La Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana: Hope Within the Inferno of a Tormented Man's Mind

Alyssa Grace James

University of Colorado Boulder, alyssa.james@colorado.edu

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La Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana

Hope Within the Inferno of a Tormented Man’s Mind

by

Alyssa James

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Thesis Advisor
Robert Nauman | Art & Art History

Committee Members
Jason Potter | Philosophy
Kirk Ambrose | Art & Art History
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Abstract

Michelangelo Buonarroti is an immediately striking figure within history. His talent seemingly had no end, as he stretched from sculpture to architecture and everything in between. The works he created were beautiful and captivating, capturing the imagination of his contemporaries and modern viewers alike. However, the desire to simply label him as a genius is a gross underrepresentation of this human. Manifold influences contributed to his achievements, and he cannot be fully appreciated until these underlying influences are understood.

This thesis began in response to a question that arose the first time I viewed the Laurentian Library. I noticed the repetition of circles throughout all three rooms and in the plans for the never-built rare book room. Upon inquiring into the symbolism of these circles, I found a gap in the scholarship. Michelangelo was undoubtedly an incredibly intentional man, and something as innocent and as simple as a circle reflects complexities and unspoken desires. Upon a deeper investigation, it became clear that the circles were indicative of a much deeper symbolic meaning within the Library, which required a trifol approach to parsing it: Michelangelo’s classical education, his Catholic piety, and his personal humanity.

A man of conflicted loyalties, Michelangelo connected strongly to the incompatible forces of the city of Florence, the Medici, Catholicism, and his Neoplatonic education. The Library, as a secular building, affords a rare view into that internal struggle. The three rooms of the Library each represent a facet of both a Dantean philosophy of hell, purgatory, and paradise, as well as the Neoplatonic trifol progression of the human soul. This philosophical convergence in the Library exhibits Michelangelo’s covert beliefs of both the power of hell, and its permeability.
Chapter 1: Introduction

The Laurentian Library manifests the rich contradictions that sculpted and tormented the mind of Michelangelo Buonarroti. In order to put the Laurentian Library into its proper context, we must first understand the 48-year-old man who was commissioned to design it. At this age, Michelangelo had already had many of the formative experiences of his life. His childhood and youth were over, and he had reached old age by the standards of the day. He had experienced acclaim and artistic triumph, but also loss, frustration, and disappointment. From his written record in both correspondence and poetry, it is clear to see that Michelangelo was deeply affected by these experiences. They influenced his life and art alike, and thus it is prudent to examine these factors within the lens of the Library.

Family History

Michelangelo was born into a minor noble family in Florence on March 6th, 1475.¹ The Buonarroti Simoni had risen to esteem during the fourteenth century during the struggle for stewardship of Florence between the Guelphs and Ghibellines. During this epoch, Italy was in no way a unified whole. Indeed, the cities so vastly differed from the other that there was no true sense of being “Italian.” The loyalty to one’s city was seen as the epitome of national pride and citizenship. The Guelph/Ghibelline divide began with the struggle for power between the pope and the emperor. The Guelph party supported the pope, and the Ghibelline the emperor.² As such, this conflict over Florence was a matter of grave importance and it would influence

Florence for many years to come. Deeply entrenched in this struggle was the noted poet Dante Alighieri. His prominent position within the Guelph party led to his eventual expulsion from Florence, and fueled his epic *The Divine Comedy*. The Buonarrotis were devoutly Guelph, and as that faction rose to power, so too did the family. The distinction of what it meant to be Guelph changed slightly over time, and when Michelangelo was born it was more appropriately deemed the party of the people, whereas the Ghibellines were the proponents of the aristocracy. The importance of the Buonarroti’s connection to the Guelph party—and thus Florence and Dante—would later manifest itself within the work of Michelangelo.

The active struggle in the 14th century between these two factions lessened, and Florence began to rise as a major metropolitan city filled with wealth. The Buonarroti family shared in this, and established their status and nobility. However, the two generations directly preceding Michelangelo had somewhat diminished their fortune. Their lack of funds in no way lessened their self-perceived stature. From birth, Michelangelo was taught that he was a member of the nobility and was expected to act accordingly. Throughout his life, this aristocratic heritage was a source of much pride. In his old age, much of his extant correspondence is to his nephew Lionardo. He regularly reminds his kin of their bloodline, and of the duties attached to that status. He chastises Lionardo for poor handwriting and lack of propriety with funds, constantly stating that Lionardo’s actions directly reflected upon the noble name of Buonarroti.

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7 Ibid., 3.
Michelangelo inherited this dignity from his own father, Ludovico Buonarrotto, who staunchly upheld the family’s consequence. Ironically, Ludovico shared the common belief that art was not a glorious nor worthy profession for an individual of importance. He wished for his son to be well educated, to eventually hold a powerful political position like their esteemed ancestors. Such was not the desire of the son. Giorgio Vasari, Michelangelo’s contemporary and biographer, cites tales of a young Michelangelo running away from lessons to churches, where he would copy the art.

A compromise presented itself in the form of the Medici Sculpture Garden. The most notable familial connection the Buonarroti family claimed was some distant, yet impactful relationship with the Medici. The Renaissance was a time in which kin was the strongest of ties, and even a distant relationship would have still been held as an almost unbreakable bond. This powerful family’s offer to nurture the budding talent of Michelangelo afforded him the context in which to develop. Michelangelo’s time in the Sculpture Garden would set the precedence for his relationship to the Medici. Living in their household, Michelangelo cemented the foundations for both a set of future patrons and personal relationships with the cousins he grew up with. This mix of professional, familial, and friendly connections with the Medici would end up manifesting in a confusing and difficult adulthood of divided loyalties and strained relationships.

