



**МИКЕЛАНДЖЕЛО В КАПЕЛЛЕ МЕДИЧИ  
ГЕНИЙ В ДЕТАЛЯХ**

**MICHELANGELO IN THE MEDICI CHAPEL  
GENIUS IN DETAILS**

THE MOSCOW FLORENTINE SOCIETY

PETER BARENBOIM SERGEY SHIYAN

**MICHELANGELO  
IN THE MEDICI CHAPEL  
GENIUS IN DETAILS**

*In memory of Alexei Komech  
and in memory of James Beck*

LOOOM  
MOSCOW 2011

УДК [76 + 73] (450)(084)  
ББК 85.103(3)z6  
Б 24

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Авторские фотографии Капеллы Медичи: Сергей Шиян  
Копирайт на фотографии передан музею Капелла Медичи, Флоренция  
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Иллюстрации в тексте:  
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ISBN 978-5-9903067-1-4

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ББК 85.103(3)z6

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**Баренбойм Петр, Шиян Сергей**

Микеланджело в Капелле Медичи: Гений в деталях

Петр Баренбойм, Сергей Шиян – М.: ЛУМ / LOOOM , 2011.

224 стр.: ил., формат 245x290 мм. ISBN 978-5-9903067-1-4

Фотоальбом, основанный на фотографиях, сделанных Сергеем Шияном в Капелле Медичи, с текстовыми комментариями Петра Баренбойма и Сергея Шияна, посвящен лучшему творению гениального Микеланджело – флорентийской Капелле Медичи, в которой увековечена память о самом ярком правителе великого города Лоренцо Медичи Великолепном и его брате Джулиано. Уже почти пять веков человечество пыгается понять замысел скульптора, прочитать его воплощенное в мраморных статуях послание потомкам. Авторы книги предлагают свою интерпретацию микеланджеловского шедевра.

**Barenboim Peter, Shiyani Sergei**

Michelangelo in the Medici Chapel: Genius in details

The Moscow Florentine Society

The New Sacristy of the Medici Chapel in Florence is the most mystical and mysterious work of art by Michelangelo. For almost five centuries, it has given rise to various interpretations. Photographs of the Chapel made by Sergei Shiyani may shed light on the author's views and allow the reader to create his own judgment on the issues discussed in this volume. Michelangelo himself once said that he expected that for the next thousand years people will think about the meaning of his sculptures in the Medici Chapel.

This book was prepared by Peter Barenboim and Sergei Shiyani, and is under the aegis of the Moscow Florentine Society. The authors suggest that all female sculptural images of the Medici Chapel constitute a triad that references a similar triad created earlier by Botticelli. The authors also suggest that the Indo-Buddhist culture has influenced some sculptural details of the statue of Lorenzo Medici.

## **ОГЛАВЛЕНИЕ**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| ОТ АВТОРОВ   | 8   |
| Е. Джани<br>ПРЕДИСЛОВИЕ  | 10  |
| Петр Баренбойм, Сергей Шиян<br>МИКЕЛАНДЖЕЛО В КАПЕЛЛЕ МЕДИЧИ.<br>ГЕНИЙ В ДЕТАЛЯХ   | 13  |
| Peter Barenboim<br>FEMININE TRIAD IN THE MEDICI CHAPEL<br>AND ORIENTAL INTERPRETATION<br>OF THE STATUE OF LORENZO MEDICI | 201 |











