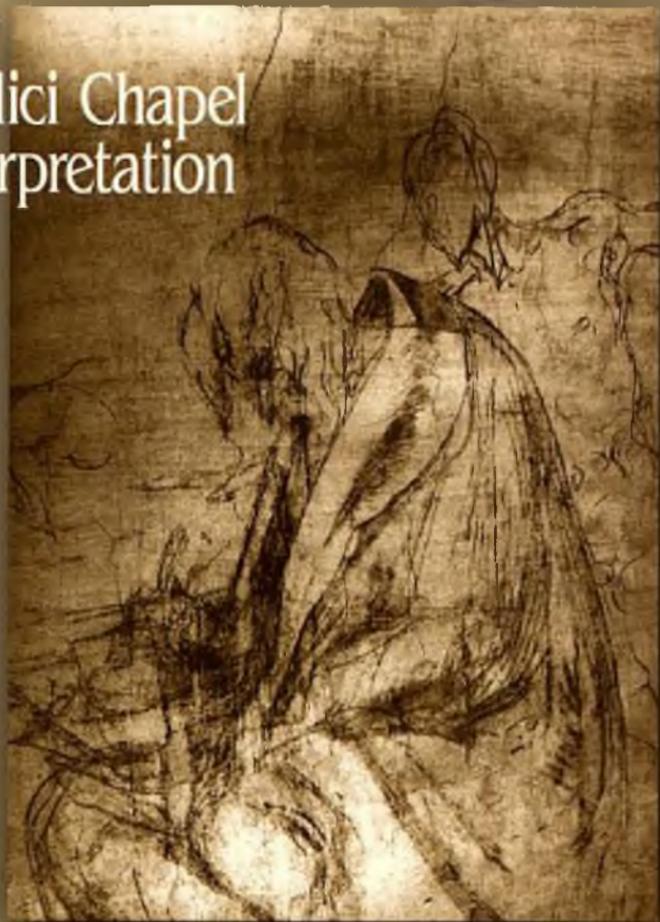


Michelangelo Drawings-

Key
to the Medici Chapel
Interpretation



Peter Barenboim

УДК 008
ББК 71
Б12

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Photos of the Medici Chapel and of Michelangelo drawings —

Sergey Chiyan, courtesy of the Medici Chapel

Photos of the tankas and statuettes — Alexander Zakharov

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Michelangelo Drawings — Key to the Medici Chapel Interpretation. Moscow, "Letny Sad", 2006, 47 p.

ISBN 5-98856-016-4

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*“Remember that the Past cannot fit into memory,
for it needs the Future”*

Joseph Brodsky

Preface

The new book by Pietro Barenboim is a valuable testimony of passionate love for Florence by a person to whom our city owes so much.

Over the past years, a group of influential Russian public figures, founders of the Florentine Society (Moscow), carried out several cultural projects, intended to better acquaint Russian people with Florence and to satisfy their growing interest in our city. After the fall of the “Iron Curtain”, which had been dividing Europe for more than forty years, such initiatives as the Florentine Society, actively participated in the organization of meetings between East and West, assisting in the fence-mending and the construction of a multinational and polycultural Europe.

Pietro Barenboim, alongside with other distinguished representatives of civil and political circles of today’s dynamically developing Moscow, played a leading part in the creation of the Florentine Society.

Being responsible for international relations of the City of Florence, I always recollect the reverent zeal with which the Moscow Florentine Society prepared the signature of Memorandum of Cooperation between the Municipality of Florence and the Moscow Duma on March 6, 2003.

The choice of that date was not accidental. It was a day of the 528th anniversary of Michelangelo Buonarotti’s birth. The ceremony took place in the “Italian Patio” of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts. This part of the Museum is an imitation of the patio of the Florentine *Palazzo del Bargello*. The “Italian Patio” contains a life-size copy

of Michelangelo's David and copies of other Florentine sculptures. This alone is a vivid proof of the respect the Russian capital has for Florence, as one of the main centres of European civilization and culture.

The official ceremony was followed by a presentation of *Road to Florence. Florence and Florentines in Russian culture*, a remarkable book co-edited by Ekaterina Genieva and Pietro Barenboim. I was amazed to discover in this book the high degree of devotion with which outstanding Russian artists and writers for the two last centuries had been engaged in the study of our city and of the great people who lived and worked there.

