the history of Florence in the fifteenth century would be the story of the fate of each of its inhabitants, who as a boy watched the construction of Ghiberti doors and as a very old man came in the company of others to compare the cartoons of Leonardo and Michelangelo commissioned by the Florentine Republic.

When from the height of past years we look at Florence of the Quattrocento, we do not see on its streets the discordant crowd of modern cities, droning in unison. Our conception of humanity becomes ennobled when we see there only separate figures, each casting its sharp shadow onto the smooth brown walls of the Florentine palazzos. We feel ourselves more free to contemplate the passion on the faces of those few dagger-clutching murderers, led by the Pazzi conspiracy into the spacious nave of the Santa Maria del Fiore. We more clearly hear the conversations of the circle of humanists gathering around Leone Battista Alberti under the pines of the Camaldoles. Nowhere, even in a military camp, even near a cathedral surrounded by forests, even in the Calimala commodity warehouses, will we see anyone humiliated into the position of a hive or anthill dweller. Lonely and important figures can be seen there in the marble dust of a modest workshop or at an unfinished fresco on the still damp and cool wall of a church. Their names, slowly read aloud one after another, constitute the history of the genius of the Quattrocento.

The end of the Quattrocento does not present the mystery with which its origin was veiled. The transition to the new epoch of the Renaissance was accompanied by the rumble of destruction that had the appearance of a real historical catastrophe. Such important events as the invasion by the French and the expulsion of the Medici, such a harsh figure as Savonarola, form the dividing line beyond which the Cinquecento began. Of course, the culture of the preceding century was

not swept away without a trace, but it was reborn. And even though the surprise of an elemental phenomenon exists in all these historical disasters befalling Italy in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, at times it seems that the people of the previous generation had already vaguely foreseen them.

The last decades of the Quattrocento are full of a silence too profound, thoughts too strained, and feelings too tense and oppressive. After Florentine intellectualism in the person of Pico della Mirandola felt ready to answer the nine hundred questions embracing the full knowledge of God, the world, and man, it found itself face to face with new mysteries. The luminous, diurnal thought of the Quattrocento proved to be powerless there, and Pico della Mirandola turned to the arcane wisdom of Kabbalah. And so he died still wandering in the impenetrable darkness, died young, beautiful, and brilliant, and with him died the very youth of the human spirit. Pico della Mirandola was a true hero of the Renaissance; there is something supernatural in his life and something divine in his talent. His appearance seems a miracle, but that miracle was not unique at the time. Art also crossed the border of the magical, when all of its lines united in the work of Leonardo.

After artists such as Botticelli and Leonardo the art of the Quattrocento lost any reason for existence. It was as if it were hurrying to sum up the results of its enormous activity while they were still alive. In it there appeared such painters as Ghirlandaio, ready to cover all the walls of Florence with frescoes. In it entire mountains of marble were shaped by the skilled hands of such minor sculptors as Desiderio da Settignano, Benedetto da Maiano, and Mino da Fiesole. Together with the products of countless workshops, such as the workshop of della Robbia, objects of art started inundating life like a river. In those years, Florence accumulated countless artistic riches, which remain unspent to this day, surprising and delighting the traveler. There was no craft in Florence of the time that would not have risen to the level of art. But the borderline between these two cannot be seen clearly during this period also because craft strongly tended towards art. It is even more

apparent from a comparison with such individual manifestations of genius as Leonardo and Botticelli. In the prolific nature of a sculptor such as Mino da Fiesole, or of a painter such as Lorenzo di Credi, there is a good deal of handicraft, that limitedness with which they ceaselessly repeated the single note sounded by their souls. This was not to be avoided even by artists such as the more nervous and interesting Filippino Lippi or the more sensitive and feminine Ghirlandaio. The famous frescoes in Santa Maria Novella, completed around 1490, are like a farewell greeting of the harmoniously festive and picturesque life of the Quattrocento. The ease with which they were executed declares that the work of the previous generation of tirelessly insightful artists was done. They not only opened doors to genius, but also provided the mediocrity of Ghirlandaio with an opportunity to be attractive, and almost excellent. Thanks to them, it does not feel so terrible to witness the inevitable old age and inevitable decline of the Quattrocento prescribed by destiny, as in any other art.

The appearance in the late fifteenth century of such persons as Leonardo and Pico della Mirandola, marvelously combining diverse talents, does not contradict as much as it might seem at first glance the trend towards craft displayed by the art of the time. The cause of a genius and the work of an entire population of artisans alike are possible only if there is a colossal accumulation of energy. In case of the former, it momentarily burns up in a dazzling flash, in case of the latter — it turns into the quiet warmth of countless hearths. It is important to note that in both cases the fuel is taken from the stock of mental forces accumulated by previous epochs. The stock preserved by Florence since the beginning of the century, the stock amassed by collectors and acquirers, who were contemporaries of old Cosimo, was so huge that to use it up remained the chief concern of the Florentines of the end of the century. People of that time hurried to show themselves, wherever possible and in any way possible. They used everything capable of releasing the mental energy tormenting them, in a fullness of feeling. Many of them had learned the habits

of genius, and it is only the impartial judgment of posterity that recognized them as simple artisans. But we unwittingly hesitate to pronounce our judgment over such a deity of his time as Lorenzo the Magnificent. We are still confused by the brilliance of his genius, flickering in the diverse and contradictory affairs, thoughts and feelings of this extraordinary man.

History has preserved the memory of Lorenzo de' Medici as one of the most skillful politicians and rulers. It is hardly possible, however, to consider him a true continuation of his grandfather Cosimo. Lorenzo's children were doomed to exile, and this shows that the political art of Lorenzo did not have power over the future. A feeling for the future, the main source feeding every epoch of life, had already run dry in this central figure for the end of the Quattrocento. An awareness of the present filled the people of that time; the charm of every minute of existence was understood by them as never before. *Il tempo non aspetta ma via fugge, Di doman non c'è certezza*⁸ — this was Lorenzo's main idea, which he sang about in his dance and carnival songs.

And his very glory is not so much the glory of a patron of Michelangelo's youth as it is the glory of the owner of Villa Castello, whose walls were decorated with *Spring* and *Venus*, representing the full flowering of Botticelli.

Lorenzo the Magnificent seems to embody the realization of all the diverse aspirations of the Quattrocento. He was the final point of a long journey, which was once undertaken by the Florentine soul with such proud hopes and morning vigor. And how can it be surprising that at the end of this journey the joy of accomplishment and relaxation became mixed with fatigue and disappointment, when a thin layer of the gray dust of time covered their once radiant faces? This is the fate of all human journeys — and Lorenzo and his friends could not avoid it. They did not escape old age, however, and they hardly knew a real youth either, the youth about which their poetry says so much. The soul of Lorenzo could hardly have been truly young

⁸ Time does not wait, but runs away, There is no confidence in tomorrow. (It.)

when he composed his sophisticated sonnets in honor of an invented platonic love. Hardly any real youth is present in the aristocratic irony of his comic poems or in his subtly amusing poems praising the rural beauty of Nencia.

Love for country living, which permeates the entire poetry of Lorenzo de' Medici, could also be one of the feelings of a tired man. When vitality is exhausted and life itself is lived to the end, we become more able to cherish individual moments, in which there is nothing but a strip of fields captured by one's gaze, or a sensation of wind on one's face, or memories of the transparent sky. And Lorenzo already knew how to cherish such moments when he remembered the morning of a falconry outing in Poggio a Caiano: "Netta era l'aria fresca e cristallina"⁹

He was to have still much more of this "fresh and crystal" air in his life. The Florence of the time was still breathing it; he made the image of it immortal. Even to the consciousness of the next generations, Quattrocento Florence, the Florence of Lorenzo the Magnificent, seemed like the phenomenon of an ancient deity in a man who had visited Italian soil. Even a simple appeal to it exalted one's spirit. When, half a century later, its faithful chronicler, but poor painter, Giorgio Vasari started working on the portrait of Lorenzo that is now displayed at the Uffizi, the genius of old Florence once again strangely resurrected in him, using his callous hands to create a profound and beautiful work of art.

*Translated by Boris Meshcheryakov
and Arthur Heath*

⁹ "Pure was the fresh and crystal air" (It.)

Viewing the New Sacristy: An Acknowledgment from the Moscow Florentine Society

The history of Renaissance art enjoys great prestige. The highest denomination banknote in the world until 2019 was the 1000 Swiss Franc banknote with portrait of the art historian Jakob Burckhardt. Princeton University, home of many of Nobel Prize laureates and other well-known persons, has decided to name a street on campus after Erwin Panofsky. The art of the Renaissance still looks more attractive to much of mankind than modern art. And of course, Florentine art occupies first place.

Rainer Maria Rilke once described Florence as “the only eternal birthplace of all things great and magnificent,” an idea that was further developed in relation to the New Sacristy of the Medici Chapel by the founder father of the Russian art history of the Renaissance Pavel Muratov.

Spanish philosopher Ortega-y-Gasset (1883 — 1955) uses the statue of the *Pensieroso* (Plate 6) in the Medici Chapel tried to illustrate the conditions for aesthetic and intellectual appreciation of a work of art:

Let us place ourselves with some attention in front of a work of art, the Pensieroso for example, divinely still under the frigid light of the Medici Chapel. And let us ask ourselves what it is that, in the last instance, serves as a term, object and subject of our contemplation. But the Pensieroso is a new object of incomparable quality with which we feel in relation thanks to that fantasy object. It begins precisely where every image ends. It is not the whiteness of this marble, nor these lines and forms, but

that to which all this alludes and which we suddenly find before us with a presence of such fullness that we could only describe it with these words: absolute presence. What is the difference between the visual image that we sometimes have of a man thinking in front of us and the thought of the Pensieroso? That visual image works as a narration on ourselves; it tells us that there at our side someone is thinking: there is always a distance between what is given to us in the image and what this image refers to. But in the Pensieroso we have the very act of thinking in its continuity. We witness what otherwise cannot be ever present to us.

. . . .

Contemporary education exerts a most deplorable influence on the development of artistic culture, considering art as something useful, trivial, and evenly measured. Because of this we lose the sense of permissible distance: we lose respect and sacred awe of art, we can approach it at any moment, using whatever dress code or state of mind, and that is how we get used to misreading and misunderstanding it.

The real emotion that people have in mind today, when speaking about aesthetic pleasure, is, if we are honest, a somewhat feeble gratification, entirely devoid of the power and tension, which ought to have been caused by even a brief contact with the beautiful creation.¹⁰

What he says is not inconsistent with the position of the Moscow Florentine Society, which holds that art history itself must be art to be a real explanation of the meaning of what is being reviewed.

Muratov considered silence to be a precondition for full appreciation of the New Sacristy. That is almost impossible to-

¹⁰ Translated by Boris Meshcheryakov from *Ensayo de estética a manera de prólogo*, pp. 254-255 in José Ortega y Gasset *Obras completas*, tomo 6: *Revista de Occidente*, Madrid. Sexta edición: 1964, as published in a preface to the book of verse by José Moreno Villa entitled *El pasajero* (The Traveler), which appeared in 1914.

day when Michelangelo is so extraordinarily popular and millions of tourists flow into Florence. Representatives of the Moscow Florentine Society had the privilege to spend many hours in empty Sacristy thanks to Antonio Paolucci, Monica Bietti and Eugenio Giani.

This book will go neither into our own detailed descriptions of the New Sacristy of the Medici Chapel nor into the history of its creation. Both can be easily found in other publications. For those interested in a visual acquaintance with the Chapel, the best option is to study the photo album of James Beck, Antonio Palucci and Bruno Santi, *Michelangelo. The Medici Chapel* (London, 1994). But since that publication is not available online, one might try looking at the photo album of Petr Barenboim, Sergei Shiyani, *Michelangelo in the Medici Chapel: Genius in the Details* (Library of Congress N6923.B9 B343 2011) <http://www.florentine-society.ru> and watching an amateur documentary of the Moscow Florentine Society at http://www.florentine-society.ru/Video_o_Kapelle_Medici.htm, which includes a 20-minute close-to-marble tour of the New Sacristy.

Several members and friends of the Moscow Florentine Society made valuable contributions in preparation of this book: Sergey Schiyani (1961 — 2016), Xenia Muratova, Alexander Zakharov, Boris Meshcheryakov, Tigran Mkrtichev, Sveta and Richard Bernard, Lolita Timofeeva, James Hickey Jr., Oleg Kudryvzev, Vladimir Rosov, Anatoly Kovler, Olga Zubets, Gabriella Tozetti, Irina Guler, Olga and Milana Pochechueva, and, of course, the vice president of the Moscow Florentine Society and our publisher Maria Mironova.

All mistakes belong to authors of this book.

The New Sacristy of the Medici Chapel

In 1516 Michelangelo was commissioned to dress in marble the simply stoned façade of the Cathedral of San Lorenzo, the Medici parish church in Florence. He was very enthusiastic and wrote “I feel myself capable of carrying out this façade for San Lorenzo in such way that it shall be a mirror of architecture and sculpture for all Italy”¹¹. But in few years this project ended and in 1519 (exactly 500 years ago) the artist started preparing for the creation of the New Sacristy in the Medici Chapel of the Cathedral. And he transferred all his flaming emotions and willingness to create “a mirror of sculpture for all Italy” from a large-scale façade to the rather small space of the New Sacristy. One can say that he did indeed fully complete his wish in the seven sculptures carved by him for the Sacristy.

A very early and authoritative description of the New Sacristy comes from Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), Buonarroti’s younger contemporary who supervised the installation of the statues:

And during this time he continued to work on the previously mentioned sacristy; of this project there remained seven statues that were partially finished and partially not, in which along with the architectural inventions of the tombs it must be confessed that he had surpassed everyone in all three crafts. These statues still bear witness to this fact, and he roughed them out and finished

¹¹ Carolyn Vaughan (ed.), *Michelangelo’s Notebook*, Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, New York, 2016, p. 100.

the marble in the place where they can be seen: one is Our Lady, Who is seated with Her right leg crossed over the left, resting one knee upon the other, while the Child, sitting astride Her highest leg, twists around towards His Mother with the most beautiful expression to ask for milk, and She holds Him with one hand, while with the other she supports Herself and bends down to give Him some. Although various parts of this statue were unfinished, what is left roughed out and full of chisel marks reveals in its incomplete state the perfection of the work. But those who examined the way Michelangelo fashioned the tombs of Duke Giuliano and Duke Lorenzo de' Medici were astonished even more by the artist's notion that the earth alone was insufficient to give them an honorable burial worthy of their greatness, and by his decision to include all the parts of the world here, and to cover and surround their tombs with four statues: on one tomb he placed Night and Day, and on the other Dawn and Dusk; these statues are carved with the most beautifully formed poses and skillfully executed muscles and would be sufficient, if the art of sculpture were lost, to return it to its original splendor.

Among the other statues, there are also the two captains in armor: one the pensive Duke Lorenzo, the image of wisdom, with the most handsome legs fashioned in such a way that the eye could not see better ones; and the other Duke Giuliano, so proud a figure with his head, throat, the setting of his eyes, the profile of his nose, the opening of his mouth, and his hair all made with splendid artistry, along with his hands, arms, knees, and feet; and, in short, everything that Michelangelo accomplished here is done in such a way that the eyes could never become bored or satiated. And truly, anyone who gazes at the beauty of the boots and cuirass will believe that this is a heavenly rather than a mortal work. But what can I say about the naked female figure of Dawn, a work that can arouse the melancholy in one's

soul and confound the style of sculpture? Her posture reveals her concern as she arises sleepily, extricating herself from the downy cushions, for it seems as if, upon awakening, she has discovered the eyes of this great duke closed. And so she twists around with grief, lamenting in her everlasting beauty as a sign of her great sorrow. And what can I say about the figure of Night, a statue not only rare but unique? Is there anyone who in the art of any century has ever seen ancient or modern statues made like this one? For this work reveals not only the stillness of someone who is sleeping but the sorrow and melancholy of someone who is losing something great and honorable. It is possible that this figure may be the night that forever eclipses all those who for some time [were] thought, I will not say to surpass, but to equal Michelangelo in sculpture or the art of design. The figure reveals the kind of drowsiness that can be seen in the living images of sleep; as a result, many verses in Latin and the vernacular were written in praise of his accomplishment by very learned people such as these, whose author is unknown:

Night, that you see in such sweet repose
Sleeping, was sculpted by an angel
In this stone, and since she sleeps, she lives;
Wake her, if you don't believe it, and she
will speak to you.

To these verses, speaking in the person of Night, Michelangelo replied as follows:

Sleep is dear to me and even more so being
made of stone,
As long as injury and shamefulness endure;
Not to see, not to hear is my great good fortune;
Therefore do not wake me, lower your voice.

And certainly if the enmity that exists between Fortune and ability, between the skill of one and the envy of the other, had allowed this work to be finished, art

could have demonstrated to Nature that it surpasses Nature by far in every thought.

Ascanio Condivi (1525-1574), Michelangelo's assistant and biographer, wrote:

Pope Clement wrote to Florence that Michael Angelo must be sought out, and ordered that, when found, he should be set at liberty if he would go on with the work of the Medici tombs formerly begun, and that he must be used courteously. Michael Angelo, hearing this, came out; and, although it was some fifteen years since he had touched the chisel, yet he set himself so earnestly to his task that in a few months he carved all the statues now to be seen in the sacristy of San Lorenzo, urged on more by fear than by love. It is true that none of these statues have received their last touches; nevertheless, they are carried so far that the excellence of the workmanship can be very well seen; nor does the lack of finish impair the perfection and the beauty of the work.

