

THE FRANKLIN D. MURPHY LECTURES XIV

*The Liturgy of Love:
Images from the Song of Songs
in the Art of Cimabue, Michelangelo, and Rembrandt*

Marilyn Aronberg Lavin and Irving Lavin

COLORPLATE ON DUST JACKET: KING SOLOMON AND HIS BELOVED, 1090-1120, MANUSCRIPT ILLUMINATION.
BIBLE. REIMS, BIBLIOTHEQUE MUNICIPALE, MS 18, FOL. 149R.

Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Acknowledgments	xvii
Preface	xix
Introduction: Love in the "Canticum Canticorum"	1
I. Cimabue's Life of Mary: Mother and Bride	5
<i>Marilyn Aronberg Lavin</i>	
The Cycle at Assisi	
The Assumption of the Virgin	
Narrative and Theology	
The Politics of the Liturgy of Love	
II. Michelangelo's Medici Madonna: Spouse and Son	49
<i>Irving Lavin</i>	
Prolepsis	
Prevarication	
Seat of Wisdom	
Bundle of myrrh	
Time	
Ravished to heaven	
Perpetual praise	
Gentle yoke	
III. Rembrandt's Jewish Bride: Sister and Spouse	85
<i>Marilyn Aronberg Lavin and Irving Lavin</i>	
Isaac and Rebecca: The Chosen People	
The Garden of Love	
Marriage Made in Heaven	
Venus Pudica	
Jan van Eyck	
The Song of Songs as Social Intercourse	
Notes	105
Bibliography	133
Index	153

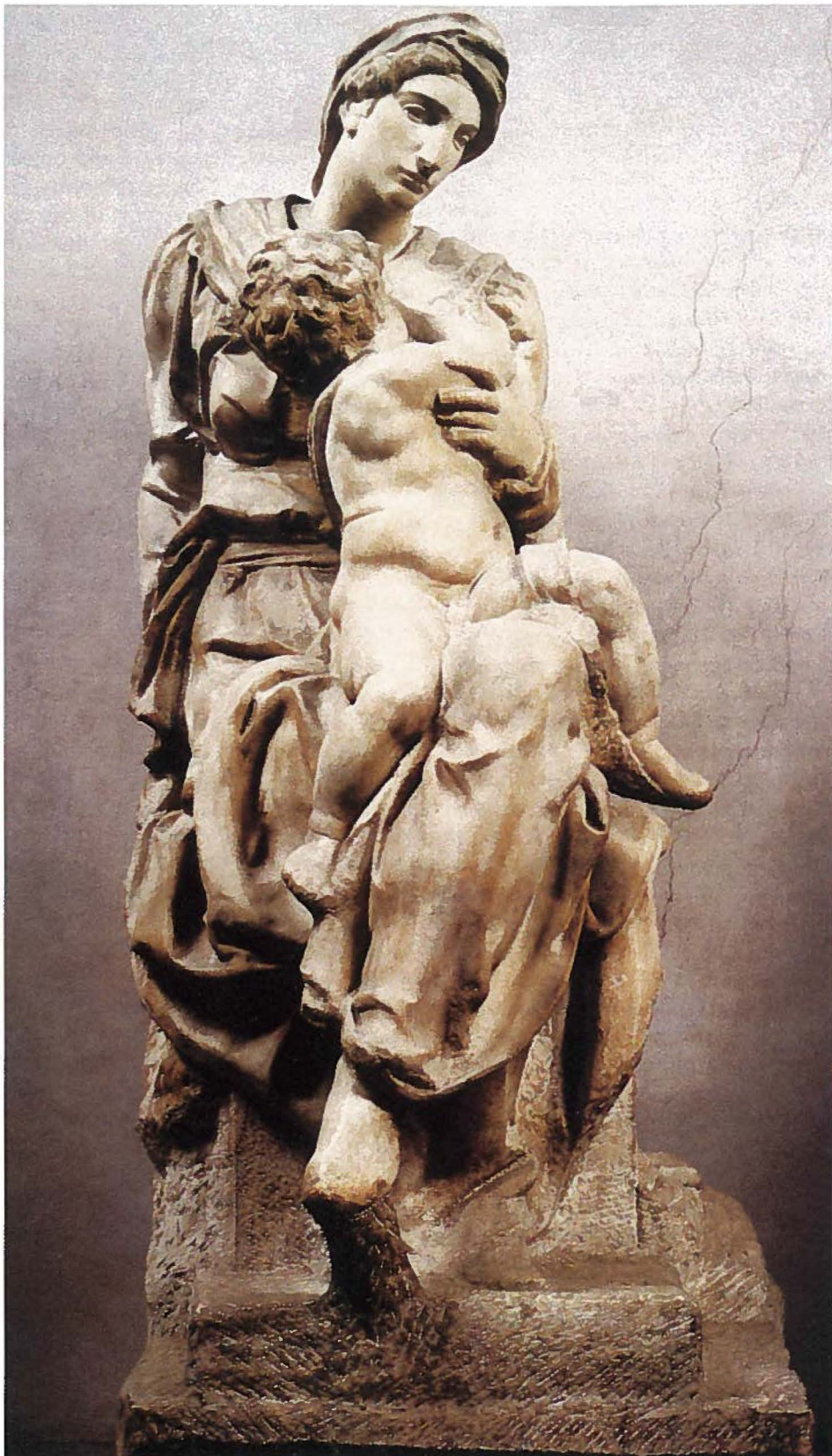


Figure 41. Michelangelo Buonarroti, The Medici Madonna. Florence, San Lorenzo.

Michelangelo's Medici Madonna: Spouse and Son

IT IS AN IRONIC TWIST OF FATE that profound and unexpected insights into the significance of one of the great monuments of European culture, the marble group of the Virgin and Christ Child executed by Michelangelo for the new funerary chapel he designed for the Medici rulers of Florence at the church of San Lorenzo, may be gained by viewing the sculpture from the back (Figs. 41 and 42). Seen thus it is apparent that the block from which the group was carved was intended for a much wider composition; at some point in its development the design was considerably narrowed. My purpose here is to explore the shift in Michelangelo's basic conception of the sculpture that is embodied in this change of format.¹

The history of the Medici chapel is immensely complicated—we know both too much and too little (Figs. 43–48). The bare facts are as follows. Commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, cousin of the reigning Pope Leo X (1513–1521) and later to become Pope Clement VII (1523–1534), the work was carried out chiefly between 1519 and 1533.² The chapel was unfinished when Michelangelo left Florence for Rome in 1534, never to return. The tomb figures remained strewn about the chapel floor and the Madonna, the block for which had been acquired early on, in 1521, was retrieved years later from Michelangelo's house. The sculptures as we see them were assembled by Michelangelo's followers while he was in Rome, and the chapel was opened in 1545.

Prolepsis

We know from many sources—reports on the project itself, records of the work, and preparatory drawings by Michelangelo or copied by his followers—that the chapel as we see it now is but a shadow of its intended self. Most important among the differences is that memorials were to have been included for two homonymous members of the Medici family, uncle and grand-uncle of the Giuliano and Lorenzo with whose tombs we are familiar. It cannot be stressed enough—in fact, it has not been stressed enough—that the task imposed by the commission, at least as Michelangelo interpreted it, was unprecedented: the project to erect in a restricted space no less than four monumental, sculptural commemorations, and at the same time provide for the accouterments of ordinary prayers and masses, pushed to the limits the tradition of the funerary chapel.³ Like Michelangelo's sculpture itself, the commission sought to compress more than humanly possible within the constraints imposed by physical reality. The evidence shows that the Madonna and Child was originally planned as the centerpiece of a complex structure attached to the wall opposite the altar (Fig. 49); the central group would have been flanked by figures of the patron saints of the Medici family, Cosmas and Damian, above the monuments



Figure 42. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Medici Madonna*, view of the back. Florence, San Lorenzo.

of the Magnifici, as they were called, the civilian counterparts of the military Capitani whose tombs adorn the lateral walls. In effect, this arrangement amalgamated the essential components of the traditional funerary chapel: the tomb of the deceased (in this case both the Magnifici), an altarpiece that included the patron saint, and a portrayal of the Virgin with her son, through whom she may intercede on behalf of the sinner to mitigate God's just wrath. Although the elements are common to many funerary chapels, Michelangelo took as his chief model for incorporating them into a structurally and thematically unified whole the chapel of the Cardinal of Portugal in San Miniato al Monte (1460–1468), which had itself created a new synthesis based on Early Christian sources to achieve what might be described as an ideal of noble Christian commemoration (Figs. 50 and 51).⁴

To understand the development of Michelangelo's thought it is essential to bear in mind three fundamental points concerning what might be called the theological and eschatological significance of the familiar image of the Virgin with the Christ Child. In this form the two figures together express, firstly, the lineal descent of Christ from the Godhead, that is, the virginal motherhood of Mary. The promise announced in the incarnation was only achieved through

- A. Old Sacristy
- B. New Sacristy
- C. Cappella dei Principi

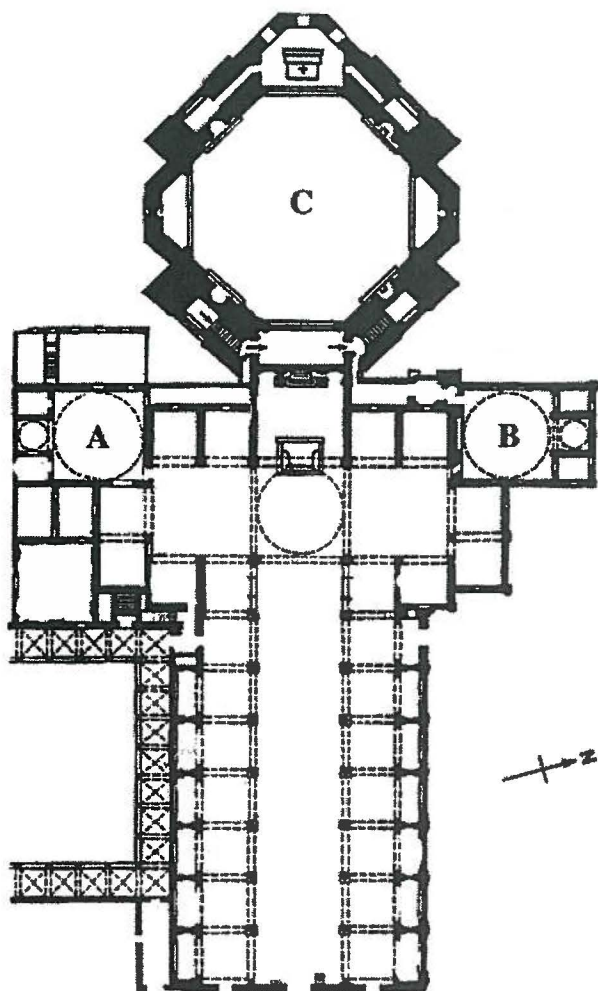


Figure 43. Plan of San Lorenzo, Florence.

Christ's death, and proleptic reference to the paradox of this sacrificial mode of salvation was the second critical ingredient of the image of the divine Motherhood. The third point of the Madonna and Child image was the universal motherhood of the Church established by God's union with his chosen bride, Mary-Ecclesia; through Mary-Ecclesia the entire process of incarnation, sacrifice, and salvation is perpetuated and extended to all mankind.