INNOVATION IN THE  
LITERATURE OF THE  
MIDDLE AGES  
BY  
J. H. M. SMITH  
LONDON  
1912

FRANCIS & TONY, B.A.S.  
LONDON  
1912





LORENZO IL MAGNIFICO - GIULIANO DEI MEDICI





































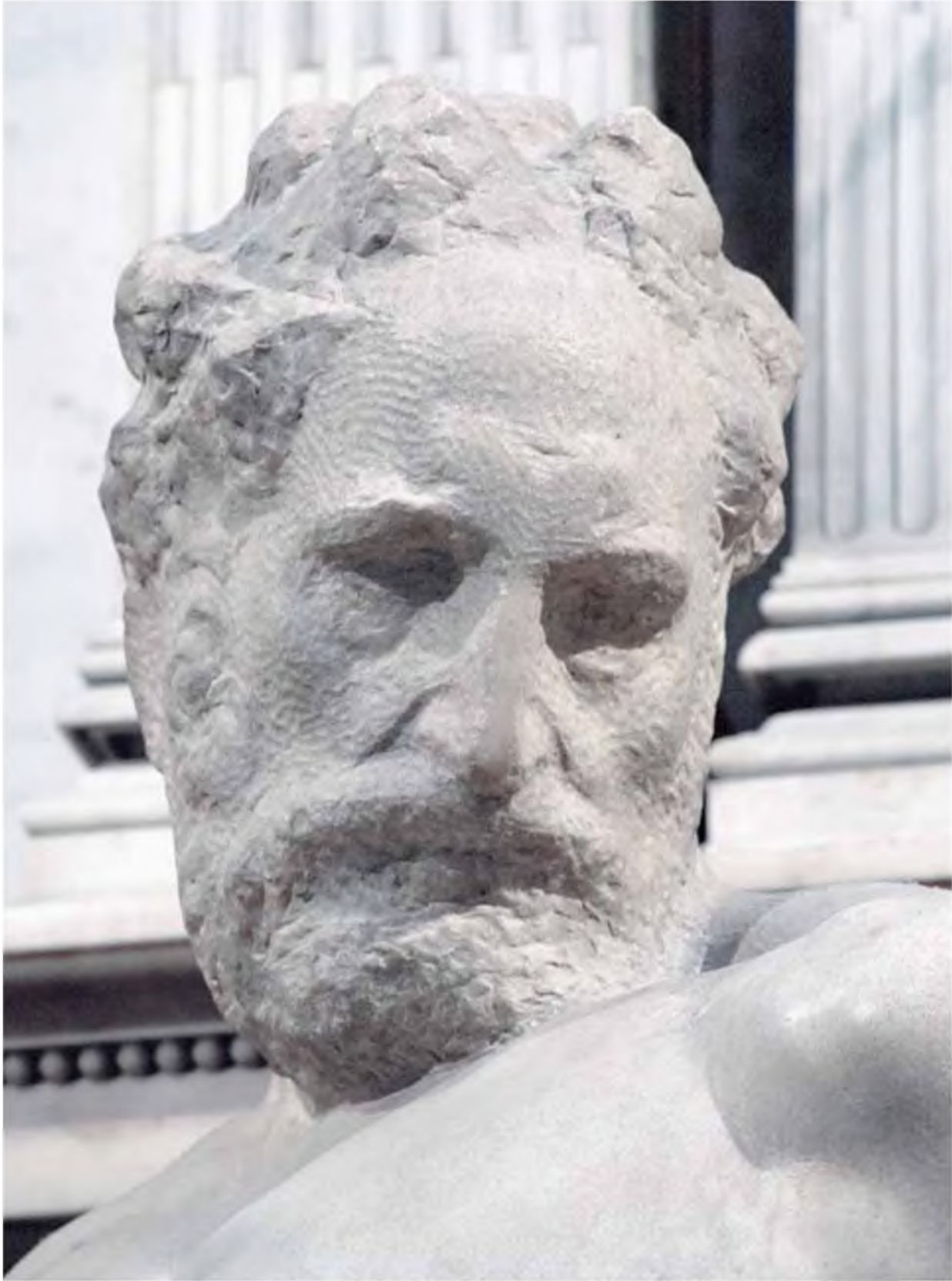






































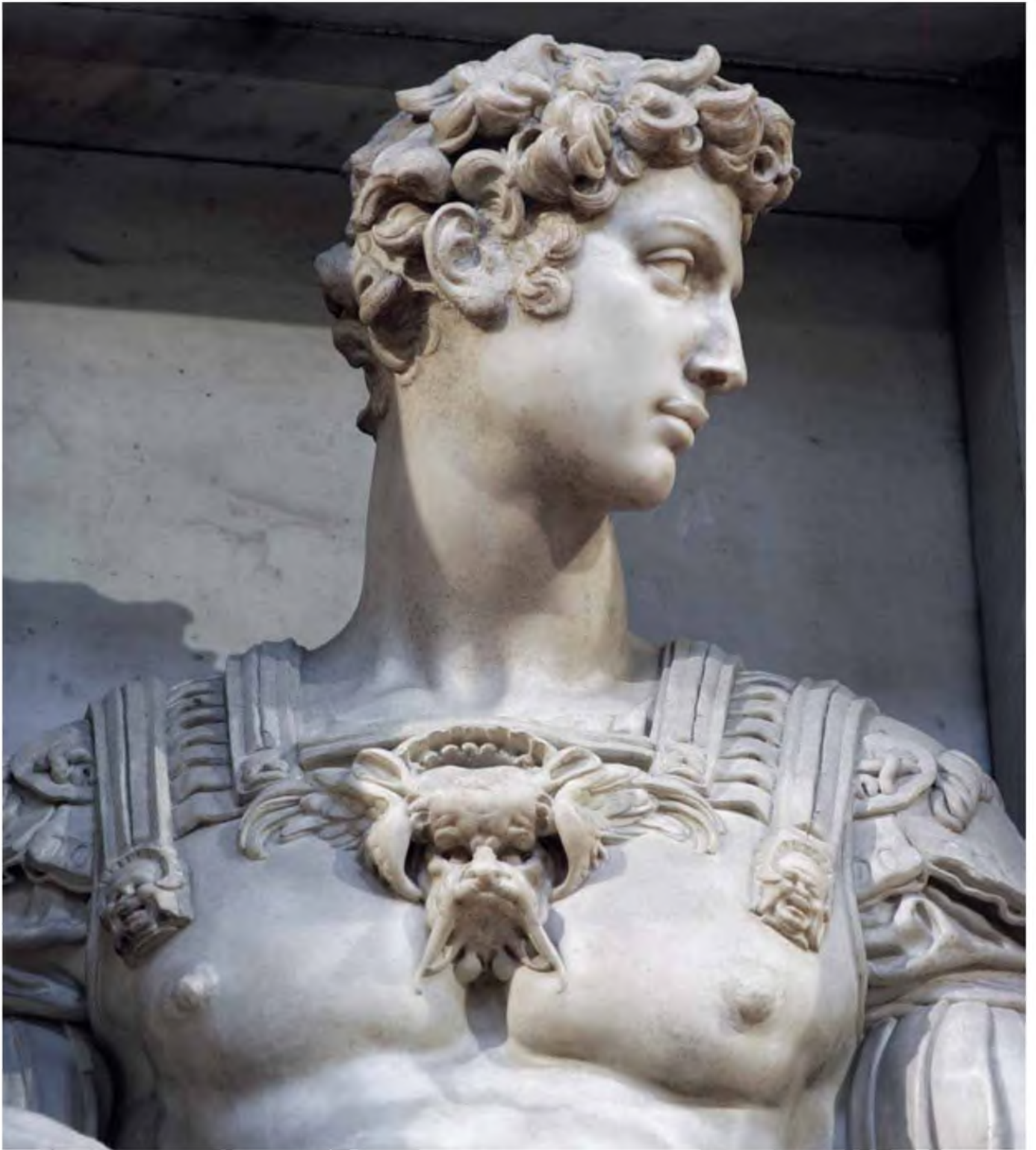








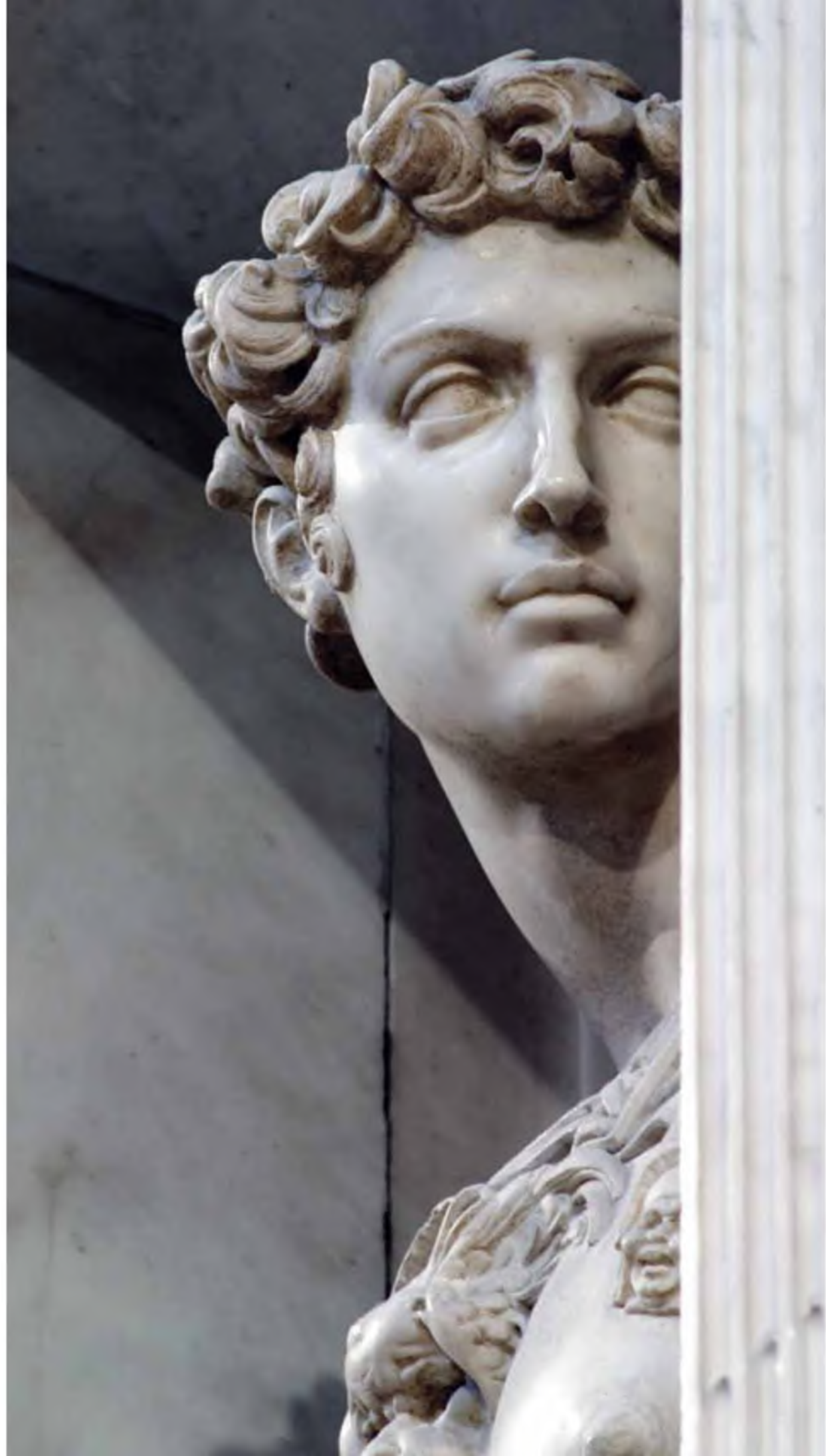


































































































































































































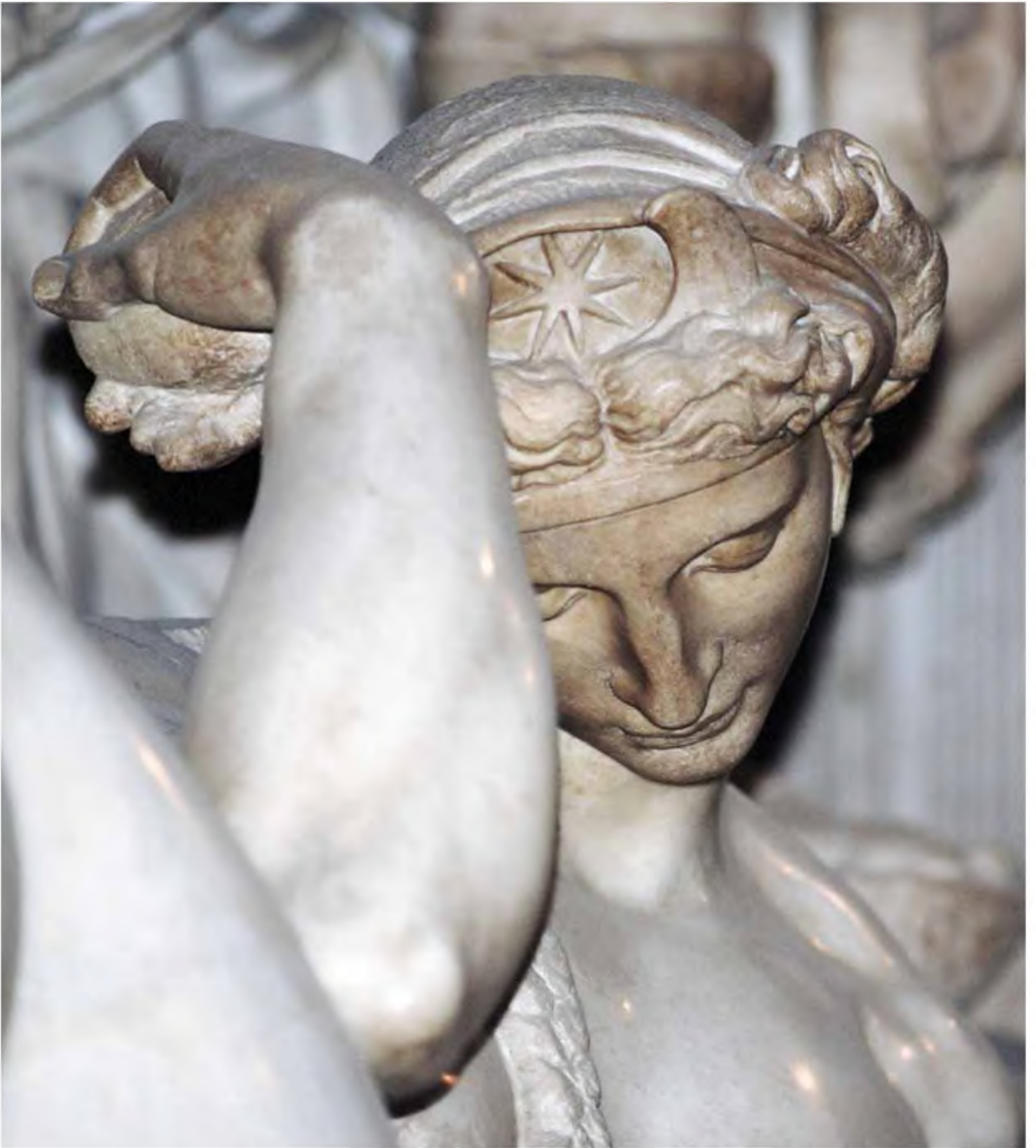
















































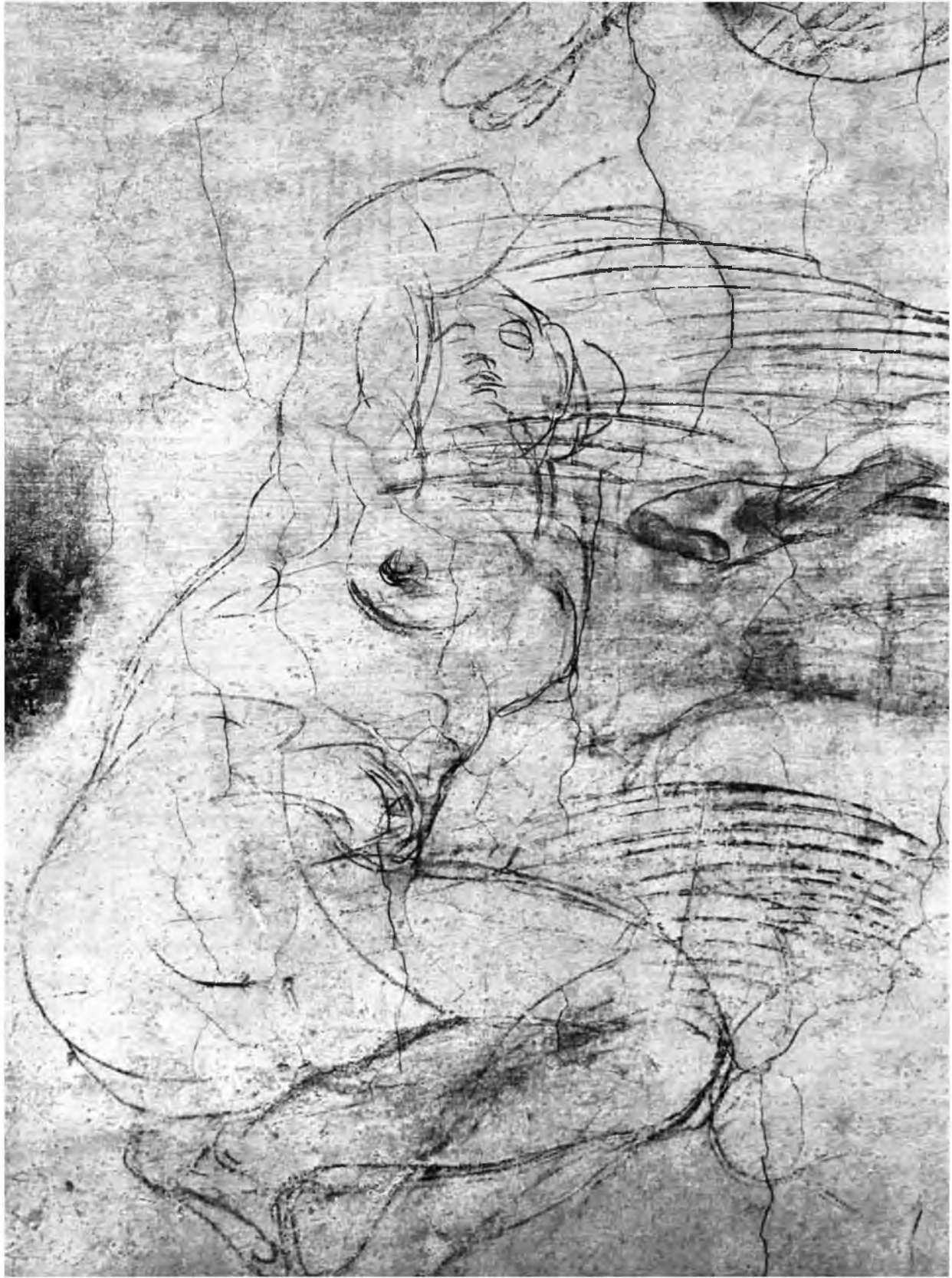














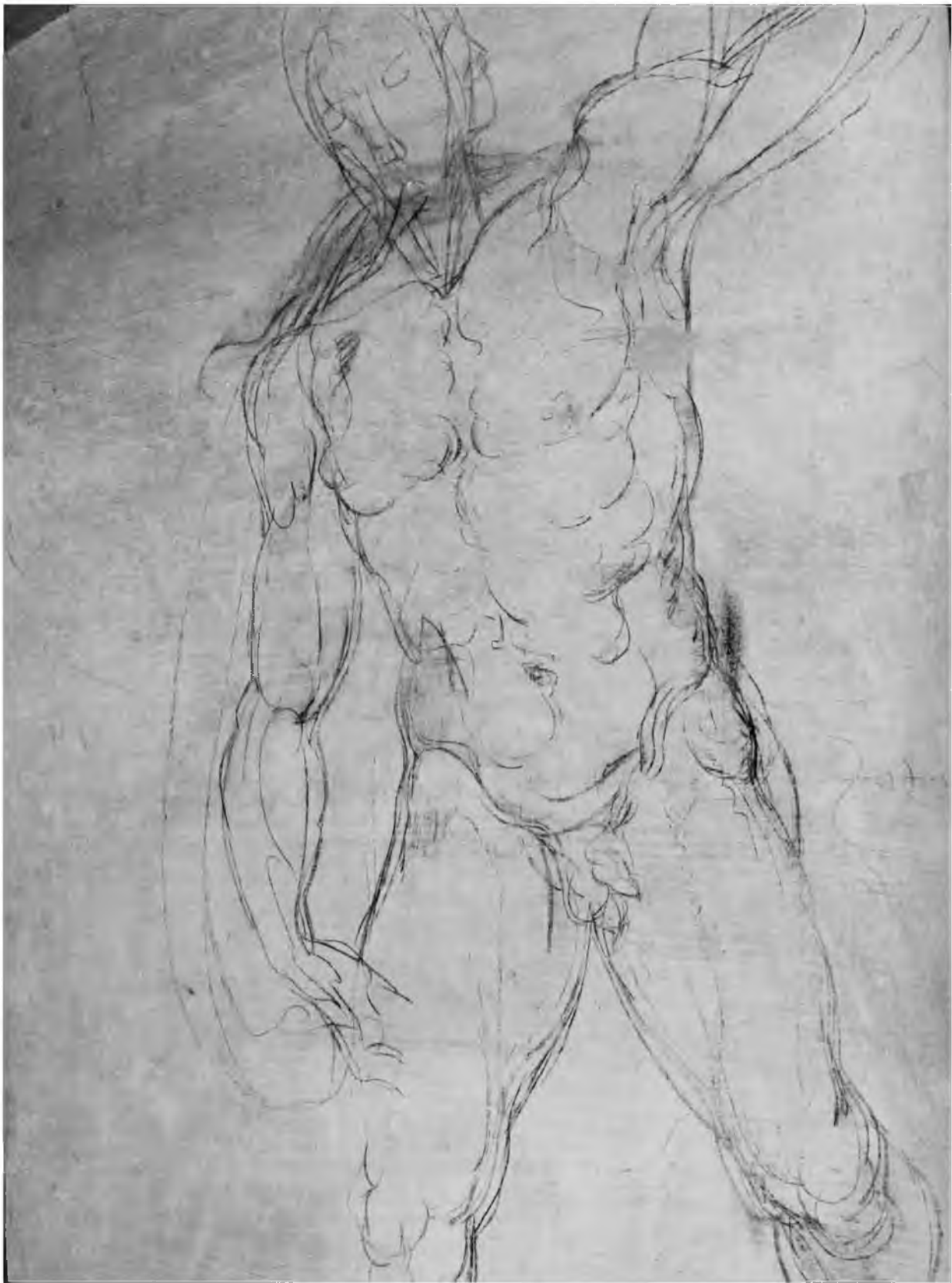




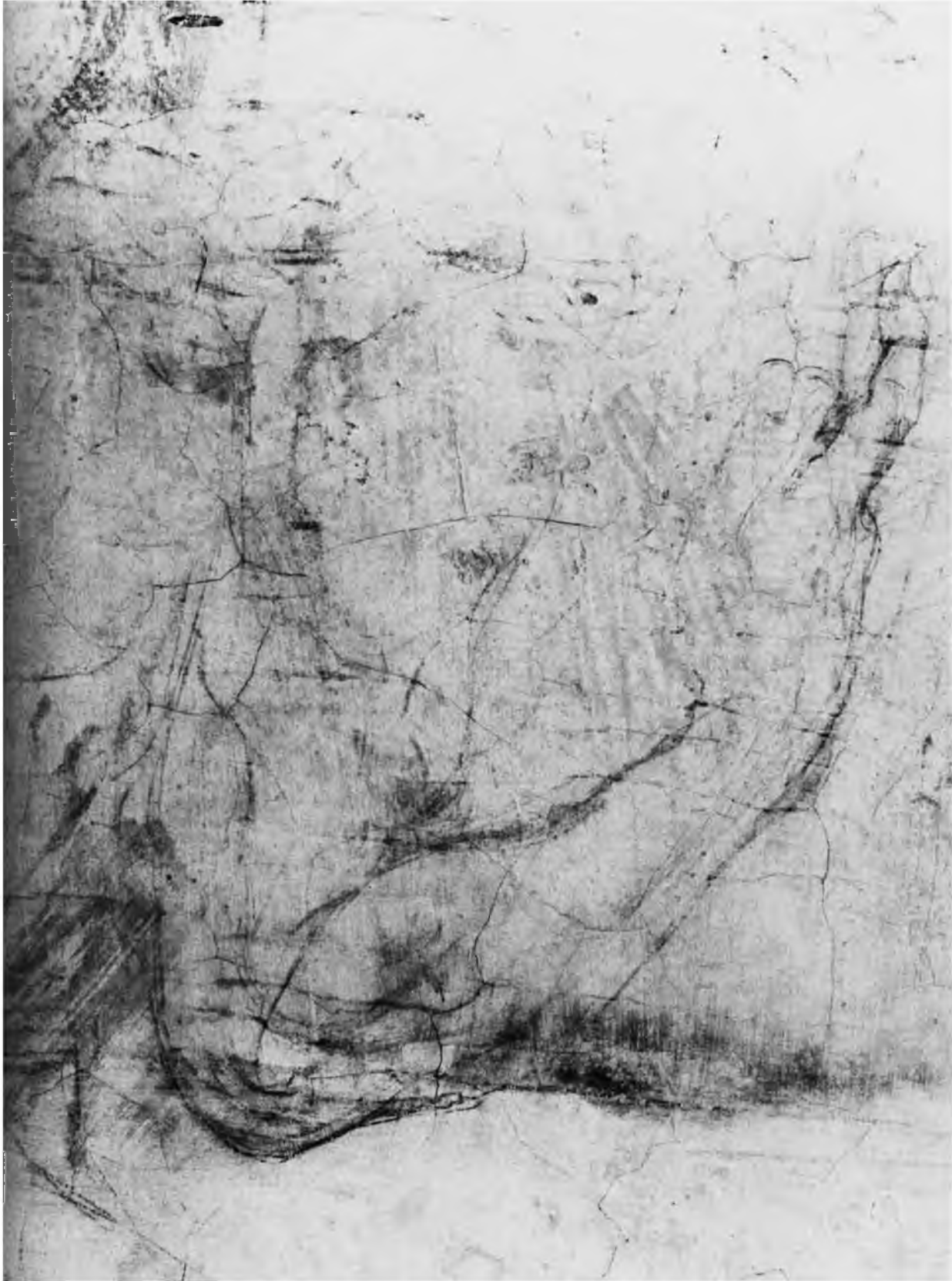


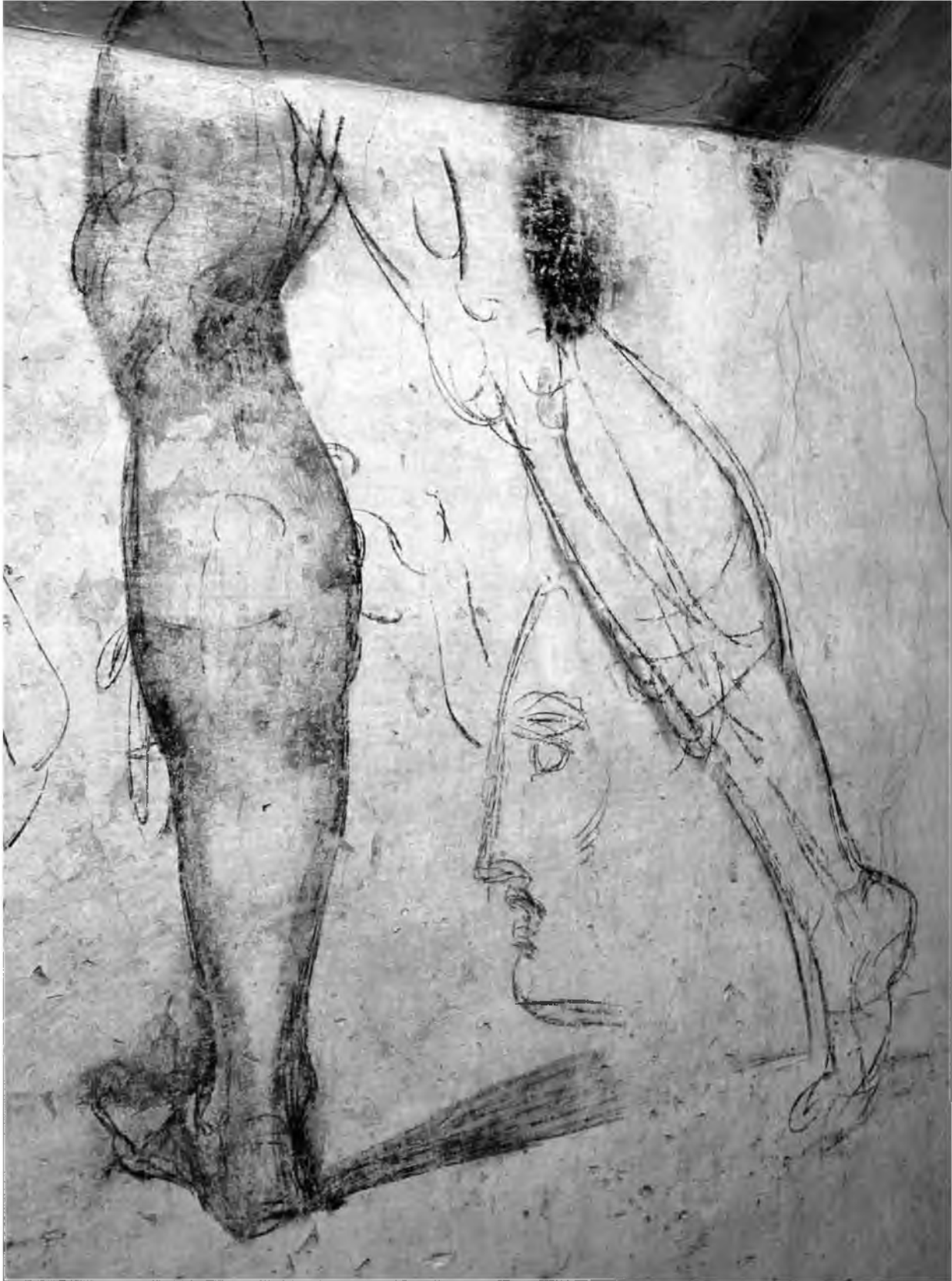
































PETER BARENBOIM

**FEMININE TRIAD  
IN THE MEDICI CHAPEL  
AND ORIENTAL INTERPRETATION  
OF THE STATUE OF LORENZO MEDICI**





The New Sacristy (*Sagrestia Nuova*) of the Medici Chapel (*Cappella Medicea*) of the San Lorenzo Basilica in Florence is the only completed architectural and sculptural complex (1521 - 1534) by Michelangelo. Many art experts believe the Medici Chapel sculptures to be the pinnacle work of the Great Florentine. Only in 1976 the concealed corridor under the New Sacristy was discovered. This corridor, probably, was some kind of a room where the sculptor and the architect of New Sacristy could have a rest. Here, being alone, he could think, draw and stay in quiet atmosphere. (A written proof was found in 2011 that Michelangelo had similar secret room in San Peter's Cathedral in Rome where he was the architect). But in 1530 he was hiding in this place every minute expecting death from the soldiers of Alessandro Medici. Michelangelo was in the age of 55 and did not feel healthy. He probably felt that sculptures of the New Sacristy are last in his life. His *Selfportrait* on the wall of the concealed corridor reflects this fear of death from Alessandro Medici or of natural reasons. This drawing is critically important for understanding the whole atmosphere in which he had been working during last 3 years to complete sculptures for the New Sacristy.

Michelangelo was making his ideas real in a situation when he had to conceal his true intentions from the project's patrons — Pope Clement VII and, later, his heirs. Michelangelo usually destroyed most of his studies after completion of sculptural work. Fortunately, many of them still have survived.