....

The statues are four, placed in a sacristy erected for this purpose on the left of the church opposite the old sacristy; and although each figure balances the other in design and general shape, nevertheless, they are quite different in form, idea, and action. The sarcophagi are placed against the side walls, and above their lids recline two figures, larger than life—that is to say, a man and a woman, signifying Day and Night; and by the two of them Time, that consumes all things. And in order that his idea might be better understood, he gave to the Night, who was made in the form of a woman of a marvelous beauty, an owl and other symbols suitable to her; similarly to the Day, his signs. And for the signification of Time he intended to carve a mouse, because this little animal gnaws and consumes, just as Time devours, all things. He left a piece of marble on the work for it, which he did not carve, as he was afterwards pre-

vented. There were besides other statues, which represented those for whom the tombs were erected. All, in conclusion, were more divine than human; but above all of this, the Madonna, with her little child straddling across her thigh, I judge it better to be silent than to say only a little, and so I pass it by. We owe thanks to Pope Clement for these masterpieces; and if he had done no other praiseworthy act in his life (but, of course, he did many), this one was enough to cancel all his faults, for through him the world possesses these noble statues.

Francesco Bocchi in his book of 1591 gave an intelligent description of the New Sacristy. Early as his book was, it provided the key formula for a correct approach to interpreting the Sacristy:

*Michelangelo's sublime intellect is no less outstanding in the statues, the sight of which completely stupefies every fine mind with their incredible beauty and skill. With seriousness of thought, and more like a philosopher than a sculptor...*¹²

And Bocchi said about *Lorenzo* statue:

Michelangelo finished this figure completely, or rather, he bestowed on it the utmost of that value with which the most marvelous and perfect human works are made. And though the other figures may be wonderful, as has been said, this one is more unique, more finished, and more stupendous.

In the present book we will return many times to Bocchi's clear and straightforward formula for interpreting the meaning of the New Sacristy.

Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864 — 1945) writes that Michelangelo “dealt with forms with sovereign freedom...” He notes “the imperious manner of handling the body

¹² Francesco Bocchi, *The Beauties of the City of Florence*, introduced, translated and annotated by Thomas Francenber and Robert Williams, Brepols Publishers, Belgium, 2006, p. 242.

and the extraordinary depth that could find its expression only in the formless..." And further: "I will repeat a few comments borrowed from the characterization given by A. Springer: 'The images of Michelangelo have much more power than exists in nature... The pressure of emotions seems to break these figures apart, but their movements are constrained: only occasionally does the feeling overcome the stagnation of the mass — with the power and passion always exceeding even the most persistent resistance.'" Wölfflin concludes: "The figures of the Medici Chapel became the pinnacle of his art. They most fully express the spirit with which this style is permeated. Looking at his so-called allegorical figures, one should avoid thinking too much either of allegory or of the place where they are located... All the subsequent development of art depended on Michelangelo."¹³

Modern author Eric Sgigliano writes:

*Ambivalence and contradiction energize every figure Michelangelo carved, from the adolescent Madonna of the Stairs... But the four allegories atop the sarcophagi raise them to a symphonic crescendo. Each is a battleground of conflicting emotions and motives, in which will and paralysis battle for supremacy... the tombs are an ambiguous, almost subversive, masterpiece — Michelangelo's most mysterious and haunting creations.*¹⁴

Probably, the best spiritual description of the New Sacristy was written by James Hall (1918 — 2007):

That Michelangelo was fascinated by the convention is evident from the New Sacristy at San Lorenzo, a 'total work of art' involving architecture and sculpture. Although it remained unfinished at Michelangelo's

¹³ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*. SPb, 2004, pp. 59, 147-148, 149, 60.

¹⁴ Eric Sgigliano, *Michelangelo's Mountain*, Free Press, New York, 2005, pp. 277, 281.

final departure from Florence for Rome in 1534, it is still the most ambitious sacra conversazione ever created. The project included the provision of tombs for four male members of the Medici family in a purpose-built chapel. For the first time, a polyphonic, three-dimensional dialogue was created between sculpted figures and human beings situated on all four sides of a chapel. As such, it had a huge influence on the development of the baroque tomb, and in a more general way could be said to prophesy modern installation art. The protagonists are deceased members of the Medici family, saints, nude allegorical figures, a breast-feeding Madonna lactans, as well as “live” officiating priests and visitors. Light, too, plays an important role... It is a wonderfully lugubrious dialogue of the dead and the living, marble and flesh, light and dark... The new Sacristy is a deeply paradoxical and mysterious work. Through the chapel, access and interaction are simultaneously offered and denied... The paradoxes in the New Sacristy have a deeper purpose and are motivated by new religious and political ideals. The whole effect was not systematically worked out from the start, as Michelangelo made constant revisions during the design process. Nonetheless, in the New Sacristy sculptures he undoubtedly imbued the human body with an expressivity that is not just new and strange, but intensely topical.¹⁵

Probably most important is the following short description of the New Sacristy (uttered right in front of Michelangelo!) belonging to Francisco de Holanda (1517 – 1585):

The famous tomb or chapel of the Medici in San Lorenzo, at Florence, painted in marble by Michel Angelo, with such generous number of statues in full relief that

¹⁵ James Hall, *Michelangelo and Reinvention of the Human Body*, London, 2005, pp. 139, 140.

*it can certainly compete with any of the great works of antiquity; where the goddess or image of Night, sleeping above the nocturnal bird, and the melancholic statue of deceased person reincarnated here by magic of art pleased me the most.*¹⁶

We can see that *melancholy* is specifically mentioned in both Vasari's and Holanda's descriptions.

¹⁶ Francisco de Holanda, *Dialogues with Michelangelo*, Pallas Athene, London, 2006. The passage was originally written in Portuguese in 1548 about meetings with Michelangelo in Rome that took place in 1538 but were only first published at the end of 19 century. The translation used here comes from that of Charles Holroyd of 1911. The above quote belongs to Holroyd except for the phrase *morta viva Cadaver que se creter voltado a vida por meios* which has been translated idiomatically by Peter Barenboim to convey its occult sense.

The Feminine Triads of Botticelli and Michelangelo as a Bridge from the Quattrocento to the High Renaissance

In thinking about the New Sacristy, we should keep in mind that even technically perfect photographic imagery cannot serve as a substitute for physical presence on site. This relates not only to the aura and the general atmosphere of the complex, but also to the effect produced by each of its statues. To one standing there it becomes obvious that the three female statues: *Dawn*, *Night* and the *Madonna* dominate the whole Chapel, creating a magical triangle inside of which your heart falters and your breathing accelerates.

The former director of the National Gallery in London Kenneth Clark remarks that the Medici Chapel stands apart from other sculptural creations of Michelangelo since two of the four main figures are female. But why did Clark forget about the statue of the Madonna? We note Clark's belief that Michelangelo used "his own discretion" in creating the Chapel's composition.¹⁷ In fact, the sculptor always dominated discussions of the project with Giulio Medici (Pope Clement VII). In fact, the Pope had not seen the work of Michelangelo because he never visited the Chapel; and as for Duke Alessandro Medici, the ruler of Florence from 1530, the sculptor simply did not let him inside the Sacristy. That allowed Michelangelo to create the Chapel the way he wanted while preventing disclosure of his true intentions.

It is known that when Vasari many years later asked Michelangelo about the plan that the latter had incorporated

¹⁷ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, New York, 1956, p. 289.

into the Medici Chapel, the elderly sculptor answered that he could not remember it. But at the same time, Michelangelo had effortlessly drawn an accurate sketch of his plan of the Laurentian Library's staircase. This story makes us strongly doubt the truthfulness of his answer to Vasari. What was it that Michelangelo wanted to conceal?

Every work of art needs to be peered into very closely. Its meaning can reveal itself under the heat from our eyes. The sculptor incorporates his original meaning or several meanings, some of which may have been added subconsciously. There may be just one solution or a whole multitude of them. In the art criticism of the mid-twentieth century, there was a popular school of "intense observation", which gave preference to the conclusions drawn from a direct observation of an artwork. The love of Michelangelo, Vittoria Colonna, wrote that she examined his drawing under the light, in a mirror and with a magnifying glass.¹⁸

The Chapel's pure magic and the multitude of conceivable impressions it leaves you with are impossible to describe. The similarity between the images of *Dawn* and *Night* is augmented by the similarity of both of these to the Madonna. The similarity of all the female images could be grasped immediately or after a rather long observation. (*Plates 19, 20, 21*)

One explanation of Michelangelo's intentions, based on the fact that the statue of *Dawn* on a clear morning is lit up by direct beams of sunlight, is that Michelangelo had portrayed the moment of the Immaculate Conception. The theme of Immaculate Conception is not foreign to visual art. The exhibition "Italian Master Drawings" held at the National Gallery of Art, Washington in 2011 includes a drawing by Ubaldo Gandolfi entitled *The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception*. Mary stands on clouds and the moon (Is it a cloud under left foot of *Dawn*? – *Plate 14*); the explanation of the drawing attached to the wall of the Gallery recalls the New Testament's

¹⁸ Catherine Whistler, *Michelangelo & Raphael drawings*, Oxford, 2004, p. 27.

Book of Revelation. This explanation is different from the text of the exhibition's catalogue.¹⁹ But what the Book of Revelation says is about the birth of Christ, not the immaculate conception of Mary:

*And there appeared a great wonder in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars. And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.*²⁰

We must not overlook the star on the small crown on the head of *Night*. *Dawn's* face, does not necessarily represent a difficult awakening. On the contrary, it may display the carnal languor of a satisfied desire. Such an interpretation of the statue has some obvious grounds. Charles Sala gives an correct description of *Dawn*:

*Her face, with its frowning brow and half-open mouth expresses the pain of labor, yet her gaze is strangely absent and blank. This powerful and overtly seductive figure is charged with disquieting tension... Unlike the other figures (Day, Night, and Dusk), Dawn has a surprisingly simple, seductive pose... The face lies midway between classical Antiquity and the "Byzantine" virgins of the Tuscan Trecento.*²¹

The German poet Heinrich Heine found the figure of *Night* unearthly and seductive in his *Florentine Nights* published in 1837. A British study of the statue of *Dawn* declares:

*Dawn is offering herself for the first time. She is awakening or dozing in a kind of drugged daze.*²²

¹⁹ *Italian Master Drawings from Wolfgang Ratjen Collection, 1525 – 1835*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2011, p. 138.

²⁰ *Revelation*, 12: 1-2.

²¹ Charles Sala, *Michelangelo*, Paris, 2001, p. 124.

²² James Hall, *Michelangelo and the Reinvention of the Human Body*, London, 2005, p. 154.

Anthony Hughes writes that “*Dawn* is a virginal figure of inexperience” but on the other hand that “her torpedo-like breasts and softly rounded limbs created a svelte type that became an erotic ideal for later Italian artists.”²³ And Margaret Miles, Professor Emerita at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, stresses that the significance of the images of the Madonna’s naked breast “was never explicitly contested”.²⁴

Mons. Timothy Verdon states, quoting Vasari, that in Michelangelo’s picture *Doni Tondo*, the Madonna displays “the pleasure she has in sharing the Child (Christ) with the holy old man.” Verdon suggests that the “holy old man” is God, the “real father from whom the Son proceeds”. Verdon notes especially Mary’s “loving gaze” and considers the scene as the moment of Madonna’s conception.²⁵

According to our own interpretation, all three female statues of the Chapel may reflect different images of the Virgin, and the statue of *Night* also may be an image of the Mother of Christ, tormented by the travails of the Crucifixion, who has fallen into leaden but already tranquil slumber after the Ascension of Christ. Malcolm Bull mentioned in his book that although the Madonna might have the face of Venus, there is very little attempt to offer images of motherhood that compete with the cult of the Virgin, saying:

*It was not just in the area of sexuality and fertility that mythological art filled a gap. Christian imagery was also low on positive images of secular power.*²⁶

We could also suggest another interpretation of Michelangelo’s triad of female statues. In this connection we note that in 1310 Giovanni Pisano’s statue of a naked Venus representing *Chastity* was installed in front of the pulpit of

²³ Anthony Hughes, *Michelangelo*, New York, 2003, p. 200.

²⁴ Margaret R. Miles, *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350 – 1750*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2008, p. xi.

²⁵ Timothy Verdon, *Mary in Florentine Art*, 2003, pp. 91 – 99.

²⁶ Malcolm Bull, *The Mirror of Gods*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p. 382.

the Pisan cathedral, which marks the first known attempt to “Christianize Venus”.²⁷

The convergence of the ancient image of Venus and the contemporary Christian morals of 15th century Florence coincided with the convergence of Christian female saints’ imagery and the idea of nudity in Antiquity. For example, in a painting by Fra. Carnevale, the Virgin Mary was shown completely naked, taking a bath.

November 7, 1357 was the day when a significant event for the future Florentine Renaissance took place. On that day several Florentines dug up an ancient statue. It was the same Greek statue of the naked Venus that had been already unearthed a few years earlier in Sienna, when the righteous citizens of Sienna could not bear the test of her naked beauty and had secretly reburied it on territory controlled by the Florentines, thus hoping to jinx their enemy. But, in fact, this sortie brought good luck to Florence. Quite soon Florence became the capital of the Italian Renaissance, one of the pinnacle works of which was Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*.

Our favorite sculptor is Michelangelo, and our favorite painter Botticelli. In the Botticelli Room of the Uffizi Gallery, one can easily notice that the head of Venus from Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* is also used by him for at least two of his Madonnas: the *Madonna of the Pomegranate* and the *Madonna of the Magnificat*. Another thing to be noticed just as easily is that the naked figure in Botticelli’s *Calumny of Apelles* (which, by the way, is the last painting of a nude that he did in his lifetime) also recalls the image from the *Birth of Venus*, though a somewhat deformed and aged one.

John Ruskin in a lecture dating back to 1874 characterized Botticelli as “the most learned theologian, the best painter and the most pleasant communicator ever produced by the City of Florence”. Antonio Paolucci writes that Botticelli was the most intelligent witness and interpreter, and was in the best position to comprehend the spirit of his time.

²⁷ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, New York, 1956, p. 117.

So we see a clear tendency to “platonize” or “paganize,” as it were, the Madonna and other female Christian saints. Kenneth Clark notes that Botticelli for the first time in the history of Christian painting managed to “reuse” the head of a naked female figure from one of his paintings to create an image of the Madonna on another canvas. Clark mentions that Botticelli used the same head for his Madonnas, and this circumstance, quite shocking as it may seem at first, shows the highest degree of human thought, a shining halo in the pure air of imagination. Clark notes that the fact that the head of our Christian goddess, with all her innate ability to sympathize with people, with all her rich inner life, can be set up upon a nude body without looking alien or out of place, and proves the ultimate triumph of the Celestial Venus.²⁸

The same can and should be said about the statue of *Dawn* and that of the *Madonna* in the Medici Chapel. To explain the statue of *Night* as an image of *Venus-Aphrodite*, we need to draw a parallel with Botticelli’s last nude female image painted by Botticelli was a figure usually referred to as “Truth” in his canvas the *Calumny of Apelles*. Kenneth Clark emphasizes the similarity between Venus and Truth in the *Calumny*. He writes:

At first blush, she reminds [us of] Venus, but practically everywhere the required flowing smoothness appears to be broken. Instead of the classical oval of Venus’ figure, her arms and head fit into a zigzag rhomboid medieval pattern. A long lock of hair entwining her right thigh purposely refuses to follow its form. The hand of Botticelli draws firm and graceful lines, but in each curve we feel his utter rejection of the thrill of lust...

Having noted the similarity, Clark did not go any further and connect this triad: Venus — Madonna — Truth together, using the unity of the artist’s plan. This was probably because Botticelli had created these works in different creative periods separated by several years. Our interpretation is

²⁸ Kenneth Clark, *Op.cit*, p. 126.

that Michelangelo decided to recreate Botticelli's triad in the Medici Chapel. (*Plate 23*)

If we may suggest that a triad of female faces of Botticelli belong to one person - Mary in different moments of her life, we also may consider *The Birth of Venice as a moment of Immaculate Conception* and the last Mary in *Calumny* as Madonna rebelliously rejecting the destiny of her son, Jesus. Michelangelo does not repeat last motif in the Chapel, but later created the cartoon on the same subject.²⁹

Michelangelo was already recognized as the best sculptor and painter in Rome (but not in Florence!). In Florence Botticelli still reigned as the sovereign of painting. Michelangelo could not be unaware of Botticelli's triad. He may even have known its exact sense and meaning either from Botticelli or from his contemporaries. Besides, Botticelli was a favorite of the Medici and their principal painter. His pictures preserve the images of Cosimo, his son Pietro, his grandsons: Lorenzo (the future *Il Magnifico*) as well as Giuliano (to be killed in the Pazzi plot) and the staff of the Platonian Academy. Even after the Medici's deposition, they continued to support Botticelli financially.

Art experts usually connect the *Birth of Venus* with Neoplatonic ideas, most often linking it to the poem by Poliziano and the ideas of Ficino, both of whom belonged to the Platonic Academy. Professor Edith Balas names Botticelli as Ficino's best-known disciple, who could have explained to Michelangelo the same ideas that earlier had been explained by Neoplatonists to Botticelli. It is known that Michelangelo and Botticelli met and could have exchanged ideas.³⁰

In other words, one should not doubt that Botticelli's triad: Venus — the Madonna — Truth was purposeful. As Edith Balas notes:

²⁹ See our book *Michelangelo's Moment: the British Museum Madonna*, Loom, Moscow, 2018; (the British Library Catalogue BLL 01019192081)

³⁰ Edith Balas. *Michelangelo's Medici Chapel: a New Interpretation*, Philadelphia, 1995, p. 135.