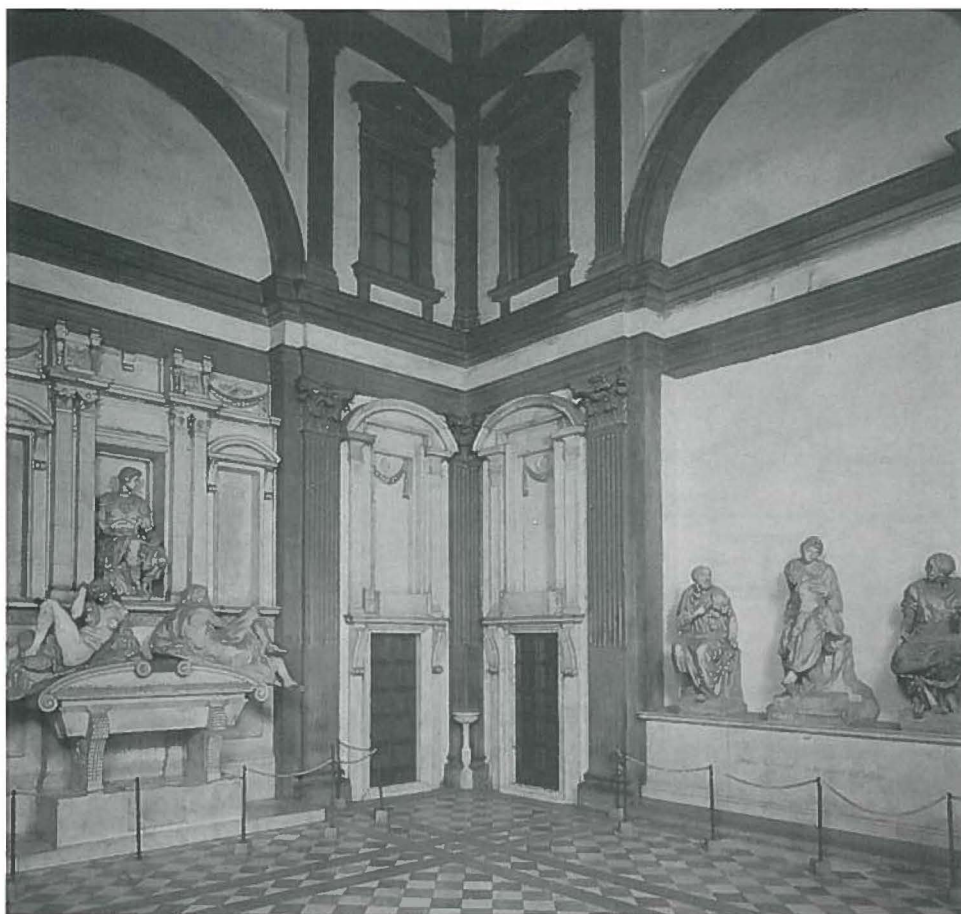
The Medici Madonna thus served a dual function, one devotional, as the centerpiece of a sort of quasi-altarpiece in which she is flanked by the patron saints, the other commemorative, as an image of intercession placed, as was frequently the case, above the tomb. This hybrid structure must be understood in part in relation to another extraordinary feature of the Medici chapel, namely, the orientation of the altar so that the priest faces, rather than turns his back to the congregation, which had been virtually the universal custom of the church for at least a thousand years (Fig. 52). Michelangelo was in fact adapting to his own purpose the rare instances where this orientation versus populum, as it was called, was still in use whether by ancient tradition or modern revival.⁵ In the first instance the device recalled the privileged altars of the popes in the ancient Roman basilicas, St. Peter's and Saint John's of the Lateran, no doubt in reference to the dignity of the reigning Medici pope. The arrangement had been elaborately revived nearly a century before Michelangelo by Brunelleschi at Santo Spirito in Florence; and at San Lorenzo itself, Brunelleschi, in the service of Cosimo de' Medici, Father of the city of Florence and founder of the political hegemony of the Medici family, had adopted this early Christian practice as part of his

transformation of medieval church architecture into a modern evocation of ancient, pristine Christianity (Fig. 53). Michelangelo's design enables the priest in the Medici Chapel to face the congregation in the "original" way, but also to face the altarpiece in the traditional way, except that it is on the other side of the room.

Whatever the motive, Michelangelo's arrangement incorporated all four walls into a coherent whole, formally, functionally, and psychologically. The worshipper is enveloped in a tightly drawn web of relationships between the priest at the altar and the effigies of the flanking tombs, all of whom look toward the entering visitor and the Madonna (Figs. 44, 47, 48).⁶

The drawings show that Michelangelo at first planned a much wider group with the Christ Child standing sideways between the Virgin's knees and reaching up toward a book, which she holds just beyond his grasp.⁷ The composition combined a number of motifs from the traditional repertory of Virgin and Child imagery, two of which I shall consider briefly. The first alludes to the "generative" nature of the relationship between the Virgin and Child, who stands between his mother's legs; it might be described as the Western, seated,

Figure 44. Michelangelo
Buonarroti, Medici Chapel.
View from altar toward south
(original entrance). Florence,
San Lorenzo.



and post partum version of Byzantine images of the standing, pregnant Virgin whose son is shown inside her transparent body (Fig. 54). In the Western Middle Ages the type evolved as the *Sedes Sapientiae*, the Throne of Wisdom, the appellation given to the Virgin Queen in reference to the seat of Old Testament wisdom, the Throne of King Solomon (Fig. 55). In the eleventh century, Peter Damian explicitly identified the womb of the Madonna as the Throne of Solomon.⁸ The generative implication of the motif was well-known in the Renaissance, and in his early Bruges Madonna Michelangelo combined this idea with that of the Christ Child taking his first, hesitant step into the world (Fig. 56).⁹ Michelangelo conveyed the portentous significance of this first step by the grave expressions of the figures and by the tension one senses in the turn of Christ's torso and the lingering clasp of his mother's hand. The second motif is that of the book held by the Virgin. Often the book simply indicates Mary's piety, but sometimes it relates to the theme of the education of the Christ Child, in which case it carries a heavy burden of meaning (Fig. 57). The book is God's word, the Book of Wisdom vested in the Virgin, in which the mystery of salvation is written. As such the book inevitably intimates the future Passion, which Christ tries to reach but his mother tries to hold off.¹⁰

It might be said that in the first version of the Medici Madonna Michelangelo solved the problem of combining the devotional function of an altarpiece with the funerary function of a tomb monument by conflating two traditional interpretations of the Virgin and Child theme, that of the Virgin as the progenitor of the Savior and the Seat of Wisdom, and that of the infant Christ predestined and prepared to achieve his sacrificial mission on behalf of mankind.



Figure 45. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici. Florence, San Lorenzo.



Figure 46. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici. Florence, San Lorenzo.

Prevarication

The shift from the initial to the final version of the group was not a single leap of the imagination, but reflected a series of projects recorded in drawings developed either sequentially, or as alternative solutions that resulted in the final synthesis.¹¹ Essentially, the process might be described as a cumulative effort to assimilate the proleptic element of the first version to two other cardinal themes of the image of the Virgin with the Christ child, the *Madonna Lactans*, in which the Virgin gives suck to her son, who is normally shown more or less in profile, and the predominant type of the *Sedes Sapientiae*, in which Christ is shown enthroned majestically and frontally on his mother's lap.¹² In this way, foreknowledge of Christ's sacrifice is combined with that of his ultimate triumph and the compassion Christ absorbed with his mother's milk, from which the grace of salvation ultimately descends.¹³ The key ingredients in the transformation—an overlapping of Christ's legs with those of the Virgin, as if he were about to ascend to her knee, and a twist in Christ's body from the front toward the back, where he reaches up to touch the Virgin herself—appear in a drawing in the Louvre (Fig. 58). With Christ's one foot on the ground between the Virgin's legs, the composition retains the generative implication of Christ's descent to earth from his mother's womb, and the proleptic reference is again manifested in the book the Virgin holds aloft. Subsequently, while the prolepsis is evident from the Virgin's gaze far off into the distance, Christ rises to straddle her right thigh and turns to grasp and suck at her right breast (Figs. 59 and 60).



Figure 47. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Medici Chapel, view toward northeast. Florence, San Lorenzo.

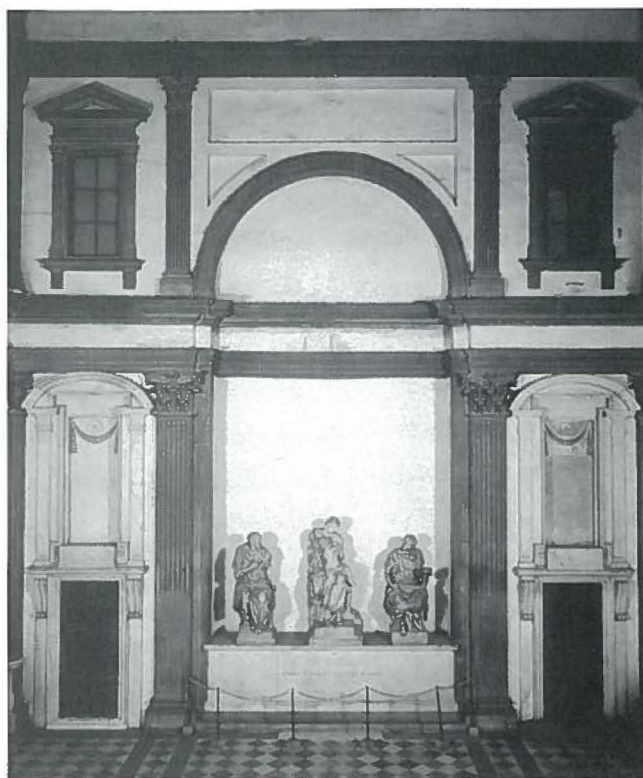


Figure 48. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Medici Chapel, view from behind the altar. Florence, San Lorenzo.

The theme of compassion, inherent in Christ's nourishment, and that of enthronement, thus appear together. Enthronement is here conceived as an intimate physical relationship, as expressed verbally in the famous invocation to the Virgin, *veni electa mea et ponam in te thronum meum/ ponam te in thronum meum* (concerning which see ??? above), and visually in a relationship that bears an uncanny likeness to the amorous couple Raphael designed in the Vatican Logge to portray Isaac and Rebecca in sanctified, marital embrace (Fig. 61). Isaac, it will be remembered, had presented Rebecca as his sister until Abimelech realized they were in fact married when he discovered them in flagrante love-making. The Old Testament spouses were progenitors of Christ and hence the hidden legitimacy of their intercourse was an essential link in the history of salvation. The duplicity of their relationship also made them prototypes of the deception that disguised the true generation of Christ himself. The invention of Raphael was destined to have an enormous influence in the subsequent history of love imagery, and I strongly suspect that Michelangelo was among the first to recognize its significance.