Some of these drawings may be the key to understanding the mysterious concept of the Medici Chapel, which has been feeding many heated discussions for over a century. "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"<sup>1</sup>.

Young Michelangelo was brought up in the household of Lorenzo Medici, the Magnificent (*il Magnifico*), whom he worshiped. He was aware of Lorenzo's grand and never ending sorrow for his brother Giuliano, who had been stabbed to death in 1478 in the Basilica Santa Maria del Fiore during a plot jointly contrived by the Pazzi, an eminent Florentine family, and Pope Sixtus IV. From that day, the jovial nature of Lorenzo and the open-minded style of Florentine rule had changed. Michelangelo had been idolizing Lorenzo the Magnificent and the memory of his brother Giuliano, but he did not feel the same for the later Medicis. "If Florence, for three generations, seemed to acquiesce in the Medici power, which, by force of circumstances, had become hereditary, it was only because the Medicis appealed to the public with their talents and

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Sgigliano, *Michelangelo's Mountain*, Free Press, New York, 2005, pp. 277, 281

merits. They were powerful, because their authority did not depend on titles, so nobody could either challenge or abolish it. They were considered the first citizens of Florence, because other people recognized them as such or took it for granted”<sup>2</sup>.

Soon after Lorenzo’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. In 1520, commissioned by Cardinal Giulio Medici, the future Pope Clement VII, Michelangelo starts working on the Medici Tombs complex of San Lorenzo. According to Pope Clement, it was to host the tombs of Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother Giuliano, the ones of the two later Medicis by the name of Lorenzo (Duke of Urbino) and Giuliano (Duke of Nemours), and the tomb of the Pope himself.

The details and shades of Michelangelo’s art, the mysteries of his ideas and designs will ever remain important to us, being a hundred times more sophisticated than our imagination. Many misinterpretations of the Medici Chapel design are due to undervaluation of the difference between the first (Giovanni – Cosimo – Lorenzo the Magnificent, his brother Giuliano) and the second (Pope Leo X, Pope Clement VII, Duke Giuliano, Duke Lorenzo, Duke Alessandro) generation of Medici politicians, as well as the difference in their evaluation by Michelangelo himself.