During the Renaissance, it was popular to depict two Venuses side-by-side, one of which displayed Sacred Love, and the other Earthly Love.³¹

And as the young Rilke wrote in his Florentine Diary:

But what are those obscure and yet obvious pictorial fairytales of the Venetians in comparison to the deep mysteries and the original plots that we find in Botticelli paintings! That's where the shyness of his Venus, the timidity of his Primavera, and the tired meekness of his Madonnas come from. These Madonnas seem to feel guilty for having avoided the tortures and wounds of the Crucifixion. They cannot forget that they have given birth painlessly and have conceived without sexual gratification. There are moments when the magnificence of their long days spent on a throne puts a smile on their lips. Then their smile strangely pairs with their tearful eyes. But, as soon as this brief and happy oblivion of pain leaves them, they again become faced with the unwonted and frightful maturity of their Spring and, in the entire hopelessness of their heavens, they start longing for the mundane caresses of ardent Summer.

And as the languorous woman mourns over the miracle that failed to happen, tormented by her inability to give birth to Summer, whose sprouts she feels to move inside her ripe body, so Venus is afraid that she would never be able to give away her beauty to all those who crave for it, and likewise, Spring palpitates for she has to be silent about her hidden splendor and mysterious sanctity.

As a matter of fact, we can decide in favor of similarity or dissimilarity only by looking at a photographic image. The similarity expressed by the master is related to the appearance of the model, just as ecstasy is related to exhaustion. Does Botticelli in his portraits appear

³¹ Marcus Lodwick, *The Museum Companion. Understanding Western Art*, London, 2003, p. 113.

humiliated, renouncing himself? His own Madonna and Venus appear to him as a rebuke.

More likely, it is Michelangelo whom we can consider to be sentimental — if only from the formal aspect. His ideas are always as stately and plastically tranquil as the contours of his most serene sculptures are restlessly agile. It seems as if someone is talking to a deaf person or to a person who does not want to hear. The speaker tirelessly and forcefully repeats his address, and the fear not to be understood leaves a mark on everything he says. Therefore, even his deeply personal revelations look as if they were manifestos waiting to be displayed for public attention at every street corner.

And what made Botticelli sad, made him vehement; and if Sandro's fingers thrilled from a disturbing melancholy, the fists of Michelangelo cut the effigy of his rage into a shuddering stone.³²

Michelangelo could not be unaware of Botticelli's triad. In the female statues of the Medici Chapel, Michelangelo was greatly inspired by the works of Botticelli. This assertion can be proven by drawings of the nudes from the exposition of *Casa Buonarrotti*, the house and museum of the sculptor in Florence. In these drawings, according to some art experts, we witness a direct connection with the portrait of Simonetta Vespucci, who according to common belief was Botticelli's model.³³

Most likely the goal for Michelangelo was to materialize and bring to a close the dispute on painting and sculpture that once had occurred between himself and Leonardo da Vinci. Michelangelo had presented his own *Birth of Venus*, where the goddess' head (unlike the one in the Botticelli painting) was already covered with a scarf. The hair fluttering in the wind allowed Botticelli to make the face of *Venus* distracted and almost indifferent. Michelangelo, on the contrary, was

³² R. M. Rilke. *Florentine Diary*, Moscow, 2005, pp. 57-58 (in Russian).

³³ Gilles Neret, *Michelangelo*, Taschen, Köln, 2004, pp. 80-81.

able to express his idea exclusively in the marble countenance of *Venus-Dawn*. The left foot of his *Venus-Dawn* rises from a substance that can also be sea foam.

The girdle on *Venus-Dawn* is explained by some as a symbol of innocence while others interpret it (though it is impossible to understand why) as a symbol of slavery. The latter explanation works well for a political interpretation of the Chapel, but it fails to provide any tangible supporting evidence. It seems most correct to me to pay attention to the tradition of depicting Venus with a girdle under her breasts on her naked body or, in any case, under her clothing. We see such a girdle in the painting *Venus, Mars, and Cupid* (1488) by Piero di Cosimo (Uffizi, Florence) and in a canvas by Lorenzo Lotto (about 1520), where Venus wears not only a girdle, but also a sophisticated headdress similar to that of *Night* (Metropolitan Museum, New York). A headdress which looks like the one on Michelangelo's *Dawn* can be seen on Venus in a painting *The Death of Adonis* (1512) by Sebastiano Pombo in the Uffizi Gallery.

In the *Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (1540) by Agnolo Bronzino (the National Gallery, London), the figure of Venus, with her muscled arms, the position of her breasts, and her headdress, closely resembles the figure of *Dawn*. In Paolo Veronese's *Allegory of Love, or the Happy Union* (the National Gallery, London) the zone under the breasts of Venus is decorated with gold embroidery and pearls, and in *Venus Entrusting an Infant to Time* (1754) by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (the National Gallery, London), a gold-decorated zone on Venus looks a bit askew, probably to impart some dynamics to her otherwise static figure. Diego Velazquez in his *Toilet of Venus* (1640, the National Gallery, London), created in strictly catholic Spain (where the next nude would appear only a century and a half later in *La Maja Desnuda* by Francisco Goya), depicts the nude Venus with her back to the spectator. To prove this is really a goddess, and not just a naked woman, Velazquez added Cupid showing Venus, who is looking at herself in the mirror, her zone. We see in Hedrick

Goltzius' painting *Bacchus, Venus and Ceres* (1606) located in the Hermitage that the zone is an attribute of Venus and not of another beautiful goddess.

The zone under the breasts of *Dawn* is an attribute of Venus. Michelangelo did not add it, as Irving Stone wrote, merely to emphasize the naked beauty of breasts or, as Panofsky believed, as a symbol of virginity. In European painting of the 15th and 16th centuries, we can find an unusual detail, such as a girdle decorating the nude or worn under clothing, on some images of Venus. Only occasionally do we see such a detail in ancient Roman frescos created about a millennium earlier. We can see such girdle on the small statue by Giambologna of *Venera Urania* in Vienna.

Michelangelo based the sketches of his models for the statue of *Night* and, especially for that of *Dawn* on the contemporary portrait of Simonetta Vespucci painted by Piero di Cosimo, in which Simonetta is depicted wearing a serpent necklace. This evidently shows the connection between the Michelangelo's female statues for the Medici Chapel and the image of Venus typical of Botticelli. Michelangelo's drawings are a key to the mysteries of the Medici Chapel. Art experts have noted their similarity on the one hand with the portrait of Simonetta, and on the other hand to the image of Venus. In his drawings Michelangelo not only demonstrates his interest for the images dear to Botticelli, but also expresses a desire to compare his models with the Botticelli's legendary model who posed for his *Birth of Venus* and who was the first beauty of Florence and the beloved of the late Giuliano Medici. Edith Balas, in her book devoted to new interpretation of the Medici Chapel, has produced convincing evidence that the figure of *Night* should be identified with the twin sister of Venus, the goddess Aphrodite.³⁴ Aphrodite means wisdom, eternity and peace, contrary to the generally accepted meaning of Venus-Aphrodite as the symbol of love and carnal pleasures.

³⁴ Edith Balas, *Op. Cit.*, p. 67.

Edith Balas calls attention to Vasari's remark that in the first plan for the Medici Tombs there was mention of Cybele, a mother goddess of Phrygia and Asia Minor known since Antiquity. Images of Cybele, Ishtar, Venus and Aphrodite are interrelated and reflect various hypostases of the *Magna Mater* cult, which was primary among the ancient cults. Professor Balas emphasizes that the name *Night*, even though used by Michelangelo once, does not completely reveal his plan. She also writes that in his correspondence Michelangelo refers to these statues as "allegories" and "images," and says that his authorized buyer of Carrara marble called them simply the "two women" or "the nudes".

The main problem is that Michelangelo's personal interpretation remains unknown to the present day. For example, according to general belief the statue includes a sheaf of poppy flowers, but as the picture in *Casa Buonarroti* shows, it is in fact a bunch of pomegranates that lies under the feet of *Night*. This does not correspond to the canonical image of *Night*. The fruits of the pomegranate were traditionally considered to be an attribute of the Great Mother Goddess. (Here we should remember that one of the participants in Botticelli's triad was the *Madonna of the Pomegranate*). Other evidence comes from the picture *La Notte* by Francesco Brina (1540–1586) in which we can see clearly a bunch of pomegranates under foot of *Night* (at *Casa Buonarroti*). As noted above, Edith Balas thinks that the pair of naked female figures in the Chapel shows two different hypostases of the Mother Goddess (identified with the Earth), which coincide with images of the twins, Venus and Aphrodite. Francisco de Holanda in presence of Michelangelo said in 1538 that the "chapel of the Medici in San Lorenzo...[is adorned] with such a generous number of statues in full relief that it can certainly compete with any of the great works of antiquity..."³⁵

To sum up, Professor Balas came to almost the same conclusions, at which we have arrived, starting with the idea

³⁵ Francisco de Holanda, *Dialogues with Michelangelo*, London, 2006, p. 70.

of the similarity between the images in the chapel and their affinity with Botticelli's triad. Unfortunately, her book does not pay sufficient attention to the image of the Madonna even though it provides an important quote from a letter of Michelangelo's contemporary, Mutcanus Rufus, who had mentioned the Virgin Mary among the goddesses personifying the sacred feminine of the Great Mother deity. In the texts of that letter we see an added magic formula: "But be careful, speaking about such things. They should remain in silence... the sacred ideas need to be shrouded in legends and mysteries".

Michelangelo in relation to the Medici Chapel obviously utilized the same approach. The sculptor left the marble of the Madonna's face unpolished, possibly to conceal the likeness to the image of *Dawn — Venus — Aphrodite*, which were closely related to the widely known Ishtar, Astarte and Cybele, as personifications of the Great Mother Goddess.

The triad that Botticelli had created over decade, i.e. the *Birth of Venus* (1484), the *Madonna of the Pomegranate* and the *Madonna of the Magnificat* (both 1487), and finally the *Calumny of Apelles* (1495), was recreated by Michelangelo, who had spent about ten years working on the female statues of the Medici Chapel.

The New Sacristy as a Mausoleum to Lorenzo the Magnificent and a Last Monument of the Quattrocento

The dividing line between the Quattrocento and the High Renaissance in Florence has always been a subject for debate. It seems to us that it should lie in the art of Michelangelo himself although this is not strictly chronological. His painting on the ceiling of Sistine Chapel seems to belong to the High Renaissance, and the New Sacristy, made two decades later, seems to be a last monument of the Florentine Quattrocento. In the Medici Chapel he “was still attached to the Quattrocento idea of architecture”.³⁶

One of the modern leaders of the City of Florence Eugenio Giani named in the afterword of this book the New Sacristy “the heart of Florentine art”.

The *Sagrestia Nuova* (New Sacristy), created in 1519-1534 in the *Cappella Medicea* (Medici Chapel) of San Lorenzo Basilica in Florence, is the only completed architectural and sculptural complex of Michelangelo. Many art experts consider the Medici Chapel sculptures to be the pinnacle work and triumph of the Great Florentine.

Only in 1976 was a long-hidden corridor under the New Sacristy discovered. The corridor was probably some kind of room where the sculptor and architect of the New Sacristy could have a rest. Alone here, he could think and draw in a quiet atmosphere. In 2011 written evidence was found that

³⁶ Cammy Brothers, *Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2008, p. 144.

Michelangelo maintained a similar secret room at San Peter's in Rome when he was the architect there. In 1530 he would have hidden in the corridor under the Medici Chapel trying to avoid death at the hands of soldiers of Alessandro Medici. Michelangelo was then 55 and did not feel well. He probably felt that the sculptures of the New Sacristy would be the last of his life. His *Self Portrait* on the wall of the concealed corridor seems to reflect this fear of death. This drawing is critically important for understanding the whole atmosphere under which he had been working during the next three years to complete the sculptures for the New Sacristy. (*Plate 31*)

Buonarotti was executing his ideas in a situation where he had to conceal his true intentions from the project's patrons: Pope Clement VII and his heirs. Michelangelo usually tried to destroy most of his preliminary studies after completion of the final sculptural work. Fortunately, many of them still have survived. Some of these drawings may be a key to understanding the mysterious concept of the Medici Chapel.

Young Michelangelo was brought up in the household of Lorenzo Medici, the Magnificent (*Il Magnifico*), whom he worshiped as Vasari mentioned. He was aware of Lorenzo's immense and unending sorrow for his brother Giuliano, who had been stabbed to death in 1478 in the Basilica of Santa Maria del Fiore as a result of a plot jointly contrived by the Pazzi, an eminent Florentine family, and Pope Sixtus IV. From then on the jovial nature of Lorenzo and the open-minded style of Florentine rule changed. Michelangelo had idolized Lorenzo the Magnificent and the memory of his brother Giuliano, but he did not harbor the same feelings for the later Medicis. As Marcel Brion writes:

If Florence for three generations seemed to acquiesce in Medici power, which by virtue of circumstances had become hereditary, it was only because the Medicis appealed to the public with their talents and merits. They were powerful because their authority did not depend on titles, so nobody could either challenge or

*abolish it. They were considered first citizens of Florence because other people recognized them as such or took it for granted.*³⁷

Soon after Lorenzo the Magnificent's death, his rather mediocre son was ousted from Florence. Afterwards, several Medicis in succession managed to return to their seat of power, almost always riding on the shoulders of foreign troops. Commissioned by Cardinal Giulio Medici (the future Pope Clement VII) in 1519, Michelangelo started work on the Medici tomb complex at San Lorenzo. According to Pope Clement, it was to house the tombs of Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother Giuliano and the tombs of two later Medici, i.e. Lorenzo (Duke of Urbino) and Giuliano (Duke of Nemours), and lastly the tomb of the Pope himself. In fact, the Pope was not buried in the Chapel and the remains of some other members of the Medici family, for instance, the remains of Duke Alessandro, were added the tomb of Duke Lorenzo of Urbino.

The details and subtleties of Michelangelo's art and the mysteries of his ideas and designs are a lasting riddle, and it is important to understand their sophistication. Many misinterpretations of the New Sacristy's design have arisen, among other things, from a failure to appreciate and distinguish between the first generation (Giovanni — Cosimo — Lorenzo the Magnificent — his brother Giuliano) and the second generation (Pope Leo X — Pope Clement VII — Duke Giuliano, Duke Lorenzo — Duke Alessandro) of Medici politicians, and Michelangelo's differing opinions about them.

Supervising construction of fortifications in 1527-1529 for the Florentine Republic, then at war with the second generation in the person of Giulio Medici (Pope Clement VII), Michelangelo used every spare moment to work on the tombs of the first generation, those of Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother Giuliano (who, by the way, was the father of Clement VII). In essence, while fighting against the usurpers of traditional Florentine republican freedom, represented by the sec-

³⁷ Marcel Brion, *Michelangelo* (in Russian), Moscow, 2002, p. 41.

ond generation of Medici, Michelangelo immortalized in the Medici Chapel the first generation who had been republican leaders of Florence in the 15th century. The seeming contradiction between Michelangelo's creation of the sculptural perfection of the Medici tombs and his direct participation in the military struggle against the offspring of the Medici helps us to uncover his original plan, one of the yet unsolved mysteries of the Medici Chapel.

In our opinion, what Michelangelo was trying to immortalize first and foremost was the memory of Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother Giuliano. Certainly, this is one of the great secrets of the Chapel and of Michelangelo himself since he could never disclose his real thoughts. The authoritative art expert James Beck assumes that the sitting figures of the so-called *duchi capitani* represent the two senior Medicis.³⁸

Marcel Brion asks:

*Why should Michelangelo have started with the tombs of the dukes, both being equally petty characters, instead of choosing Lorenzo the Magnificent, who was his dearest friend and generous patron, and who entirely deserved to be glorified by the sculptor's genius? Let everyone explain it in his own way.*³⁹

At what exact moment did Michelangelo opt for limiting his design to only three sculpturally decorated tombs? We do not know that for sure, but one should not forget that Michelangelo was also the architect of the New Sacristy and, as some critics reasonably note, he could hardly have been mistaken in his calculations. In fact, he himself had drawn "an architectural borderline" for the deployment of its sculptural monuments.

Michelangelo sometimes indicates his authorship and his personal involvement in the content of his art by intro-

³⁸ James Beck, Antonio Paolucci, Bruno Santi, *Michelangelo. The Medici Chapel*, London, New York, 1994, p. 27.

³⁹ Marcel Brion, *Op.Cit.*, p. 41.

ducing a self-portrait into the composition. The best-known example of this is his “flayed skin” self-portrait on the Last Judgment fresco in the Vatican Sistine Chapel, which is somewhat reminiscent of the death of the great Persian painter and prophet Mani. (*Plate 30*)

It seems that in the statue of *Day* in the New Sacristy Michelangelo presented a heroic image, but also made a grotesque image of himself in the mask just beneath the figure of *Night*. Moreover, the mask reminds us of the lost *Faun* in the Medici Gardens, the very first sculpture Michelangelo ever created. Both of them have a broken nose similar to Michelangelo’s. (*Plates 26, 27, 29*) Irving Stone also sees a self-portrait of Michelangelo in the figure of *Dusk*.⁴⁰ (*Plates 24, 25*) If Stone is right, then both of the naked male images and the grotesque mask may reflect facial features of our sculptor. This shows how personal this work was for Michelangelo. He obviously would not to put himself under feet of Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino, but might easily have paid homage in this way to the memory of Lorenzo the Magnificent.