Raphael's composition evidently had a two-fold genesis. In a remarkable way, the Logge group seems to hark back to the late medieval images of loving couples, including those of the Virgin and Christ by Cimabue and the Cesi Master (see Figs. 17 and 21 and pp. 16-17 above). In addition to isolating the pivotal role of Isaac and Rebecca in the genealogy of Christ, Raphael must further have perceived the underlying analogy between the Old Testament spouses and the sponsa-sponsus of the Song of Songs—in the tradition of Honorius of Autun, who spoke of the ultimate union of Christ with Mary-Ecclesia in heaven (see p. 25 above). Raphael seems, in effect, to have transferred the late medieval image of heavenly copulation from the autonomous ideal of matrimony expressed in the Song of Songs to a narrative context in which divinely ordained physical union and procreation were the essential theme. The



Figure 49. Studio of Michelangelo Buonarroti, Wall Tomb, drawing. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

note that in each case Pliny qualifies the noun *symplegma* with the adjective *nobile*, a point that has been dismissed as senseless by modern editors but which I think must have seemed very significant indeed for Renaissance readers of the text. I suspect that the concept of the *symplegma nobile* played a critical role in the genesis of a whole series of groups with interlocking figures, including Michelangelo's own compositions with Hercules and Cacus, David killing Goliath, and Samson and a Philistine (Fig. 64).

In two further sketches essentially the same actions of Christ are shifted to the Virgin's left, which releases her right arm for independent movement (Figs. 65 and 66). In the drawing closest to the executed version, that in the Albertina, three fundamental changes occur: the torso of the Virgin is no longer nude and Christ no longer grasps her breast but rather turns his face and hand to her chest; the Virgin's right arm, at first extended outward, seems now to reach down at her side; and Mary now looks down toward the earthly realm of the worshipper. In the executed sculpture two features appear that were without precedent: with his left hand Christ grasps the Madonna's shoulder, so that together his gestures unmistakably evoke the lover's embrace described in the Song of Songs (2, 6), "his left hand is under my head and his right arm embraces me" (*laeva eius sub capite meo, et dextera illius amplexabitur me*), and the Virgin now crosses her legs, so that the enthronement of Christ is now complete. The change in the conception of the Madonna must have occurred at a relatively late stage in the development of the project. A *terminus post quem* is provided

genealogical association embodied in the figures' relationship may have had a literal component, as well. The love of Christ and Mary-Ecclesia in heaven, through which mankind's salvation is ultimately achieved, was often taken as the legitimate consummation of the illicit relationship between Adam and Eve that brought about man's original fall from God's grace and expulsion from Paradise. Christ was the new Adam, Mary the new Eve. It is surely not a coincidence in the context of Raphael's loving pair and Michelangelo's Medici Madonna, that the transgression of Adam and Eve was defined as an act of "prevarication," from "varicare," to straddle.¹⁴ The very term evokes the physical relationship portrayed in the visual tradition we have been following. This verbal parameter of the Christian tradition of love imagery has a striking counterpart in the classical term *symplegma nobile*, noble interlace, used by ancient writers to describe a compositional formula involving pairs of figures in intimate embrace.¹⁵ Pliny reports the celebrity of a sculptured group at Pergamon by Kephistodotos, the son of Praxiteles, with the figures interlaced and where the fingers seem to press on flesh rather than marble, and in another passage an interlaced group of Pan and Olympos. The term evidently described sculptures depicting couples in erotic embrace (Fig. 62), but might also apply to struggling figures like the famous pair of Hellenistic wrestlers discovered later in the sixteenth century (Fig. 63).¹⁶ It is important to



Figure 50. Antonio Manetti, Alesso Baldovinetti, Antonio Rossellino, Chapel of the Cardinal of Portugal. Florence, San Miniato al Monte, altar wall.



Figure 51. Antonio Manetti, Alesso Baldovinetti, Antonio Rossellino, Chapel of the Cardinal of Portugal. Florence, San Miniato al Monte, right lateral wall.

by the drawings for the Magnifici tomb showing earlier versions of the group, dated March-April 1524, in any event after Giulio de' Medici became Pope Clement VII, in November 1523.¹⁷ All the innovations in the final design are interdependent and serve to transform the altarpiece of the Medici Chapel from a quasi-narrative action into a profound and timeless meditation on the mysterious relationship between love and death that is the body and soul, as it were, of the Christian promise of salvation.

As far as anyone has been able to discover, the final version of the Medici Madonna is the first portrayal of the Virgin and Child in which the Virgin is shown with crossed legs.¹⁸ It has been suggested that the arrangement served to raise the child to his mother's bosom and grasp her shoulder with his left hand.¹⁹ Apart from this mechanical function, however, the pose had a long, independent tradition, in a variety of contexts where it conveyed a distinct expressive content. In antiquity a personification of the city that awaits the return of its wandering citizens might be shown thus, as might the forlorn Penelope who awaits Ulysses, Niobe mourning her children, the father of Prositelaus mourning his son, the Muses, especially that of history, Clio, personifications of captive provinces, and poets. In the Middle Ages the Old Testament prophets might be shown with crossed legs, so, too, the four evangelists, Pontius Pilate as the judge of Christ, and Michelangelo himself gave the crossed legs pose to the Erythrean sibyl who prophesied the coming of Christ and the Last Judgment (Fig. 67). However different these appropriations may seem, they all have a common denominator in the very processes of thought: intellection, contemplation, judgment, meditation on the passage of time, foreboding.



Figure 52. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Medici Chapel, view of the altar wall.

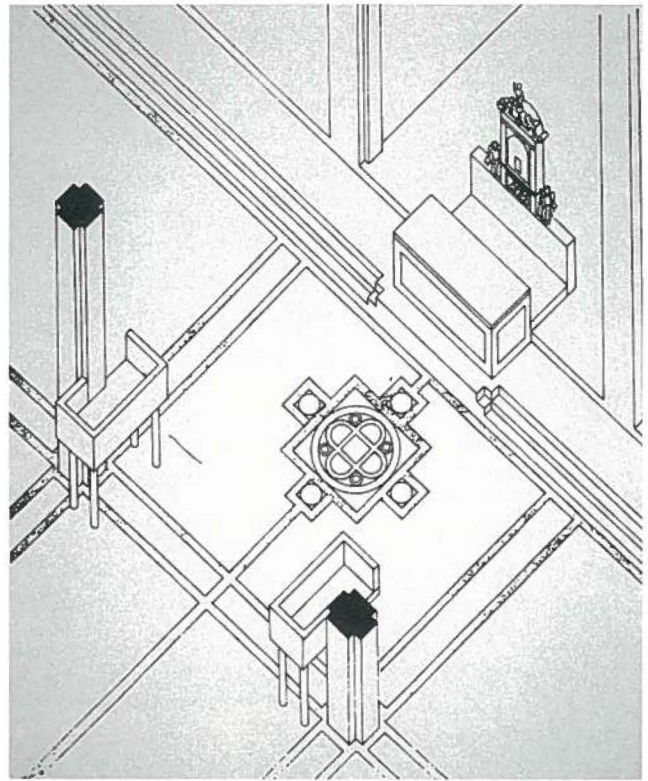


Figure 53. Reconstruction drawing of the tomb of Cosimo de' Medici and the crossing of San Lorenzo.

Seat of Wisdom

The full import of the motif only emerges in connection with two innovative details that make clear what Michelangelo had in mind—with her right arm the Virgin reaches down and grasps the top of her seat, which is not an ordinary chair or throne but consists of a cubic block with a curving protuberance at the side, no doubt intended as a floral swag like those that commonly decorate ancient altars (Fig. 68). The seat can only have been meant to suggest what it is, a block of stone whose ornament alludes to the pagan sacrifice supplanted by that of Christ. Michelangelo used the motif twice before, in the *Madonna of the Stairs* and in the *Pitti Madonna*, where the child contemplates the open book held by the Virgin, who wears a diadem with a cherub's head signifying her gift of prophetic knowledge (Figs. 69 and 70).²⁰ The stony seat is a familiar symbol of patience in the endurance of hard adversity, and in cubic form it makes clear reference to the immobility of the virtuous "homo quadratus," the four-square man, as we would say.²¹ The concepts of Wisdom and Virtue were closely related, and in Charles de Bovilles's *Liber de sapiente*, published in 1510, the personification of Sapientia is seated on a block labeled "Sedes virtutis quadrata" (Fig. 71).²² In Christian terms, of course, the most familiar stone (Latin *petra*) is that of Peter, on whom Christ founded his church; the pun is pluperfect here, where the stone in fact supports the mother church who nurtures her son, and illustrates the concept of the Madonna "super petram," with the stone understood as Christ.²³ Of no less importance, however, is a passage from the prophet Isaiah 28,16: "Therefore thus saith the Lord God: Behold I will lay a stone in the foundations of Sion, a tried stone, a corner stone, a precious stone, founded in the foundations. He that believeth, let him not hasten."²⁴ It is significant in our context, as we shall see, that Savonarola actually described Christ as the cornerstone joining the walls of the Jewish and Christian churches.²⁵ But the passage also relates the stone on which the church would be founded to



Figure 54. Madonna Platytera.
Venice, Scuola di San Giovanni
Evangelista.

Figure 55. Sedes Sapientiae,
altar frontal from Carrière-St.-
Denis. Paris, Musée du Louvre.



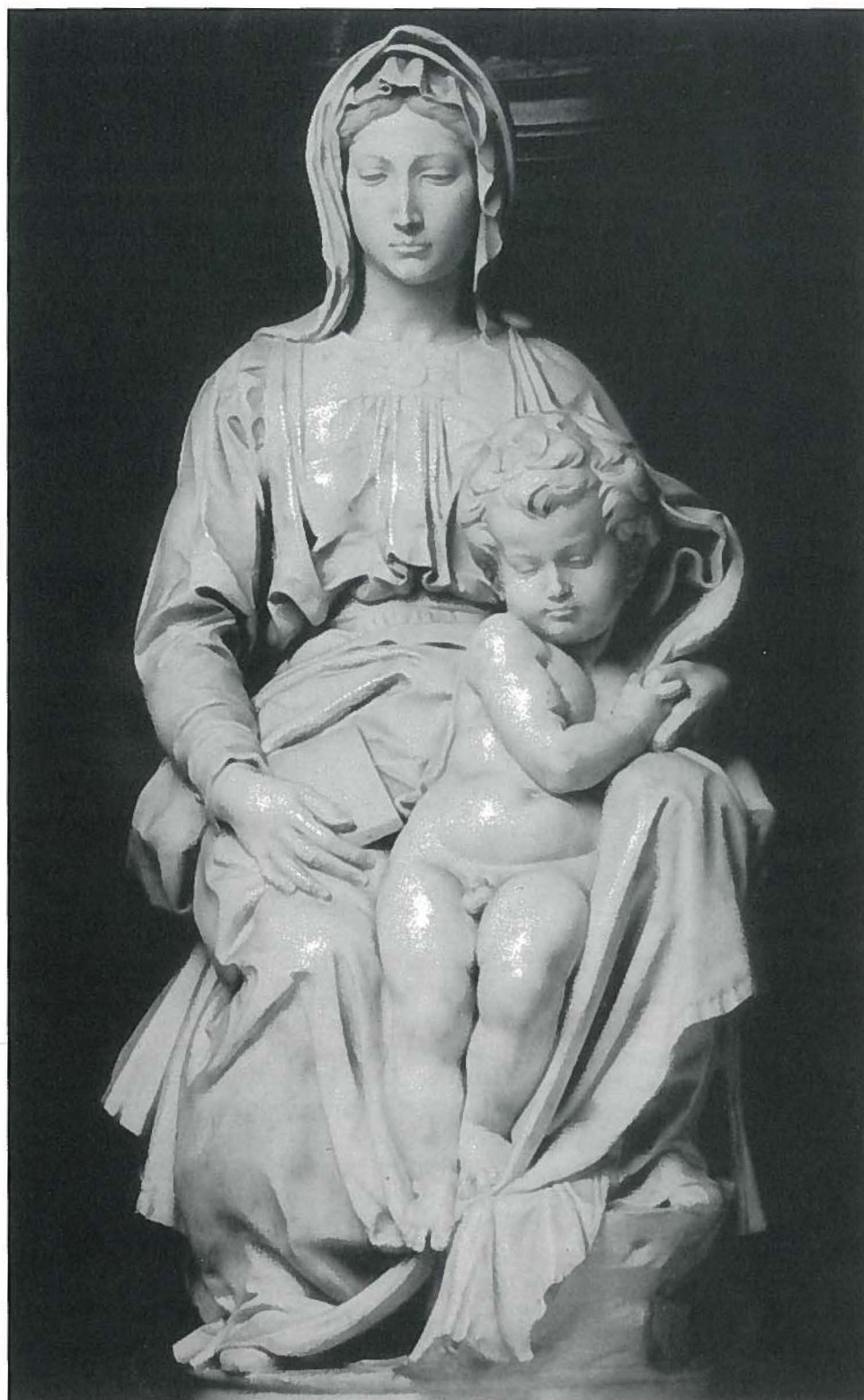


Figure 56. Michelangelo
Buonarroti, Madonna and
Child. Bruges, Nôtre-Dame.



