

The Project for the Façade of the Basilica of San Lorenzo

By the end of the fifteenth century, after the work carried out by Brunelleschi and his successors under Cosimo and Piero de Medici, the church of San Lorenzo was almost complete except for the facade, which had been left as rough masonry work, just as it appears today. With the restoration of the Medici in 1512 and his election to the papal throne, Giovanni de Medici decided that it was necessary to complete the construction of the building, a symbol of the family's patronage and of its repossession of the city. The idea for the project came from the temporary decorations erected for his entry into the city in November 1515, which included the wooden facade for Santa Maria del Fiore. Vasari tells us that many artists competed for the architectural project (Baccio d'Agnolo, Antonio da Sangallo, Andrea and Jacopo Sansovino, and even Raphael), but Michelangelo got the better of them and was given responsibility for both the architectural and the sculptural work. So, he went to Carrara to choose the marble while Baccio d'Agnolo, appointed his assistant, prepared the wooden model. The woodcarver's model, with ten statues placed on three levels, did not please Michelangelo, who dismissed it as a «child's thing,» and for this reason replaced Baccio d'Agnolo by Francesco di Giovanni. After several interruptions in 1520 and 1521, work was resumed, though with further interruptions, until 1534, when the death of Clement VII put an end to any hope of completing it. Numerous drawings and a wooden model made by Pietro Urbano attest to the existence of a series of designs, but the most important evidence comes from the sketches concerning the cutting of the marble blocks, dimensioned so accurately that they can be used to reconstruct the definitive design of January 1518. The facade would have had two orders separated by a fascia of panels in relief. It would have been decorated with columns and with statues and tondi representing life-size figures. A majestic and monumental design that would have changed the classic canons of the Renaissance facades that were still in use at the time.