Bernadine Barnes in her recent book *Michelangelo and the Viewer of his Time* expresses a very important insight that “from very beginning, how people saw his works mattered very much to Michelangelo.”⁴¹ Following professor Barnes’ recommendation we deduce that in Michelangelo’s time the main entrance to the New Sacristy was from San Lorenzo Cathedral and from the first step a viewer could not see the sculptural group of Giuliano and the Madonna at all. He would see only the altar and sculptural group of the tomb of Duke Lorenzo of Urbino, from which the statue of *Pensieroso-Lorenzo* (*Plate 3, 6*) looks towards the tomb of Lorenzo the Magnificent thereby giving the impression of a direct relationship between them. After a few steps the viewer would see everything and notice that the statue of *Giuliano* is looking into the wall without any willingness “to participate”. (*Plates 5, 34*)

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 658.

⁴¹ Bernadine Barnes, *Michelangelo and the Viewer in his Time*, Reaction Books, London, 2017, p. 7.

A few steps more into the center of the Sacristy and the viewer would be “seduced” by the magical triangle of the three female sculptures. We believe that Michelangelo carefully created this impression and that the sculptures were put in their current places in accordance with Michelangelo’s intentions a decade after he had departed from Florence leaving the sculptures on the floor (except for *Pensieroso-Lorenzo*, which he had placed in its own niche himself).

A legend broadly shared by many art historians that *Pensieroso-Lorenzo* and *Giuliano* are looking at the statue of the *Madonna* turns out to be unsupported if we follow Bernadine Barnes’ advice and orient ourselves in the New Sacristy. We then will see clearly that neither of the male statues looks at the *Madonna*. Based on this “legend” and the *fotomontaggio* Heinz Georg Haussler in his interesting book comes to the conclusion that sculptural group of the *Madonna* (Plate 4) is the spiritual center of the Medici Chapel.⁴² But based on actual observation we must say that the spiritual center of the New Sacristy in fact is situated in the *Pensieroso-Lorenzo* sculptural group and note that his statue is the tallest in the chapel and the only one put in place by the Master himself before his departure. Michelangelo also created a design for the statues of Saints Cosmas and Damian in the *Madonna* sculptural group but left their carving to other people.

In the creation of a sacred burial monument not the least important role is played by the person for whom it made. Strictly speaking, there are only two truly great people present in the New Sacristy of the Medici Chapel: Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449-1492) and Michelangelo Buonarroti himself, the creator of the New Sacristy. The others who are buried there matter only for being members of the Medici family. Lorenzo the Magnificent’s brother Giuliano (1453-1478), although he was illuminated by the glory of his brother

⁴² Heinz Georg Haussler, *Il Segreto della Forma in Michelangelo: Le figure della Sagrestia Nuova*, Edizioni Arcobaleno, Venezia, 2002, p. 138-139.

and by his own tragic death, failed to distinguish himself by any special accomplishments of his own other than fathering Giulio Medici, the future Pope Clement VII (1478 — 1534). The Duke Giuliano de' Medici (1479 — 1516) was the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent but left no significant mark in history. The grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent, Duke Lorenzo of Urbino (1492 — 1519) was a poor ruler and unsuccessful military commander. "Of relief felt in Florence at the news of Lorenzo's death there is ample evidence".⁴³

Lorenzo de' Medici the Magnificent was not only a patron of art in Florence, a member and the guardian of the Florentine Platonic Academy, a good poet and an outstanding political figure, but in fact he was the godfather of Michelangelo. Lorenzo took Michelangelo to his palace at a young age, seated the boy at his family table (which included two future Roman popes), admitted him to discussions of the most famous modern philosophers, and gave him an opportunity to study sculpture. As noted by Carolyn Vaughan:

*Michelangelo had a thorny relationship with the Medici, the powerful ruling family of Florence. He felt great admiration and gratitude toward Lorenzo the Magnificent, in whose household he learned his art and absorbed the philosophy that would inform it.*⁴⁴

Custom would have required the artist to informally name the sculptures on the tombs of the Dukes in their honor, which may have been done (although it remains in question) in the case of the statue traditionally called *Giuliano*. However, Michelangelo never named the statue standing opposite. The name *Lorenzo Duke of Urbino* appeared later, and without Michelangelo's participation, in Vasari's description of the New Sacristy.

Francisco de Holanda, addressing Vittoria Colonna in the presence of Michelangelo during a conversation in 1538,

⁴³ J.R. Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, Phoenix Press, London, 2004, p.100.

⁴⁴ Carolyn Vaughan, *Op.Cit.*, p. 96.

admires the works of the sculptor in the Medici Chapel, mentioning *Night, Dawn* and an “especially appealing” sculpture of a “melancholy deceased Person magically returned to Life.”⁴⁵ What was the “melancholy” statue that Francisco de Holanda had in mind when he mentioning it in the presence of the artist, as if it were something everyone would know?

It seems to us that only Lorenzo the Magnificent could have such characteristics. And the melancholy character of the Magnificent and the melancholy feeling of his poetry are mentioned by other researchers.⁴⁶

Michelangelo himself used the names “Day,” “Night” and “Giuliano” in his famous poem, but nothing is known about what names he used to refer to the statues on the opposite side of the New Sacristy. At the same time, according to the description Michelangelo provided to Condivi, the sculptures of the Medici Chapel are all interconnected, but reflect different ideas.

The *Lorenzo* statue is the only clearly melancholic one and it does portray a deceased who has returned to life by the magic of Michelangelo’s art. For every contemporary who still remembered the incompetent and dull Duke Lorenzo of Urbino (1492 — 1519) it was crystal clear that the beautiful image of a spiritual man lost in deep thought had absolutely nothing to do with him. Michelangelo lived in Florence for a few years during Duke Lorenzo’s reign but we have no documented information about their relationship, if any. The sculptor certainly had personal knowledge of the other Duke Giuliano (1479 — 1516) and in one letter of 1512 to his father had even ask him to contact Duke Giuliano and to pass on a letter relating to some disputed situation.⁴⁷

The ruler-philosopher (Plato’s ideal) and talented ruler-poet Lorenzo the Magnificent corresponds perfectly in spir-

⁴⁵ Francisco de Holanda, *Dialogues with Michelangelo*, London, 2006, p. 70 n. 35.

⁴⁶ Miles J. Unger, *Magnifico*, Simon&Schuster, New York, 2008, pp.33, 398.

⁴⁷ Carolyn Vaughan, *Op.Cit.*, p. 75.

it to the image of *Il Pensieroso*. But in life he was by no means a handsome man. Thus the statue with the name of *Lorenzo* (given later by other people, such as Vasari) inherently could not have been intended by Michelangelo to bear any physical resemblance to Lorenzo the Magnificent.

Vasari, who communicated with Buonarroti when the latter finished the statues of the New Sacristy (1530 — 1534), probably has given us a clue for their interpretation. In 1531 Vasari created a portrait of Duke Alessandro with clear reference to the statue of *Giuliano*. (Plate 35) But much more interesting for us is a portrait of Lorenzo the Magnificent from 1532, whom Vasari never saw because was born two decades after his death. And we can see in it a strong similarity to the melancholic and spiritual image of *Il Pensieroso*. This portrait even includes such details as a strange head under arm of the Magnificent. (Plate 36) Professor Vera Dagzina (1944 — 2014) of Moscow State University pays particular attention to the “strange iconography” of the portrait with its mask and other rather ambiguous symbols that must, according to her, emphasize the wisdom of *Il Magnifico*.⁴⁸ Even Muratov, who generally does not have a high opinion of the art of Vasari, calls this portrait “a profound and beautiful work of art”.

Antonio Forcellino writes:

There is no evidence to produce a precise identification of the dukes, and what there is came after Michelangelo's death: even the sonnet that links Giuliano to allegories of night and day came from a much later period and so there could easily have been confusion over the correspondences, without weakening the iconographic associations of the tombs. Having established the symbolic reasons that drove [In them] Michelangelo to perceive those figures, we still have not resolved the question of the iconography of the sculptures, which are themselves something entirely new in

⁴⁸ *Culture of Renaissance and Government*, Nauka, Moscow, 1999, p. 133.

*the Western tradition... Michelangelo had produced the most vital of his works.*⁴⁹

Both Panofsky and de Tolnay agree that “the Tomb of the Magnifici remained unexecuted”. Colonel G.F. Young wrote in 1910:

*Lorenzo the Magnificent has been acknowledged by the united voice of Europe to have been one of the most remarkable men who ever held the rule of State... He was a leader in an age which abounded with great men. And he has been recognized as being one of the chief inspiring forces of the fifteenth century... It is, however, strange to record that no monument marks the grave of the great Lorenzo the Magnificent... Michelangelo was to have executed a monument for his tomb, but left Florence without doing so...*⁵⁰

Quoting Edward Armstrong, Colonel Young also wrote: “Florence has not repaid the generous recognition to Lorenzo...”⁵¹

What is strange is that all “fans” of Lorenzo the Magnificent could have thought that Michelangelo cared about the memory of his godfather less than they did. An artist who until his last day cared about his “difficult” father Lodovico, who tried to deflect his son from art in his decisive young years! It is impossible to think that after spending almost 15 years on the Medici tombs in the New Sacristy he would have departed from Florence without leaving behind a monument to that Lorenzo. Irving Stone, consider Michelangelo’s thoughts first rather than his own. In his famous fictional biography Stone vividly portrays a Michelangelo who, after fourteen years of work and before leaving for Rome, examines the Chapel and comes to the conclusion that to him it looks finished

⁴⁹ Antonio Forcellino, *Michelangelo: A Tormented Life*, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 176, 178.

⁵⁰ Col. G.F. Young, *The Medici*, New York, 1930, p. 222.

⁵¹ G.F. Young, *Op.Cit*, p. 223.

since he has expressed in it everything he wanted to express. The sculptor uses just one idea as the criterion for such a conclusion: Lorenzo the Magnificent would have been pleased with the Chapel the way Michelangelo created it.⁵² James Beck writes that the statues of the New Sacristy are a triumph of the sculptor.⁵³

The presence of the ashes of Lorenzo the Magnificent in the Medici Chapel instantly negates any “socialist revolutionary” suppositions that in the New Sacristy Michelangelo ostensibly was expressing his protest against the Medici family. (The authors who share this wrong-headed conviction include Romain Rolland and several others.) As a matter of fact, the creation of the New Sacristy was the only opportunity for the master to pay tribute to his great patron. Fate allocated him almost 15 years for this task, which was more than enough time.

Following the opinion of James Beck, we formerly believed that it was necessary to consider the statue on the tomb of Duke Lorenzo of Urbino to be actually an idealized monument to his grandfather, Lorenzo the Magnificent. But we now believe that the monument comprised the New Sacristy as a whole by the analogy with James Beck’s interpretation considering the entire Cathedral of San Lorenzo to be a mausoleum for Cosimo de’ Medici the Elder, the grandfather of Lorenzo the Magnificent. It seems to us now that the entire New Sacristy of the Medici Chapel is a mausoleum for the Magnificent, and that the statue of *Lorenzo*, which is the highest of them all and dominates the whole Sacristy, should be regarded as part of this conception.

Michelangelo himself determined the content of the New Sacristy, and therefore when the question of a shrine for the then Pope Clement VII (Giulio de’ Medici) became irrelevant, Michelangelo could dedicate the entire Chapel

⁵² Irving Stone, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, London, 1997, p. 667.

⁵³ James Beck, Antonio Paolucci, Francesco Santi, *Michelangelo: The Medici Chapel*, London, 1994, p. 23.

to his patron, while also making a formal observance of the memory of the other three members of the family, especially Giuliano, father of Clement VII and brother of Lorenzo the Magnificent.

The Cathedral San Lorenzo, which James Beck considers to be a giant mausoleum to Cosimo the Elder contained his tomb in the basement of the central part of the church. Next to his tomb by the order of Cosimo is the tomb of his beloved artist Donatello. Michelangelo was about 60 years old when he completed his work on the New Sacristy and considered himself ill with Death approaching as he drew on the wall of his secret corridor in the Sacristy. (*Plate 31*) Maybe he thought that if he died in Florence at that time, his ashes could be buried in the Sacristy near Lorenzo the Magnificent. It is not unreasonable to assume that Michelangelo considered the New Sacristy to be mausoleum not the only for Lorenzo the Magnificent but also for himself.

The *Melencolia* of Dürer and of Michelangelo

The art historian James Beck (1930 — 2007) wrote in a review of Edith Balas's book:

Broadly speaking, three larger positions with regard to the iconography of Renaissance art can be detected over the years: interpretations that see layers of meaning of the most intricate erudition, often defined by Neo-Platonic hermeneutic wisdom; an inclination to find contemporary political themes buried in the imagery; and a rejection of elaborate meanings altogether in favor of the artist's expressive intentions and the artist's educational possibilities. One may, of course, imagine diverse combinations of the three. I lean toward the third, which puts in question the eventuality that most of the artists with whom we engage had the cultural wherewithal to control heavily esoteric, usually Latin or Greek, texts. Trained as artists and not humanists, they probably did not have much stamina in devoting time away from the studio reading [and] cogitating philosophical issues. Balas opts for the first, and, of course, she is in excellent company (e.g., de Tolnay and Panofsky) when it comes to the problem she attacks.⁵⁴

On the one hand we completely agree with Beck's approach to favor "the artist's expressive intentions and the artist's educational possibilities". On the other hand, we call

⁵⁴ James Beck, *Review of Edith Balas' Michelangelo's Medici Chapel: A New Interpretation*, Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1995, appearing in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 620-621.

Michelangelo a 'humanist' as some historians have called members of the Florentine Platonic Academy, where Michelangelo was "educated" in philosophy. Also, we should mention that Francisco de Holanda describes philosophical discussions of Michelangelo in his intellectual circle in the Rome of 1538, which were at the same level as the Florentine Platonic Academy discussions. We follow Mons. Timothy Verdon in calling him a "theologian"⁵⁵ and will follow Francesco Bocchi and call him "philosopher". A piece of art in marble or in engraving may have important philosophical meaning.

The word "melancholy" (*melencolia* in Latin, μελαγχολία in Greek) from ancient times was often associated with a weak nervous system even though Hippocrates, the famous doctor of antiquity, had already included "melancholic" in one of the four varieties of normal people. The leader of the Florentine Platonic Academy Marsilio Ficino was convinced that melancholy engendered creative processes and was thus a reassuring vital force. This idea is well depicted by Dürer in his engraving *Melencolia I*: a person is shown with eyes aflame with creative energy (*Plates 38, 40*). Actually, this work of art is one of the most well-known visualizations of melancholy. Of course, Michelangelo knew Dürer's engraving of 1514 when he worked on the sculpture of *Lorenzo* in twenties of 16th century. He discussed the works of the German artist with de Holanda and Condivi. We attach considerable importance to the possible influence of Dürer's powerful engraving on Michelangelo in creation of the statue of the *Pensieroso (Lorenzo)*. The times of Dürer and Michelangelo almost coincided.

It is worth nothing that a link between the Florentine Quattrocento and Dürer's *Melencolia* was suggested by Jonathan Jones in a March 18, 2011 article in *The Guardian*:

Albrecht Dürer's Melencolia I has cut its black lines deep into the modern imagination. It shows a winged being who sits in apparent dejection, surrounded by

⁵⁵ Mons. Timothy Verdon, *Michelangelo teologo: fede e creatività tra Rinascimento e controriforma*, Milano, Ancora, 2005.

unused objects of science, craft and art, holding a pair of dividers as she broods. Her face is a mask of darkness, but her bright eyes glare, revealing an acuteness of mind that contrasts with her exhausted pose.

In 16th-century portraits, the head resting on hand pose was to become a universal image of the soul afflicted by sad thoughts — as in Moretto da Brescia's Portrait of a Young Man in London's National Gallery. The influence of Dürer's print is everywhere in Renaissance Europe. But what is equally amazing is the power of this 1514 work to fascinate us today...

Dürer's work of art continues to appeal because it is a diagnosis. It describes a malaise in the way a doctor might list symptoms. Sitting around, head in hand? Face a bit shadowy? My diagnosis: melancholia. Helpfully, Dürer even names this condition on the banner held aloft by a bat-like creature...

Dürer offers something else not found in the old pseudo-science — a sense of a soul weighed down by its own intellect. In fact, the roots of his visionary masterpiece lie in Renaissance Italy, which he had visited and whose artists he knew well.

In 15th-century Florence, philosopher Marsilio Ficino claimed that intellectuals, gifted and introspective souls like himself, were especially prone to the malaise of melancholy. He proposed various magical remedies to lift it — often invoking the power of the planet and goddess Venus to bring joy to the joyless.

Dürer powerfully translates Ficino's idea of the sad intellectual into a heroic portrait of a great mind surrounded by unused tools of discovery and creation. Yet there is something more still. Dürer, we can guess from this print, knew the darkness of melancholy personally...

Nothing is any more insightful than Albrecht Dürer's majestic and enduring study of the troubled human mind.