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9 Ibid., 5.  
10 Ibid., 12.  
11 Ibid., 11.  
13 Ibid., 35.
The Medici

The most influential and powerful family in Florence was the Medici.\textsuperscript{14} With a seemingly unending supply of money and resources, this banking clan was soon the de facto ruler of that city. Their palaces were grand, their tastes rich, and their desire for Florence to be an artistic epicenter would be a major motivating factor for the Renaissance. Cosimo di Medici, the patriarch of the family, was deeply interested in the template of Ancient Greece.\textsuperscript{15} Major excavations in Greece and Italy during this time had unearthed both the physical evidence of the Classical world and spurred an interest in Humanism as well as interest in them.\textsuperscript{16} Cosimo, as a rare educated man, was most profoundly interested in the art and philosophy of these ancients. Classical philosophy was a mainstay throughout history, but specifically Neoplatonism had been revived by the interest and passion of Marsilio Ficino.\textsuperscript{17} Cosimo was deeply fascinated by this

\textsuperscript{14}Roscoe, The Life of Lorenzo de Medici, Called The Magnificent., vii-x.
\textsuperscript{15}Katharine Dorathea Ewart, Cosimo de Medici (Florence: McMillan and Company Ltd., 1899), 227.
\textsuperscript{17}R. Baine Harris, ed., The Significance of Neoplatonism, Studies in Neoplatonism 1 (Norfolk, Va: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, Old Dominion University, 1976), 18.
branch, which led him to founding The Florentine Academy in 1462.\textsuperscript{18} This school was loosely based on the romantic notion of the school of Athens, with incumbent scholars Plato and Aristotle influenced on the work of Socrates.\textsuperscript{19} This was particularly appropriate for a school based on Neoplatonism, and their main agenda within the school was to read and interpret Plato’s works through Neoplatonic eyes.

The interest in the Greeks did not end with Cosimo. The most famous of the Medici was his grandson Lorenzo, known as \textit{il magnifico}.\textsuperscript{20} A charismatic man, he is remembered as being a patron of the arts as well as a savvy businessman and politician. It was Lorenzo who founded the Medici Sculpture Garden, and it was also Lorenzo who formed preliminary notions of art, philosophy, nobility, and genius in the mind of the young Michelangelo.\textsuperscript{21}

 Michelangelo’s relationship with the Medici was far from over after he left the garden. The Medici’s influence spread from Florence to envelop much of Italy. During his long life, Michelangelo worked for two Medici popes.\textsuperscript{22} The Medici would also be one of his greatest patrons, and an intimate friendship with several of the sons his age is clear.\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{The Siege of Florence}

The citizens of Florence had a complex relationship with the Medici. Often, their influence was regarded as tyranny. This was particularly true of members of the Guelph party. The Guelphs, who had originally supported the pope in his power, were now staunch believers in

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Jackson J Spielvogel, \textit{Western Civilization} (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012.), 91.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Roscoe, \textit{The Life of Lorenzo de Medici, Called The Magnificent}, viii.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} de Tolvey, \textit{The Youth of Michelangelo}, 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} David Watkin, \textit{A History of Western Architecture}, 5th ed (London: Laurence King, 2011.), 232.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} de Tolvey, \textit{The Youth of Michelangelo}, 19.
\end{itemize}
the power of the populace and were excited by the idea of establishing Florence as a republic.\textsuperscript{24} They viewed the Medici as their main opponents in this suit, as the family had a veritable monopoly of power within the city. This conflict grew to a climax in which the citizens of Florence expelled the Medici from their city. The family returned in force, laying siege in an attempt to break the fledgling republic the revolutionaries had desired and established. During this war, Michelangelo was pulled from both sides. The Medici were his kin, his patrons, and his educators. Florence was his home. In the end, Michelangelo decided to stand with the people of Florence. This may have been in part due to the nostalgia and loyalty he felt to both his father and his brother, who had both died recently, and who had both deeply loved Florence.\textsuperscript{25} He took up the role of engineer for the city’s fortifications against the Medici’s siege.\textsuperscript{26}

The citizens of Florence had, however, flown too close to the sun, and like Icarus, their hopes fell. The Medici ultimately regained control of the city, which had consequences for Michelangelo. Doubtless, the relationship between Michelangelo and the Medici was strained for the remainder of his life. However, they still maintained their patronage of his talents with many commissions, including designing the Laurentian Library.\textsuperscript{27}

\textit{Fortifications of Florence}

While the walls of Florence have long since been destroyed by the juggernaut of modernity, plans of Michelangelo’s fortifications remain (\textit{Figure 2}). They are slightly difficult to

\textsuperscript{24} Dante, Moser, and null, \textit{Inferno}, 323.
\textsuperscript{25} Symonds, Gilbert, and Michelangelo, \textit{The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti}, 402
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 409.
parse at first glance, with strong triangular shapes and sharp bafflements. Their meaning is elucidated when we turn our gaze to his plans for the rare book room in the Laurentian Library.

The Humanist thought of the Renaissance did not end with asking Michelangelo to be an architect. Indeed, his genius must, like Leonardo da Vinci, also reach into engineering and the art of warfare. It is because of this thought that Michelangelo was asked to take up arms against the Medici in the form of their engineer for fortifications of the Florentine walls.

It is understood that this must have been an incredibly difficult choice for Michelangelo. Turning his back on the Medici went beyond merely personal strife, but into the realm of the most egregious sin. Within Dante, the ninth level of hell is reserved for betrayal, with a designated area specifically for those who betray their kin. While Michelangelo’s family was only tenuously related to the Medici, the tie was still enough for this betrayal to offend both his personal relationships with the Medici as well as his Catholic beliefs. Additionally, this action compromised his entire artistic career. The Medici represented a hefty chunk of his patronage. By siding with the common people, he risked being permanently unemployed as an artist, and his hopes of achieving great fame dashed.

In order for Michelangelo to side with the Florentines, he must have believed his ties to them to be stronger. He must have had deep loyalty to the reimagined Guelph party, as well as to the place his father and brothers called home. He must have believed the sin of betraying his city to be worse than betraying the Medici. This shows us how deeply Michelangelo loved Florence, and what he was willing to risk to protect it.

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28 Ibid., 120
29 Dante, Moser, and null, Inferno, 293.
In his role as civil engineer, Michelangelo designed fortifications of the Florentine walls. The Renaissance was the era in which firepower entered military conflicts.\textsuperscript{30} Up to this point, the most elaborate technology was the crossbow. While it could inflict considerable damage, any thick wall could easily repel an arrow. As such, military movements were more like complex posturing, with an artful eye towards strategy. Each side was aware of the limits of the other. However, gunpowder changed this landscape into the bloody and devastating reality it still is today.