The present book testifies that Florentine studies in Russian culture still continue, yielding remarkable new results. With great interest we welcome the research on the New Sacristy of the Medici Chapel, presenting an original interpretation of the sculptural images of Dawn and Night, which decorate the Michelangelo's Florentine masterpiece, immortalizing the memory of Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother Giuliano, as well as "oriental" interpretation of the image of the mouse-like head.

If Florence is really a Russian "dream city", it will be a great honor for us, Florentines, to realize what deep and beneficial imprint our city leaved on the minds of many representatives of Russian intellectual elite, playing an important role in the social and cultural life of Moscow and Russia, in general. I am deeply convinced that further strengthening of our contacts will lead to an even greater cross-fertilization of our cultures.

Eugenio Giani
The Deputy of the Mayor of Florence

1. Drawings as the key to interpretation of sculptures

Michelangelo's sculptures in the New Sacristy of San Lorenzo can be discussed in terms of history, of technique and of style, and their particular language and historical context can be analyzed objectively. But they are far more. They are the emotions aroused in those seeing them for the first time, and they are the distant and chance associations evoked in the mind of the visitor who has seen them many times before. The aura of their reputation has a profound psychological effect on the viewer, who sees them, not as an objective reality, but as a reflection of his own expectations and desires. Michelangelo's sculptures are part of the myth surrounding their creator. Vasari and Condivi's eulogistic view of him as a unique and divine being, carefully fostered by the artist during his lifetime, has been taken over, practically unaltered by the tourist or television producer.

Antonio Paolucci

The only known sculpture by Michelangelo in Russia (the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg) is a small statue of a boy, attributed by most art experts to the initial (afterwards revised) design of the Medici Chapel (*Cappella Medicea*).

On March 23, 2006, the British Museum opened to visitors a long-awaited exhibition of Michelangelo drawings. Let us use this occasion to focus our attention on his drawings related to the Medici Chapel.

The New Sacristy (*Sagrestia Nuova*) of the San Lorenzo Basilica in Florence, also known as the Medici Chapel, is the only completed architectural and sculptural complex by Michelangelo. Many art experts believe the Medici Chapel sculptures to be the pinnacle work of the Great Florentine.

You can see on the cover of this book a drawing of Michelangelo discovered only in 1976 in the concealed corridor under the New Sacristy. 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 a quiet atmo-

sphere. But in 1530 he was hiding in this place every minute, expecting death from the soldiers of Alessandro Medici. This drawing could be called “Self-portrait of hiding Michelangelo”. Michelangelo was at the age of 55 and did not feel healthy. He probably felt that sculptures of the New Sacristy were the last in his life. His “Self-portrait” 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 last 3 years to complete the New Sacristy.

Sculptor 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.

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 the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore during a plot jointly contrived by the Pazzi, an eminent Florentine family, and Pope Sixtus IV.

Rainer Maria Rilke, keenly sensing Giuliano’s nature, wrote: “In Santa Maria del Fiore, the assassin’s dagger, which Lorenzo himself escapes cold-blooded, takes the life of radiant Giuliano. In the prime of his spring, with its childishly lavish and placid beauty, yet unblemished by disappointment or suffering, Giuliano was cut off by a sordid tool of totally undeserved enmity, whose blind rage befell this unsuspecting youth... The Spring chose Giuliano to be her lover, and, when the Summer was about to ascend to power, he had to die. His summer mission was nipped in the bud. The whole epoch of Early Renaissance seems to be illuminated by the effulgence of this fair-haired youth.”¹

From that day, the jovial nature of Lorenzo and the open-minded style of Florentine rule had changed. Michelangelo had been idoliz-

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke “Florentiiskii dnevnik”, Moskva, 2001, pp. 57—58

ing Lorenzo the Magnificent and 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 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”¹.

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 De’ 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.

Nobody has yet surpassed the Great Florentine in sculpture, 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 Buonarrotti. The details and shades of his art, the mysteries of his ideas and designs will ever remain important to us, being a hundred times more sophisticated than any of the politically engaged devices of the so-called “social realism”.