There is, in fact, a noticeable similarity between Dürer's engraving *Melencolia* and Michelangelo's sculpture *the Pensieroso* even down to such details as presence of a bat or mouse-like image. The title *Melencolia* probably refers to a human condition not just to a certain figure symbolizing melancholy.⁵⁶

Michelangelo was very competitive in every sense, and the melancholic nature of *Pensieroso-Lorenzo* is clear beyond any doubt. European thought at that time did not know of the philosophical and religious concept of "meditation," which is to say, an elevated thoughtfulness, a state in which one must immerse himself in order to attain "nirvana", an inner harmony, peace and deliverance from suffering. The practice of such meditation had been known in India from the time of the "Mahabharata," i.e. no later than the 11th century BC. The depiction of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas immersed in this state has been the main goal of Buddhist art for almost two millennia.

The distinction in a work of art between a European state of melancholy and Oriental meditation and an immersion in a state of nirvana depends not so much on the skill, but on the empathy of the artist and on his penetration into the visual philosophical idea of higher spirituality. This is simply philosophy in stone.

In 1931 Erwin Panofsky, then a visiting professor at New York University, presented a lecture course entitled *Albrecht Dürer as Artist and Thinker*. But he and most others never gave Michelangelo the title of "Thinker." And this is a common, if not systematic, problem with understanding of the intentions of Buonarrotti in his art. In fact, there are a few exceptions as, for instance, the book of Mons. Timothy Ver-

⁵⁶ It should be noted that the being in *Melencolia* is not necessarily female, as some researchers have thought. Long hair in the start of 16th century could belong to young men. The strong hands and the carpenter's instruments by the legs are also signs that the figure is a man. Of course, the wings on the back could suggest an archangel, which would obviate a discussion of gender altogether.

don, *Michelangelo Teologo* and the book of Professor Leonard Barkan *Michelangelo: A life on Paper* (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2011).

Norbert Wolf, the author of a book on Dürer, writes that “the most plausible seems to be the version of Erwin Panofsky, who interpreted the meaning of this engraving in the context of three talents ruled by Saturn: imagination, discursive reason and divine intuition. According to the ideas that existed during the time of Dürer, the artists were to stay in the first, the lowest and inferior of these three spheres.”⁵⁷ It is very unlikely that Dürer himself would propagandize for the “inferior role of an artist.” The U.S. researcher David Finkelstein writes that Dürer likely would not have shared the “naïve Neoplatonic cosmology of spheres,” but that Dürer would still have had to use it, since it was the language his viewers were able to understand.⁵⁸

So here we would like to note the most important aspect: Michelangelo could not agree with the above-mentioned Neoplatonic interpretation of his low place in the spheres of life and thought. Throughout his life and work he claimed the artist was a representative of the highest spheres.

It is hard to believe that the gods of the Greco-Roman Pantheon were all that important to him. He in his works depicted the one and only God of the Bible, contemplated about Him, addressed Him in his poems, sometimes quite boldly so, as an equal! Michelangelo was neither an ironic philosopher, combining the ancient beliefs of the Greeks and Romans with Christianity, such as Ficino and the Neoplatonists contemporary with him, nor was Michelangelo an illustrator of the ideas of the latter.

One has only to look at the bas-relief *Madonna of the Steps* by which he opened a series of his incomparable “Michelangelo Madonnas,” which he depicted in the highest matter in the sculptures, paintings and drawings and the

⁵⁷ Norbert Wolf, *Dürer*, Moscow, 2007, p. 48.

⁵⁸ David Finkelstein, *Op. Cit.*

meaning of many of which continues to puzzle Michelangelo researchers. The bas-relief was created by Michelangelo at the age of fifteen at the time of his “training” at the Platonic Academy by the above-mentioned Ficino and his colleagues. This shows the deep roots of Michelangelo’s biblical thinking. The stormy spirit of Michelangelo is still raging in his frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, forcing the cardinals present there for regular meetings to constantly sense and mentally “reread” the Bible.

The “divinity” of the personality and creativity of Buonarroti is important here for the topic of Michelangelo as a philosopher. He was not just a visual exponent of other people’s ideas, including the ideas of Neoplatonism, as many still believe, but was a truly independent thinker. Rafael learned from Michelangelo *in absentia*, but in Rome at the beginning of the 16th century they already met as rivals. Supported by Bramante, Rafael even tried to “take over” Michelangelo’s painting commission for the Sistine Chapel. It is to Rafael that the rough, but probably true, phrase about Michelangelo belongs: “[He is] lonely like an executioner.” The rivalry between them for commissions from the Vatican continued under the Pope Julius II and Pope Leo X (the latter came from the Medici family and remembered Michelangelo from his childhood as a young sculptor sitting at the Medici table). In 1508-1511, Rafael painted the famous fresco *Philosophy* (more often known as *The School of Athens*). In the foreground he portrayed Michelangelo in the image of Heraclitus, the famous founder of dialectics. We probably also see a figure of Michelangelo in the foreground of another fresco of Rafael, the *Disputa*, together with images of famous theologians.

The Russian art researcher and translator Abram Efros, writing about Michelangelo’s “philosophical poems,” argues that “Michelangelo utilizes not a prefabricated and rigid system of views, taken from somebody else’s hands, but rather a live process of passionate and inquiring understanding

of reality and of relationships with people and the world.”⁵⁹ In order to appreciate Michelangelo as a philosopher corresponding to the above assessments we simply need to assume that he could create a philosophical work in the form of sculpture, without any oral or written comments or any further explanation.

Michelangelo created illustrations not of other people’s texts, but of his own thoughts, and such “illustrations” may were more powerful than many written philosophical texts.

⁵⁹ Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Poems and Letters*, St. Petersburg, 1999, p. 240 (in Russian).

Oriental Influences on Europe and “the Silk Road to Michelangelo”

The last words of the title to this chapter are borrowed from the book by Jerry Brotton *The Renaissance Bazaar: From the Silk Road to Michelangelo*. The author correctly speaks about a “global Renaissance” which was “remarkably international” and “looks very different when viewed from beyond the bounds of Europe” and he notes that impact of the East “transforms our understanding of the Renaissance”. He cites Dürer and Bellini for the eastern motifs in their art and also says that “Michelangelo’s career captures something of this internationalism”.⁶⁰ This monograph deeply explores the cultural connections with the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Egypt other African countries but, is not focused on the start of the Silk Road in China at its paths situated in Tibet and the northern regions of India.

In the memoirs of the Portuguese artist Francisco de Holanda, who was a friend of Michelangelo, one can find that in their conversations they mentioned a well-known world stretching from Europe to the Ganges, that is, a world including the entire territory of India.⁶¹ Francisco de Holland in the presence of Michelangelo expressed the idea that a work of art, for example, a picture, expresses thought better than words. Francisco cites the example of a resident of India who from a work of European art will understand an idea better than from a literary text. This philosophical concept appar-

⁶⁰ Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance Bazaar: From the Silk Road to Michelangelo*, Oxford, New York, 2002 pp. vii, 19, 37.

⁶¹ Francisco de Holanda, *Dialogues with Michelangelo*, London, 2006.

ently was then already well known and obviously was easily perceived by the participants in the dialogues with Michelangelo.⁶² It follows that Michelangelo could adopt ideas drawn from various Hindu and Buddhist figurines and *thangkas* as well as Manichaeian paintings.

It is necessary to consider the entire body of evidence for Oriental (Manichaeian, Hindu and Buddhist) influence on the creation of the idea behind, and the embodied in, the statue *Pensieroso-Lorenzo*.

Turning to this statue it is useful to lay out the authors' guiding theses:

1. The statue demonstrates a visible similarity with Oriental sculptures, especially with statues of Bodhisattvas.

2. When Michelangelo lived in Lorenzo's house in the circle of philosophers of the Florentine Platonic Academy, he had an opportunity to gain knowledge of Oriental religions and images of Oriental gods and saints, including Buddhist Bodhisattvas and eastern (Tibetan and Chinese) — one could say semi-Christian — Manichaeian paintings. Such paintings on silk and paper which date as early as several centuries before the time of Michelangelo would certainly have reached the papal court in Rome, where Buonarrotti later spent many years.

3. Buddhism (as well as Buddhist statues) were known in Europe long before Michelangelo's time as were Manichean teaching and art.

4. An oriental saint's features provided a means for Michelangelo to express his memory of Lorenzo the Magnificent as a "godlike" person.

5. Mani was a great painter and founder of a world religion, which combined worship of Christ, Buddha and Zarathustra and also employed images of Indian gods such as Ganesha. (*Plates 57 – 60*)

6. In the time when Michelangelo worked on and finished (1524 – 1534) the statue of Lorenzo, the Protestant movement against idolatry (images of foreign gods) start-

⁶² Francisco de Holanda, *Op. Cit*, pp. 82, 83

ed gaining momentum, so Michelangelo had reason not to overemphasize the Oriental features of the sculpture.

Many researchers, noting the lack of similar sculptures anywhere in Europe, seem to explain its uniqueness as a manifestation of Michelangelo's innovative skill. Many have tried to unravel the ideas incorporated by Michelangelo in this statue in the Medici Chapel, but no one has mentioned that the statue demonstrates a remarkable similarity to Oriental sculptures and paintings of saints, and even such a detail as an animal head under elbow of *Pensieroso-Lorenzo*.

The teaching of Mani was not uncommon to Florentine intellectualism several centuries before Michelangelo:

*“Catharism itself originated outside Europe, in the East, and was at bottom a non-Christian religion. ... Catharism represented the first attempt by an eastern non-Christian religion to gain foothold in the West. It had its roots in Gnosticism, which was Greek, and Manichaeism, which came from Persia and the Near East... The Cathar ‘paradise’ was Italy and Provence. In Italy they had six churches, of which the Lombard was the largest and the Florentine, where they had their own theological academy at Poggibonsi, the most sophisticated... It was said that in districts where they were particularly influential, such as Toulouse, Milan and Florence they even use churches for their service... The Cathars had powerful friends in Florence, the Cavalcanti, the Baroni, the Pulci and the Ciprani. It was not uncommon for Cathars to find advocates among nobles supporting the Ghibelline cause...”*⁶³

Michelangelo may have heard in the Platonic Academy discussions references to one of the first Gnostic movements, Manichaeism, and have remembered from them that the founder of this movement, Mani, was also a great painter who considered painting as a tool to clarify the meaning of a reli-

⁶³ Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval World: Europe 1100 – 1350*, Phoenix, London, 1961, pp. 163, 164, 167, 170, 177.

gious teaching to be equal to a written text. From the notes of St. Augustine, Florentine philosophers may have learned that Mani considered music to be a message from God. An Arabic description of Mani's painting on silk did survive in history: it was left to us by Imam al-Haramayn Dhia' ul-Din Abd al-Malik ibn Yusuf al-Juwayni al-Shafi'i (1028-1085).⁶⁴ It is useful repeat for the reader some basic background information on Manichaeism from Britannica and Wikipedia.

Mani (Latin: Manichaeus) (216–274 AD) was the prophet and the founder of Manichaeism, a gnostic religion of Late Antiquity. He was born in southern Mesopotamia, in an ascetic Judaeo-Christian sect which he left in his mid-twenties. The canon of Mani included six works originally written in Syriac Aramaic, and one in Persian. Mani claimed to be the reincarnation of the Buddha, Lord Krishna, Zoroaster and Jesus depending on the context in which he was carrying out his preaching. Such strategic claims fostered a spirit of toleration among the Manichaeans and the other religious communities and this particular feature greatly assisted them in gaining the approval of authorities to practice in different regions along the Silk Road. Mani claimed to be the Paraclete promised in the New Testament, and the Last Prophet.

Other than incorporating the symbols and doctrine of dominant religious traditions, Manichaeism also incorporated the symbols and deities of indigenous traditions, in particular the Hindu deity Ganesha, into its fold, demonstrated by the image available in the article, *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy* by Hans-Joachim Klimkeit.⁶⁵

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) converted to Christianity from Manichaeism in the year 387. This was shortly after the Roman Emperor Theodosius I had issued a decree of death for all Manichaean monks in 382 and shortly before he declared Christianity to be the only legitimate religion for the Roman Empire in 391.

⁶⁴ Wikipedia.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Manichaeism, the religion created by the Mesopotamian prophet Mani in third-century Iran, is one of the most fascinating of the world's great religions. A fusion of elements from many sources, including Gnosticism and the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, it teaches a strict dualism of good and evil, light and dark, spirit and matter. Despite almost universal persecution, it spread rapidly and became highly influential both in the Roman empire and in Central Asia, where it was for a time the state religion of the Uighur Turks; it survived longest in South China, where the last remaining Manichaean temple still stands. The scriptures composed by Mani were translated into many languages, forming the nucleus of a huge body of Manichaean literature written in virtually every language of the known world, from Latin in the West to Chinese in the East.

For many centuries Manichaeism was known only in a distorted form from the polemics of opponents such as St Augustine. This situation has gradually been transformed by the discovery of substantial extracts from Manichaean texts embedded in Syriac and Arabic works by Christian and Muslim authors, and later, during the twentieth century, of genuine Manichaean texts in Latin (from Algeria), Coptic, Greek and Syriac (from Egypt), Middle and New Persian, Parthian, Sogdian, Bactrian, Tocharian, Turkish and Chinese (from Xinjiang, Gansu and Fujian). This plethora of languages, many of them extremely obscure, is exhilarating but at the same time problematic, since it is hardly possible that any individual would be competent to study all of these sources in the original.⁶⁶

Oxford historian Peter Frankopan writes:

The vibrancy of the cultural exchange as Europe and Asia collided was astonishing. Statues of the Buddha started to appear only after the cult of Apollo became established in the Gundhara valley and western India... 120 Roman boats were sailing to India each year... Roman amphorae, lamps, mirrors and statues of gods

⁶⁶ The Dictionary of Manichaean Texts.

had been recovered from a wide range of sites [in India], including Pattanam, Kolhapur and Coimbatore... Commerce opened the door for faith to flow through... The spread of Buddhism from northern India along the trade routes taken by merchants, monks and travelers accelerated rapidly... As religions came into contact with each other, they inevitably borrowed from each other... [Some missionaries] tried to codify the fusion of Christian and Buddhist ideas, producing a “hybrid” set of gospels... There was a theological logic to this dualistic approach, usually called Gnosticism... Few understood better than Buddhists how important it was to publicize and show off objects that supported declarations of faith...⁶⁷

And this cultural connection left physical evidence. As a study of art objects on the “silk road” shows, small-sized (25-40 cm) statues, depicting Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with a masterly skill were made in India to be easily transportable as far back as the 3rd-4th centuries B.C.⁶⁸

Even the two-thousand-year-old “thoughtful Bodhisattva” of about 90 cm in height (*Plate 44*), as well as numerous smaller images, could travel with caravans along the “silk routes” and have reached Michelangelo’s Italy. Michelangelo understood the essence of meditation and nirvana and the essence of high spiritual ministration and understanding. He did so without studying any ancient texts and he embodied this essence in the statue of *Lorenzo*. European art before him did not know anything similar to this work.

One of the leading scholars of the Florentine Academy was Pico della Mirandola. He based his ideas chiefly on Plato, but retained a deep respect for Aristotle. Although Pico was a product of the *studia humanitatis*, he was constitutionally eclectic, defending what he believed to be the best of the medieval and Islamic commentators on Aristotle, such as Averroes and

⁶⁷ Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, New York, 2016, pp. 9, 17, 31, 32, 57, 59, 60.

⁶⁸ See chapter entitled *Silk Road: Kushan Art in the North in History of Civilization of Central Asia*, Vol. 2, ISBN 978-92-3-102846-5.

Avicenna, in a famous and lengthy letter to Ermolao Barbaro in 1485. Similarly, Pico believed that an educated person should also study Hebrew and Talmudic sources, and the Hermetics, because he believed they represented the same concept of God that is seen in the Old Testament, but in different words.⁶⁹

The ideas of Pico were rather close to those of Manichaeism and he must have known of the teachings of Mani through works by his admired Augustine as well from other sources including Arabic, Aramaic, Hebrew, Persian sources because he knew those languages. Pico was introduced to the mystical Hebrew *Kabbalah*, which fascinated him, as it did the late classical Hermetic writers, such as Hermes Trismegistus.

Michelangelo may have heard mention of Pico's ideas and stories in the Medici household, perhaps regularly. The young sculptor may also have received information about oriental gods and saints from discussions in the Platonic Academy, including the story of the follower Buddha and Christ great painter Mani, who believed that art could clarify the meaning of a religious teaching as well as a written text could.

Commercial and cultural contacts extended India's influence in Western and Southeast Asia. Ganesha is one of a number of Hindu and Buddhist deities who consequently reached foreign lands. From approximately the 10th century onwards, new networks of exchange developed including the formation of trade guilds and a resurgence of money circulation. During this time Ganesha became the principal deity associated with traders, and the earliest inscription invoking Ganesha before any other deity is associated with the merchant community.

Of course, images of Buddha always accompany his believers. According to Donald Lopez:

Buddhists have produced tens of thousands of images of the Buddha, in wood, in metals and in stone, as well as painted on scrolls and murals... In 1956, archaeologists excavating a ninth-century Viking house on Helgo

⁶⁹ Wikipedia.

*Island in Sweden unearthed an Indian statue of the Buddha. The statue dates from the sixth century.*⁷⁰

Egyptian artifacts were known in Italy since Roman times. They could enter the visual philosophy of Michelangelo organically, without his even needing to have studied Buddhist texts, Indian legends or Egyptian myths although he may have heard of them in the philosophical conversations at the Platonic Academy or later in dialogues with the most educated people of his time, as described by Francisco de Holanda.