Figure 57. Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna and Child*. Milan, Museo Poldi Pezzoli.

Figure 58. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Madonna and Child*, drawing. Paris, Musée du Louvre.



the patience of the believer who does not hasten but remains firm in his faith. The word "patience," like "passion" derives from the Latin *patior*, meaning to suffer, and the two complementary aspects of the squared block, perdurance and rectitude, were attributes of Christ, "*homo quadratus*," the tried and precious cornerstone. The block was combined with the crossed-legs pose of Patience in an image that Michelangelo surely knew, Albrecht Dürer's woodcut showing the suffering Christ, "*Christus Patiens*," seated on his tombstone (Fig. 72).²⁶ The print, which serves as the frontispiece to Dürer's series illustrating the Passion, does not depict any particular moment in the narrative but distills its very essence into a pure, iconic picture of enduring self-sacrifice.

One of the cardinal principles of Mariolatry is that the Madonna shared Christ's passion in every respect, suffering as he suffered, enduring as he endured. In fact, the compassion—*compassio* is the technical term—of the Madonna is what makes her the unfailing intercessor with her son, who can refuse her no request, and earned her the right to sit beside him as Queen of Heaven.²⁷ Michelangelo applied Dürer's concept to the Madonna by appropriating the ancient type of knowing forbearance and constancy, the figure sitting crossed-legs on a cubic stone, on which one hand rests as a further indication of determined stability (Fig. 73).²⁸ Evidence that this complex of imagery was familiar in Michelangelo's time is provided by a depiction of the



Figure 59. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Madonna and Child*, drawing. Florence, Casa Buonarroti.



Figure 60. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Madonna and Child*, drawing. London, British Museum.

triumph of Patience by the German artist Hans Sebald Beham showing Patience seated cross-legged on a column, a common emblem of stability and fortitude, and embracing a lamb, the Christian symbol par excellence of yielding self-immolation (Fig. 74).²⁹ The Christian context is also evident from the presence of the Devil, whose imprecations she steadfastly ignores. Patience's eyes are closed; she is clearly asleep, and the seductions of the devil are thus specifically nightmarish. This explains the fact that the figure insistently recalls Michelangelo's *Night on the Giuliano tomb*, who is haunted by the horrendous face that masks the fraudulent fantasies of sleep, and is watched over by the wise and vigilant owl (Fig. 75).

Bundle of Myrrh

Underlying these changes from the first version of the *Medici Madonna* is a fundamental shift of emphasis from action to contemplation, from foreknowledge to forebrooding. The earlier version was a kind of encapsulated reenactment before the fact of the process of salvation from birth to sacrifice, whereas the final version creates a sense of suspended animation. The idea that



Figure 61. Raphael, Isaac and Rebecca. Rome, Vatican Palace, Logge.

motivated this shift may be discerned, I believe, from the last of the anomalous features of the Madonna and Child, who is always described as suckling at the breast of his mother (Figs. 76 and 77). Yet, the Virgin's upper torso is fully and explicitly covered, and Christ's face is buried deep *between* her breasts. There was some precedent for showing the Christ child facing his mother with his back to the spectator (Fig. 78), and Michelangelo had adapted this idea in the earliest sculpture of his that has come down to us, the Madonna of the Stairs (see Fig. 69); in allusion to the theme of the *pietà*, the Christ child seems to have fallen asleep at his mother's breast, his arm dangling down, as if having absorbed the passion itself from her milk.³⁰ The motif seen in the Medici Madonna is unprecedented, however, and this dramatic departure from the familiar modes of representing the Mother and Child provides a clue to the ultimate meaning of the group and, so I believe, to many aspects of the imagery of the Medici Chapel. To grasp the implications fully, however, one must bear in mind two more fundamental tenets of the church's interpretation of the role of the Virgin in the process of salvation, centered on the Song of Songs, the Old Testament book that is the very turning point of the idea that the Church of Christ replaced the Synagogue.³¹

Hebrew tradition regarded this supremely passionate lyric, in which the yearning of the lover for the beloved is couched in an effusion of similes and allusions, as one of the most important of the Books of Wisdom, expressing metaphorically the affection of Jahweh for his chosen people. Christian thinkers appropriated this view and for them the Canticle became the key prophetic book of the Old Testament, celebrating the union of God, through Christ, with the church on earth. The Song of Songs thus represented the incorporation of the



Figure 62. Hermaphrodite and Satyr. Dresden, Skulpturen-Sammlung.



Figure 63. Wrestlers. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

Old Dispensation in the New, announcing the establishment of Christianity. In the course of the Middle Ages this doctrinal, institutional interpretation came to be suffused by a more precise and personal identification of the vehicle of divine insemination as the Virgin, who thus herself came to be identified with institutionalized Christianity, defined as the Mother Church, Mary-Ecclesia. As the vehicle of temporal salvation on earth, Mary is Christ's mother; as the vehicle of eternal salvation in heaven, Mary is Christ's bride and the Queen of Heaven.

There were three essential links in this chain of salvation: God's love for mankind, which motivated the process, Christ's sacrifice, which effected atonement, and the Virgin's foreknowledge of the whole process, which attested to its divine origin. The heroic enterprise of converting the Song of Songs into this great structure of Catholic doctrine identifying Mary with the Church, was accomplished in the twelfth century—during the same period, and often under the same sponsorship, as the first great church buildings of the High Middle Ages were erected, the Romanesque basilicas. Among the churchmen who participated in the enterprise of creating a new, totally Marian interpretation of the Canticle, the most important were, in the early twelfth century, Rupert, abbot of the Benedictine monastery at Deutz, who was the first to offer a wholly Marian reading, and, later in the century, St. Bernard, founder of the great and glorious Cistercian monastery at Clairvaux, whose impassioned voice in praise of the Virgin earned him the title of the "Mellifluous Doctor" of the Church. Although the specific details of Rupert's and Bernard's readings of the text were largely compiled from earlier sources, their consistently Marian interpretation and inspired tone were enormously influential, providing a coherent and compelling framework for Christian understanding of the biblical message. Two principles of the Marian interpretation are essential in our context. One was the idea of Mary herself as the faithful prophetess who linked the Old Dispensation to the New and replaced the Church of the Old Testament with the "true Jerusalem." As a corollary, the breasts of the beloved in the Song were taken constantly as symbolizing the Old and New Testaments, with the sacrificial Christ between. The related idea was that, as prophetess, Mary knew from the beginning the fate of her son. This concept is reflected, for example, in the

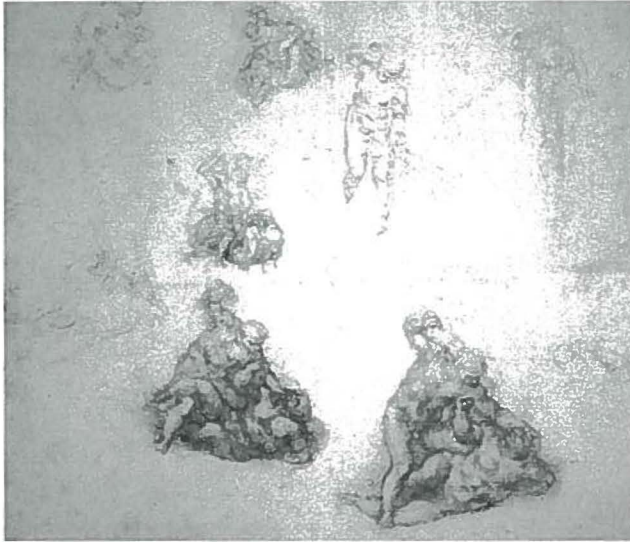


Figure 64. Michelangelo Buonarroti, studies for Samson killing a Philistine, drawing. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.



Figure 65. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Madonna and Child, drawing. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Merode altarpiece of Robert Campin (Fig. 79), where the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation brings not only the body of Christ, but also the cross, not only as a symbolic reminder to the spectator but also as a proleptic message to the Virgin.

These two interrelated themes are brought to bear by Rupert of Deutz on a passage in the Song of Songs that I believe Michelangelo had in mind when he redesigned the poses and actions of the figures of the Medici Madonna. The passage, chapter 1, verse 13, reads as follows in the King James version:

A bundle of myrrh is my well beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts.³²

Speaking for the Virgin, Rupert says, "For I was a prophetess, and because I was his mother, I knew he was going to suffer these things. When, therefore, I fondled such a Son, born of my flesh, at my bosom, carried him in my arms, nursed him at my breasts, and had always before my —nay, more than prophetic—mind, what kind of passion of maternal grief, how much and how extensive, do you imagine me to have endured? This is what I mean when I say: 'A bundle of myrrh is my well beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts.' O sojourn, sweet indeed, but filled with unutterable groanings."³³

St. Bernard devoted one of his eighty-six sermons to this verse, which he interpreted explicitly as a presentiment of the passion of Christ: "Because myrrh is a bitter herb it symbolizes the burdensome harshness of afflictions." The burden of the bitter bundle is not light to carry: "there is nothing light about the cruel passion or the bitter death—only the lover finds it light. Hence she does

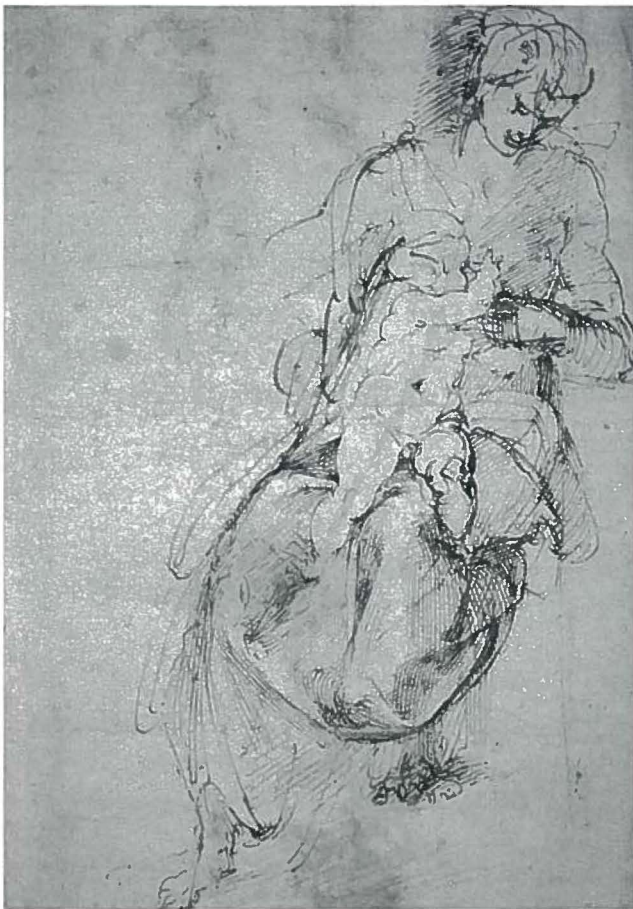


Figure 66. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Madonna and Child, drawing. Vienna, Albertina.