Supervising in 1527-1529 a construction of fortifications 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, the ones of Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother Giuliano (by the way, the father of Clement VII). While fighting against the usurpers of traditional Florentine republican freedom represented by the second generation of Medici, Michelangelo immortalized in the Medici Chapel the first generation who had been the republican leaders of the Florentine Republic in the fifteenth century. The seeming contradiction between the sculptural and architectural perfection of the Medici tombs, being completed by Michelangelo, and his direct participation in the military struggle against offsprings of the Medici should help 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 in these tombs should be the memory of Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother Giuliano. It is difficult to find a different explanation. Certainly, this is one of the great secrets of the Chapel and of Michelangelo himself, since he could never disclose his real thoughts. A well-known art expert James Beck assumes that the sitting figures of the so-called *duce capitani* should also represent the two senior Medicis.<sup>3</sup>

Michelangelo makes the best of his creations – the two sculptural tombs for Lorenzo and Giuliano (officially, those of the second generation), the statue of the Madonna Medici, and the architectural design of the interior, where he leaved only space for third tomb (planned for Pope Clement VII), and, after that, stops all further work. Marcel Brion, one of the best experts on Michelangelo, 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 everybody explain it in his own way”<sup>4</sup>.

In which exact moment had Michelangelo opted for limiting his design only to two sculpturally decorated tombs? Did his plan change over time? We do not know that for sure,

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2 Marsel Brion, *Michelangelo* (in Russian), Moscow, 2002, p. 41.

3 James Beck, Antonio Paolucci, Bruno Santi, *Michelangelo. The Medici Chapel*, London, New York, 2000, p. 27

4 Marcel Brion, (in Russian), Moscow, 2002, p. 41.



but one should not forget that Michelangelo was also the architect of the New Sacristy and, as some critics reasonably note, could hardly be mistaken in his calculations. In fact, he himself had drawn “an architectural borderline” for the deployment of sculptural monuments.