Michelangelo probably would have approved of the “pygmalionic” element of Buddhism, which is to say, the teaching that “a Buddha could appear in the form of a statue, and have approved of the numerous texts from across the Buddhist world extolling the virtues of making images of the Buddha, often with the Buddha himself recommending the practice. A statue of the Buddha, whether painted or sculpted, is not considered finished until it has been animated in a consecration ceremony. It is this ceremony that turns the dead material of the statue, be it wood, bronze, or stone, into a living buddha. This appears to be a very ancient practice... According to the *Mahāyāna*... the consecrated image of the Buddha thus is not a symbol of the Buddha but effectively is the Buddha himself, and there are numerous stories of images speaking to their devotees... This Buddhist theory of images did not go unnoticed by European travelers and missionaries.⁷¹

A sculptor must feel an ultimate joy when he thinks that he creates not just the image of a saint but the very saint himself. Repeating the words of Michelangelo, his apprentice Condivi writes that the statues in the New Sacristy “were more godlike than human.”

“Godlike.” This idea is something to think about, i.e. to re-appreciate the statue of *Pensieroso-Lorenzo* for its similarity to a divine being. And it is at the tomb of Lorenzo the Magnificent, that this statue gazes, not at the Madonna as

⁷⁰ Donald S. Lopez, *From Stone to Flesh: A Short History of the Buddha*, Chicago, 2016, p.34, 23.

⁷¹ Donald S. Lopez, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 43, 45.

Panofsky claims. All art researchers who argue that the statue of *Lorenzo* looks at the Madonna or at the front door of the cathedral of San Lorenzo are mistaken. That is a simple fact that can be easily verified on site.

Antonio Forcellino spoke of the “difficult poetry of poses” in the sculptures of the New Sacristy. Lorenzo sits in the posture of a *Bodhisattva*.⁷² The thumb and index finger of Lorenzo’s right hand represent a Buddhist *mudra*. The upper part of his helmet resembles the head of a Buddhist statue and, if we still talk about armor — the helmet of a Tibetan warrior (*Pl. 46*).⁷³

The thick cord braid on *Lorenzo*’s neck has nothing to do with the rest of his clothes, but is a frequent attribute of many Buddhist images. However, the main point here is the state of highest spiritual concentration and tranquillity of *Lorenzo*, that is so typical of similar Buddhist images. The crossed legs of the statue illustrate one of the three postures known as the “Thoughtful Bodhisattva”. His eyes are lowered and point to the tomb of Lorenzo the Magnificent.

The right hand, as is often the case with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, is turned in the direction to which the eyes of the statue are looking, i.e. at the spectator facing it, although the turn of the hand in this case is not quite the same as in the Buddhist statues. We should only remark that if the turn of Lorenzo’s right hand completely corresponded to the Buddhist canon, the recognition of this statue as “Eastern” would hardly have awaited the publication of our book, but would have become obvious to everyone long ago. This is the Buddhist *mudra* known as the “*mudra* of knowledge” (*Plate 45*).

Of course, the genius of Michelangelo could have probably created all of this independently, as if steering a course

⁷² We heard this opinion first from Tigran Mkrtichev, the deputy director of the State Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow.

⁷³ George Cameron Stone, *A Glossary of the Construction, Decoration and Use of Arms and Armor*, Mineola, New York, 1999, pp. 50, 52, 325, 327, 330, 349; Carolyn Springer, *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance*, Toronto, 2010, pp. 59, 91; Donald J. LaRocca, *Warriors of the Himalaya: Rediscovering the Arms and Armor of Tibet*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2006, pp. 70-71, 74-78 46.

parallel to the Hindu-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but so many coincidences cannot be mere accident. His sculpture of *Lorenzo* impresses the European connoisseurs of Christian art with its meditative novelty, but over the last two or three thousand years any — even the most straightforward — Buddhist statues and figurines express a quite similar spiritual concentration. Michelangelo simply could not have avoided seeing them because, as mentioned above, the “silk roads” both centuries before and in his time were busily importing Buddhist, Hindu and Manichaean artifacts into Western Europe. Of course, these rarities reached both the cultural capital of Italy (Florence), and the cultural capital of the Christian world (Rome). We also should not forget about the frequent Portuguese voyages to India, which already belonged to the *ecumene* of the Renaissance.

The iconography of the well-known self-portrait of Michelangelo with his face on a flayed skin in the hand of St. Bartholomew in the center of the fresco *The Last Judgement* may be attributable to his views about the later generations of Medici. (Plate 30)

The apostle Bartholomew was executed on Persian territory belonging in the 1st. Century to Greater Armenia. He was flayed alive and beheaded for having converted the local ruler to Christianity. The prophet and great painter Mani was also flayed alive two centuries after Bartholomew on the almost same territory, which then belonged to the Sassanid Empire. He also may have been martyred for converting the local ruler to his religious teachings.

A flayed skin was probably an important symbol of “love of a ruler” to Buonarrotti. Benvenuto Cellini wrote in his Autobiography how Michelangelo had sharply rejected a strong demand of Duke Cosimo the First that he come to Florence to join the Duke’s court, using words of his assistant Urbino about flayed skin.

The Mouse from the East in the Chapel

The American philosopher Joseph Vining has written:

Such attention to detail we show, to the perception, recovery, preservation of it. Restorers clean the nine statues on Michelangelo's Medici tombs using feathers, lancets, cotton, and nothing stronger than water and few drops of turpentine. They take three years to do it...

Why such labor for details, such devotion of lives to their recovery, when the general outline of the whole is there, and when in the end we are not bound to respect the detail we recover, or to preserve it further?

*Because detail may be critical to understanding: the change of a window changes a façade.*⁷⁴

Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), who has been rightly described as “the most influential art historian of the twentieth century,”⁷⁵ tried to take into consideration every conceivable detail, including the written account left by Ascanio Condivi (1525-1574) of Michelangelo's desire to carve a mouse in the Medici Chapel as a symbol of All-devouring Time.

Panofsky analyzes this in his book *Studies in Iconology* (1939) and he returned to the subject of the mouse once again shortly before his death in a scholarly paper entitled *The Mouse that Michelangelo Failed to Carve*, in which he wrote:

⁷⁴ Joseph Vining, *Newton's Sleep*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995, pp. 99, 100.

⁷⁵ See Jeffrey Chipps Smith's Introduction to Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005, p.xxvii

Whatever esoteric meanings may be attached to Michelangelo's *Four Times of Day* in the Medici Chapel, certain it is that their direct or overt purpose was to symbolize the destructive power of Time. This we learn from two unimpeachable sources: a few lines jotted down by Michelangelo himself, presumably in 1523, and a statement in his biography published in 1553 by his faithful disciple, Ascanio Condivi, which is largely based on his own recollections. The Michelangelo fragment reads, or rather begins, as follows: "Day and Night speak and say: with our swift course we have led Duke Giuliano to his death." Condivi gives the following description: "The statues are four in number, placed in a sacristy... the sarcophagi are placed before the side walls, and on the lids of each there recline two big figures, larger than life, to wit, a man and a woman; they signify Day and Night and, in conjunction, Time which devours all things."

Apart from the absence of the personal reference to Giuliano de' Medici, Condivi's statement parallels Michelangelo's own: in both cases only Day and Night are mentioned as the operative manifestations of all-destructive Time, while Dawn and Dusk (though alluded to in Condivi's "the figures are four in number") are not mentioned by name. But Condivi has more to tell. "And so that this his purpose might be better understood," he continues, "he added to the [figure of] Night, appearing in the guise of a woman of admirable beauty, the owl and other symbols concordant therewith, and likewise to the [figure of] Day its [appropriate] attributes. And in order to signify Time he planned to make a mouse, having left a bit of marble upon the work (which [plan] he subsequently did not carry out because he was prevented by circumstances), because this little animal ceaselessly gnaws and consumes just as time devours everything."

Condivi, having no first-hand knowledge of the Medici Chapel, committed a slight inaccuracy in speaking of the "attributes" of the figure of Day which has no attributes

at all; nor is he quite clear as to the exact location of the “bit of marble” which Michelangelo is said to have reserved for the mouse. It is, however, just this absence of first-hand knowledge which lends credibility to what he tells us about the Master’s intentions: had he visited the Medici Chapel he — or a guide — might have invented the mouse in order to account for the little “bits” of uncarved stone. As it is, we have a right to assume that he repeats what he was told by Michelangelo.

The idea that human life is brought nearer to its close with every night and every day, combined with the thought that small rodents may be employed as symbols of all-consuming Time (and, therefore, all-consuming Death), brings to mind one of the best-known and most impressive attempts to describe la condition humaine in the guise of a parable. Told by Barlaam, the wise old sage, to Josaphat, the beautiful young prince, this parable — formerly attributed to John of Damascus — compares the behavior of most human beings to that of a man who, pursued by a mad unicorn, climbs a tree where he believes himself to be safe. Looking down, he perceives two mice (in later versions often replaced by “rats” or simply by “little beasts”), one black, the other white, which continuously gnaw at the base of the tree and have gone far with their destructive work. Still farther down, he sees a horrid dragon, observing him with greedy eyes and opening its mouth in anticipation. Four asps lurking in the masonry beneath the tree intensify his fright. Looking up, on the other hand, he realizes that the tree distills sweet honey (μέλι, in later versions mostly replaced by “fruits”). So he foolishly delights in the sweetness of the world (symbolized by the tree), forgetting death (symbolized by the unicorn), the “terrible maws of Hell” (symbolized by the dragon), and the instability of the elements (symbolized by the four asps). Oblivious of all this — and particularly of the two mice which stand for Day and Night, each of them bringing

him nearer to death — he entirely abandons himself to the thoughtless enjoyment of life.

Though artistic representations of this engaging tale are more frequent in the Northern countries than in Italy, they are by no means absent from the Italian scene, the best-known example being Benedetto Antelami's south portal of the Baptistery at Parma; even in Michelangelo's Florence the story was popular enough to be alluded to in *Triumph of Time* attributed to Jacopo del Sellaio (d. 1493), where two little beasts, one white, one black, are seen gnawing, instead of the tree, the support of a sundial on top of which the figure of Father Time is perched...

White mice — though only white mice — were considered as favorable omens (for mice were considered *μαντικώτατοι των ὑφῶν*); there were those who derived the word “mysteries” from *μῦς*; and tame mice were permitted to nest beneath the altar of Apollo Smintheus (or Sminthios). The Egyptian Priest-King Sethos erected a statue to Hephaestus, which showed the god carrying a mouse and exhibited the inscription “Learn from me how to be pious and worshipful”), because Hephaestus had saved the Egyptians from an invading Assyrian army by sending innumerable mice who devoured the enemy's bows and shield straps as well as all other leather equipment. And a well-known fable tells us of the little mouse who, spared by a hungry lion, later on saved the latter's life by gnawing through the net into which he had fallen.

These favorable implications of the mouse are, however, only the positive aspect of its basically weird and harmful qualities: its swift and stealthy movement; its nocturnal and subterranean way of life; and, above all, its unlimited power of destruction. Mice were kept not only in the Temple of Apollo Smintheus but also in that of Nephtys, the Egyptian goddess of Night. Athena hated them because they, greedy and fond of darkness, damaged the garlands in her temples and broke the lamps,

lapping up the oil. And Scopas' cult image of the same Apollo Smintheus who tolerated mice beneath his altar, showed him with a mouse at his feet...

In art the interpretations of the mouse are, if anything, even more varied than in the literary sources; but here, too, the sinister aspect of the little rodent prevails. Apart from tiny works of sculpture-in-the-round, which seem to be pure genre, and such facetious scenes as a weighing contest between a mouse and an elephant, we find the mouse either as a special, uniquely determined attribute — as in Archelaus of Priene's Apotheosis of Homer in the British Museum, where a mouse, paired with a frog, appears at the feet of the hero in order to designate him as the author of the Batrachomyomachia — or as a symbol of destructiveness...

Michelangelo's mouse, had it ever been realized, would thus have had a most distinguished and diversified ancestry; but just for this reason it is difficult to say precisely which of the elements of the tradition was present in the artist's mind when he decided to embellish the Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici with a mouse. That he was familiar with the Barlaam and Josaphat story is more than probable... But it may well be that literary reminiscences like these would not have caused Michelangelo to include a mouse in the program of Giuliano's Tomb had he not met the little animal in an actual image, and this in an Etruscan tomb — a place not only hallowed by its classic, even specifically "Tuscan," associations but also analogous in purpose to the Medici Chapel. If this hypothesis were admitted, the case of the mouse which Michelangelo had planned to immortalize by his chisel would have paralleled that of the wolf-helmeted Hades whom he recorded with his pen...⁷⁶

During a trip to Nepal in 2006, the one of the authors happened to come across a statuette of the God Ganesha, the

⁷⁶ *Essays in Memory of Karl Lehmann*, New York, 1964, pp. 243 – 247.

posture of which looked surprisingly similar to that of the statue of Lorenzo with a mouse placed under Ganesha's hand.⁷⁷ (*Pl.41*)

In 1950, several researchers from the University of Ghent (Belgium) published a monograph on the symbolism of the mouse and came to the conclusion that it had come to Europe from the East through Greece and was originally associated with ancient Hindu mythology. The book contains a photo of an ancient coin on which the Greek god Dionysus stands on the mouse — an iconography that coincides with many popular depictions of the Hindu god Ganesha.⁷⁸

Unfortunately, the Flemish scholars from Ghent did not have the opportunity to see a tapestry made at the end of the 15th century in the neighbouring city of Bruges that contains a symbolic depiction of the transfer of the titles of the Count of Flanders and the Duke of Burgundy from Mary of York to her son Philip (*Plate 39*). In it the symbol of power in Burgundy is a helmet with plumage and a stuffed mouse, wonderfully similar to the bat in the engraving *Melencolia* by Albrecht Dürer (*Plate 40*). The tapestry has resided in the Spanish Escorial for 500 years. Philip, King of Spain in 1504 — 1506, had taken his collection of Flemish tapestries along with him. The tapestry has never become a subject of study by art researchers and has not even been catalogued. In our opinion its mouse is “the most mysterious mouse in Europe.”

It is important to note that the full meaning of the symbol of the mouse in European civilization in the time of Michelangelo is not entirely clear. The mouse was an important symbol during the time of Michelangelo probably not only for the East, but also for European civilization, yet its traces have so far been lost in history.

⁷⁷ The results of that discovery is described in the books: P. Barenboim, A. Zakharov, *The Mouse of the Medici and Michelangelo*, Moscow, 2006 (in Russian, English and Italian); Peter Barenboim, *Michelangelo Drawings – A Key to the Medici Chapel Interpretation*, Moscow, 2006 (in English); and Peter Barenboim and Sergei Shiyan, *Michelangelo in the Medici Chapel: Genius in the Details*, Moscow, 2011 (in Russian and English).

⁷⁸ Henri Gregoire, R. Goossens, M. Mathie, *Asklepios Appolon Smintheus et Rudra*, Bruxelles, 1950, (in French).

The description of the Medici Chapel provided by Condivi is chaotic and incomplete due to the fragmentary nature of the information he received. In addition, the question arises about Michelangelo's level of trust: the master, after twenty years, still might not want to disclose to others his secret intentions in all their entirety. After all, he did not talk about half of the statues in the New Sacristy, including the statue of *Lorenzo*.

For Panofsky the choice of an animal like the mouse as a symbol of Time remained incomprehensible, although his linking the mouse to the Indian myth of Barlaam and Josaphat could indeed have spurred him to notice the Oriental motifs throughout *Lorenzo*. It is likely that Panofsky did not know that Josaphat was a phonetic transcription of Bodhisattva and that the entire legend was linked to an old Buddhist text.⁷⁹ "The statement made earlier that little was heard of the Buddha in Europe between Clement of Alexandria and Marco Polo is not entirely accurate. The story of Buddha became a persistent presence in Europe throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance... The holy Josaph, son of Abener and king of India, converted to Christianity, and was included by Pope Sixtus V in the calendar of saints. "The bodhisattva had become a saint."⁸⁰

Panofsky believed that the statue of *Lorenzo* serves as an image of the Roman god Saturn.⁸¹ It is worth noting that Panofsky should have noticed the illustration that had been used by his teacher Aby Warburg (1866-1929) in several of his books, in one of which Saturn is depicted in a helmet decorated with sea shells (which can also be seen on the front of the *Lorenzo* statue), and he holds on his left a small monster (*Plate 47*) that symbolizes All-devouring Time.⁸² This image could have spurred Panofsky to compare it with *Lorenzo* and correctly attribute the animal's image on the casket as the

⁷⁹ Donald S. Lopez, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 9. 23.

⁸⁰ Donald S. Lopez, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 21, 24.

⁸¹ Erwin Panofsky, *Op. cit.*, p. 334.

⁸² Aby Warburg, *The Great Transmigration of Images*, Saint Petersburg, 2008, pp. 257, 259.

symbol of All-devouring Time. Panofsky wrote: “It seems to me — and not only to me — that the characteristic features of the animal head (which is rather a *mascaron* than a naturalistic portrait) in this sculpture by Michelangelo suggest, in all likelihood, rather a bat than a lynx.”⁸³

If Panofsky had compared *Lorenzo* to the illustration of Warburg, he would have found the required symbolism and with it the “mouse” (or similar creature), to which, after the original publication of his *Studies in Iconology* in 1939, he returned in 1962 and 1967, as well as in a separate paper on the subject in 1964.