Figure 67. Michelangelo Buonarroti, The Erythrean Sibyl. Rome, Sistine Chapel.

not say: 'My beloved is a bundle of myrrh'; but rather he is a bundle of myrrh 'unto me,' because I love. That is why she calls him 'beloved,' to show that the power of love can prove superior to all the miseries of suffering for 'love is strong as death.' As proof, too, that she does not glory in herself but in the Lord, that she does not presume on her own strength but on his, she says that he will lie between her breasts. To him she sings with safety: 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.'"³⁴ Bernard sees the bundle of myrrh as the emblem of Christ crucified and urges his listeners to "place it at the very center of your bosom where it will protect all the avenues to your heart. Let it abide between your breasts."³⁵ The custom of wearing the crucifix suspended on a chain between the breasts was said to have been inspired by this interpretation of the passage in the Song of Songs, and in one of the most important early printed books, which illustrates the Song of Songs, Mary-Ecclesia is shown carrying the crucified Christ before her bosom (Fig. 80).³⁶ The familiar line in Bernard's text from the twenty-third Psalm, which is recited in the Office of the Dead, makes it a particularly apt gloss on the Medici Madonna as the intercessory image in a funerary chapel.

Time

It seems to me that the main innovations of the Medici Madonna, her rock throne, her crossed legs, and the Christ child burying his face between the breasts of the Virgin, may all be understood in the light of this fundamental tradition of meaning associated with the Song of Songs, and particularly verse 1, 13: the Virgin who foresees and endures her son's passion, and the foredoomed



Figure 68. Michelangelo Buonarroti, The Medici Madonna, right side.



Figure 69. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Madonna of the Stairs. Florence, Casa Buonarroti.

Christ child who, in fulfillment of the ancient prophecies, eagerly “enshrines” his head in the bosom of the Church until the end of time. Christ’s action epitomizes the sense of expectancy engendered in the chapel by the poised and watchful figures, and this quality of suspended animation evokes another, eschatological level of meaning that is the necessary complement to the Mariological implications we have considered so far. Indeed what has been said so far—virtually all of which referred to the role of the church, Mary-Ecclesia, in the commemoration of the passion—only makes full sense when one recalls that the chapel was dedicated to the Resurrection.³⁷ Christ, who lies all night in the bosom of his bride and mother, will arise and one day return, and the denizens of the chapel, both dead and alive in effigy, await and meditate upon that time. In fact, if any single theme underlies the significance of the Medici Chapel, I should say, it is time. This is the theme, to begin with, that underlies the two, and only two, references to the meaning of the chapel that have come down to us from Michelangelo himself. One of these statements, which appears on a sheet of architectural sketches, concerns the tomb of Giuliano (Fig. 81):

Heaven and Earth



Figure 70. Michelangelo
Buonarroti. Pitti Madonna.
Florence, Museo Nazionale del
Bargello.



Figure 71. Fortune and
Wisdom, woodcut (after
Boville 1510).

Day and Night speak, and say, "We have with our swift course brought to death the Duke Giuliano; it is just that he take revenge upon us as he does, and the revenge is this: that we having slain him, he thus dead has taken the light from us and with closed eyes has fastened ours so that they may shine forth no more upon earth. What would he have done with us then while he lived?"³⁸

The point, in essence, is that while time stops life, the death of Giuliano stops time, and in the end the poignant question remains, what might Giuliano have achieved had he lived? The second pronouncement occurs on a drawing for the double tomb of the Magnifici (Fig. 82), which was to have included a figure of Fame holding an inscription: "Fame holds the epitaphs still; it goes neither forward not backward for they are dead and their action is stopped."³⁹ Both formulations, apart from commenting on the ephemerality of life and the pursuit of glory, had personal resonances for Michelangelo. The former is echoed in a dialogue written not long after the artist abandoned work on the Medici Chapel sculptures, by his close friend Donato Giannotti.⁴⁰ The title of the dialogue, in which Michelangelo is given a leading role, is "How Many Days Dante Spent in Hell." The subject of the exchange, singularly appropriate for the Medici Chapel, is the measurement of time between death and redemption, and many of Michelangelo's speeches quote passages from the *Divine Comedy* on the succession of night and day. The second epitaph about fame and time evidently reflects one of the best-known works of the author to whom Michelangelo was most devoted after Dante, that is, Petrarch, whose *Trionfi* describe the ascending succession of earthly values toward the Triumph of Fame, which is followed by the Triumph of Time, to climax with the Triumph of Religion—a progression that



Figure 72. Albrecht Dürer, *Man of Sorrows*, woodcut. Frontispiece of the *Large Passion*.



Figure 73. *Seated Muse*, engraving (after Bisschop, 1669).

may also be said to underlie the meaning of the Medici Chapel.⁴¹

Ravished to Heaven

Much of what today seems obscure in the meaning of the chapel would have been clear had the mural decoration Michelangelo originally planned been carried out. We know the pope wanted to have a narrative decoration in the chapel and it has been suggested that a number of drawings by Michelangelo of the resurrection of Christ were intended for the lunette above the Virgin (Fig. 83), so that the theme of fulfillment of the promise of salvation would have been plain to see.⁴² The decorations would have culminated, both literally and figuratively, at the apex of the chapel, in the lantern of the cupola (Fig. 84). In a letter to Michelangelo of 7 July 1533, his friend and protégé, the painter Sebastiano dal Piombo, offers an astonishing suggestion for the lantern cupola—a representation of Ganymede, portrayed as John of the Apocalypse ravished to heaven: “As to the painting in the vault of the lantern, Our Lord [viz., Pope Clement VII] leaves it to you to do what you like. It seems to me that Ganymede would go well there, providing him with a halo so that he would appear as St. John of the Apocalypse ravished to heaven.”⁴³ This proposal may at first seem to



Figure 74. Hans Sebald Beham, *Patience*, engraving.



Figure 75. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Night*. Florence, San Lorenzo.

be an incongruous whim of Sebastiano's, and it has sometimes been dismissed as a joke. In fact, Sebastiano must have been confirming his approval of Michelangelo's own thought, partly because the passage was evidently written in response to a previous suggestion or inquiry by the artist, but mainly because the theme itself lends a deep level of significance to the Medici Chapel and, in my view, provides the ultimate key to its message.⁴⁴ Strangely, it has not been pointed out that a reference to St. John is singularly appropriate given the fact that the New Sacristy, as it was called, even though this was never its function, was specifically conceived as the counterpart to the Old Sacristy, which also served as the tomb chapel of Giovanni d'Averardo de' Medici, father of Cosimo Pater Patriae (Fig. 85).⁴⁵ Cosimo commissioned Donatello to execute the decorations of the chapel, which was dedicated to Giovanni's patron saint, including a series of stucco relief narratives depicting the life of St. John (Fig. 86). The reference to St. John in the New Sacristy was the thematic equivalent of its visual and conceptual correspondence to the Old Sacristy, across a century of Medici patronage of the church and hegemony over Florence.

The unexpected reference to St. John through Ganymede was presumably evolved from the famous drawing of Ganymede abducted to Olympus by Zeus in the form of an eagle, which Michelangelo had presented to his beloved young friend Tommaso Cavalieri, shortly before designing the Medici Chapel (Fig. 87).⁴⁶ The result, and no doubt the point, of the association would have been a dramatically illusionistic depiction of St. John carried aloft by his symbolic eagle, through the oculus at the apex of the chapel. Although unprecedented in itself, such a portrayal of John would have been related to depictions of the evangelists



Figure 76. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Medici Madonna*, left side. Florence. San Lorenzo.



Figure 77. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Medici Madonna*, detail.

seated on their respective symbols, sometimes even cloudborne (Figure 95). However, this conflation with Ganymede was quite different, and was based on the two quintessential aspects of the role of St. John in the process of salvation: as evangelist and as apostle of Christ—both linked though his symbolic eagle.

As evangelist, John's authorship of the fourth gospel and the Book of Revelation was what associated him with the eagle in the first place. In his gospel, more than all the evangelists, John defined the cosmic import of the New Law ("In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," 1, 1) and the spiritual significance of the incarnation ("And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we behold his glory," 1, 14). And in the Book of Revelation, which he composed high on the pinnacle of Mount Patmos, he recounted his great vision of the City of God, the Heavenly Jerusalem. The most common epithet of John, in fact, was that to him alone God had vouchsafed the secrets of heaven. This understanding of John the Evangelist's role in the revelation of God's plan of salvation is reflected in St. Jerome's explanation of the prophet Ezechiel's vision of the four heavenly creatures with the faces of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle, which John echoes in his own Revelation.⁴⁷ Jerome interpreted the four creatures as allusions to the four gospels, and he describes the eagle as the wings upon which John rose to greater heights to discuss the word of God.⁴⁸ The eagle was appropriate not only because it soared nearest to God but also because of all God's creatures it alone



Figure 78. Attributed to Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna with an Angel and St. John*. Turin, Galleria Sabauda.



Figure 79. Robert Campin, *The Merode Altarpiece*, central panel. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters.

was able to gaze directly into the sun, which became the metaphor for John's inspired vision.⁴⁹

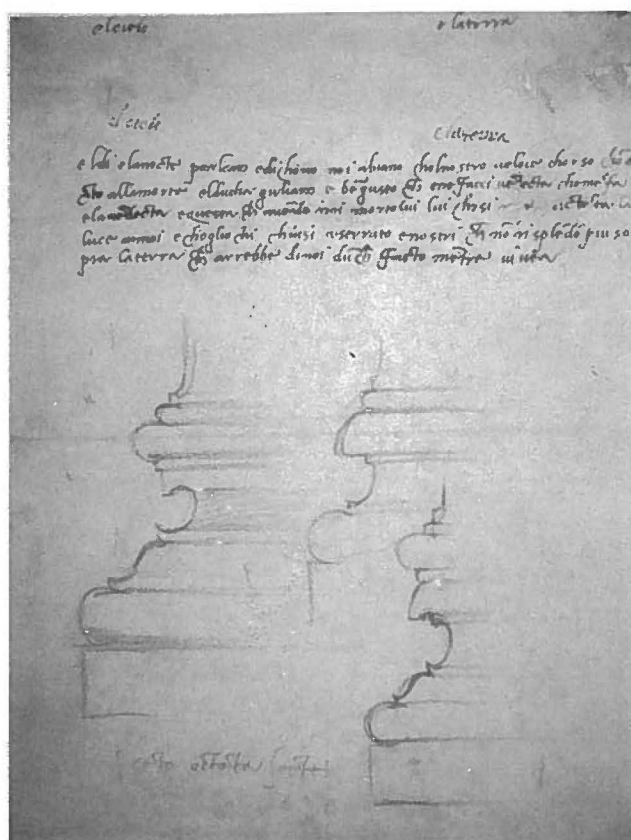
The analogy with Ganymede was evinced, in part, by the apostle John's personal relationship to Christ as described in his own gospel. John repeatedly refers to himself, always indirectly, as Christ's beloved, for which he was accorded a series of unique privileges. At the Last Supper, that is, at the institution of the Eucharist, which commemorates Christ's sacrifice, he reports that he was allowed to rest his head on the bosom of the Savior: "Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved" (John 12, 23)—a passage that was often linked to the one in the Song of Songs to which I believe Michelangelo's *Medici Madonna* alludes. On the Cross Christ conveyed to him the care of his mother, so that John became the particular guardian of the Virgin: "When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home" (19, 26–7). John was the first apostle, after Mary Magdalene, to have knowledge of the Resurrection: "Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved...and the other disciple came first to the sepulchre" (20, 2–4). Finally, at the end of his gospel John reports the enigmatic exchange that gave rise to the tradition that John was taken to heaven before he died: "Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper. . . . Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me. Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" (21, 20–3).