In his famous book, Irving Stone vividly depicts Michelangelo, when the latter, after 14 years of work and just before his departure for Rome, examines the Chapel and concludes that, for himself, it looks complete, since he has expressed in it everything that he wanted. His criterion for such an evaluation is the idea that Lorenzo the Magnificent would have been pleased with the Chapel in its present form.<sup>5</sup>

Michelangelo sometimes stated his authorship by introducing a self-portrait (also in a grotesque form) 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. In this connection, it may seem appropriate to reflect upon the possibility of an assumption, that in the statue of *Day* the sculptor presented his heroic image and did his grotesque image in the mask just beneath the figure of *Night*. Irving Stone saw a self-portrait of Michelangelo in the figure of *Dusk*, assuming that the sculptor had modeled this statue after himself.<sup>6</sup>

If Stone was 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. Besides, the mask may remind us of the lost *Faun* from the Medici Gardens – the first sculpture Michelangelo created in his life.

Speaking about the Medici Chapel, we should immediately note that even the technically perfect imagery cannot serve as a substitute for one’s physical presence in that place. This concerns not only the aura and the general atmosphere of the complex, but also the effect produced by each of its statues. 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.

Famous English art researcher Kenneth Clark remarks that the Medici Chapel stands apart from other sculptural creations by Michelangelo, since two of the four main figures are female. But why should he forget about the statue of the Madonna? We want to stress Clark’s idea that Michelangelo used “his own discretion” to create the Chapel’s composition.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the sculptor was always dominating in discussions of this project with Giulio Medici (Pope Clement VII). Besides, the Pope had not seen the work of Michelangelo because never visit the Chapel; and, as for Duke Alessandro Medici, the ruler of Florence from 1530, the sculptor merely did not let him inside the Sacristy. Such situation allowed Michelangelo to create the Chapel the way he wanted, while preventing him from disclosure of his true intention.

It is known that, when Vasari after many years asked Michelangelo about the plan, which the latter had incorporated in the Medici Chapel, the elderly sculptor answered that he could not remember it. At the same time, Michelangelo had effortlessly drawn an accurate sketch of his plan of the Laurentian Library’s principal staircase. This story makes us strongly doubt the truthfulness of his answer to Vasari. What was that Michelangelo wanted to conceal?

In the last 18 years, I was privileged to visit the Chapel many dozens of times, with the total time spent in it well exceeding a several days, including many hours, almost a solar day, of being there alone. The personal feeling sometimes could help but obviously one cannot deny it when speaking about art. One famous expert mentioned that both “Dukes” look at Madonna, another also famous expert said that they look in direction of entrance door, etc. Its pure magic

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

6 Ibid, p. 658.

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

and a multitude of inconceivable impressions it leaves you with are impossible to describe. The similarity between the images of *Dawn* and *Night* in my perception was augmented by the similarity of both of these, especially the former, to the Madonna.

I asked several artists, good friends of mine, to tour the Chapel, and they all confirmed my observation. Every work of art needs to be peered into very closely. Its meaning can reveal itself under the heat from our eyes. The sculptor had incorporated his original meaning or several meanings, some of which might 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 "an intent observation", which preferred 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 magnifying glass.<sup>8</sup>

Irving Stone wrote that from the time of his first marble Madonna - *Madonna of the Stairs* Michelangelo is thinking "about Mary and her child, and her moment of decision". He thought that in all well-known painting she had been given no choice. But God can not force Mary to such destiny without her knowledge and consent. God's wisdom and mercy have allowed her the opportunity to reject it. "And if Mary did have freedom of choice, when would she be likely to exercise it? At the Annunciation? When she had borne child? At the moment of suckling, while Jesus still an infant?... Knowing the future, how could she subject her son to such agony? Might she not have said, "No, not my son. I will not consent. I will not it happened"?<sup>9</sup>

I believe that very often this novelist surpass even famous art historians because if they pay attention to quoted part, they will found sense and content of Michelangelo's cartoon in the British Museum half of century ago. The most revolutionary image of Madonna is reflected in the cartoon created by Michelangelo when he was around 75, could be titled, "*A Rebellion Madonna*", or more traditionally "*The British Museum Madonna*". The recent title, "*Epifania*", has no justification. Well-known expert Michael Hirst did not use the title "*Epifania*" in his book and mentioned "exceptionally enigmatic subject" of the cartoon.<sup>10</sup>

"*Epifania* (Italian - Epiphany) is a cartoon, a full-scale drawing in black chalk by Michelangelo, produced in Rome around 1550-1553. It is 2.32 metres tall by 1.65 metres wide, and is made up of 26 sheets of paper. The cartoon is on display in Gallery 90 of the British Museum. Michelangelo's fellow Ascanio Condivi used this cartoon for an unfinished and not talented painting".<sup>11</sup>

The mysterious composition shows the Virgin Mary (who looks very similar to the Michelangelo drawing "*Cleopatra*" made 30 year ago). The Christ child is sitting between her legs and she is trying to take him back to her womb... An adult male figure to the right, probably God, is pushed away (or better say keeping on the distance) by Mary. The adult figure standing to Mary's left is unidentified, but might be Archangel Gabriel. The image was a culmination of Michelangelo's persistent theme - the unwillingness of Maria to accept the future tragic destiny of her son - dating from his first "*Madonna of the Stairs*" made when he was only 15 years old. Remember that Maria was told by Gabriel that she will know happiness and after she gave the birth of Christ she was told by somebody else about his tragic future.<sup>12</sup>

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

9 Irving Stone, Op. cit, pp. 139-140

10 Michael Hirst, *Michelangelo and his Drawings*, New Haven&London, 2004, pp. 77-78

11 *Epifania*, Wikipedia

12 St. Luke, 1 : 32, 33, 42; 2 : 35



As Robert Browning says:

*“Our Lady borne  
smiling and smart  
With a pink gauze  
gown all spangles,  
and seven swords stuck in  
Her heart!”*<sup>13</sup>

The first concept, based on the striking similarity of all female images, was an idea that in the statue of Dawn, which on a fine morning gets lit by direct beams of sunlight, Michelangelo had represented the moment of Immaculate Conception. The theme of Immaculate Conception is not a foreign for visual art. The exhibition “Italian Master Drawings” in the National Gallery of Art, Washington in 2011 included drawing of Ubaldo Gandolfi “*The Virgin of Immaculate Conception*”. Mary is staying on clouds and the moon (it could be a cloud under left foot of Dawn) and explanation of the drawing attached on the wall of the Gallery refer spectators to New Testament’s “Book of Revelation”. This explanation is different to the text of exhibition’s catalogue.<sup>14</sup>

But Book of Revelation said about birth of Christ not 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”. (Revelation, 12: 1-2). We can not forget a star on small crown on the head of Night. Another similarity.

The Dawn’s face may not necessarily represent a difficult awakening, but, on the contrary, it may display a carnal languor of a satisfied desire, which can hardly be confused with anything else. Such interpretation of the statue has some obvious grounds.

Charles Sala gave overwhelmingly 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 surprisingly simple, seductive pose... The face liest midway between classical Antiquity and the “Byzantine” Virgins of the Tuscan Trecento”.<sup>15</sup>

By the way, the famous German poet Heinrich Heine found figure of *Night* extremely, “unearthly” seductive in his *Florentine Nights* published in 1837. In British study on the statue of *Dawn*, its author writes: “*Dawn* is offering herself for the first time. She is awaking or dozing in kind of drugged daze”.<sup>16</sup>

Anthony Hughes wrote that on the one hand “*Dawn* is a virginal figure of inexperience”, but on the other hand, “her torpedo-like breasts and softly rounded limbs created a svelte type that become an erotic ideal for later Italian artists”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Browning, *The Major Works*, Oxford University Press, p.163

<sup>14</sup> “*Italian Master Drawings from Wolfgang Ratjen Collection, 1525 – 1835*”, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2011, p. 138

<sup>15</sup> Charles Sala, *Michelangelo*, Paris, 2001, p. 124

<sup>16</sup> James Hall, *Michelangelo and the Reinvention of the Human Body*, London, 2005, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Hughes, *Michelangelo*, New York, 2003, p. 200

Professor Emerita at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley Margaret Miles stressed that even significance of the images of Madonna's naked breast "was never explicitly contested".<sup>18</sup>

The priest and the head of the Office for Catechesis Through Art of the Archdiocese of Florence Timothy Verdon, quoting Vasari, stated that in Michelangelo's picture "*Tondo Doni*", Madonna had "the pleasure she has in sharing the Child (Christ) with holy old man". Verdon suggested that this "holy old man" is God, "real father from whom the Son proceeds". He specially mentioned Mary's "loving gaze" and considered the scene as the moment of Madonna's conception.<sup>19</sup>

In his preface to Verdon's book, the Archbishop of Florence Ennio Antonelli wrote: "The text by Mons. Timothy Verdon helps readers to rediscover Mary".<sup>20</sup>

According to our concept, all three female statues of the Chapel reflected different images of the Virgin, and the statue of *Night* may be an image of the Mother of Christ, tormented by the travails of Crucifixion, who has fallen into leaden but already tranquil slumber after the Ascension of Christ. Malcolm Bull mentioned in his book that though 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. "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."<sup>21</sup>

We may suggest another concept of Michelangelo's triad of female statues. Here, we should note that, in 1310, Giovanni Pisano's creation — the statue of naked Venus representing Chastity — was installed in front of the pulpit of the Pisan cathedral, which had become the first known attempt to "christianize Venus".<sup>22</sup>

The convergence of the antique image of Venus and the contemporary Christian morals coincided in Florence of the mid-fifteenth century with the convergence of the Christian female saints imagery and the antique idea of nudity. For example, in a painting by Fra Carnevale, the Virgin Mary was shown fully naked, while 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 out an antique statue from the ground. It was the same Greek statue of naked Venus, which had been already unearthed a few years earlier in Sienna. Then, the righteous citizens of Sienna had not stood the test of her naked beauty and, on the above-mentioned date, had secretly buried it in the ground, but on the territory controlled by the Florentines, thus hoping to jinx the enemy. But, in fact, this sortie brought good luck to Florence. Quite soon, Florence became the capital of Italian Renaissance, one of the pinnacle works of which was Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*.