The main reason Michelangelo was conscripted into fortifying Florence’s walls was because of this paradigm shift in warfare. The walls utilized in the medieval era were straight and punctuated regularly with tall towers. While these were effective against an arrow, a cannon blast could easily tear through walls. Therefore, the emphasis was turned towards bastions and intellectual manipulations of existing structures to make them impermeable.\textsuperscript{31}

In the end, the walls were not what caused the fall of the city. Michelangelo’s plans and inventions were one of the reasons that the city stood as long as it did. He brought his trademark sensibility of stone to this venture, along with his omnipresent knack for approaching everything through the eyes of a sculptor. However, the Medici had returned en mass, with their ally’s armies in tow. They laid siege to their own city, with only these walls keeping them at bay. It seemed that Italy was not prepared for a republic, however, as there was little order and much confusion. Their own mercenary armies ended up turning against them; the Medici’s money tasted sweeter than the hollow ideals of the citizens.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Ackerman and Newman, \textit{The Architecture of Michelangelo}, 120.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 122.
Education in the Sculpture Garden

Within the Medici Sculpture Garden (Giardino Mediceo), Michelangelo was taught the foundations upon which his later life would be built.33 The Medici supplied the young man with marble and tools, the materials that would define him. From the fragmented remains of his fledgling efforts, it is clear to see that he showed great aptitude with spatial awareness; his fawn’s head and Battle of the Centaurs both twist throughout the air, intertwining and interweaving with their surrounding space (Figures 4 and 5). However, many of the romantic notions surrounding the Garden are unsubstantiated, and based on the highly biased beliefs of Vasari.34 What is not disputed is that a garden did exist in which Michelangelo learned his craft. It is also widely accepted that this garden housed antiques in the collection of Lorenzo, which

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33 de Tolnay, The Youth of Michelangelo., 16.
would be used to teach the students the craft of classical statuary. It is clear that Michelangelo fostered an obsession with antiquity—his first major commission was the first freestanding life-size figure since antiquity. From there, he continued to try to best the ancient masters; the David was a distinct response to classical tradition, and his Florentine Pietà was an attempt to create the first statue with four figures from a single piece of marble.

However, the Medici education was not merely limited to the craft of art, and Michelangelo’s obsession with antiquity was not limited to their statues. The Medici ensured that he was extensively educated in literature and philosophy. He was taught the Tuscan poets—Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio—alongside Plato and other classics. The two distinct genres would have held an equally distinctive and influential role in the mind of the young man. Indeed, he was most likely educated using the very same books that would later rest within the Laurentian Library.

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35 Ibid.
36 Wallace and Michelangelo Buonarroti, Michelangelo., 262.
37 Ibid., 41.
History of Architecture

The art of classical architecture returned during the Renaissance. After nearly a millennium, the style of the Romans was back with a vengeance. The Italians were vastly curious about these ancient peoples, and venerated their arching designs. This curiosity was enabled by the writings of Vitruvius. This ancient had the singular luck of having his writings about architecture and proportion survive, which was translated in the 1400s by Alberti. These texts vastly altered the notion of architecture as art. Instead of merely emulating the Roman style, Renaissance artists could interpret their theory. This theory vastly influenced literally every great mind of the Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci is famous for his Vitruvian Man sketch, and Michelangelo’s one existent statement about his architectural theory almost exactly emulated the ideas set forth by Vitruvius. Indeed, Vitruvius writes, “Architecture consists of Order…Arrangement… Proportion, Symmetry, Propriety, and Economy.” As such, architecture was able to divorce itself from its purely utilitarian roots and become the playground for the intelligentsia. Renaissance architecture is difficult to parse for the majority of modern viewers, as it was intended to have the same elevated levels of intellectual stimulation as the other fine arts. As such, it is complicated and deeply symbolic, which is a departure from the more sensual and aesthetic desires of today’s architects. This is deeply important within the context of the Laurentian Library, as it is expected for Michelangelo to include much of his personal philosophy and genius within the very design.

39 Ibid., 11.
Alberti was not the only architect that assisted in the revitalization of Roman art. The distinction ‘Roman’ is important, as the Italians did not really have a sense for Ancient Greek architecture until much later. However, they had easy access to the plentiful ruins of Rome, and as such Renaissance architecture is influenced by Roman tastes. The resurgent interest in the vast domes and structures of Roman antiquity is largely attributed to Fillipo Brunelleschi. The Duomo of Florence had remained uncompleted for many years, with the technical capabilities for completing the 138½-foot diameter being non-existent. Brunelleschi performed an act of engineering brilliance, and erected the still-standing Duomo of Florence. Such an act was so impressive that it caused Florence’s sister-city, Rome, to be jealous, and later enlist none other than Michelangelo to build a rival dome in St. Peter’s Basilica.

However, arguably the greatest figure in the popularization and proliferation of this Roman style was a man by the name of Donato Bramante. He rekindled the notion of artful design within architecture; previous structures displayed much rigidity in their composition, with function dominating over style. Bramante moved the focus of architecture away from the walls and back towards the space the walls created. The interior spatial volume dictated the building, and therefore the buildings were designed with cylinders and spheres in mind rather than circles and squares. This change vastly influenced the geometry of fifteenth century Italy, and shifted the art of architecture indelibly. While Michelangelo’s architecture differed greatly from Bramante’s, he absolutely accepted the notion of designing for spatial shapes rather than rigid walls. Michelangelo also inherited another of Bramante’s innovations; he modeled his buildings

41 Murray, The Architecture of the Italian Renaissance., 7
42 Ibid., 31.
43 Wallace and Michelangelo Buonarroti, Michelangelo., 228.
44 Ackerman and Newman, The Architecture of Michelangelo., 27.
rather than drawing them.\textsuperscript{45} This was another way these architects could better understand shape and flow rather than merely function. From Bramante onwards, architecture would forever be a marriage of both function and design.

Bramante’s architecture was highly in demand, but often was unrealistic. The desire for perfect radial symmetry often led him to creating floor plans that would block all the light from entering the building, and his arching ceilings were often impossible to actually build.\textsuperscript{46} Nonetheless, the popes adored his aesthetic, commissioning many buildings from him. Perhaps the most notable commission was Saint Peter’s Basilica in the heart of Vatican City. However, this building proved to be incredibly difficult to erect. After the death of Bramante, it bounced down through his heirs until finally being given to Michelangelo, 41 years after Bramante created the initial design.\textsuperscript{47}

Michelangelo’s style was a vast departure from the beloved intricacies of Bramante’s aesthetic. Vasari described Michelangelo’s style as lacking decorum, or an adherence to the traditions of the classics.\textsuperscript{48} Indeed, while his style appears to be classical to the modern eye, it was actually a rejection of the current obsession with the Romanesque style.\textsuperscript{49} He was often viewed as the last resort for design, with his buildings taking a strong geometric approach with clear lines. His buildings were still grand and complex, but with attention to practical matters, such as light and flow. Indeed, Michelangelo did not consider himself an architect, and expressed surprise at this role being handed to him.\textsuperscript{50} However, the Renaissance was the time of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 34.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Wallace and Michelangelo Buonarroti, \textit{Michelangelo}, , 223.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ackerman and Newman, \textit{The Architecture of Michelangelo}, , 31.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Symonds, Gilbert, and Michelangelo, \textit{The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti}, , 4.
\end{itemize}
Humanism, and with that came the expectation of the overarching genius of the individual. He was expected to be sculptor, painter, architect, poet, aristocrat, engineer, and whatever else he was called upon to do. Michelangelo would have doubtless preferred to spend all his time on his favorite medium, marble, but was commissioned to do a plethora of other projects. It is important to remember this when viewing Michelangelo’s architecture. He approached each task with the eye of a sculptor, and thus each work is tinged with his inherent love of supple stone.