Christ loved John as Zeus loved Ganymede, and indeed, as Ganymede was the only ordinary mortal Zeus transported directly to Olympus, so John was accorded the same privilege, which only the prophets Elijah and Enoch of the Old Testament enjoyed—that of direct, physical assumption into heaven.⁵⁰ In the Golden Legend Jacobus de Voragine, citing Isidore of Seville, recounts that



Figure 80. Mary-Ecclesia with the Crucifix, woodcut, ca. 1465.

Figure 81. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Architectural moldings for the Medici Chapel, with poem, drawing. Florence, Casa Buonarroti.



Christ appeared with the disciples to the aged apostle at Ephesus, saying that John would join them on the following Sunday; thereafter John, in preparation for death, had a tomb dug in the floor before the altar of his church and on the appointed day stepped inside and prayed, whereupon there was a blinding flash and the saint disappeared.⁵¹ Christ's redemption of John from Ephesus had often been portrayed as a conflation of these two episodes from the legend: Christ, surrounded by his disciples as a heavenly apparition, lifts John bodily from the earth.⁵² John's assumption had a specific soteriological overtone that is relevant to the dedication of the Medici Chapel: in a Tuscan altarpiece of the early fifteenth century, the assumption of John is crowned by a portrayal of Christ's Descent into Hell after his death and before his Resurrection, to rescue mankind from Satan (Fig. 88).⁵³ This interpretation of John's end was much debated, since it placed John on a par with the Virgin; indeed John's virginity was a virtue frequently stressed in accounts of his life, and his end, surrounded by the apostles and carried heavenward by Christ, was comparable to that of the Virgin.⁵⁴ Representing John borne aloft on his eagle obviated this objection, while retaining a metaphorical reference to the salvific power of God's love.

The dual nature of the association between Ganymede and St. John—predicated on the eagle as both symbol of divine thought and vehicle of divine love—was expressly stated by Petrus Berchorius in his *Moralized Ovid* long before the Medici Chapel.⁵⁵ Berchorius evoked both aspects of the relationship, identifying Ganymede with St. John and the eagle with Christ: "Ganymede was a most beautiful boy who, beloved by Jove in the form of an eagle, was suddenly ravished to heaven and made into a star. . . . That eagle signifies limpidity as Ganymede signifies the young and graceful John the Evangelist, for the eagle is the subtlety and clarity with which he, ravished to the sky, was able to speak

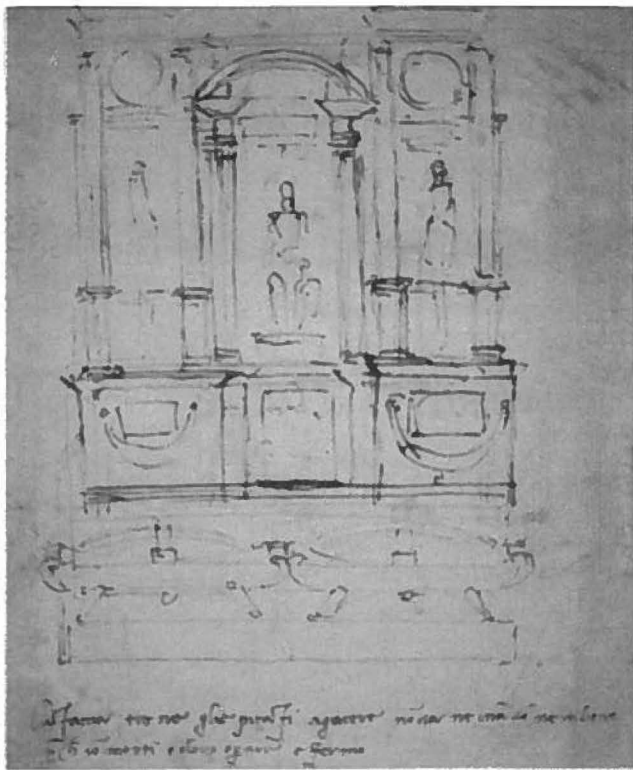


Figure 82. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Project for wall tomb, with inscription, drawing. London, British Museum.



Figure 83. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Resurrection of Christ, drawing. London, British Museum.

loftily about the heavens. . . . Or the eagle is Christ who loved that youth, and sublimated him to the secrets of heaven."⁵⁶ Graphic evidence of the continuity of this tradition, and of the correspondence between Sebastiano's suggestion and Michelangelo's own way of thinking, is provided by the drawing of Tityus, his liver devoured by a vulture, which Michelangelo gave to Tommaso Cavalieri as a pendant to the drawing of Ganymede (Fig. 89); on the reverse of the sheet he retraced the body of Tityus, transforming it into the Risen Christ, perhaps even as a preparatory sketch for the Medici Chapel composition itself (Fig. 90).⁵⁷ These interconnections and transpositions testify to the linkage in Michelangelo's mind between the heavenly *raptus* of the John-Ganymede theme and that of the Resurrection, to which the chapel is dedicated.

From the formal point of view, it is perhaps significant that in Donatello's relief in the Old Sacristy John is viewed illusionistically from below as he is lifted high above the architectural setting (Fig. 91). But in the Medici Chapel the eagle would have performed Christ's role and the episode would have been assimilated not only to the theme of Ganymede but also to the ancient Roman emblem of apotheosis in which the image of the mortal was shown transported to the empyrean on the wings of an eagle (Fig. 92). Isidore of Seville takes John and his eagle precisely as signifying the resurrection and ascension of Christ: "By the figure of the eagle John demonstrates that the Lord himself rose to heaven after the resurrection in the flesh."⁵⁸ For Rupert of Deutz, John and his eagle are a figure of Christ himself, on whose shoulders the saved are carried to heaven.⁵⁹ The association with Ganymede made it possible to combine references to the dedications of both the Old and the New Sacristies, that is, to St. John and to the Resurrection, in a single image of the heavenly ascent to which the faithful aspire—after lying all night between the breasts of the beloved.

It may be relevant to the Medici Chapel that the quintessential aspects of John the Evangelist had been portrayed a decade before by Correggio in the cupola of

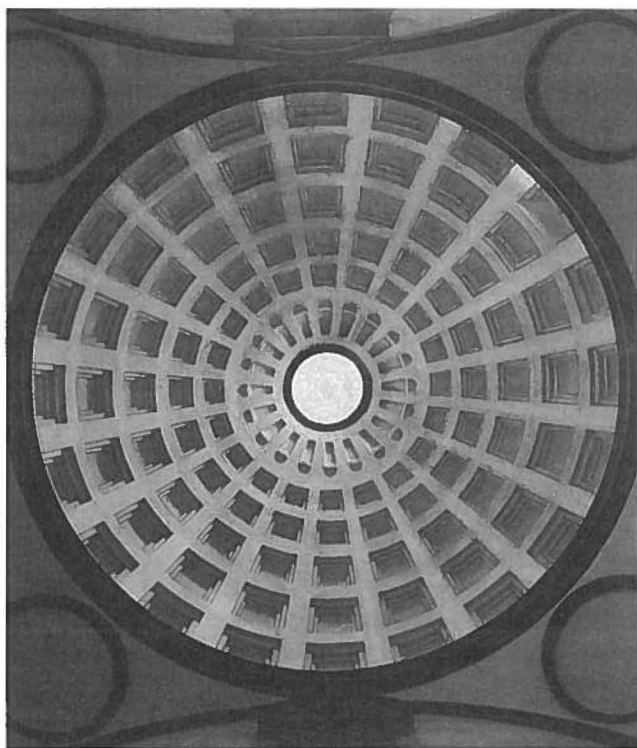


Figure 84. Medici Chapel, view of the dome. Florence, San Lorenzo.

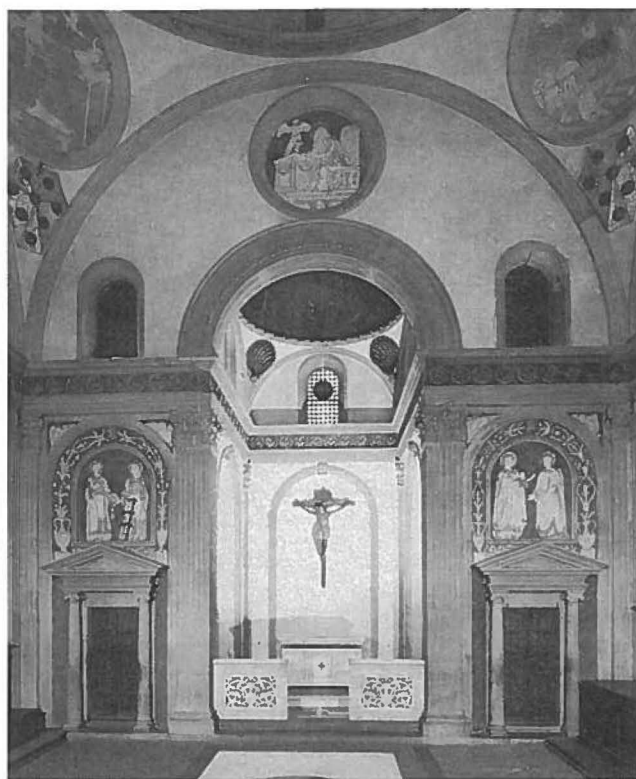


Figure 85. Old Sacristy. Florence, San Lorenzo.

the Benedictine monastic church in Parma dedicated to the saint. In the cupola itself Christ appears in the center bidding the aged Evangelist, who kneels on the rim before his open book resting on the eagle's back, to join him and the other apostles in heaven (Figs. 93 and 94).⁶⁰ Correggio reverts to an early mode of depicting the subject, in which Christ appears with the apostles to rescue John from his tomb; the inclusion of the book and eagle, John as evangelist and beloved apostle, makes Correggio's work specifically relevant to the idea for the Medici Chapel lantern. John's special role as evangelist in defining the mysteries of divinity is represented in the pendentive below, where he is shown seated on his eagle, in conversation about the Trinity with Saint Augustine, who wrote massive commentaries on John's gospel and on the Trinity (Fig. 95). The allusion to John's assumption is made clear by the depictions on the supporting arches of Elijah and Enoch, the two Old Testament characters who had also been transported bodily to heaven. Finally, John's exalted role among the evangelists is spelled out, as it were, in the lunette above the portal in the left transept that gives access to the sacristy, which shows him as the inspired author accompanied by his symbol (Fig. 96); the lunette is surrounded by the inscription: *ALTIVS CAETERIS DEI PATEFECIT ARCANA* (more lofty than the others he revealed the mysteries of God).