My favorite sculptor is Michelangelo, and my favorite painter — Botticelli. In the Botticelli Hall of the Uffizi Gallery, one can easily notice that the head of Venus from Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* is used by him for, at least, two of his Madonnas: *Madonna of the Pomegranate* and *Madonna of the Magnificat*. Another thing to be noticed just as easily is that the naked figure in Botticelli's *Calumny of Apelles* (by the way, the last painting of nude he did in his life) also reminds of the image from *The Birth of Venus*, though a bit deformed and aged one. This is a known fact. But, probably, nobody before compared all three images — the magic female triad of Botticelli.

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18 Margaret R. Miles, *A Complex Delight: The secularization of the breast, 1350 - 1750*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2008, p. XI

19 Timothy Verdon, *Mary in Florentine Art*, 2003, pp. 91 - 99

20 Op. cit, p. 9

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

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



So, we see a clear tendency, as it were, to “platonize” or “paganize” the Madonna and other female Christian saints. Kenneth Clark, an eminent British art expert and a former director of the National Gallery (London), 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 mentioned that Botticelli used the same head for his Madonnas, and this circumstance, quite shocking as it may seem at first, shows (to those who are able to understand) the highest degree of human thought, a shining halo in the pure air of imagination. He said 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, proves the ultimate triumph of the Celestial Venus.<sup>23</sup>

The same may 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 another parallel with Botticelli’s art. The last nude female image painted by Botticelli was a figure, usually referred to as “Truth”, in his canvas *Calumny of Apelles*. Kenneth Clark emphasizes the similarity between Venus and “Truth” from *the Calumny*. He writes: “At first blush, she reminds Venus, but practically everywhere the required flowing smoothness appears to be broken. Instead of the classical oval of the 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...” But, having noted the similarity, Clark did not go any further so as to connect this triad – Venus – the Madonna – “Truth” (Wisdom) – together, using the unity of the artist’s plan. Probably, this was because Botticelli had created these works in different creative periods, lying many years apart. Our concept presumes that Michelangelo in his Medici Chapel decided to recreate the above-mentioned Botticelli’s triad.

Michelangelo was already recognized as the best sculptor and painter in Rome (in Rome, but not in Florence!). There, Botticelli was still reigning as the sovereign of painting (though already with some reservations). Michelangelo could not be unaware of the Botticelli’s triad. He could even have known its exact sense and meaning, either from Botticelli or from his contemporaries. Besides, Botticelli was the principal Medicean painter, a favourite of the Medicis. He preserved on his pictures the images of Cosimo, his son Pietro, his grandsons: Lorenzo (the future *il Magnifico*) and Giuliano (to be killed in the Pazzi plot), 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. Among possible advisers to Michelangelo during his work on the Medici Chapel, Professor Edith Balas names the 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 several times and could have exchanged their ideas.<sup>24</sup>

Antonio Paolucci writes that Botticelli was the most intelligent witness and interpreter of his contemporary elite, who was in the best position to comprehend the spirit of his time. A famous art historian John Ruskin in his lecture, dated 1874, characterizes Botticelli as “the most

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<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Op.cit*, p. 126.

<sup>24</sup> Edith Balas. *Michelangelo’s Medici Chapel: a New Interpretation*, Philadelphia, 1995, p. 135.

learned theologian, the best painter and the most pleasant communicator ever produced by the City of Florence". In other words, one should not doubt that the Botticelli's triad: Venus — the Madonna — "Truth" (more likely just another image of Aphrodite) was not purely coincidental. In *The Fifteenth Century Painting* book, its German authors mention the likeness between images of Venus and the Madonna in Botticelli's works. "During Renaissance, it was popular to depict two Venuses side-by-side, one of which displayed the Sacred Love, and the other — the Earthly Love", writes an English author.<sup>25</sup>

How much was sensed and recounted to us by young Rilke in his "*The Florentine Diary*": "But what are those obscure and yet obvious pictorial fairytales of Venetians in comparison with the deep mysteries and the original plots we find in the Botticelli paintings! Thence comes the shyness of his Venus, the timidity of his Primavera, the tired meekness of his Madonnas. These Madonnas — they all as if feel guilty for having avoided the tortures and wounds of 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 been silent about her hidden splendour and mysterious sanctity... As a matter of fact, we can decide in favour of similarity or dissimilarity, only by looking at a photographic image. The similarity expressed by the master, is related to the appearance of model, same as the ecstasy is related to the exhaustion. Does Botticelli in his portraits appear humiliated, renouncing his own self? His own Madonna and Venus appear to him as such a rebuke.

More likely, it is Michelangelo whom we can consider to be sentimental — however, only from the formal aspect. His ideas are always as much stately and plastically tranquil as restlessly agile are the contours of his most serene sculptures. It looks 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 manifests waiting to be displayed for public attention at every street corner.

And that from what Botticelli was sad, was making 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».<sup>26</sup>

Michelangelo could not be unaware of the 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-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".<sup>27</sup>

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

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

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



But, most likely, the prime goal for Michelangelo was to materialize and bring to a close that dispute on painting and sculpture, which 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 Venus' face distracted and almost indifferent. Michelangelo, on the contrary, was able to express his idea exclusively in the marble of the *Venus-Dawn's* countenance. The left foot of his *Venus-Dawn* rises from a substance that cannot be but sea foam.

The girdle on *Dawn-Venus* is explained by some as a symbol of innocence (here we should recollect our first version), while others interpret it, though it is impossible to understand why, as a symbol of slavery. The latter explanation works well for the political version of the Chapel, but it fails to provide any tangible evidence in its support. The most correct, as it seems to me, is to pay attention to the tradition of depicting Venus with a girdle under her breasts on her naked body and, in any case, under the clothing.

We see such girdle in a painting *Venus, Mars, and Cupid* (1488) by Piero di Cosimo (Uffizi, Florence) or 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, looking like the one seen on Michelangelo's *Dawn*, we see 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, position of her breasts, and her headdress, is closely similar to 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 rather static figure. Diego Velazquez in his *Toilet of Venus* (1640, the National Gallery, London), created in very strictly catholic Spain (where the next nude would appear only in about century and a half – *La Maja Desnuda* by Francisco Goya), depicts the nude Venus with her back to the spectator, and to prove this is really a goddess, and not just a naked woman, Velazquez added Cupid, showing to Venus, who is looking at herself in the mirror, her zone. We see on painting of Hedrick Goltzius in Hermitage *Bachus, Venus and Cerers* (1606) that the zone is attributing of Venus not other beautiful goddess.

The zone under the breasts of *Dawn* is a direct indication to Venus. Michelangelo had not added it, as Irving Stone wrote, merely to emphasize the naked beauty of breasts as Panofsky believed as a symbol of virginity. In the European painting of XV–XVI centuries, we can find such an unusual detail, as a girdle decorating the nude or worn under clothing, but on some images of Venus. Only sometimes we see such a detail on the antique Roman frescos created about a millennium earlier. We can see such girdle on the small statue of Giambologna *Venera Urania* in Vienna.

Michelangelo's bases 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, where she is depicted wearing a serpentnecklace. This evidently shows the connection between the Michelangelo's female statues for the Medici Chapel and the image of Venus typical for Botticelli. Michelangelo's drawings are the key to the mysteries of the Medici Chapel. Art experts note their similarity; on the one hand, with the portrait of Simonetta, and, on the other, many

of them correlate these sketches, obviously made for the statues of the Chapel, 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, which posed for his *The Birth of Venus*, – the first beauty of Florence and the beloved of the late Giuliano Medici. Edith Balas, professor of Pittsburgh Carnegie Mellon University, in her book devoted to new interpretation of the Medici Chapel produced convincing proof that the figure of *Night* should be identified with the twin sister of Venus – the goddess Aphrodite. Aphrodite means wisdom, eternity and peace, contrary to the generally accepted meaning of Venus-Aphrodite's image, as the goddess of love and carnal pleasures.<sup>28</sup>

Edith Balas brings her attention to the Vasari's remark that in the first project of Medici Tombs there was a 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 the primary among ancient cults. Professor Balas emphasizes that name *Night*, even though used by Michelangelo once, do not completely reveal his plan. She also writes that, in his correspondence, Michelangelo refers to them as “allegories” and “images”, and that his authorized buyer of Carrara marble calls them simply “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, it is a sheaf of poppy flowers but, as the picture of in Casa Buonarroti shown, is in fact a bunch of pomegranates, that lies under the feet of *Night*. But this does not correspond with the canonical image of *Night*. The fruits of pomegranate were traditionally considered as an attribute of the Great Mother Goddess. (Here we should remember that one of the participants in the Botticelli's triad was *Madonna of the Pomegranate*). Another evidence coming from the picture Francesco Brina (1540–1586) *La Notte* where we can see clearly a bunch of pomegranates under foot of the *Night* (Casa Buonarroti). Edith Balas thinks that the paired naked female figures of the Chapel show two different hypostases of the Mother Goddess (identified with the Earth), which coincides with images of the twins, Venus and Aphrodite. Francisco de Holanda in presence of Michelangelo said in 1538 that “chapel of the Medici in San Lorenzo... with such a generous number of statues in full relief that it can certainly compete with any of great works of antiquity; where the goddess or image of *Night*, sleeping above the nocturnal bird...”.<sup>29</sup>

To sum it up, professor Balas, after her twenty-year-long studies, made almost the same conclusions, to which we have arrived, starting from the idea of similarity between the images and their affinity with the Botticelli's triad. Unfortunately, in her book, she did not pay sufficient attention to the Madonna's image, even though she provided an important quote from a letter of Michelangelo's contemporary, Mutcanus Rufus, who had mentioned the Virgin Mary among the goddesses impersonating the sacred feminine of the Great Mother deity. In the quoted text 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, had obviously utilized the same approach. The sculptor had left the marble of the Madonna's face unpolished, possibly to conceal the likeness to the image of Dawn – Venus – Aphrodite, closely related to the widely known Ishtar, Astarte, – Cybele, as impersonations of the Great Mother Goddess.