It seems to us that for such a deeply Christian thinker as Michelangelo Saturn, the primitive ancient deity, known to eat his own children, could hardly have become a figure whose image Michelangelo would make into a symbol expressing the greatness of his spiritual father and patron — Lorenzo the Magnificent. Saturn could not fit in with the high religious aesthetics of Michelangelo.

A more correct approach to the animal in Dürer’s *Melencolia* might have helped Panofsky, who wrote an entire monograph on this engraving, to come up with the animal under the left elbow of Lorenzo. The animal does not resemble the usually repulsive snout of a bat although the ears and the fold that rises between them does create a certain similarity, but the profile of the carving, when viewed from below the side of the altar, resembles the nearly peaceful nose of a common mouse. One should pay attention to Condivi’s remark that Michelangelo knew the anatomy of animals perfectly, one has to say that the front (unlike the profile) of the face on the box under Lorenzo’s hand is not very similar to that of an ordinary mouse. (*Plate 53*)

In the New Sacristy Michelangelo did everything himself without bothering to explain it to anyone. As noted above, he did not even let the tyrant of Florence, the cruel Duke Alessandro de’ Medici (1511-1537), see the unfinished statues; and the twenty-year-old duke like a little boy had to climb into the

⁸³ Erwin Panofsky, *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

Chapel through the window in the artist's absence. Michelangelo did inevitably have to report to his client Pope Clement VII and to provide ready answers to the Pope's questions. Therefore, a reference to the god Saturn, remembered in Neoplatonic interpretation as the father of the Golden Age and a contemplative, secluded god, but not as a cruel devourer of his children, could serve for Michelangelo as an explanation that might satisfy the Pope. (*Plates 48, 54*)

Also Clement VII probably wished to have legitimacy as a great military leader associated with his nephew the young Duke Lorenzo of Urbino "in spite of the historical evidence to the contrary."⁸⁴

Michelangelo preferred to mask the Eastern elements in *Lorenzo* such as those on the statue's head and the Buddhist *mudra* formed by the fingers of its right hand. After all, the Pope, who was born as Giulio de' Medici and was the son of the senior Giuliano, who is also buried in the Chapel, was a Neoplatonist deep down in his soul. But the fight against "idols" of foreign gods and saints was already well under way. Therefore the "semi-Eastern" nature of this sculpture was duly encrypted and not made obvious.

The authors relied on the *de facto* traditional conflation of such animals as the mouse and the mongoose in the zoological knowledge of the time and referred to the images of these animals on the Raphael Loggia frescoes, seen both in the Vatican and the St. Petersburg Hermitage (*Plate 52*), and also referred to the fact that these two animals often are not strictly distinguishable in the Tibetan-Buddhist tradition. In addition, in the most authoritative source before Alfred Edmund Brehm, i.e. in Aristotle's treatise entitled *Historia animalium*, several animals which clearly belong to other species are described as mice.⁸⁵ For example, the mongoose and *ichneumon* (also known as the Egyptian mongoose or pharaoh rat) are not

⁸⁴ Antonio Forcellino, *Op. Cit.*, p. 178.

⁸⁵ Aristotle, *The History of Animals*, translated into Russian by V.P. Karpov and edited by B. A. Starostin, Moscow: Russian State Humanitarian University, 1996, p. 528.

easily distinguishable from the weasel and ferret as described by Aristotle. In this case the weasel, honored in the tradition of Bhutan as a disgorging of precious stones, does not differ from the sacred mongoose, which is an attribute of the god of wealth Kubera.⁸⁶ On the pediment of the 12th century Parma Baptistery, the roots of the Tree of Life are eagerly gnawed by a mouse and either a mongoose or a weasel. At the time, the latter two were treated as one and the same animal.

One is also reminded of the ancient Egyptian god Seth, who is sometimes correlated with Saturn. Seth is often portrayed with the head of an animal, either a dog or a donkey. The front part of *Lorenzo's* helmet looks like the upper part of a skull that could belong to either of those animals although researchers more often consider it to be the jaw of a lion. Two things are important here: the strands of fur on the sides of the helmet are similar to the strands of fur on the sides of the face on the box. Equally intriguing are ancient Egyptian sarcophagi with mouse-like animals, very similar in shape to the box on *Lorenzo*. (Plates 50, 51, 53).

There exists yet another interpretation by the authoritative Florentine art researcher Cristina Acidini Luchinat, who says that the casket under the elbow of *Lorenzo* is, in fact, a beehive, depicted exactly the way it looked at the time of Michelangelo. She expressed this opinion in her book *Michelangelo the Sculptor*.⁸⁷ According to Aristotle, the weasel is a robber of beehives. It is difficult to assess the validity of this interpretation since its author did not provide any additional arguments in its favor. However, it was Christina Acidini who correctly determined that the pattern found on the wall of a secret room under the New Sacristy in 1976 was indeed a sketch of the feet of the statue of *Giuliano*, and not of *Lorenzo* as Charles Sala had mistakenly believed, whom we previously followed in this error.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Michael Palin, *Himalaya*, London, 2004, p. 257.

⁸⁷ Cristina Acidini Luchinat, Aurelio Amendola, *Michelangelo the Sculptor*, 2010.

⁸⁸ Charles Sala, *Michelangelo*, Nederlandstalige editie, 2001, p. 128.

If one turns attention to the furry strands on the sides of the snout of the animal carved on the box, one is reminded that certain types of “mice” (in a broad sense of the word) and animals similar to them, such as mongooses, weasels, ermines, and ferrets, also have rather thick fur, as well as a nose and ears quite close in shape to those on the carved image.

The god of wealth Kubera (Vaishravana, Jambala), with his gem-disgorging mongoose could well have become such a prototype (*Plates 42, 43*). Some sculptures depicted in the illustrations to this book date back to several centuries B.C. Stuffed mongooses were used in the East as containers or purses from whose mouths coins or precious stones were squeezed out.⁸⁹ This coincides with the idea of a cash drawer, that is accepted by most researchers, including Panofsky. In addition, one of the most important Bodhisattvas, Lokishwara, is also sometimes portrayed with a small animal: a mouse or a mongoose.⁹⁰

Antonio Paolucci remarks about pictures of the Medici Chapel taken by the photographer-artist Aurelio Amendola:

[The] Camera — like a third eye — has also discovered hitherto unknown or unpublicized aspects of the sculptor’s genius. The decorative elements are a good example. The total impact of the New Sacristy is so strong that they usually escape notice. The visitor tends to be totally involved with, or even hypnotized by, the great statues, which, within the total concept of the Sacristy, symbolize the heroic struggle between the Temporal and the Eternal... The world Michelangelo conceived for the Medici tombs is a nocturnal world, heavy with sorrow and shot through with horrific and grotesque images.⁹¹

This remark is significant for perception of the details in the Medici Chapel. The animal image under the left hand of *Lorenzo* is located about three meters above the floor level.

⁸⁹ Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, Chicago, 2004, p. 212.

⁹⁰ Madanjeet Singh, *Himalayan Art*, New York, 1968, p. 165.

⁹¹ James Beck, Antonio Paolucci, Bruno Santi, *Michelangelo. The Medici Chapel*. London, 1994, p. 9.

It looks like a big-eared Mickey Mouse to anyone who looks up from the level of normal human height. This was how it was perceived from the time of its creation until quite recently, when the power of modern optics finally allowed one to zoom in and capture on still photos the second sharp-toothed mouth and head of this animal (or rather monster with two mouths). Apparently, none of this could be seen by Panofsky either when visiting the Chapel or in the photographs made in his time. The first high-quality photo album dedicated to the Medici Chapel appeared only 25 years after Panofsky's death. The lighting pattern in the New Sacristy even now does not allow us to examine the second mouth freely; all we see is a mere shadow, under both natural and electrical lighting, which comes from above and plunges Lorenzo's eyes and the image of the second mouth — already belonging not to a mouse, but to a mouse-like monster — into eternal shadow. The toothiness of this mouth quite naturally befits a symbol of all-consuming Time. Michelangelo sculpted this quite clearly, but the setting has hidden it from view for centuries. Even though the Tuscan Galileo Galilei invented his telescope only 50 years after the death of Michelangelo, hardly anyone has used it to reveal the details of the Medici Chapel. And a reference to the second mouth cannot not be found in any of the descriptions of the Chapel's authoritative art researchers.

The second mouth turns our dear little mouse into an aggressive monster, well-suited for the symbol of All-devouring Time that Michelangelo must have intended. In India, the concept of Time as the principal god has existed from time immemorial. It is the Eastern approaches that absolutely dominate this area. One example is the Hindu tradition of depicting Kali, goddess of Time, with an open mouth as a symbol of an all-devouring nature; another is the evil demons of Indian mythology (*rakshas*), which devour everything around Kali and are sometimes depicted with multiple mouths each. We will not continue along this well-researched road anymore. The rest can be easily found in numerous monographs and papers by experts on the East.

More than ten years have passed since the death of James Otis Hall (1918 – 2007), an amateur historian rather than a professional scholar, who became a leading authority on the interpretation of symbols in art. In 2005 Hall proposed that instead of the mouse as the devourer of Time, Michelangelo portrayed All-devouring Time in the New Sacristy by placing on its walls grotesque masks with their “hungry gaping mouths”.⁹² As for the symbolism of carving an animal (“a bat, or a lynx, or a monster”) on the money box, which stands at the center of Hall’s holistic interpretation of the New Sacristy as a hymn to the Medici family’s philanthropy, Hall attributed the symbol entirely to the distribution of money. For us it is important to know that Hall did not for a single moment accept the possibility that Buonarroti throughout his 15 years of his work on the Chapel could fail to carry out his original intention to depict the symbol of All-devouring Time in the Chapel. It is quite another matter to say that Hall found this symbolism only in the grotesque faces on the Sacristy’s walls.

We can see in the Tibetan *thanghka* from the Moscow’s State Museum of Oriental Art (made in the 19th century but in an ancient style) a striking similarity to a central image of a monstrous head on the front of the figure of Vaiśravaṇa (Kubera, Jambala) with many (especially horned) images of grotesque masks on the walls, pillars and altar decorations in the New Sacristy. But the most striking similarity is between the combined head of Michelangelo’s “mouse” under the left hand of Lorenzo and the combined image of a living mongoose in the left hand of Vaisnavara and a painted grotesque mask on the front of Vaiśravaṇa’s dress. (*Plates 55, 56*)

Perhaps Michelangelo at first wanted to portray the mouse as a common ubiquitous rodent, but later enhanced this idea by providing a monstrous combined head with a second gaping mouth, which was a direct link to the Oriental symbols of All-devouring Time. Michelangelo most likely saw these symbols in the samples of Eastern art that reached Italy

⁹² James Hall, *Michelangelo and Reinvention of the Human Body*, London, 2005, pp. 153, 162.

in his time. Similarly, the images of Hindu gods and Buddhist saints, which are depicted with the mouse, the mongoose, etc., usually placed under their left hand, could also have reached Michelangelo and attracted his attention. A common problem, accurately noted by the Russian art historian Alexander Yakimovich, who pointed out a deficiency in classical art history of being limited only to European civilization, and who criticized the latter's condescending attitude toward the richness and venerable age of the cultures belonging to other civilizations, such as the Oriental ones.⁹³

It seems to us that the “mouse”, as conceived by Michelangelo, is present in the Medici Chapel in order to help people understand the meaning embedded in the statue of *Lorenzo*, which is not located on the side of the New Sacristy, where Panofsky was looking for the mouse.

At the same time, Condivi says that the statue of the *Night* has its signs (emblems), including the owl, and the statue of the *Day* also has some of its signs, which in reality are not seen in the New Sacristy. Condivi does not limit the description of the Medici Chapel to the statues of *Night* and *Day*. He wrote about “four statues” in total, but his text specifically mentions only three: *Night*, *Day* and the *Madonna* holding the Christ Child. (Did he count Baby Jesus as a fourth statue?) Condivi did not see the Chapel himself, so he described it approximately from the words of Michelangelo, who told him about the mouse and its symbolism, but did not take the trouble to describe other sculptures, although the statues of “those whose ashes were buried” were mentioned in the text, indicating that they were “more godlike than human.” Nor did Panofsky notice that on the marble near the statues of *Night* and *Day* there was no “elevation” to carve the future mouse from, but on the other side of the New Sacristy, under the left hand of the statue of *Lorenzo*, such an elevation did exist, and it was out of this elevation that a casket with the head of an animal was carved.

⁹³ A. Yakimovich, *Heinrich Wölfflin and Others* in the book *Heinrich Wölfflin, Renaissance and Baroque*, St. Petersburg, 2004, pp. 30-31.

When considering the statue of *Lorenzo* in the context of the general sculptural group inside the Medici Chapel, Dürer's *Melencolia*, with a bat depicted on it is often cited for comparison. We can also note the descriptions from the East of "bats and flying serpents protecting aromatic trees..."⁹⁴ This is superimposed on the animal from *Melencolia*. In fact, what is depicted by Dürer is a typical mouse with a long rat's tail. This mouse is provided with bat's wings instead of paws. David Finkelstein writes that this is a "chimera with the head of a mouse, wings of a bat, and a snake's tail."⁹⁵ *The Dictionary of Symbols* notes the "chimeric" nature of this animal when instead of the paws it uses wings.⁹⁶

According to Francisco de Holanda, Michelangelo had in 1538 explained his position on the depiction of various grotesque animals by saying that one should replace their paws with wings, so that they would look more impressive and "monster-like".⁹⁷ At the age of twelve, Michelangelo was already a "specialist" in monsters, depicting them in the painting that the Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas purchased from the New York Metropolitan Museum.

If you look at Dürer's bat under magnification (*Plate 40*), you will see a common mouse (or rather a large rat, taking the tail into account) that holds in its clawed paws a leather (or paper) poster in the shape of bat's wings reading: "Melencolia." As a matter of fact, there are no real bat on the engraving at all.

It should be noted in passing that a common mouse still can be found in the Medici Chapel not in the New, but in the Old Sacristy in the form of a small image in a marble mosaic on the wall that was made in subsequent centuries. Could it be a later embodiment of Michelangelo's idea? But that is another story...

⁹⁴ Frankopan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 177.

⁹⁵ David Finkelstein, *MELENCOLIA I: The Physics of Albrecht Dürer*, received from df4@mail.gatech.edu

⁹⁶ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, England, 1996, p. 492.

⁹⁷ Francisco de Holanda, *Op. Cit.*, p. 110.

Robert Beer has written:

The symbol of a jewel-raining, -spitting or -vomiting mongoose, which produces treasures when squeezed, has its origin in the Central Asia custom of using a mongoose skin as a jewel container or money-purse, where coins, precious stones or cowrie-shells could be squeezed upwards through the empty skin and ejected from the mongoose mouth”.

This author also mentioned that the mongoose “is often incorrectly identified with some other animals.”⁹⁸

The full-scale copy of the Vatican’s *Logia* made by Raphael and his school in 1517–1519 that hangs in the Hermitage creates even more mysteries. In 1778 Russian Empress Catherine II ordered the creation of her own copy of the *Logia* made by Raphael. Raphael’s work transmits the motifs and symbols of antique Roman drawings, which were discovered in the early 16th century in the grottoes and are called “grotesques.”⁹⁹

As a result we can see in the Hermitage that Raphael and his people drew at least four different kinds of mouse or rat. One of them clearly suggests the presence of a big and dangerous snake, which is a characteristic of the mongoose, not the rat. We can understand that in ancient Rome and even in the time of Raphael and Michelangelo no artistic or scientific zoological description differentiating these animals existed. The mongoose was probably considered to be some kind of rat. A large rat has approximately the same size as a small mongoose. (A marmot, or mountain mouse, measuring up to 50 cm is found in mountainous areas of southern Europe.

We do not know for sure what a mouse or rat meant to ancient Rome or to Michelangelo’s Florence, but we can see in Michelangelo’s house, the *Casa Buonarroti*, a small old Ro-

⁹⁸ Robert Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, Chicago, 2004, p. 212.

⁹⁹ N. Nikulin, *The Logia of Raphael in Hermitage* (in Russian), St. Petersburg, 2005, p. 2.

man statuette of *Topolino* (small mouse). We can see in the famous *Studiolo*, the office of Duke Francesco Medici I in Palazzo Vecchio, among other splendid paintings on the ceiling the image of a mouse- or rat-like animal right above the entrance. It is difficult to figure out what it symbolizes or why it was situated between images of angels and beautiful naked goddesses.

During a meeting with former Buddhist monk Lama Tsonamgel, who is currently owner of a famous workshop in Kathmandu, Nepal, which produces *thangkas*, we found out that the image of Ganesha's mouse as a symbol of wealth producer is very similar to or even the same as the mongoose of the god of wealth and prosperity Kubera. On the *thangkas* the mongoose of Kubera (Jambhala) looks like the mouse of Ganesha (the Tibetan Tsog Dag), and both vomit jewels. Lama Tsonamgel explained to us that it was a tradition typical of Nepal and Tibet.

Professor Edith Balas suggested, like Panofsky, that the sculpture of Lorenzo was similar in concept to the Roman god Saturn. She writes:

The cash box that Lorenzo leans on refers to Saturn's identification as the god of hidden things. Metaphorically, this is in keeping with Michelangelo's habit of developing secret, elaborate iconographies... Michelangelo's success in accomplishing this may be judged by the deep mystery that surrounds his images, one [so] deep that even Vasari and Condivi, his contemporaries and inmates, were unable to fathom it.¹⁰⁰

The British historian Arnold Toynbee in his massive work, *A Study of History*, wrote about use of rat-like gods and images of the mouse in Buddhism.

