

New Sacristy

Giulio de Medici's idea of building the New Sacristy of San Lorenzo dates from the summer of 1519. For the purpose he bought two buildings adjoining the church and had them demolished. The new building was to be constructed alongside Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy and used to house the tombs of the younger members of the family, the two Medici known as the Magnificent, Lorenzo and Giuliano (the latter assassinated during the Pazzi conspiracy), who were the fathers of Leo X and Cardinal Giulio; the Captains, Giuliano and Lorenzo (the brother and nephew of Leo X); and Popes Leo X and Clement VII, who were added only in 1524. In the original scheme, Michelangelo would have been responsible for the sculptural work alone, but his various contributions to the project led to him being placed in charge of the architectural work as well. Note how there is no correspondence between the exterior and interior in the New Sacristy. In fact, the structural part was built exactly as in Brunelleschi's model, and the interior was only modified later to make room for the tombs that were to be placed in it. Michelangelo adapted his design to suit the dimensions of the plan and the materials (pilasters of *pietra serena* set against a white wall). He also used the colossal order that Brunelleschi had inserted in the rear facade to frame the choir, but applied it to all four walls of the chapel, giving the architecture a tighter and more unitary rhythm. He retained the plan therefore, but not the elevation, in which he inserted an intermediate story to improve the illumination of the interior and of the lunettes that taper toward the top. A further modification to the original model was the coffered ceiling instead of an umbrella vault.

The project

The first project dating from 1520, which preserved the Brunelleschian structure of the building, envisaged tombs set in the corners. Some time later, Michelangelo proposed to the cardinal that the tombs be made independent and placed in the middle of a shrine with four faces. The cardinal objected that there was not enough room in the chapel for a monumental tomb, convincing Michelangelo to adopt the solution of double wall tombs for the Magnificent and individual ones for the Captains. The models for the Captain's tombs were only begun in 1524, when the marble had already begun to arrive from Carrara. The *Night* and *Dawn* were already complete by sometime between 1525 and 1526 and Lorenzo's tomb was set up in 1526. During the siege of Florence work was interrupted and not resumed until 1531, when Michelangelo finished the statue of Lorenzo and commenced that of Giuliano with the aid of Montorsoli. At the same time, the models for the *Heaven* and *Earth* were prepared. Michelangelo's departure from Florence in 1534 left the tombs incomplete and without the decorative part, which was entrusted to Giovanni da Udine. Responsibility for the final arrangement was given to Niccolò Tribolo and Raffaello da Montelupo, who completed it in 1545.

Iconological significance

In his design for this monument, Michelangelo gave expression to his own complex conception of humanity and the world. It is certainly a meditation on human life, on its brevity and tragicalness, as well as a glorification of the soul released from the prison of the body by death. The contemplation of the divine, represented by the *Madonna and Child*, is the ultimate goal of human beings, whatever suffering they may have experienced in their lives. To this typically Neoplatonic interpretation has recently been added a hermetic and alchemical one that is related to the architectural structure as well: the cubic interior of the chapel (a square) concluding in the hemisphere of the cupola (a circle) has been seen as an allegory of time. The expressiveness of this chapel is so dense and its sense of spirituality so lofty that it is hard to stop looking for the meanings that the artist intended to convey.