Many misinterpretations of the Medici Chapel design are due to underestimation of the difference between the first (Giovanni — Cosimo — Lorenzo) and the second (Pope Leo X, Pope Clement VII, Duke Giuliano, Duke Lorenzo, Duke Alessandro, Catherine) generation of Medici politicians, as well as the difference in their evaluation by Michelangelo himself.

Supervising the building 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

¹ Marsel’ Brion. “Mikel’andzhelo”, Molodaya gvardiya, 2002, p. 41

to work on the tombs of the first generation, the ones of Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother Giuliano (the father of Clement VII).

While fighting against the usurpers and persecutors of traditional Florentine republican freedom represented by the second generation of Medicis, Michelangelo “idolized” and immortalized 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 armed struggle against offsprings of the Medicis, whom he was immortalizing with such devotion, should help us to uncover his original plan — one of the yet unsolved mysteries of the Medici Chapel.

In our opinion, what the great Michelangelo was trying to immortalize in these tombs should be the memory of Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother Giuliano. Michelangelo consciously shunned the idea of portrait-like similarity, for he had decided to immortalize Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother, but not their cachectical posterity.

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 Medicis¹.

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 does not leave any space for more tombs, 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”².

¹ James Beck, Antonio Paolucci, Bruno Santi “Michelangelo. The Medici Chapel”, London, New York, 2000, p. 27

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

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, 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 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.¹

One of the Chapel’s secrets is this desire of Michelangelo’s to immortalize only the two senior Medicis, while freeing himself from really “impossible obligations” to immortalize their offsprings. This fully explains the lack of portrait similarity.

Michelangelo usually stated his authorship by introducing a self-portrait (sometimes, 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.² If Stone was right, then both of the male images and the grotesque mask should reflect facial features of our sculptor. This shows how personal this work was for Michelangelo. Besides, the mask may remind us of the “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

¹ Irving Stone, “The Agony and the Ecstasy”, London, 1997, p. 667

² *Ibid.*, p. 658

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.

Kenneth Clark remarks that the Medici Chapel stands apart from other sculptural creations by Michelangelo, since two of the four main figures are female.¹ 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. In fact, the sculptor was always dominating in the discussions of this project with Giulio Medici (Pope Clement VII). Besides, the Pope had never seen the work of Michelangelo, being unable to visit the Chapel; and, as for Alessandro De' Medici, the then ruler of Florence, 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 intentions.

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 it that Michelangelo wanted to conceal?

In the last 13 years, I was privileged to visit the Chapel many dozen of times, with the total time spent in it well exceeding a couple of 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 and a multitude of inconceivable impressions it leaves you with are impossible to describe. The similarity between the images

¹ Kenneth Clark — Op. cit. p. 289

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 “steadfast observation”, which preferred the conclusions drawn from a direct observation of an artwork, as the ones free from stereotypes.

The first concept, based on the striking similarity of female images, was a rather presumptuous idea that in the statue of Dawn, which on a fine morning gets lit by direct beams of sunlight, Michelangelo had represented the Immaculate Conception. In fact, 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. In a recent 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”.¹

According to this concept, the statue of Night may be an image of the Mother of God, tormented by the travails of Crucifixion, who has fallen into leaden but already tranquil slumber after the Ascension of Christ.

However, this concept of an image of the naked Virgin in the scene of Immaculate Conception seems too daring. Besides, in the literature currently available to us, we were unable to trace any direct scientific evidence supporting this concept.

Therefore, we would like to present another concept that appeared somewhat later, but, unlike the previous one, has a substantial, though indirect, scientific rationale.

My favorite sculptor is Michelangelo, and my favorite painter — Botticelli. In the Botticelli Hall of the Uffizi Gallery, one can easily

¹ James Hall, “Michelangelo and the Reinvention of the Human Body”, London, 2005, p. 154

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 not compare three images — the magic female triad of Botticelli.

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. The righteous citizens of Sienna had not stood the test of her naked beauty and, on the above-mentioned date, 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*.

