

BY MARK LUZIO

Michelangelo's Jobsite Drawings

Michelangelo's last commissions in Florence, Italy, were the designs of the Medici Chapel and Laurentian Library—both in the Basilica of San Lorenzo. He worked on these interiors from 1520 to 1533, and his scope of work included the design of the tombs for the Medici family, with the famous sculptures *Dawn*, *Dusk*, *Day*, and *Night*—full-size figures that many art historians consider the pinnacle of his work. These figures and all the architectural details he designed and constructed for this job were produced on site.

Behind layers of flaking paint and plaster in an alcove behind the altar in the chapel, researchers in the 1970s discovered Michelangelo's jobsite drawings, and these especially were on the list of works I needed to see on my first trip to Florence last year. Their purpose seemed evident. For the last 45 years, I have built custom millwork and sometimes I've needed more than architectural-scale drawings. The best approach is often to draw or make full-size templates to resolve details and work out problems on a jobsite.

In her book *Michelangelo, Drawings, and the Invention of Architecture*, Cammy Brothers writes, "The drawings remain striking for their immediacy in conveying a sense of how Michelangelo worked on site. They confirm the impression, formed by his drawings on paper, that he continued to rethink problems obsessively—apparently up to the very moment of execution ... They also show that Michelangelo found it useful to work ideas out at full scale."

For more than two hours, I sat in the alcove or walked the room, crossing from the full-size drawings, and returning to the room to marvel at the tombs and their figures.

As I walked back and forth, I was thinking of a letter from Michelangelo to Giorgio Vasari (who wrote the first history of Italian Renaissance artists and was mentored by Michelangelo) in which he wrote, "If I work one day with a chisel and mallet, I must rest two." He was 55 and transitioning from the intensely physical work of carving marble as an artist to the more cerebral and managerial work of a designer and architect but still doing both. From the drawings to the work, one day and the next.

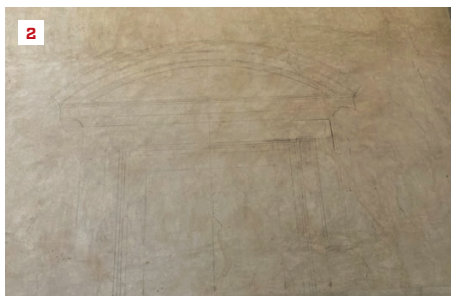
The wall sketches were made during Michelangelo's last days working hands-on at the San Lorenzo site. He left shortly afterward, and the chapel interior, as well as the library with its amazing flowing stairway, took more than 20 years to complete after Michelangelo's departure to Rome. He never returned to his beloved Florence to see the project completed.

Before I left the site, one last detail caught my imagination: a series of lines—tic marks—drawn on the wall. My guess is they were to mark the months of his labor so he could finally get paid the thousands of ducats owed to him by the fabulously wealthy Medici family.

Mark Luzio owns Post Pattern Woodworking in Brooklyn, Conn.



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2



3

In an alcove behind the altar in the Medici Chapel (1), Michelangelo drew full-scale drawings on the wall to work out details for his sculptures and the interior architectural elements (2) he designed and constructed in the chapel. In one area, the author found a series of tic marks (3), which he speculates was Michelangelo's way of keeping track of his time so he could get paid by the Medici family.

Photos by Mark Luzio