A remnant of this part of the chapel's intended meaning is still preserved, in a context that also makes the meaning perfectly clear. On the altar stand two identical candelabras, which flank the officiating priest (only that on the right is original; that on the left is an eighteenth-century copy).⁶¹ On one face is depicted the ancient symbol of Christ's sacrifice, the pelican, which was thought to nourish its young with its own blood by piercing its breast (Fig. 97). In the Medici Chapel the image may have had a special significance, based on Dante's reference to the two Eucharist privileges of John, to have slept at Christ's breast at the Last Supper, and to have been present at the crucifixion, when Christ



Figure 86. Old Sacristy, view of the dome. Florence, San Lorenzo.



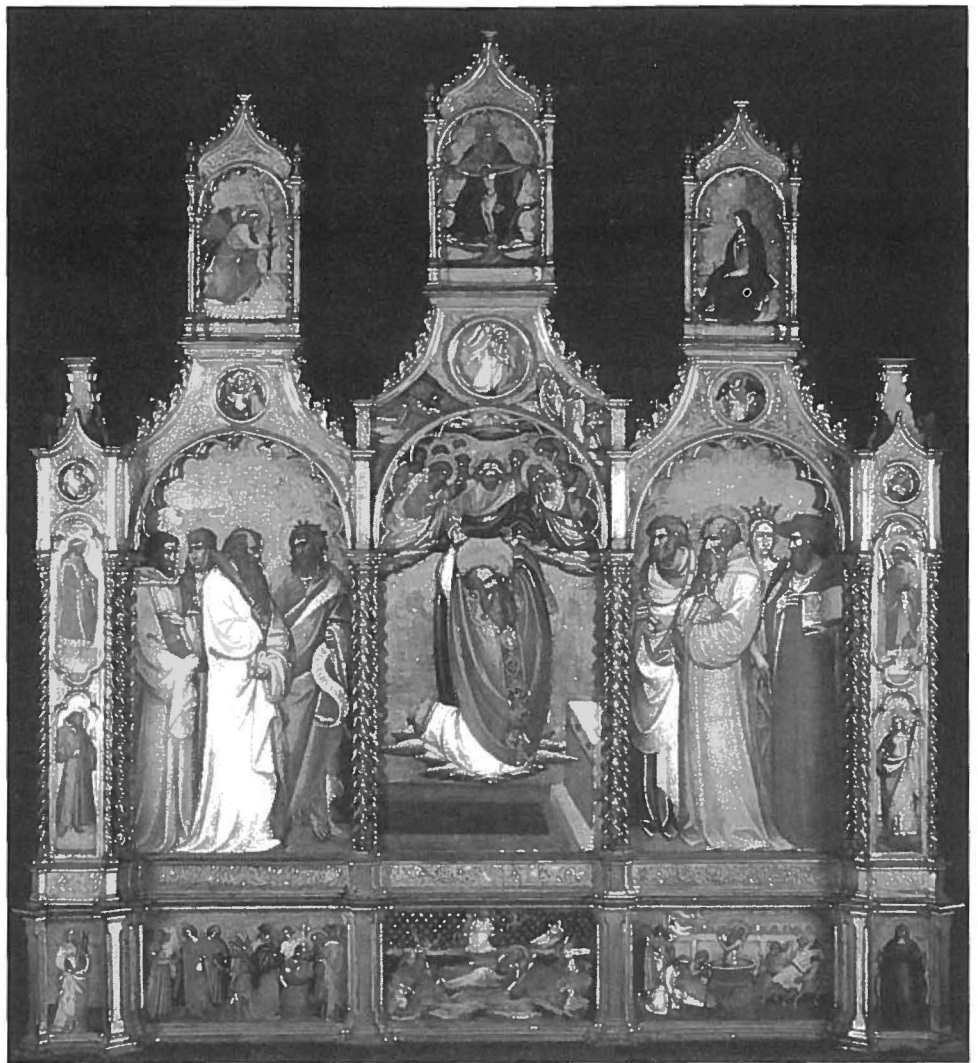
Figure 87. Copy of Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Rape of Ganymede*, drawing. Windsor, Royal Library.

charged him with the care of his mother: "This is he who lay upon the breast of our Pelican, and this is he who was chosen from upon the Cross for the great office."⁶² John might appropriately be thought of as nourishing at the breast of the pelican, since he was the Eucharist apostle par excellence, often shown carrying the chalice of the sacrament. On the adjacent face is another bird that has always been taken as the mythic phoenix, a symbol of the Resurrection by virtue of its capacity to regenerate from its own ashes (Fig. 98). No doubt this allusion was intended. But phoenixes were normally shown rising from a bed of flames, which are missing here (Fig. 99). Just as Michelangelo conflated Ganymede with John in the lantern of the chapel, here he has conflated the phoenix with the eagle of St. John, which flies up toward the vision of salvation awaiting at the end of time.

Perpetual Praise

We know that the Medici Chapel was dedicated to the Resurrection—perhaps in commemoration of Leo X's coronation on Easter Saturday—from a remarkable document bull issued on 14 November 1532 by Giulio de' Medici, then reigning as Pope Clement VII.⁶³ Apart from the dedication to the Resurrection the bull provides for the masses and other religious services normally performed in such foundations. Among the latter was the traditional recitation of the psalms, each followed by a particular prayer. One provision, however, was quite extraordinary, unique, in fact, in a private chapel: the Psalter and accompanying prayers were to be recited in the chapel *continuously*, night and day without interruption, in perpetuity. This stipulation was of course an index of the lavish expenditures of the patron. From all that has been said here,

Figure 88. Giovanni del Ponte, Altarpiece of St. John the Evangelist. London, National Gallery.



however, it should be clear that the extraordinary nature of the devotions was integral to the meaning embodied in the chapel. It should be recalled that the psalter is the very basis of Christian prayer, the only book of the Bible that is recited in its entirety in the Divine Office each week, and the “*laus perennis*,” as it is called, was from the outset a fundamental constituent of monastic devotions.⁶⁴ The continuity of recitation is mandated at the very outset of the text itself: “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly. . . . But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night” (Ps. 1, 1–2). As a private devotional form, however, the “*laus perennis*” was ipso facto very rare, and specifically a royal tradition in Northern Europe.⁶⁵ The Medici Chapel in this respect was unique in Italy, and may be regarded as the liturgical counterpart to the dynastic ambitions evident in the very conception of the chapel in a series of family appropriations of the church of San Lorenzo. The ambitions began unofficially, as it were, in the early fifteenth century with the tomb of Giovanni and Piccarda de’ Medici in the Old Sacristy provided by their son Cosimo Pater Patriae (Fig. 100), who was himself buried beneath the crossing of the church in front of the high altar (Fig. 53).⁶⁶ The tradition continued with the tomb of Cosimo’s sons Piero and Giovanni (at the left in Fig. 100) inserted in the wall between the Old Sacristy and the adjoining

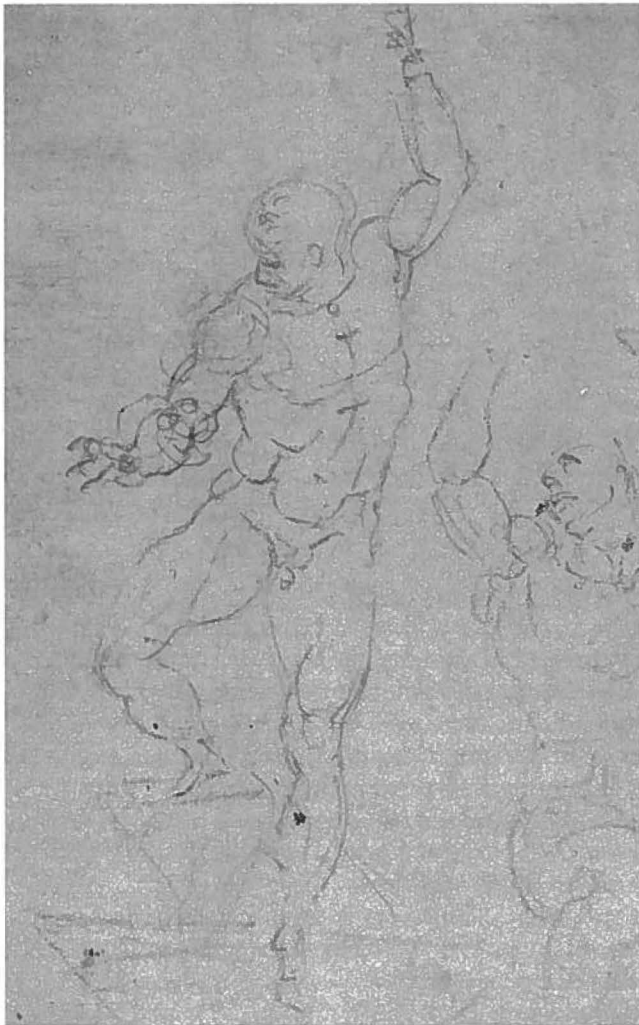
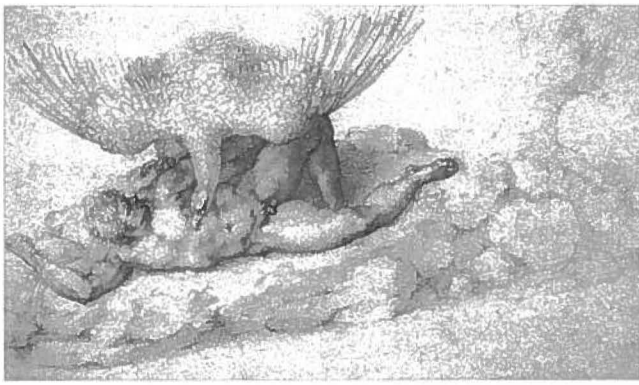


Figure 89. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Tityus, drawing. Windsor, Royal Library.

Figure 90. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Christ of the Resurrection, drawing. Windsor, Royal Library.

Figure 91. Donatello, Assumption of John the Evangelist, stucco relief. Florence, San Lorenzo, Old Sacristy.

Figure 92. Apotheosis of Germanicus, sardonyx cameo. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles.



Figure 93. Correggio, Assumption of St. John the Evangelist. Parma, San Giovanni Evangelista, dome.

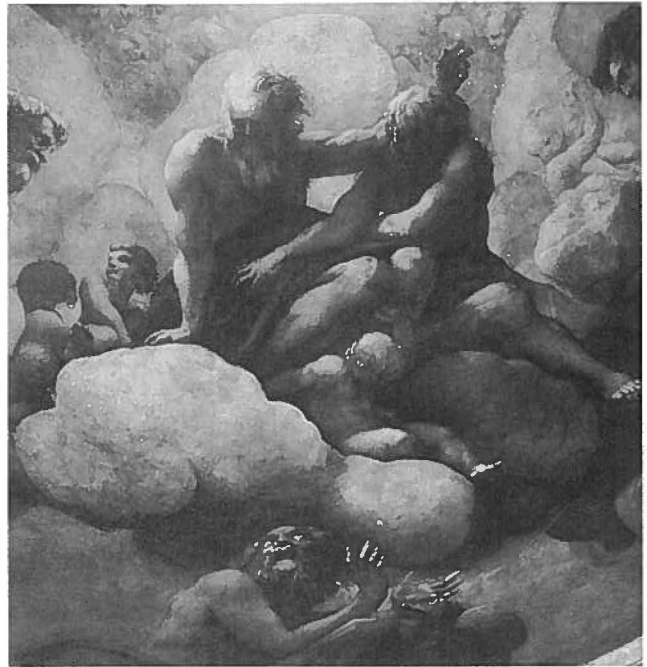


Figure 94. Correggio, St. John the Evangelist, detail of the dome. Parma, San Giovanni Evangelista.