¹⁰⁰ Edith Balas. *Op. Cit.* p. 67.

Mice, Time and Apollonian dream

Apollo, the Ancient Greek and Roman god, is closely connected with mice. The famous Russian poet and painter Maximilian Voloshin (1877-1932), who pointed out the connection between mice and the passage of time, extensively described the symbolism of mice and its connection with Apollo in his essay *Apollo and the Mouse* (1911):

[The connection] is confirmed by the mythological link existing between Apollo and the mouse. In the first lines of the Iliad, we see the appeal to Apollon Smintheus — Apollo the Murine. Also known is the statue of Apollo created by Scopas, where this sun god is pictured with his heel placed on a mouse. There is information that in some cities of the Troad under the altars dedicated to Apollo lived tame white mice, and on the island of Crete their image stood next to the altar of this god.

The mouse is not a constant companion to Apollo, like the snake or the laurel [tree], but its presence is always felt in Apollonian art, here and there — that slight, unsettling, barely perceptible, and elusive presence. How can we understand this mysterious connection between the small gray animal and the resplendent and formidably perfect god? How can we unravel this conundrum of the mouse?..

The gift of prophetic vision is inextricably linked to the immersing oneself in an instant. And if our assumption that the mouse in the Apollonian cults was the sign of a fleeting instant of time¹⁰¹ was correct, then all myths

¹⁰¹ Underscoring added by Peter Barenboim.

about prophecies and oracles should be connected with the mouse. And indeed, we find in the works of Pliny (N. H. VIII, 82) that the Ancient Greeks called the mouse *zoon mantikotaton* — the most prophetic of all animals.

In the rapid escaping movement of a small gray animal, Greeks saw the semblance of a prophetic, elusive and evasive instant, — that of a thin crack that always threatens to disrupt the Apollonian dream, providing at the same time the only opportunity to perceive it consciously.

And as soon as we understand the symbolic meaning of this fast, terrible and mysterious movement of an escaping mouse that can barely be caught with an eye, we will understand another mysterious image. Eternal Time, a tense and eternally moving sphere of inner intuitive feelings that appears to our logical consciousness as a huge mountain of darkness and chaos, is shaken to the ground and from a crack in it an infinitesimal instant is born: the mouse. The mountain gives birth to a mouse exactly the way eternity gives birth to an instant. Every instant is an elusive crack between the past and the future. Every instant rings in the crystal Apollonian dream, like a crack in a crystal vessel.¹⁰²

Socrates was described as having engaged in a dialogue with an Indian Brahmin, and there is a thought-provoking historical theory according to which Pythagoras acquired most of his scientific and philosophical ideas in the 6th century B.C. when he was travelling in India. Incidentally, the distance from the Ancient Greek towns in Asia Minor to India exceeds only slightly the distance to France. Neo-Platonism, which became a state-sponsored ideology of Florence during the reign of Lorenzo the Magnificent when Michelangelo grew up, is rooted in ancient Alexandria of the first century, which contained Hindu and Buddhist communities and probably

¹⁰² Maximilian Voloshin, *Images of Creativity*, Moscow: Nauka, 1988, (in Russian), pp. 96–111, 623–625.

witnessed an active philosophical interaction between them and Greek and Christian intellectual circles.

In the philosophy of the Buonarroti era, the question of time occupied an important place. According to Marsilio Ficino, a rational human soul is the place where the finite meets with the infinite, time with eternity: “Everything existing above the reasonable human soul belongs to eternity, everything below is doomed to time; and it is only the rational human soul that unites eternity and time within itself.” If a medieval man felt he was living within the time continuum, the Renaissance man carried this time in himself and perceived it as his own time. “There are three things a person can call his personal property: his soul, his body and... the most precious thing... his time,” Alberti writes. “The most striking [thing] is the unflinching insistence with which the people of the Renaissance sought to capture, each for himself, the future. The greatest advantage of painting before other types of art is precisely this, as Leonardo maintains, that it confronts time by its (painting’s) eternal present.”¹⁰³

We should probably pay more attention to the Ancient Greek idea of Time, set forth by Voloshin, and consider that the mouse could be an important symbol which was used by Michelangelo also in this meaning.

¹⁰³ Quoted from I.E. Danilova, *On the Category of Time in the Painting of the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance*, see in *From the History of Culture of the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance*, Moscow, 1976, pp. 166, 169.

Completeness and Intention

It is axiomatic that to appreciate a work of art correctly it is necessary to understand the artist's intentions in creating it. In trying to understand any of Michelangelo's works we cannot take refuge in the notion that it is a spontaneous product, which we can grasp instinctively. To do so would fly in the face of abundant evidence that he was deliberate and subtle rather than spontaneous and instinctive. He possessed consummate technical skill. If he did not seem to employ it in a given case, we must try to find out why in order to have any hope of divining his intent.

In fact, there are many real barriers to finding it, both objective and subjective. We are separated by 500 years of time from the physical, social and political world that constitutes the context of his work. It was an exceedingly complex world. Moreover, it was a dangerous world for a prominent artist working in proximity to powerful men engaged in deadly political and ideological struggles. It demanded subtlety, and could punish transparency.

Added to those barriers is the fact that many of his sculptures contain what appear to be unfinished elements. Any serious student of his work must at least ask the question of whether what we are looking at today even reflects Michelangelo's intent.

No wonder that Michelangelo's intentions in creating the sculptural ensemble in the New Sacristy has been and will be the subject of endless debate and discovery.

As discussed earlier, a number of its statues were placed in their final positions after Michelangelo had left the New Sacristy for the last time, but there is evidence to suggest

that their placement reflected his intentions. The question of incompleteness not arise in the case of *Pensieroso-Lorenzo*, since that statue was placed in its discrete niche by Michelangelo himself before his final departure from Florence in 1534, and therefore must have been considered by the Master to be finished. It seems to us that the incompleteness of the statues in the New Sacristy, even if was accidental, only improves Michelangelo's original design, which featured additional statues of river gods, crouching boys, etc.

It is a commonplace to refer Michelangelo's idea of creating a statue by "liberating" it from the block of marble in which it was already embedded. People often cite how the sculptor expressed this idea in poetic form:

*Nothing the greatest artist can conceive
That every marble block does not confine
Within itself; and only its design
The hand that follows Reason can achieve.*

(Translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

But it seems that the philosophical meaning of the image of "liberated from marble" eludes its researchers. It is the thought of the sculptor that is embodied in stone, and once this thought has been expressed, any further decorative processing by him can be stopped, which is exactly what often happens. Auguste Rodin, a consummate professional, once tried to explain this in his own words:

The streams of masses must first meet the subject [of the sculpture], and then absorb it. The plan ends not because the subject ends, but because the mass ended its movement. If this movement has not been fully developed, then the sculpture remains unfinished. (I am talking about the true perfection, which is much more important than any careful finishing of hands, feet, heads, etc.)... In sculpture you are always looking whether the form is good or bad, and what is the subject, but you are

wrong. The main rule says: “The most important thing is to group the mass together.”¹⁰⁴

Many believe that a sculptor creates a statue for them as an ornament or decorative element, which is often true, but they sometimes forget that a great sculptor creates for himself, in order to express himself and his thoughts and ideas. Rilke articulated this notion better:

*You should know that art is a means by which a creative person—a loner—can attain fulfilment... You should know that a true master creates for himself — only for himself... Such a master can, in fact, influence the general public only through his personality...*¹⁰⁵

The intervention of Life, or rather God, infuses the works of the Medici Chapel with even more “divinity.” After all, the words about their divinity that were dictated by Condivi had first been uttered by Michelangelo himself. It is as if God becomes both a co-author of the Medici Chapel and its participant. The unpolished marble of the *Madonna’s* face, the completely unworked face of the statue of *Day* (or maybe the latter was intended to be the face of God or the face of the “Day of the Last Judgment,” as James Hall argued) do not weaken, but rather strengthen the magic of the New Sacristy. For Michelangelo it became customary to portray God himself ever since the time of his frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. In his poems Michelangelo often addressed God directly. The well-known Russian conductor Valery Gergiev remarked in a May 12, 2017 interview with *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, “Only very few people over the centuries have been able speak with God.” I would make a slight correction: not “over the centuries” but “over millennia.” And what we mean here is not addressing God through prayers and requests, but speaking

¹⁰⁴ Auguste Rodin, *Conversations About Art*, Saint Petersburg, 2006, pp. 7, 288-289.

¹⁰⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Florentine Diary*, Moscow, 2001, pp. 29-30, 102.

with God in a dialog in which God answers. It should also be clear that we are not discussing religion *per se*, but divinity as a synonym for higher spirituality and depth.

Michelangelo once, in answer to a question, said that physical resemblance of statues to living persons will not matter in a thousand years. On the one hand, he was sure that people would look for meaning of his sculptures for that long. On the other, he probably thought that the true meaning could only be understood in a thousand years. So we are doing our attempt at the half-way mark, and leave it for the generations of the next 500 years to do more.

After five centuries Lorenzo Medici still retains the title of “Magnificent” even for our generation also because he opened a door to Michelangelo into art and philosophy. The historic connection of these two geniuses remains tightly tied even now.

If you slowly pass by the large and small groups of tourists listening to guides in different languages on the streets of Florence, you will surely catch the names Michelangelo or Medici or both. What will it be like after another five of the centuries predicted by Buonarotti?

Attempts to plumb the mystery of Michelangelo’s intentions in the Medici Chapel and to solve the riddles of its artistic design should be continued. This page of history has not yet been fully turned, and the currents of creativity of the great Florentine still create fields for the highest intellectual tension in today’s world.

Afterword by the President of the Tuscan Regional Council Eugenio Giani

It has already been over fifteen years that a group of influential Russian public figures, the founders of the Moscow Florentine Society, have been carrying out various cultural projects intended to better acquaint the people of Russia with Florence and to satisfy their growing interest in our city.

Being at that time in charge of international relations of the City of Florence, I could not help appreciating the reverent zeal with which the Moscow Florentine Society laid the groundwork for the signing of a Memorandum of Co-operation between the Municipality of Florence and the Moscow Duma on March 6, 2003.

The choice of that date hardly was accidental since it was the 528th anniversary of Michelangelo's birth. The ceremony was held in the "Italian Patio" of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. That part of the Museum is a recreation of the patio of the Florentine Palazzo del Bargello. This "Italian Patio" contains a full-size copy of Michelangelo's David and replicas of other Florentine sculptures.

As the President of the Tuscan Regional Council I received a new proposal from Peter Barenboim to strengthen our friendly ties even more, leading to the signing on March 9, 2016 — also at the initiative of the Moscow Florentine Society — of a Memorandum of Co-operation between the Moscow Duma and the Tuscan Regional Council. I believe this significant event should lead us to an even greater intellectual cross-pollination.

If Florence is indeed a "dream city" for many Russians, it is also a great honor for us Florentines to realize what a deep

and beneficial imprint our city has left on the minds of the best representatives of the Russian intellectual élite. And it is noteworthy that the activities of the Society involve lovers of Florence not only from Russia but also from other countries as Italy, France, England, Canada, USA.

The vice president of the Florentine Society, Latvian-Italian artist Lolita Timofeeva in her painting called the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore the “heart of Florence”.¹⁰⁶ And it is possible to say that the Medici Chapel is the heart of Florentine art.

Several research books have been published by the Society about the New Sacristy of the Medici Chapel. This book by the President of the Moscow Florentine Society Peter Barenboim and its International Vice-President Arthur Heath presents a new and original interpretation of the New Sacristy, an a sculptural masterpiece that immortalizes the memory of Lorenzo the Magnificent.

¹⁰⁶ Maurizio Vanni, *Lolita Timofeeva: Anatomia di Firenze e vizi capitali*, Carlo Campi Editore, Siena, 2005, p. 12.



















































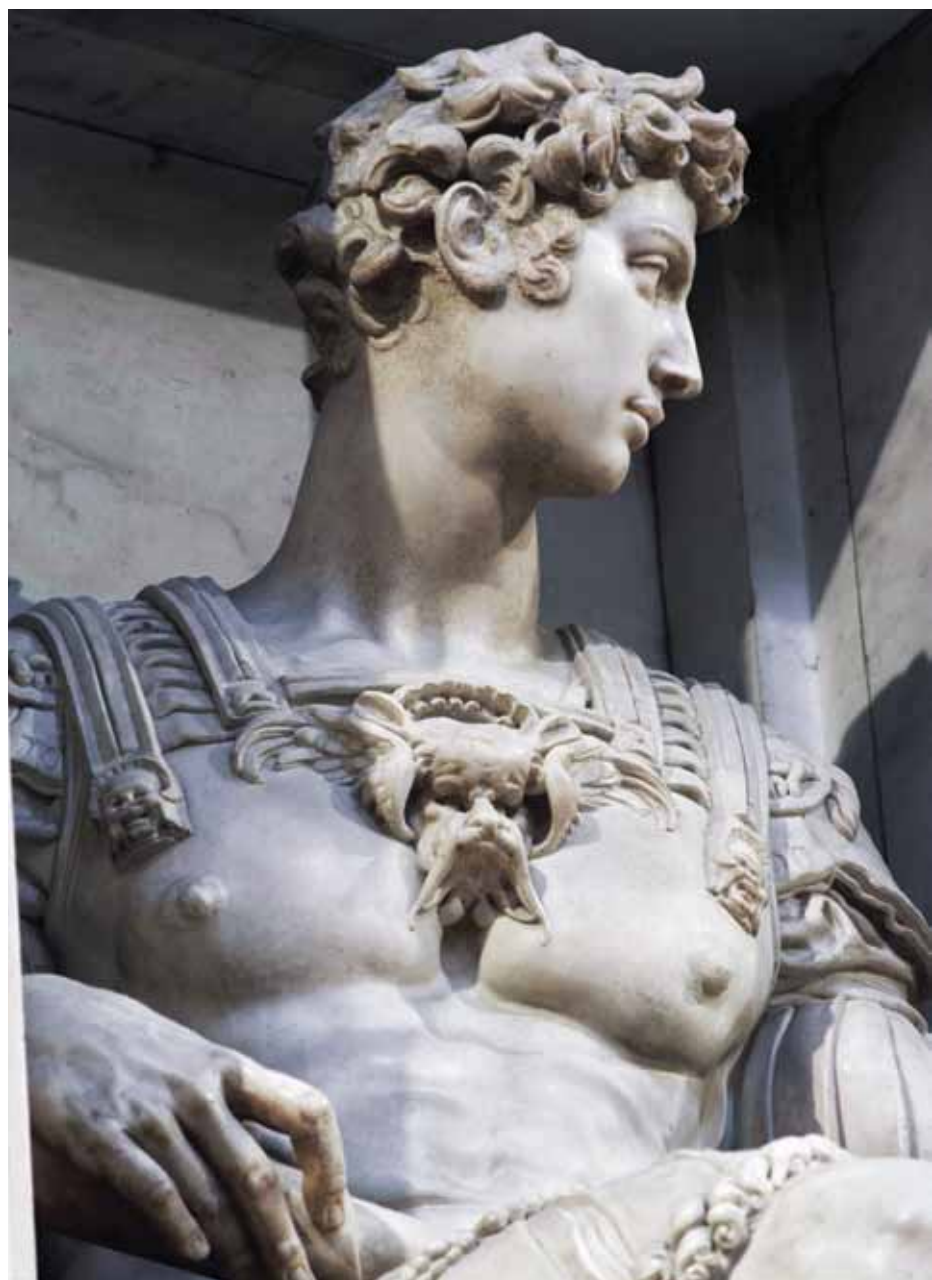














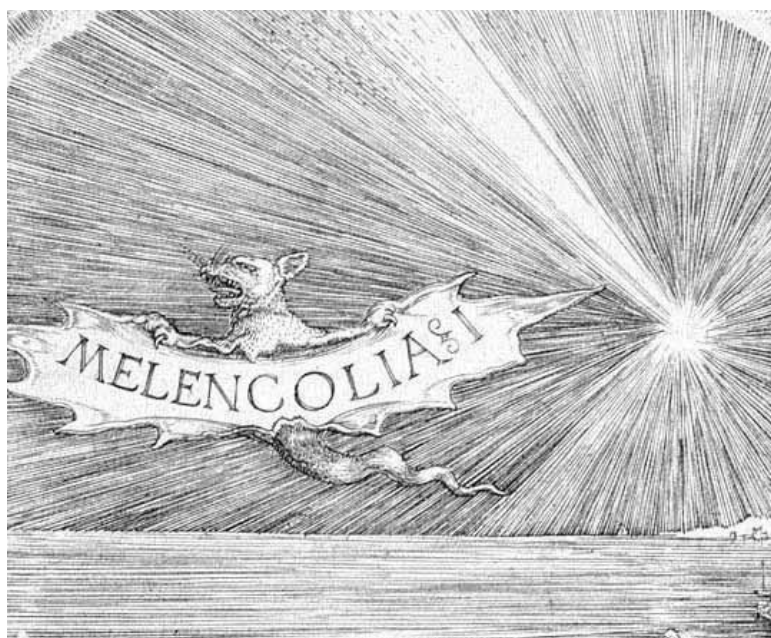




















Saturnus

















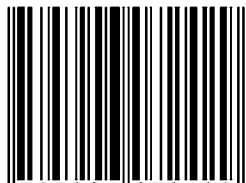








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