It was only after the death of Bramante and his students—most notably, Raphael of Urbino—that the popes begrudgingly turned to Michelangelo for completion of the overly ambitious project of Saint Peter’s Basilica. Michelangelo, however, brought an invaluable talent with him. After years of working with stone, he had engineering sensibility. What others started, Michelangelo could finish. His buildings were sound and his designs in line with tangible realities. This aspect, along with changing tastes, brought this once undesirable architect to the public eye. Once there, Michelangelo made many contributions to the skylines of both Florence and Rome. He also made his way into the lore of both cities; one of his lasting marks is a still-used children’s rhyme: Sará a Roma a far la sua sorella, lei é piú grande ma certo non piú bella (I go to Rome to build your sister, she is larger but clearly not more beautiful). It speaks of Michelangelo’s departure from Florence to build the dome of St. Peter’s, which the loyal Florentine children state to not be any more beautiful than their beloved Duomo. The continued use of this chant in playgrounds across Italy is testament to Michelangelo’s influence, however begrudgingly, as an architect.

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Chapter II: The Laurentian Library

The Laurentian Library was, admittedly, a rather minor note within the canon of Michelangelo. It was vastly outshone by his greatest architectural achievement, the completion of Saint Peter’s Basilica. The layman often overlooks even that achievement; Michelangelo is usually only presented as a sculptor and painter. The fact that he was the architect for this building is generally considered uninteresting in the face of the towering presence of The David or the overwhelming feat of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. However, it is specifically because of this that the Library is of particular interest. His peers and patrons doubtless thought much the same as we do now, and were much less apt to scrutinize or consider the underlying philosophy of a building than a piece of fine art. The aspect of practicality inherent within architecture often undercuts more intricate analysis of the artistic meaning. As such, it was precisely the perfect opportunity for Michelangelo to express his frustrations, curiosities, and unusual beliefs.

Figure 6
Michelangelo’s Theory of Architecture

Michelangelo left us with an extensive amount of literature, both in correspondence and personal notes. This text is vital to understanding Michelangelo, as it offers another view from which to look at all of his works. While he fleshes out his philosophy of art quite extensively, he only mentions his theory of architecture in one letter. Furthermore, this letter is fragmented, without known date or recipient. However, within this brief overview of his thoughts he displays a vast of information regarding his philosophy. He does not part absolutely from the symmetry of Bramante, but rather moves it from radial symmetry to linear. Additionally, and most extraordinarily, Michelangelo utilizes the metaphor of a body when discussing a building. Indeed, he writes:

When a plan has diverse parts, all those (parts) that are of one kind of quality and quantity must be adorned in the same way, and in the same style, and likewise the proportions that correspond. But where the plan is entirely changed in form, it is not only permissible but necessary in consequence entirely to change the adornments and likewise their corresponding proportions; the means are restricted (and may be chosen) at will; similarly the nose, which is in the center of the face, has no commitment either to one or

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In relation to the sides (of the body), and to its correspondences. And surely, the architectural members derive from human members. Whoever has not been or is not a good master of the figure and most of all, of anatomy, cannot understand anything of it.\textsuperscript{53}

His assertion that those who do not understand the human body cannot understand architecture is a rather shocking one. In this, he asserts that architecture has much deeper importance and intricacies than merely a building. Indeed, unless one has the requisite knowledge, nothing can be gleaned. Within the context of the Library, this assertion is deeply influential, as it allows us to understand that there is intended meaning in architecture, and that we must look to understanding of the human body to parse it. Furthermore, the line, “…the architectural members derive from human members” is vastly important. The word Michelangelo uses to describe the connection between architecture and the human body is dipendono, which more accurately translates to “they depend on” than “derive.”\textsuperscript{54} This shifts the understanding of that line, from merely being sourced in the human body to depending on it. In this, Michelangelo is telling us that were it not for the human body, there would be no architecture.

Michelangelo easily demonstrates this connection between architecture and the body when we view his work. When given the task of St. Peter’s, he rejected Raphael’s intricate and vast basilica in favor of one much more akin to Bramante’s original (\textit{Figures 9, 10, and 11}).\textsuperscript{55} However, he rejected absolute radial symmetry with the addition of a columned porch, which created flow from the front to the back. The altar was clearly placed opposite the opening, with the two side chapels appearing smaller and therefore not detracting from the flow. Here, Michelangelo has created a body of sorts; the porch is the legs, the smaller side wings the arms,

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} This distinction comes from my own personal translation as an Italian speaker.
\textsuperscript{55} Ackerman and Newman, \textit{The Architecture of Michelangelo}, 194.
and the altar the head. This was especially appropriate for St. Peter’s, as the supposed tomb of the saint was positioned at the heart.

This notion of architecture as a body is poignant, even beyond the physical and obvious metaphor. Indeed, this distinct idea is central to any parsing of his buildings. Renaissance artists were deeply aware of the manifold layers within their work. Art was not just aesthetic; it was religious and philosophical. Art was the tool through which meaning was translated to a vastly illiterate population, which needed pictures to understand the complex notions inherent in both. As such, this allusion to the human body would have not been stated merely for the body’s function or beauty. Remembering that Michelangelo was first and foremost a sculptor, it is understood that he approached the design and construction of the Library with the same desire for intrinsic meaning in his work. Michelangelo utilizes the human body in his painting and sculpture to represent the entirety of a human. He places figures within the Last Judgment to represent the status of their souls, and he binds slaves in his statuary to show their spiritual
entrapment (Figures 12 and 13). Therefore, when Michelangelo speaks of the body of a man, he is also speaking about the human’s mind and soul. Indeed, Michelangelo would have been doubly conscious of this mind-body connection, as both a Neoplatonist and a Catholic. According to his beliefs, the body, being designed by God in his own image, was representative of the perfect form. It also housed within it a soul, which, according to Dante, took the exact same shape in the afterlife. Therefore, when he speaks of a body, he is also discussing the mind and soul. As such, we must look at his buildings and understand them to clearly represent a human: mind, body, and soul.