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<sup>28</sup> Edith Balas, *Michelangelo's Medici Chapel: a New Interpretation*, Philadelphia, 1995, p. 67

<sup>29</sup> Francisco de Holanda, *Dialogues with Michelangelo*, London, 2006, p. 70.



The triad, which Botticelli had been so painfully creating for a whole decade – *The Birth of Venus* (1484), *Madonna of the Pomegranate* and *Madonna of the Magnificat* (both 1487), and, finally, *Calumny of Apelles* (1495) – was recreated by Michelangelo, who had also spent ten years on the statues of the Medici Chapel. Readers are welcome to pursue their attempts of understanding the plan of the Medici Chapel and trying to solve its mysteries. This page of history has not yet been turned over and the strong currents of Renaissance art of the Great Florentine, after nearly five centuries, are still to create the fields of high intellectual force.

## Oriental Interpretation

“...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 an nocturnal world, heavy with sorrow and shot through with horrific and grotesque images”, wrote Antonio Paolucci about pictures of the Medici Chapel by the photo-artist Aurelio Amendola.

The sculpture of Lorenzo Medici by Michelangelo from the Medici Chapel is also known by the name of *The Thinker*. In spite of the armour covering his body, Michelangelo’s Lorenzo personifies *The Thinker* more persuasively than the famous bronze statue by French sculptor August Rodin. Officially this statue is attributed to Lorenzo de Medici, the Duke of Urbino, who was a military commander, however not a thinker at all. Moreover he was extremely unpopular in Florence. It is more probable that the statue was actually attributed by Michelangelo to the grandfather of the Duke of Urbino, Lorenzo the Magnificent, whom the young Michelangelo had considered to be his godfather. This Lorenzo was a real thinker, philosopher and poet. Lorenzo the Magnificent was also celebrated as a winner of many a jousting tournament.

Furthermore, he was the last banker in the Medici family who formally controlled the Medici European banking network. Most of the Medici money at the time of Lorenzo the Magnificent ruling, however, were donated to public and cultural life of Florence. As a result, Lorenzo’s banking business gradually declined, while his exorbitant expenditures for supporting artists, philosophers and sculptors, including Michelangelo Buonarroti, largely contributed to his fame and his informal title “The Magnificent”.<sup>30</sup>

The left elbow of the statue of Lorenzo is resting on a small box with an animal head. It is interesting that on a well-known fresco of Luigi Flammingo in the Museo degli Argenti in Florence we can see Lorenzo the Magnificent sitting on the chair with his left arm resting on an animal head as well. This painting refers to the XVI century, probably after Michelangelo. It is not by chance that the above mentioned fresco opens the illustration list of Lorenzo Tanzini’s

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30 Tim Parks, *Medici Money. Banking, Metaphysics, and Art in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, Atlas Books, N. Y., 2005, pp.244, 247;

Raymond de Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank, 1397-1494*, Beard Books, Washington D.C., 1999, p. 374.

article devoted to the Magnificent; the list finishes with the picture of Lorenzo's statue from New Sacristy with appropriate attribute to the Magnificent.<sup>31</sup>

The small box has a mouse-like head (if you look at it from below) either looking out from the box or serving as an ornament. Many researchers contend that it is a bat's head. I would doubt that Michelangelo, despite some animals' images in his works, could be called "animalist". As absolutely correctly well-known art expert Antonio Paolucci said: "The great "animalist" is one who succeeds in understanding and representing, not simply the individual creature which is the object of his attention, but the very character of the species which this creature embodies."<sup>32</sup>

According to documented in 1538 words of Michelangelo, he told about a preference of grotesque form for images of animals. He speak about possibility "alter some of limbs or part of one thing into another species such as to change a griffin or a deer into dolphin, putting wings instead of arms, putting off arms if wings suit it better, that limb which he (artist) changes, whether of lion, horse or bird, will be quite perfect of the species to which it belong, it can be only be called well imagined and monstrous."<sup>33</sup>

May be according to above concept the animal head on the statue of Lorenzo was stylized by sculptor as mixed image of mouse, (and further for any taste), rat, bat, mongoose, weasel, lynx, lion. Erwin Panofsky stated that "seems to me and others that the distinctive features of Michelangelo's animal head, a *mascherone* rather than naturalistic 'portrait', suggest bat rather than lynx".<sup>34</sup>

Michelangelo's pupil Ascanio Condivi, in his biography book about Michelangelo, mentioned that the sculptor wanted to carve a mouse in the Chapel. He wrote: "And to signify Time, he meant to carve a mouse, for which he left a little bit of marble on the work, but then he was prevented and did not do it; because this little creature is forever gnawing and consuming just as time devours all things".<sup>35</sup>

Condivi was not personally familiar with New Sacristy at the time when he wrote his book and he described from Michelangelo words the content of the Chapel as the Madonna and the tomb of Julian. He did not specify the place where mouse would belong to and said nothing about Lorenzo tomb and its sculptures. He mentioned also the only four sculptures in the Chapel (typo or a translation mistake in Pennsylvania 2003 edition where we see "four tombs" as a translation of "le statue son Quattro").

We can easily allow some gaps in the memory of Condivi or, more likely, that the elderly Michelangelo did not tell the young man all he had in mind concerning the Medici Chapel. Maybe the box is not exactly a box but a small block "bit" of marble which Michelangelo mentioned to Condivi. Special camera and lighting allows to see on the picture more than what a regular spectator is able to distinguish — namely, another mouth with dangerous teeth of this mouse that make it look like some monstrous animal "devouring us".

Erwin Panofsky did not recognize this mouse on Lorenzo statue, probably, because he distinguished between a mouse and a bat — for him these were completely different creatures. He has written a special article titled "The Mouse that Michelangelo Failed to Carve"<sup>36</sup> and

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31 Lorenzo Tanzini, *L'importanza di essere Magnifico*, MediovEvo, Settembre 2005, p. 56.

32 Antonio Paolucci, *The Animals of Giambologna*, Florence, 2000, p. 5

33 Francisco de Holanda, *Dialogues with Michelangelo*, London, 2006, p. 110

34 Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, Oxford University Press, 1962, p. XII

35 Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, Pennsylvania, 2003, p. 67.

36 Erwin Panofsky, *The Mouse that Michelangelo Failed to Carve*, N. Y., 1964.



stressed in the article “Neoplatonic Movement and Michelangelo” that this was the head of a bat.<sup>37</sup>

In Russian we say “mouse” (*mysh'*) and “bat” as “flying mouse” (*letuchaya mysh'*) because there are many similarities between the two animals, first of all between their heads. French, German, and Dutch give the same lexical duality. Psychologically those languages' speakers perceive these two creatures as the same or similar animal. In Italian and English mouse and bat are two different notions, they are perceived as different animals. But the similarities are still in place.

Albrecht Durer also used a bat or “flying mouse” in his famous gravure *Melancholia* (1514) that dates back at least 10–15 years before the statue of Lorenzo. Michelangelo theoretically and practically might have seen one of the gravures. Condivi mentioned that when Michelangelo “reads Albrecht Durer, he finds his work very weak, seeing in his mind how much more beautiful and useful in the study of this subject (proportions of human body) his own conception would have been”.<sup>38</sup>

But this memoir of Condivi refers to the period at least twenty years after the statue of Lorenzo was completed. Some researchers think that at least in early XVI century “flying mouse” was associated with melancholia. Maybe Durer's gravure provided a strong influence on future researchers' position about the kind of animal's head we see on the statue of Lorenzo than any zoological characteristic. But whatever approach is accepted, there is a mouse-like animal head with a small mouse mouth located in the niche, more than meter above the eyes of any spectator, her lion-style nose as well as the second mouth with dangerous teeth is actually not visible easily. Can it be that Michelangelo had on purpose hidden second mouth by placing it that high into natural shadow? Can it be that he put the mouse on the distance as if waiting until the time when we have special optic devices and lighting to see it?

Vasari quoting Michelangelo wrote that in 1000 years it will be not important who resembles whom when he was talking about statues of Lorenzo and Juliano. So, the Master knew that the next generations will care about meaning of his sculptures. Does it mean that Michelangelo had hidden his own interpretation until one millennium passes and right time for understanding comes? Maybe today, just 480 years after Michelangelo, it is too early to understand and we are not simply ready for it.

Panofsky writes in his article about the mouse that the wise old saga told by Barlaam to Josaphat formerly attributed to John of Damascus may inspire Michelangelo to think about mouse image. Also he mentioned that this story has an Indian origin.<sup>39</sup>

It is important to mention that in 1976 after Erwin Panofsky died, a great discovery was made in the Medici Chapel. The room with drawings by Michelangelo on the walls was discovered exactly under New Sacristy. Some experts still question if these drawings were made by Michelangelo. We completely agree with Charles Sala, who published in his book several of wall drawings (including legs of Lorenzo statue) with a remark that technique of the drawings witnesses that they were done by Michelangelo himself.<sup>40</sup>

More frequently the above mentioned box is regarded as a money box. This assumption commands special attention so long as a money box would be the most appropriately attributed to Lorenzo the Magnificent as to a banker, and it would hardly be suitable for his grandson

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37 Erwin Panofsky, *The Neoplatonic Movement and Michelangelo in "Michelangelo: Selected Readings"*, edited by William E. Wallace, N. Y., London, 1999, p. 599.

38 Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, Pennsylvania, 2003, p. 99.

39 Erwin Panofsky, *The Mouse that Michelangelo Failed to Carve*, p. 243–244.

40 Charles Sala, *Op. cit.*, p. 128

– also Lorenzo – who died early and was infamous for his notoriously bad rule of Florence. Finally, he never had anything to do with banking nor was he ever remembered for his charity exploits. It’s worth quoting the remark of Mary McCarthy about these dukes, Lorenzo and Juliano, as “two members of the family who would better have been forgotten.”<sup>41</sup>

The money box could serve to ascertain that the statue is dedicated to Lorenzo the Magnificent rather than his grandson. Famous art expert John Pope-Hennessy in his book *Italian Renaissance & Baroque Sculpture* made an important point. He wrote: “It is often difficult to follow the minds and motives of the great artist and at first sight nothing is stranger than the fact that Michelangelo should have looked for the last time in 1534 at the great statues strewn about the Chapel floor, and then for 30 years refused not only to place them in position, but even to explain how he intended that they should be placed. But his reason becomes more intelligible when we examine the individual sculptures”.