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".¹

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, and another character — St. Anne — depicted topless.² 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

¹ K.Clark, *Nagota v iskusstve*, (in Russian), SPb., 2004, p. 117

² *International Herald Tribune*, February 27, 2005

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.¹

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 zig-zag 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 had been creating the Medici Chapel as an artistic entity. He started his work at the age of 45, already recognized as the best sculptor and painter in Rome (in Rome, but not in Flor-

¹ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A study in Ideal Form*, New York, 1956, p. 126

ence!). 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 canvas 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, 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.¹

According to Karl Burdach, proper Italian Renaissance started with Dante and ended with Michelangelo. He writes: "Humanism and Renaissance ... sought not the branches of a dead culture, and a new life for their present and the future."² Burdach continues by saying that the rise of Renaissance could be explained by the desire to revive Christianity by invoking the spirit of Antiquity. He writes: "...it occurs from the religious excitation by a seraphic exciter of a new piety in people... Based on my, ever growing, studies in the field of religious phantasy... which, in particular, are connected with ...legends about Longinus and the Holy Grail, I can now clearly see all the relationship and body of evidence."³

A burst of public interest in the topic of the Holy Grail after the publication of Dan Brown's book "The Da Vinci Code" is probably

¹ Edith Balas. *Michelangelo's Medici Chapel: a New Interpretation*, Philadelphia, 1995. p. 135

² K. Burdakh, "Reformatsiya, Rennsans, Gumanizm" (in Russian), M., 2004, pp. 9, 16, 17

³ K. Burdakh, *Op. cit.*, p. 18

based on the similar feelings of people living in the early twenty-first century.

In his best-selling fiction book, Dan Brown, among other things, invents a “fact” that, according to the materials discovered at the National Library in Paris, one of the members of the Priory of Zion, who practiced the ancient cult of Mother Earth (or the *Magna Mater*), was the famous painter Sandro Botticelli.

Therefore, Dan Brown continues, Botticelli’s paintings “whispered of the quest to restore the banished Sacred Feminine”.¹ Early religions, according to Dan Brown, were all based on the primacy of Mother Nature, so the goddess (and a star in the sky) Venus, which in other nations was also called Cebele, Ishtar, Astarte, Ashtoreth, Inanna or Mylitta, symbolised the powerful female deity related to the Nature (or “Mother Earth”).² The star Venus for each period of eight years circumscribes a perfect “pentacle” (a five-pointed star) on the bigger circle of the celestial dome. That is why this sign had originally been a symbol of perfection and simplicity, until it did eventually change its meaning.

Dan Brown writes that, trying “to hammer down” these ancient beliefs in the Sacred Feminine, on which the early Christianity was also based, the Catholic church for three centuries of the Middle Ages has burnt at the stake an astounding *five million* women, many of which, according to the instructions from the Holy Office, were suspected of being “suspiciously attuned to the natural world”.³

Perhaps, some art experts will consider my reference to “The Da Vinci Code” not too scientific, but over 30 million copies, printed in all main languages of the world, speak for themselves. The London “Sunday Times”, in an attempt to explain the phenomenal success of this, in fact, a popular-science book (only spiced-up with a detective plot), writes that interest in the Brown’s book is ignited by the desire to restore the importance of its religious values, hidden in the collective subconscious of Western civilisation.

It might be about this book by Dan Brown that Rainer Maria Rilke wrote almost a century prior to its publication: “If somebody

¹ Dan Brown, “The Da Vinchi Code”, London. 2004, p. 315

² Ibid, p. 49

³ Dan Brown. Op. cit., p. 152

wanted to show in one way or another that our epoch embosoms an inner heat, he should have spoken about the painful bliss of its great masters. The book about this should be entitled *The Great Mother Our Art* — but then it would disclose the secret, this book would”.

Perhaps, Dan Brown has embellished something, but his hypothesis partly coincides with the opinion of some researchers, writing that Botticelli himself was a philosopher who generated his own ideas and did not need scholarly advisers.

Art expert 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 historian John Ruskin in his lecture, dated 1874, characterizes Botticelli as “the most 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.¹

How much was sensed and recounted to us by young Rilke: “But what are those obscure and yet obvious pictorial fairy-tales 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

¹ Marcus Lodwick, *The Museum Companion. Understanding Western Art*, London, 2003, p. 113

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 manifesting 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."¹

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

¹ R.M. Rilke — *Op. cit.*, pp. 84-85, 94, 107.

experts, we witness a direct connection with the portrait of Simonetta Vespucci, who, according to common belief, was Botticelli's "model".¹

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 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 Piombo 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

¹ Gilles Neret, Michelangelo, Taschen, Koln, 2004, pp. 80-81

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 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 believed, merely to emphasize the naked beauty of “Dawn” or as Panofsky believe 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.

