

Tomb of Julius II

Thanks to the good offices of Giuliano da Sangallo, Julius II invited Michelangelo to come to Rome to design and execute his tomb. Thus began what Michelangelo called the «Tragedy of the Tomb», a story documented by forty years of letters, drawings, and accounts. In fact, the tomb that we see today in San Pietro in Vincoli was realized only after numerous designs, false starts, and adaptations, and is in no way comparable to the first grandiose project, which was followed by five other versions.

First (1505) No drawings have survived, but from the accounts of Condivi and Vasari, however conflicting, it appears that it was an isolated monument, not set against the walls, a true mausoleum of rectangular shape with a length of about 10 meters and a width of about 7. It was on three levels and tapered toward the top like a pyramid. The lower section, divided into three parts, was to have two large niches containing *Victories*, flanked by prisoners or slaves; a door in the middle led into the chapel inside. On two sides of the level above the niches were to be set four statues representing *Moses*, *Saint Paul*, *The Active Life*, and *The Contemplative Life*. On the top level, two allegories were to support a catafalque with the figure of Julius II. This plan was never carried out, even though Michelangelo had spent eight months choosing the marble in the quarries of Carrara, since the pope, taken up with military ventures and the reconstruction of St Peter's, gave him neither money nor an audience to explain things. This conduct led to a break in relations between the pope and the artist, who fled Rome and went back to Florence. «If I had stayed in Rome, it would have been my tomb that was made and not the pope's» he appears to have said, referring to the atmosphere of intrigue and rivalry in the artistic circles of Rome at that time. However, the pope wanted him back in Rome at any cost and used Gonfalonier Soderini as a go-between to persuade him: «We do not want to wage war with the pope on your behalf and put the state at risk.» So the artist gave in and went to meet the pope in Bologna.

Second (1513) On the pope's death in 1513, Michelangelo came to an agreement with his heirs to resume work on a modified version of the project: The tomb would now be set against the wall, the chapel eliminated, the number of statues on the front increased, and the height raised by the addition of a *Madonna and Child*.

Third (1516) By 1516, Michelangelo was already preparing another design for Julius's heirs: the number of statues were reduced and the tomb given a more architectural form. The lower section was to be the same and a bronze relief set on the second level. The pope would still be supported by two allegorical figures as in a *Pietà*.

Fourth (1522) In 1522, the pope's relatives wanted Michelangelo to give them back the money that had been paid in advance for the tomb. In 1524, they tried to prosecute an action to this end but were thwarted by Pope Clement VII. So, in 1526, a new design was prepared, for which there is at present no documentary evidence, but this did not please the clients. It has been supposed that it had a front with niches and a seated figure of the pope in the middle.

Fifth (1532) In 1532, Michelangelo, utilizing what had already been realized on the basis of the 1516 design, undertook to finish the tomb within three years. It was no longer to be located in St Peter's, but in San Pietro in Vincoli.

Sixth (1542) This was the design that Michelangelo finally put into effect between 1542 and 1545. The monument was laid out on two levels: on the lower one, *Moses* in the center was flanked by the figures of *Leah* and *Rachel*, set in niches with pillars surmounted by herms; on the upper level, an arch in the middle with the prone figure of the pope, and the figures of a prophet and sibyl between strongly projecting pillars; on top, the *Madonna and Child* in a niche. Michelangelo made considerable use of assistants in the execution of the monument, operating under his direction and to his designs: the Virgin, prophet, and sibyl are the work of Domenico Fancelli and Raffaello da Montelupo, the figure of the pope is by Tommaso Boscoli.