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56 Helen Gardner and Fred S Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art through the Ages: The Western Perspective* (Boston, MA; Australia; Brazil; Japan; Korea; Mexico; Singapor; Spain; United Kingdom; United States: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2014), 470.
Overview of the Library

Understanding that the possession of texts and information is one of the most poignant expressions of power and status, the Medici spent a vast amount of time and money amassing an extraordinary collection of manuscripts and books. Lorenzo *il magnifico* was one of the main procurers of these tomes, with his personal interest and cunning ambition fueling this elevation of his family both mentally and socially.\(^58\) Wealth was the sign of a merchant, but education the sign of nobility. While the Medici had begun their juggernaut with money, they wished to end it with nobility. The construction of a library would make public this collection, and cement their status. While the Library is housed within the compound for San Lorenzo, the Laurentian Library (*La Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana*) was actually named for Lorenzo *il magnifico*, he who most fervently desired this.\(^59\) At 48, Michelangelo had the rare experience of being a living artist of mythic fame. He was the obvious choice for architect, as the school of Bramante had reached a close.

The first mention that we see of the Library is in one of the letters to Michelangelo. Dated to January 2\(^{nd}\) 1524, a man named Giovan Francesco Fattucci briefly mentions being contacted by a member of the Medici to conscript Michelangelo into building a library.\(^60\) However, he states that he has no further information about where or what kind they are imagining. The next instance within his personal correspondence is another letter, dated to July of the same year, in which Michelangelo cites issues of payment at the beginning of the Laurentian commission.\(^61\) This points to a slight annoyance and strained working relationship that doubtless influenced the

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\(^59\) Ibid.


\(^61\) Ibid., 93.
artist. Work finally began in 1549, as Michelangelo was busy juggling several other clients and commissions at the same time.  

In the interim between correspondences, Michelangelo received the information needed regarding what and where the Library was to be. The site for the Library was chosen to be on the monastery of San Lorenzo. A couple of places within the compound were suggested, only for Michelangelo to reject them as being unsuitable due to lack of light or concerns about blocking the extant façade of San Lorenzo. Finally, a place was settled upon, on top of the existing cloisters. This proved to be an interesting challenge for Michelangelo, as he was not working with a virgin site. Rather, he had to include the extant structure beneath in all of his plans. However, a second story library was in canon with the libraries of that time. A concern in the housing of books was dampness, which was lessened by raising the books higher into the air.

Another influencing factor in the library was the commissioner. While the first letter merely states that the Medici contacted him, it was in reality Pope Clement VII. A son of the Medici—one that actually grew up with Michelangelo—Clement was especially direct in his approach to the commission. Extensive correspondence exists between the two, in which Clement stresses the desire for the utility of the space. Michelangelo, in contrast, is much more interested in the decorative and artistic elements he wished to explore.

Construction of the Library after its initial design was not Michelangelo’s greatest worry. Indeed, he was not even in Florence for a fair portion of it, sending instructions via friends and assistants. This proved to be particularly difficult for the staircase due to its unprecedented appearance. Additionally, Michelangelo’s instructions were difficult to execute. Michelangelo

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64 Ibid., 97.
65 Ibid., 98
left Florence in 1534, never to return or see the manifestation of the Laurentian Library.\textsuperscript{67} Completion could only happen via the assistance of others. Michelangelo still maintained plasticity within his design process even as he sent them to his assistants, and as such it is clear that the influences of his move and its effect on him was a deep influence within the finalized structure of the Library. However, his entire vision never materialized. The vestibule and reading room were built, but the planned rare book room was not. Its incomplete status, like the rest of Michelangelo’s \textit{non-finito} works, is a testament to the extenuating circumstances and pressures of his life. While the rare book room was never built, it was and is a part of the unified whole imagined by Michelangelo. However, the Library was finished in this truncated form, and the results are still employed today as a functioning landmark of Florence.

\textbf{The Vestibule}

The most striking room in the Library is the vestibule. This is attributed to its oddity and the discomfort of those who enter it. Immediately, it does not seem like a classic entryway. Rather, the wall with the opening into the reading room appears to be a façade of its own (\textit{Figure 14}). This false front is housed within the inorganic space created by the walls of the vestibule, with the overall effect of being transported from the bustling streets of Florence to an altogether different realm. It is from this new space that we are then invited to ascend into the Library proper, via a particularly strange staircase.

\textsuperscript{67}Wallace and Michelangelo Buonarroti, \textit{Michelangelo}, 166.
The staircase is the most immediate feature any visitor confronts. Extending down from the entry to the reading room, it stands in three parts. The center stair appears to be a vicious, flowing entity that cascades down, with two classic flights flanking it on either side. The staircase is a dark gray color, which ends at the herringbone brick of the floor. The vestibule itself is a narrow room, and this staircase extends almost all the way to the other door and flows
out to either side. There is no room to enter and observe; rather, one is immediately thrust upon
the liquid stairs. The room appears too small to house this enormous staircase.

What the vestibule lacks in depth it makes up for in height. The walls are soaring,
extending far beyond the ceiling of its adjoining room. They are decorated with manifold crests
and curls, with compressed columns dispersed throughout. Between the columns are squares
created with three pieces of stone, with a large triangle or curved ridge capping them off like a
window. Above these is a line of demarcation, and above it are true windows. They are square
and allow light to enter only from the highest plane of the room. Foreboding colors of dark gray,
lighter gray, and the red brick of the floor dominate the entire vestibule. Even the Tuscan light
appears harsh as it bounces off of the gray walls to the floor.

The room is disconcerting. A vestibule is traditionally the space in which guests
transition from the street to the building. It passively provides a transition. The Laurentian
Library vestibule does the opposite. Indeed, it provides a disruption between the street and the
reading room. This catharsis is only added to by the staircase, which appears to be so fluid as to
discourage walking on it. Most visitors opt to walk up the traditional staircases flanking the main one.