How can one prove, however, that the box under the statue’s elbow indeed relates to the money? What does a mouse have to do with it? An unexpected clue can be found in the Orient. We will use the word “mouse” because on different Oriental sculptures, statuettes and paintings the mouse, rat, mongoose, weasel looked very similar. A well-known British journalist and writer M. Palin in the hardcover edition of his book *Himalaya* made a comment on wall painting, which he saw on his way to Taksang-Buddhist temple in Bhutan. He wrote: “What I thought was a rat was a weasel, seen here disgorging pearls of wisdom”. In previous paper edition he wrote about “the curious symbol of a weasel disgorging pearls”. He was told that “the Guardian King of the North Direction traditionally holds a weasel, so anything emanating from a weasel’s mouth denotes good fortune.”<sup>42</sup>

It might have been a local translator’s linguistic mistake – and Palin actually saw the picture of another animal, because in Indo-Buddhist tradition “pearls of wisdom” or simple jewels produced by mongoose attributed to God Kubera or as we can show later by mouse (rat) that belongs to God Ganesha. (Perhaps, weasel should be added to the traditionally known sacred animals.)

It is more important to note that all these animals look very similar on the paintings and sculptures as we can understand from Palin’s passage and from our personal observations of many thankas («thangka», also known as «Tangka», «Thanka» or «Tanka» (Nepali pronunciation) is a Tibetan silk or paper painting with embroidery, usually depicting a Buddhist deity) and statuettes in Nepal as well as paintings and sculptures in different museums including the British Museum, Metropolitan Museum and, especially, Hermitage.

Robert Beer wrote: “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 mongoose “is often incorrectly identified with some other animals.”<sup>43</sup>

Russian Empress Catherine the Second ordered in 1778 to create in the Winter Palace (now part of Hermitage Museum) the full-scale copy of Vatican’s Loggia of Raphael made by this great artist and his school in 1517 - 1519. The artist Giovanni da Udine was responsible as assistant of Raphael for images of grotesque «mouses» in this Loggia and he worked later on the decoration in the Medici Chapel as assistant of Michelangelo. Raphael transfer the motifs and

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41 Mary McCarthy, *The Stones of Florence and Venice Observed*, London, 2006, p. 40

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

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



symbols of antique Roman drawings discovered in early XVI century in the grottoes and called “grotesques.”<sup>44</sup>

As the result we can see in Hermitage that Raphael and his people drew at least four different kinds of mouse (rat). One of them clearly is hinting a big and dangerous snake which is actually characteristic of mongoose and not rat. We can understand that in the time of antique Rome and even in the time of Raphael and Michelangelo any artistic or scientific zoological description and differentiation of these animals did not exist. Probably, mongoose was considered as some kind of rat. Big rat has approximately the same size as a small mongoose. (*Marmot*, the mountain mouse measuring up to 50 cm is found in mountainous areas of southern Europe. See drawings of Jacopo Ligozzi made for Grand Duke Francesco Medici in 1605 on the page 59 of the mentioned above catalogue of “Italian Master Drawings” exhibition in the national Gallery of Art, Washington).

We do not know what a mouse (rat) meant for antique Rome or for Michelangelo’s Florence, but we can see in the house of Michelangelo – Casa Buonarroti – a small old Roman statuettes of Topolino (small mouse). We can see in the famous Studiolo – office of the Duke Francesco Medici the First in Palazzo Vecchio – between other splendid paintings on the ceiling the image of a mouse (rat)-like animal exactly above the entrance. It is difficult to figure out what it symbolized and why it was situated between images of angels and beautiful naked goddesses. We will take a risk of stating that – based on its various features – the statue of Lorenzo resembles Indian statuettes depicting Hindu deities and gods. Some scholars have pointed out its distinctions from the European sculptural grave tradition that had existed before Michelangelo. However, in doing so they would usually attribute it to the great sculptor’s innovative approach.

The position of the statue of Lorenzo is very similar to many statues of Buddha, Tibetan or Indian gods, especially Ganesha. Also, if we pay attention to construction of back side of the helmet of Lorenzo and compare it to all known models of warrior’s helmets in different countries, we may suggest Oriental influence on the unique for West model of this helmet. A round overhead of the helmet is very similar to Indian, Chinese, Tibetan and Japanese helmets.<sup>45</sup> This overhead of the helmet became visible in full only when the statue was taken down 450 years after it was established by Michelangelo himself on the height of 4 meters above spectators eyes.

Helmet is important symbol. “The symbolism of helmets is akin to the symbolism of the head which they protect. It may be said in this context that they hide as well as guard the thoughts... The more or less elaborately decorated crest discloses the creative imagination and ambitions of the head which wears it”.<sup>46</sup>

Lorenzo’s helmet is executed in the collaboration with young sculptor Giovanni Montorsoli (1506 -1563) but it is no doubt that Michelangelo produced all ideas for its symbolic design.

We will now try to focus on the image of the mouse which is directly associated with the image of the Hinduist and Buddhist God of Ganesha depicted with an elephant’s head. The mouse – rat is his vahana – the animal that allows to distinguish him from other deities.

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44 N. Nikulin, *Loggia of Raphael in Hermitage*, (in Russian), StPetersburg, 2005, p. 2

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

Statues of many Indian gods have their own vahanas for this purpose but Ganesha is easily recognisable because of his elephant head. But the artistic depiction of the mouse of Ganesha and the mongoose of Kubera obviously look very much alike.

Ganesha is the God of wisdom and success. The mouse serves as the God's vehicle. It can usually be seen under his arm or foot, or (in its considerably overblown proportion) as his carrier. Sometimes Ganesha holds pot of jewels (ratna kumbha) in his hand. We found statuettes of Ganesha with mouse supplying this spot of jewels. Throughout our stay in Nepal, where the mixed Indian - Buddhist tradition has been preserved in the same form as it existed at the Hindustan Peninsula one thousand five hundred years ago, we discovered that according to the generally accepted belief Ganesha's mouse merges with and plays the same role as mongoose depicted usually in hand of Kubera, the God of wealth and prosperity (his Buddhist name being Jambhala). Both animals produce (vomit) precious stones thereby symbolizing the creator of affluence. Such images may be found on traditional Buddhist tanks – the pictures drawn on paper and silk.

During our meeting with a former Buddhist monk Lama Tsonamgel who is currently an owner of the famous workshop in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, which produced thankas (Buddhist icons on paper and silk) we found out that the image of Ganesh's mouse as a symbol of the wealth producer is very similar or even the same to mongoose of the god of wealth and prosperity Kubera. On the thankas 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.

Well-known expert on the Medici Chapel professor of Carnegie-Mellon University (USA) Edith Balas suggested after Panofsky, that the sculpture of Lorenzo was very similar to the conception of god Saturn. She wrote: "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 too deep that even Vasari and Condivi, his contemporaries and inmates, were unable to fathom it."<sup>47</sup>

So we can see that the idea of connection between the statue of Lorenzo and some antique god has already been discussed. It is important to mention that elephant-headed God Ganesha lost his first head, which "had been decapitated by the gaze of the planet Saturn" according to The Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs.<sup>48</sup>

We suggest to consider a possibility that Michelangelo, as well, might have been aware of the mouse being a symbol of prosperity and wealth and he used the image that he observed in the Indian tankas made on silk or in the statuettes. Someone may raise a doubt that Michelangelo could ever see any images of Oriental deities. To assuage such doubts, we would like to mention that Indian soldiers were present in Ancient Greece as part of the Persian troops already in 480 B.C.

Famous British historian Arnold Toynbee in his book A Study of History wrote about rat-like gods and images of mouse used in Buddhism. Also in his description of the role of different gods of Hinduism he made a reference to a thanka of 5th century A. D

Thankas and sculptures from India could have been brought to Italy with other oriental products, and Michelangelo might be familiar with them; he could also have met people who knew about Indian sculptures as well as the content of tanks. Later, in the IV century B. C., the

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47 Edith Balas. Op. cit. p. 67

48 Robert Beer, Op.cit., p. 82



troops led by Alexander the Great were sure to bring back home from India the statuettes of Hindu deities made of ivory, gold and silver. The thankas, which constitute the Indian-Buddhist icons made on silk, have been known in Europe since the VII century A. D., while intensive trade with India over the Mediterranean Sea in the days of Michelangelo was very likely to bring to Europe great varieties of Indian statuettes and silk thankas.

Socrates was described to engage in a dialogue with an Indian Brahmin, and there is a provoking historical concept according to which Pythagoras acquired most of his scientific and philosophical ideas in the VI century B. C. when he was traveling in India. Incidentally, the distance from the Ancient Greek towns in Asia Minor to India exceeds but slightly the distance to France. Neo-Platonism that became the state ideology of Florence during the reign of Lorenzo the Magnificent of the time of Michelangelo's maturity is rooted in antique Alexandria of the I century that already included the Hinduist and Buddhist communities. We should bear in mind that Buddhism is six centuries older than Christianity, and Hinduism is older by about three millennia.

The circulation of pieces of art between India and Europe might have provoked the circulation of ideas and artistic concepts that could lay the basis for deliberations at Platonic Academy in Florence which young Michelangelo might attend to hear; the renowned philosophers such as Pico della Mirandola, Ficino, and Policiano were indulged in a philosophical discourse. We should also remember that in the Ancient Greek tradition the mouse was associated with Apollo and Dionysus and that ancient Greeks used to refer to India as Dionysus' sacred territory. We hope that the researchers of the Medici Chapel will pay attention to the significance of the symbol of the mouse-like animal under the arm of the statue of Lorenzo, and our publication may be useful for its evaluation.

No sculptor has yet surpassed the Great Florentine, and until it happens (remember that Praxiteles had been "waiting" for Michelangelo for almost two millennia), we will be living in the epoch of Michelangelo Buonarroti.