Medici chapel of Sts. Cosmas and Damian. The tradition became official barely a decade after the New Sacristy was begun, with the establishment of the dukedom by Cosimo I, and culminated subsequently when his project for a new family funerary sacristy was realized with the erection nearby of the great Cappella dei Principi of the Medici Grand Dukes (Fig. 101).⁶⁷ A particular detail of the devotions offers a remarkable confirmation of the relevance of this motive. The text of the Psalter used in the Medici Chapel, which had been specially prepared by Clement VII, included after each psalm a prayer composed by the great German mystic Ludolph of Saxony, best known for his popular book of meditations on the life of Christ, the *Vita Christi*.⁶⁸ Ludolph's prayer on Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd"), the famous invocation of salvation from the Office of the Dead which St. Bernard quoted in his eschatological interpretation of the Song of Songs, must have seemed particularly relevant for the Medici: "Rege nos domine suauius tuas praeceptiones habenis: vt aeterni habitaculi habitatione percepta plenitudine perennis poculi brepleamur, per Christ dm nost"⁶⁹ (Shepherd us, Lord, with the gentle reins of your commandments, that in the dwelling of your eternal house our cups may overflow with the perennial plenitude of your rule. / Govern us, O Lord, with the sweet yoke of Thy commandments, that we may obtain a place in Thine eternal habitation, and be satiated with the plenitude of the celestial banquet). Ludolph echoes the psalm at several points, but it must have seemed truly providential that the very prayer Ludolph offered for the very day of the resurrection was based on the metaphor of the Lord's precepts as gentle reins ("habenae suaves"), practically synonymous with the famous Medici device of the Gentle Yoke ("jugum suavis") (Fig. 102); Ludolph's reference to the eternal house must have seemed no less prophetic of the Medici dynasty as the salvation of Florence,⁷⁰ and the perennially full cup must also have been seen as a providential reference to the sacramental chalice of St. John the Evangelist. In sum, no other concept more fully corresponds to the function and to the mood of the Medici Chapel than this notion of "laus perennis," a perennial celebration of faith that awaits the final resurrection and invokes the intercession of the Virgin on that fateful day.



Figure 95. Correggio, St. John the Evangelist with St. Augustine. Parma, San Giovanni Evangelista, pendentive.

Figure 96. Correggio, St. John the Evangelist Writing his Gospel. Parma, San Giovanni Evangelista, sacristy lunette.



Figure 97. Candelabrum, detail of the pelican. Florence, San Lorenzo, Medici Chapel.

Gentle Yoke

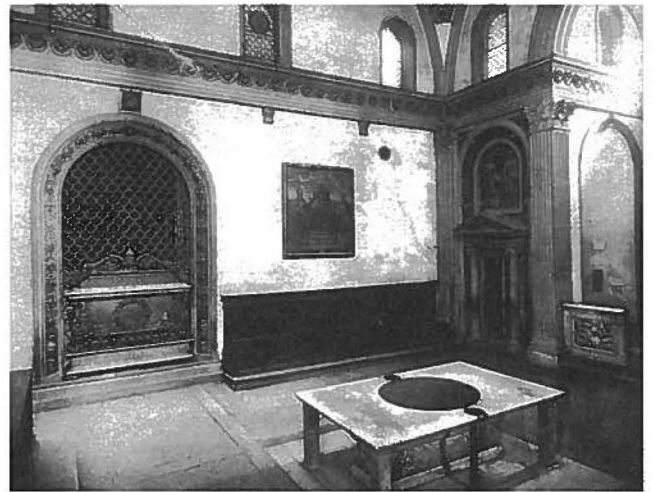
Contemporaneously with the creation of the Medici Chapel there took place in Rome a convergence of ideas and images that is, I think, symptomatic of the kind of syncretistic ideology, inextricably merging private and public, religious and secular, that fired the imagination of Michelangelo in Florence. There is good, independent, if circumstantial, evidence that the crucial shift in the format of the Medici Madonna took place, along with the establishment of the final form of the architecture, upon the succession of Cardinal Giulio to the papacy in November 1523, choosing to call himself Clement, the seventh of the name. The theme of clemency expressed in the name is singularly congruous with the notion of Medicean rule as the "gentle yoke" that became Clement's primary personal emblem, and we know that this was in fact one of the reasons for his choice.⁷¹ But it can scarcely be coincidental that many of the complex ingredients of the program of the Medici Chapel also derive from one of the seminal formulations of the church's doctrine of the Resurrection, by none other than the first pope of that name, St. Clement of Rome. We know from Michelangelo's own words and from Vasari's description that figures representing Heaven and Earth, the former portrayed smiling, the latter grieving, were to occupy the niches flanking the figure of Giuliano. The combination of the times of day and Heaven and Earth endows the Medici Chapel with an almost cosmic scope, couched in



Figure 98. Candelabrum, detail of the eagle. Florence, San Lorenzo, Medici Chapel.

Figure 99. Phoenix emblem, engraving.

Figure 100. Tomb of Giovanni and Piccarda dei Medici (under altar table). Florence, San Lorenzo, Old Sacristy.



Michelangelo's note on the tomb of Giuliano in terms of a lament over the loss of the Medici hero. However, the evocation of these figures of time and the physical world has a deeper and more specific significance in the context of a funerary chapel dedicated to the Resurrection, and it was St. Clement of Rome who initiated the perception that the entire world around us, by its very nature, bears testimony to that promise. In his Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians, which the early church regarded as a canonical text, Clement relates the Resurrection specifically to the recurrent alternation of night and day: "Let us consider, beloved, how the Master continually calls our attention to the future resurrection, the first fruits of which He has made the Lord Jesus Christ by raising Him from the dead. Let us consider, beloved, the kind of resurrection that occurs at regular intervals. Day and night give us examples of resurrection. The night sleeps, the day rises; the day departs, the night comes on." A few sentences later, Clement offers the case of the phoenix.⁷² The first Christian writer to speak of the fabled animal, he introduces it here as nature's own exemplar of the Resurrection. Clement's argument is repeated in greater detail, including references to heaven and earth, and in the context of a treatise devoted to the Resurrection, in one of the most eloquent and influential texts of the great rhetorician among the early church theologians, Tertullian. Tertullian was the



Figure 101. Cappella dei Principi. Florence, San Lorenzo.

principal thinker in the development and elaboration of the concept of the Resurrection, through his *De resurrectione carnis*, Christianity's first comprehensive treatment of the subject. "Look next at actual instances of divine power. Day dies into night and is on every side buried in darkness. The beauty of the world puts on mourning. . . . And yet again the same light...revives the whole world, slaying its own death...until night itself also revive. . . . For there is also a rekindling of the beams of the stars, which the lighting up of morning had put out. . . . Moreover, the earth also learns from heaven (i.e., rain): to clothe the trees after their stripping, to color the flowers anew. . . . To put it in one word, the whole creation is recurrent." In the succeeding passage Tertullian also takes up Clement's invocation of the phoenix as a death that is also a birth.⁷³ The universal, one might well say cosmic theme encompassed by this eschatology of the Resurrection in the Medici chapel seems to express explicitly the ideology

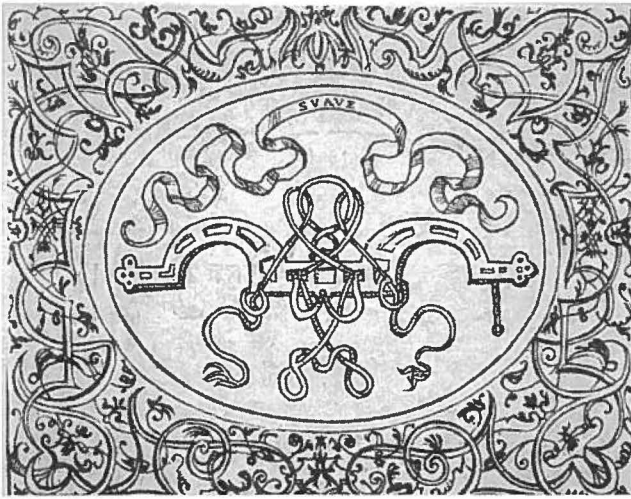


Figure 102. The Medici yoke, impresa of Leo X (after Giovio 1562).



Figure 103. Giulio Romano, Constantine Addressing his Troops, flanked by St. Peter and Clement I/Leo X. Rome, Vatican Palace, Sala di Costantino.

Figure 104. Giulio Romano, Leo X as Clement I. Rome, Vatican Palace, Sala di Costantino.



that had been intimated in the tomb of Cosimo de' Medici in the crossing of the church.⁷⁴

Striking proof of the pertinence of these associations is provided in one of the most grandiose religio-political decorative projects carried out in the Vatican palace itself under the patronage of Leo X and Clement VII, the two Medici popes who sponsored the chapel in San Lorenzo. The frescos of the Sala di Costantino, in effect, establish the continuity of the church under the rule of the popes from the establishment of Christianity by Constantine (Fig. 103).⁷⁵ At

Figure 105. Giulio Romano, Leo X, drawing. Chatsworth, Collection Duke of Devonshire.



intervals along the walls are depicted the series of popes from St. Peter to Gregory the Great, who established the temporal authority of the papacy. Following Peter, the first pope depicted is none other than Clement I (Fig. 104), and here the ultimate conflation takes place: Clement is given the features of Leo X himself (Fig. 105). Holding a book alluding to his letter, he gestures and glances upward toward the apparition of the cross in the adjacent scene of Constantine addressing his troops and assuring them of victory under the sign of Christ's conquest over death. Clement was given the place of honor following Peter

because in his notorious Letter to Jacob, Bishop of Jerusalem, now regarded as spurious but considered canonical by the early church, he reported receiving his Episcopal charge directly from Peter, thus establishing the spiritual and temporal primacy of the popes, one of the burning issues raised by the Protestant reformers. The qualities of papal rule, mandated by Christ himself in the very dictum that inspired Leo X's emblem, "Tollite iugum meum super vos. . . . Iugum enim meum suave est et onus meum leve" (Matth. 11.29f.), are expressed by Clement's name and illustrated by the two allegories flanked below, Moderation and Kindness. Leo X was perceived as the reincarnation of Clement I, the providentiality of which is witnessed in the frieze above, where two docile maidens are gracefully bound by the gentle Medicean yoke. Giulio must have followed his cousin's lead in assuming the name of Clement, in adopting the "natural" interpretation of the Resurrection in the Medici Chapel, and in having himself portrayed at the opposite end of the room in the guise of his cousin's namesake, Leo I.⁷⁶ Clement's provision for the perpetual recitation of the Psalter, with its accompanying prayer for the dead, related these themes to that of the Medici family as the guarantor of the future.