In looking at a cross-section of the Laurentian Library (Figure 6), one sees that the vestibule is much taller than the reading room. The practical explanation for this is the fact that the Library is built on top of an existing cloister. The vestibule is the vehicle by which people ascend from the ground to this second story library. However, that does not account for the width or for the fact that the ceiling extends above that of the reading room. As soon as the vestibule is entered, one is presented with the immediate reality of the curved stairs. As soon as the second room is entered, the ceiling is much lower.

Both of these factors combine to create a feeling of compression within the vestibule. Upon entering, the visitor is immediately thrust upon the stairs and is pushed onwards by both the discomfort of their surroundings and the architecture, which squeezes them upwards and inwards. The vestibule gives the overall impression of urgency and is discombobulating.

The Reading Room

Once the reading room is entered, that feeling of pressure is alleviated. Perfect linear symmetry and equidistant spacing dominate this room. Large windows flank both sides of this long and narrow space. They let in large swaths of the golden, Tuscan sun as they stand like sentinels at equal intervals down the length. The ceiling is decorated in large square blocks, which are intricately patterned.
Michelangelo also decorated the furniture within this room; large desks with attached chairs were fastened to the floor at the same intervals of the windows, to allow the greatest amount of ease and light for those reading at them. The desks were home to the pride of the Library: the Medici’s rare and valuable collection of manuscripts. Each desk had a number of books chained in place, with lists at the end of each desk denoting which books were there.

The walls of this room are a continuation of the color pallet of the vestibule, with light gray accented by dark gray columns. However, a rich floor patterned with red and yellows, as well as the dark brown of the wood used in the furnishings and ceiling, contrasts the gray. Furthermore, the drastically greater amount of light allowed into the room bounces off of the ample wood, illuminating it with an altogether cheerier glow.
This room exemplifies order and consistency, with each part of the room appearing much the same as its twin. Indeed, each quadrant of the room is identical. The only bisections are horizontally, by a door, and vertically, between the door leading to the vestibule and where the rare book room was planned to go. The reading room is eerily perfect, with absolute order, absolute geometry, and absolute equality.

The Rare Book Room

The rare book room is the only of the three that was not built. Its intended use was to house the extremely rare and valuable manuscripts belonging to the Medici. However, as it was not built, the analysis must be based purely on the surviving sketches made by Michelangelo.

![Figure 21](image)

This poses an inherent problem, as Michelangelo had an eccentric style when it came to designing. Often, he would make many changes to a building, even during production. His approach was plastic and based as much off of sight and instinct as predetermined planning. Nonetheless, the sketches do give us a rather clear understanding of his plans. The ones that do exist elucidate a triangular room with rounded nooks along the edges. In the middle of the plan is a large circle, whose function is unknown. Also unknown are the coordinates of windows. What
is clear is the striking geometry of this room. The triangle and circle dominate, with smaller circles and semicircles being the only other discernable features. While Michelangelo would have doubtless added manifold flourishes to this room, there is no denying that the existing idea is much different from the other two rooms; it is bolder and more simplistic. The overall effect would have been in accordance with the desired notion of the room: it housed things rare and valuable, it was distinct, and it was important.
Chapter III: Arguments

After inspecting in detail the tangible and intangible facets of the Library, it is clear to see that there is a great distinction between each of the rooms. It is also understood that Michelangelo was designing from the assumption that any buildings would function like a body, or soul, of a human. It, too, is apparent that Michelangelo was creating this at a time of great personal and professional stress. He had reached a cleavage point, and the Laurentian Library shows his attempt to assimilate all of this confusion into one whole.

The Library and Dante

There is no denying the indelible impact that Dante Alighieri had upon all of Italy. The Divine Comedy was a masterpiece in more ways than one; it created a standard Italian language from all of the dialects, it fleshed out folklore regarding the Catholic afterlife that is not specified in the bible, and it was an epic the likes of which had not been seen in over a thousand years. The effects were immediate and extraordinary. People across Italy heard this tale, and they venerated Dante with extreme devotion. His work is still read alongside the Ancient Greek classics, and his genius generally unquestioned.

However, The Divine Comedy is not as straightforward as one might believe. This is no mere tale, but a complex series of commentaries. Throughout this poetic journey, Dante encounters many figures from his Florentine life. Still smarting from the devastation of being exiled from his home, his approach is vengeful and his placement of these figures is a political statement. Dante discusses heavily the notions of sin, placing those he is most guilty of in a less severe light than those he abhors in others. Indeed, the inner, most severe circle of hell is reserved for betrayal. While this is in line with common belief at the time, it is also
demonstrative of Dante’s deep pain at the betrayal of his city. Lucifer cries as he chews in his
three mouths Cassius, Brutus, and Judas, which also shows the absolute sorrow and loss of Dante
as he faced the reality of never being able to return home. However, while the political message
is clearly central within the work of Dante, he also provides a description of the common beliefs
regarding the afterlife.

_The Divine Comedy_ deeply and personally affected Michelangelo. Born only a hundred
or so years after Dante’s death, Michelangelo was still functionally his contemporary. He would
have passed the Baptistery where Dante was baptized, and walked daily through the streets of
Florence whose architecture gave the framework for that of hell. The cultural craze surrounding
the epic had not died down, and the story would have been discussed in great length in the
streets. Furthermore, Michelangelo’s Guelph ties made him especially amenable to Dante’s
influence. The political commentary would have been one that Michelangelo doubtless agreed
with, which made the story and the struggles it presented a particularly personal one.

As his life went on Michelangelo’s ties and similarities to Dante only grew. He, too, left
Florence, never to return. He saw different social and political regimes rise and fall, and he
would have been able to relate to Dante’s distaste for the pettiness and hypocrisy of both parties.
Michelangelo immortalized his veneration of Dante in one of his poems, titled simply “Dante.” It
reads:

What should be said of him cannot be said;
By too great splendor is his name attended;
To blame is easier than those who him offended,
Than reach the faintest glory round him shed.
This man descended to the doomed and dead
For our instruction; then to God ascended;
Heaven opened wide to him its portals splendid,
Who from his country’s, closed against him, fled.
Ungrateful land! To its own prejudice
Nurse of his fortunes; and this showeth well
That the most perfect of grief shall see.
Among a thousand proofs let one suffice,
That as his exile hath no parallel,
Ne’er walked the earth a greater man than he.68

This poem clearly demonstrates his frustration with Florence, deep veneration of Dante, and unfailing belief in what he wrote. When Michelangelo speaks of this “ungrateful land,” he is referring to both of their homelands. This is reinforced by the country’s description of being “closed against him;” both of these are emotions that Michelangelo would have been familiar with and empathetic to. His closing line, “Ne’er walked the earth a greater man than he” unequivocally demonstrates Michelangelo’s absolute adoration of this human. It is no great stretch to believe that he would wish to emulate his idol’s thoughts and images within his forte: visually rather than Dante’s verbally.