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”.¹

Michelangelo 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 serpent-necklace. This evidently shows the connection between the Michelangelo’s female statues for the Medici Chapel and the image of Venus typical for Botticelli.

¹ Gilles Neret, *Michelangelo*, Taschen, Koln, 2004, pp. 80—81

Michelangelo 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 *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 remarkable book “Michelangelo's Medici Chapel: a New Interpretation” 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.¹

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 names “Dawn” and “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 or, more likely, 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

¹ Edith Balas, “Michelangelo's Medici Chapel: a New Interpretation”, Philadelphia, 1995, p.67

that one of the participants in the Botticelli's triad was "Madonna of the Pomegranate").

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.

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 image, even though she provided an important quote from a letter of Michelangelo's contemporary, Mutcanus Rufus, who had mentioned the Virgin Mary (Maria) 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." (Op.Cit., p. 77). 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 Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* and to that of Venus-Aphrodite, closely related to the widely known Ishtar, Astarte, or Cybele, as impersonations of the Great Mother goddess.

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. They can be assisted by the materials of this article, other available sources, and, best of all, by personal impressions from visiting the Medici Tombs. 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.







2. Mouse of the Medici Chapel

... 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 a nocturnal world, heavy with sorrow and shot through with horrific and grotesque images. Amendola forces us to look at it as if we are gazing into a darkened mirror or staring into the depth of an abyss.

Antonio Paolucci
(*about photo-artist Aurelio Amendola*)

This concept was first introduced in the book written together with Alexander Zakharov (Peter Barenboim, Alexander Zakharov, *Mouse of Medici and Michelangelo*, Moscow 2005).

The sculpture of Lorenzo de 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 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. Note worthily, 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 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."¹

The left elbow of the statue of Lorenzo is resting on small box with animal head. It is interesting that on a well-known fresco of Luigi Flammingo in 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 16-th century, probably after Michelangelo.

It is not by chance that the above mentioned fresco opens the illustration list of Lorenzo Tanzini's (an Italian researcher) article devoted to the Magnificent; the list finishes with the picture of Lorenzo's statue from New Sacristy with appropriate attribute to the Magnificent.²

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."³ This animal head on the statue of Lorenzo was stylized by sculptor, probably not without reason.

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".⁴

¹ 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

² Lorenzo Tanzini, *L'importanza di essere Magnifico*, *Medioevo*, Settembre 2005, p., 56

³ Antonio Paolucci, *The animals of Giambologna*, Florence, 2000, p. 5

⁴ Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, Pennsylvania, 2003, 67.

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 Juliano. He did not specify the place where mouse would belong to and say 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”. Edwin 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”¹ and stressed in the article “Neoplatonic Movement and Michelangelo” that this was the head of a bat.²

In Russian we say “mouse” (mysh) and “bat” as “flying mouse” (letuchay 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 use 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

¹ Edwin Panofsky, *The Mouse that Michelangelo failed to carve*, N.Y., 1964

² Edwin Panofsky, *The Neoplatonic movement and Michelangelo in “Michelangelo: Selected Readings”*, edited by William E. Wallase, N.Y., London, 1999, p.599

the study of this subject (proportions of human body) his own conception would have been”¹.

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 16th century “flying mouse” was associated with melancholia. May be 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 then 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 then meter above the eyes of any spectator, her lion style nose as well as the second mouth with dangerous teethes is actually not visible easily. Can it be that Michelangelo had on purpose hidden the nose by placing it that high and the mouse’s mouth 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? May be 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.²

It is important to mention that in 1976 after Edwin 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. Art critics are taking their time before

¹ Condivi, p.99.

² Edwin Panofsky, Op.cit., p.243-244,

full recognition but more often those drawings can be seen on the pages of art books about Michelangelo.

We completely agree with Charles Sala, who published several of wall drawings with a remark that technique of the drawings witnesses that they were done by Michelangelo himself.¹

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 — 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 this duke Lorenzo and duke Juliano as “two members of the family who would better have been forgotten”.²

The money box could serve to ascertain that the statue is dedicated to Lorenzo the Magnificent rather than his lacklustre 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 become more intelligible when we examine the individual sculptures”.