The Library’s three rooms are a clear representation of The Divine Comedy. The disturbing vestibule veritably screams, “Abandon every hope, who enter here,” which Dante describes as being the epitaph above the gate to hell.69 Likewise, the reading room is a strong representation of purgatory, and the rare book room a representation of paradise, or heaven. The visitor would, much like Dante himself, have to pass from hell to paradise when experiencing this library.

Beginning with the vestibule, the first thing one notices is the darkness of the room. The lack of natural light combines with the gloomy color palate to give a stark contrast to the bright Florentine street. This transition into darkness is parallel to Dante’s at the beginning of his journey. Dante writes:

The day was now departing; the dark air
Released the living beings of the earth

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69 Dante, Moser, and null, Inferno., 18.
From work and weariness; and I myself
Alone prepared to undergo the battle
Both of the journeying and of the pity,
Which memory, mistaking not, shall show.\textsuperscript{70}

Twilight signals the transition into hell, just as the shade of the vestibule signals the beginning of the journey into the Library. Likewise, entry into this building would also separate one from the crowded streets, which would simulate the feeling of isolation and release “from work and weariness.”

The parallel to Dante’s experience continues when one comprehends the internal space of the vestibule. While Michelangelo was radical in many of the designs of the Library, he continued Bramante’s philosophy regarding designing for the space created by the walls rather than the walls themselves. This is quite clear in the Library, where the internal space of the vestibule is so striking and disorienting. This discomfort is due to the high ceilings and narrow width, which seems to have no immediate rationale. However, when the room is viewed in cross-section (Figure 6), the staircase creates a line from the opening into the reading room to the bottom of the opposite wall. The narrow space between the two acts as a pseudo-step to connect that line. If the pattern of the staircase were to be repeated from the top of the entryway to the height of the ceiling, the resulting shape would look like a spiral, with the jagged lines of the steps differentiating the spiral from a cone. This is in canon with Dante’s \textit{Inferno}. Hell is represented as a spiral, with each circle being distinct, like each step. Dante describes the \textit{Inferno} being a series of nine circles, each with a distinct placement for each shade of each sin. Every circle is smaller than the one before, ending with the body of Lucifer wedged in the opening between hell and purgatory (Figure 22). Michelangelo approximates this by giving us this staircase, ending at the opening to the purgatory of the reading room.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 14.
The lack of space in the vestibule before the staircase interrupts the floor further develops the experience of being immediately placed into spiraling out of control. The tall ceiling adds to this. The height gives the feeling of space, which appears smaller and smaller as one ascends the staircase. This entire experience coalesces into the feeling of moving through a chaotic realm into the comparatively minute opening of the door. This feeling is emphasized by the optical illusion that appears when looking up the staircase from the ground; each step looks smaller than the one before it, creating a funnel.

Furthermore, the staircase itself is odd. A common word used to describe it is “vicious,” a term usually reserved for blood. Its seeping onto the deep red of the bricks further validates that connection. This bloody staircase makes it uncomfortable for the visitor to ascend. Rather, one
feels pulled down with the flow of the stairs, much like being pulled down into the depths of hell. Dante makes it exceedingly clear that hell is final, and leaving only happens in the rarest of circumstances.\textsuperscript{71} This is emulated in the overwhelming size of the staircase flowing down, with only the narrow steps on either side allowing the visitor to ascend in comfort. Likewise, the curved steps are sectioned off into parts. The bottommost three steps are the most rounded. The number three and the rounded shape bring to mind the repetition of the number three within Dante’s works; there are three destinations in the afterlife—hell, purgatory, and paradise—and within these places there are multiples of three, such as the nine circles of hell, or three times three. It is also connected to the three rooms of the library. The flanking staircases on either side of the central one each have nine steps as they ascend; a step for every circle of hell. Here, again, Michelangelo is drawing a distinct parallel.

The motif of three is continued on the walls. Each one is sectioned into three parts. On the two walls flanking the staircase, three window-esque openings stand in the negative space carved out by the compressed columns. Each of these spaces are furthermore divided into three, with the bottom part housing the scrolls, the middle part housing the window-esque openings, and the upper part housing the windows. To further emphasize the Dantean link, above each window is a circle—three on each wall.

Michelangelo also decorated the room with medallions. They appear in niches over the doors, and are presented as a pattern of concentric circles. It is divided, again, into three main sections, with the innermost circle patterned and containing another ring. This repetition of circles in multiples of three again links back to the Dantean principles Michelangelo emulated.

The viewer mimics Dante’s journey and ascends the staircase, moving up to and through the opening between them. From there, they are presented with the expanse of the reading room.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 22.
In the first Canto of *Purgatorio*, Dante describes his great relief at being able to view the blue of the sky. He writes, “The gentle hue of oriental sapphire/ in which the sky’s serenity was steeped—/ its aspect pure as far as the horizon—.”72 Upon entering the reading room, the viewer would first be presented with the view of the sky pouring in from the massive and plentiful windows. This sight would be a stark departure from the vestibule, in which the windows are placed so high as to not be easily seen. Dante continues, “[the sky] brought back my joy in seeing/ just as soon as I had left behind the air of death.”73 So too, would the visitor to the Library be glad at seeing the sky again as soon as they had passed through the vestibule.

The motif of circles extends into *Purgatorio* and into the Library. Purgatory is slightly different than hell in its structure; while it still manifests as a spiral of circles, there are only seven proper levels. The other two are anti-purgatory at the bottom and earthly paradise at the top (*Figure 23*). This is manifest within the reading room. The ceiling is immediately striking; intricately carved boards are held up by the infrastructure of the room. The central motif of the ceiling is an ornate oval. The same design is repeated over and over again down the laudable length of the room. The diminishing size of the ovals act in the same way as the staircase; it creates an optical illusion of being drawn towards a point at the end. Indeed, the fact that they are made up of ovals rather than true circles only heightens this illusion. Likewise, it also is representative of a spiral, with concentric circles decreasing in size. The oval is more germane for purgatory than the circle, as it is a place of in-between. While hell and paradise are both absolutes, purgatory exists only so long as the earth is still functioning. Catholic doctrine believed that the earth would only exist for a set amount of time, with the birth of Jesus Christ marking the halfway point. When the time was over, Jesus would make a second coming.