How can one prove, however, that 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 in hardcover edition of his book “Himalaya” made a comment on wall painting, which he saw on his way to Taksang-Buddist temple in Bhutan.

¹ Charles Sala, Michelangelo, Librero b.v. (Nederlandstalige editie), 2001, P.128.

² Mary McCarthy, The Stones of Florence and Venice Observed, London, 2006, p.40.

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.”¹

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 tanks 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.”²

We can see on the statuette of “Future Buddha Maitreya (10-11 century AD) in Hermitage a pose that is very similar to Lorenzo statue with two very small animals under each of its legs. These images reflect traditional Buddhist symbol- two deer but in such small scale both look more like mouse.

Full-scale copy of Vatican’s Loggia of Rafael in Hermitage creates even more mysteries.

Russian Empress Katherine the Second ordered in 1778 to create for her the copy of the Loggia of Rafael made by this great artist and his school in 1517-1519. Rafael transfer the motifs and symbols of

¹ Michael Palin, Himalaya, London, 2004, p.257

² Robert Beer, The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and motifs”, Chicago, 2004, p.212

antique Roman drawings discovered in early 16 century in the grottoes and called “grotesques”.¹

As the result we can see in Hermitage that Rafael 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 Rafael 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).

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 statuette 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 not take the risk of stating that — based on its various features — the statue of Lorenzo resembles Indian statuette 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.

A sketch of legs of Lorenzo’s statue gives a better proof of the originality of Michelangelo’s approach to the wall drawings in the room under the New Sacristy. We may see that on the drawing the legs are not crossed which means that this is not a later copy, but the initial sketch made before the statue itself. And of course we see the sketch of mouse-like animal on the left side of this drawing. This means that the box from which this animal looks out or to which it serves as the ornament was of less importance and it was the mouse

¹ N. N. Nikulin, “Logia of Rafael in Hermitage”, StPeterburg, 2005, p.2

that really mattered as the most important symbol. Of course both are meaningful but when taken together they acquire a dual meaning. This is the crucial proof that on the statue of Lorenzo we see exactly the mouse as planned by Michelangelo and carved by him.

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. Statues of many Indian gods have their own **vahanas** for this purpose but Ganesha is easily recognizable 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 (a 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 symbolising 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 tanks (Buddhist icons on paper and silk) we found out that the image of Ganesha'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 tanks the mongoose of Kubera (Jambhala) looks like the mouse of Ganesha, 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 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."¹

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"²

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 tanks made on silk or in the statuettes.

Someone may raise a doubt that Michelangelo could ever see any images of Indian and 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...³15-snoska

Later, in the 4th century B.C., the 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 tanks, which constitute the Indian-Buddhist icons made on silk, have been known in Europe since the 7th century A.D., while intensive trade with India over the Mediterranean Sea in the days

¹ Edith Balas. Op. cit. p. 67

² Robert Beer, Op.Cit. p.82

³ 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 tank of 5th century A.D. Tanks 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.

of Michelangelo was very likely to bring to Europe great varieties of Indian statuettes and silk tanks.

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 6th century B.C. when he was travelling 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 1st century that already included the Hinduist and Buddhist communities.

We should bear in mind that Buddhism is 6 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' the 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 materials may also be useful for the evaluation of that symbol.

























ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is a part of scenario of the movie "Mysteries of the Medici Chapel" which is now being prepared by the Moscow Florentine Society together with the Government of the City of Florence, the University of Florence, the Order of Journalists of Tuscany and Russian TV. I hope that this movie will give an opportunity for many people and art students to get a first hand knowledge of the New Sacristy of the Medici Chapel.

The Moscow Florentine Society would like to thank:

**The Government of the City of Florence
and personally the Deputy Mayor of Florence
*Eugenio Giani***

**Soprintendente Polo Museale Fiorentino,
Direttore della Galleria degli Uffizi
*Antonio Paolucci***

**Direttore delle Cappelle Medicee
*Monica Bietti***

**Soprintendente Opificio delle Pietre Dure
*Cristina Acidini***

**President of the Order of Journalists of Tuscany
*Massimo Lucchesi***

**Professor of the University of Florence
*Donatella Lippi***

***Valter Acciai*
of the University of Florence**

Michelangelo Drawings-

Key
to the Medici Chapel
Interpretation



ISBN 5-98856-016-4



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