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73 Ibid.
purgatory would end, and all the souls would be sent to their final resting place without hope or change. This is shown through the ovals, which are themselves created piecemeal from four different sections. This demonstrates a continuation of the circle motif, while emphasizing the fluidity of this space. It is transient in a way that neither hell nor paradise is, while still being contained within the overarching whole.

The rare book room arguably demonstrates the most distinct connection to *The Divine Comedy* of any of the rooms. This could be attributed to the fact that it only exists in sketches. The plans we do have are bold in their composition, with clear, large circles. It is important to remember that they may have been convoluted during their construction, and that Michelangelo brought an unprecedented level of malleability to his design. Nonetheless, what we do have shows a clear connection to *Paradisio*. The middle of the room is dominated by the theme of the circle. While its overall shape appears to be a triangle, the corners are rounded. Furthermore, the edges themselves are dotted with semicircles throughout. The visitor would have walked along bookshelves placed in a triangular pattern. However, this can be attributed to the practical
requirements of a bookshelf; straight edges are more easily viewed than rounded ones. The experience of walking through them would have been circular, with the individual returning to the same place he began. Furthermore, the shelves create a sort of concentric circle. There are three sets of bookshelves, and the visitor would have had to walk around three times to see every book, returning to the same spot after each rotation. This returning spot is marked in the design with a series of concentric circles—three, to be exact.

![Diagram of concentric circles and triangular shape]

**Figure 23**

Furthermore, the triangular shape does not detract from the overall symbolism of the Library. It accents it. The reading room combines the circular motifs with the number three. The triangle has three sides, and Michelangelo then truncates the corners of the triangle to give it another three while simultaneously creating a rounder shape.

Due to this triangular shape, it can be assumed that, no matter where the windows were placed, the rare book room would have been absolutely flooded with light. Windows would have
been available from all angles. As the sun moved through the sky, the room would have remained illuminated until the last possible moment. This is in stark contrast to the vestibule, with only meager and feeble sources of light. We are aware of the deep impact of light within the work of Michelangelo, as he chose the site of the Library based on exposure to light. Light is likewise central in the work of Dante. Hell is described as being an extremely dark place, with the only light arising from the fires constantly ablaze. Indeed, one of the most famous lines in the entire Comedia occurs after Dante and Virgil have climbed on Lucifer’s fur to escape hell. He line reads, “E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle” (…we emerged, to see—once more—the stars). This reference to natural light highlights its importance, which only grows as they move to purgatory and paradise. At the boundary between the last level of purgatory and earthly paradise, Dante is finally reunited with Beatrice, his muse. She is presented in a progression accompanied with flags made of rainbows. The Rose Bowl is likewise spoken of with great reverence to the light of the place. Michelangelo’s use of light, moving from the dark vestibule to the glowing rare book room, underscores this connection.

Dante is the least descriptive in his narration of paradise. So much so that Botticelli, who illustrated The Divine Comedy, merely showed the cantos within Paradiso as circles with human figures floating around in them (Figure 25). Nonetheless, what is clear is Dante’s strict adherence to the notion of the levels of heaven, and the levels being circular. This culminated as the Rose Bowl, where the Virgin Mary and Jesus himself resides. This ambiguity is likewise concurrent with Michelangelo’s plans. Their simplicity and their openness are testaments to Michelangelo’s desire to accurately represent the cantos of The Divine Comedy. Barring explicit description, he alludes with overarching shape.

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74 Dante, Moser, and null, Inferno, 317.
The geometric shapes within all three rooms are of the utmost importance. It is understood that Dante describes the afterlife as having perfect geometry because the divine creator crafted it. In this, Dante is equating geometry to godliness. Michelangelo, with his abundant use of geometric shapes within the Library, is clearly alluding to this belief. While previous architects did use geometric shapes, they usually hid it beneath ornamentation. Michelangelo is incredibly clear with his shapes. Triangles, squares, and—most notably—circles are displayed boldly. Their stark and naked appearance is another link to the Library being a representation of this afterlife. Michelangelo displays the shapes clearly, to emulate to perfect geometry utilized by a divine creator.

All this evidence converges to enunciate the deep impact that Dante Alighieri had upon Michelangelo Buonarroti. His original vision for the Laurentian Library was deeply influenced by Dante and *The Divine Comedy*. He connected to this seminal work on many different levels—human, Florentine, Catholic—and chose to venerate it though his use of shape, form, light, and most importantly, geometry.
Neoplatonism is a slightly misleading term. The basis for this philosophy is not Plato, but the *Enneads* by Plotinus, written in the 3rd century C.E.

Plotinus was deeply influenced by the ancient philosophers, specifically Plato, but reimagined their notions within his own works. Neoplatonism can be described as a deeply mystical philosophy, with complex notions of the human soul within the universe. In this, there is a trifold progression over the Chaos of Nature. The point of climax within Neoplatonism is union with the One, the Good, the Ultimate, or the Beautiful. All these terms are an attempt to convey the meaning inherent in the original Greek word, which has no English approximate.

Plotinus and his school did not call themselves Neoplatonists. This was a term that was ascribed to them much later, when interest in the mystical movement returned in mid-nineteenth century Germany. However, this was not the first time this particular belief system was highly regarded; it had reached extreme popularity in the Renaissance. This was mainly due to two major factors. Interest in the antiquity had soared, and Neoplatonism had rare compatibility with Christianity. The connection can be traced back to Plotinus’ own time, because an overlap was found in the notions of omnipotence of both the One and of God.

The Renaissance became reacquainted with the figure of Plotinus through the person of Marsillio Fincino. A Catholic priest with an avid penchant for philosophy, he made the first
translation of the *Enneads* in 1492.⁸¹ A complex character, he also translated the works of Plato, was the central figure in the Medici’s Florentine Academy, and was vastly influential on every major thinker of the day. His impact extended to a young sculptor named Michelangelo.

After understanding Neoplatonism, it is very clear to see that the Library is also heavily influenced by this philosophy. Michelangelo’s very thought process regarding architecture is deeply based on the Neoplatonic understanding of the body as the ultimate, and the manifestation of the deepest aspect of the divine.

While Neoplatonism is distinct from Plato, it is still intrinsically linked with his writings. Likewise, Michelangelo would have read Plato and been familiar with his works. Plato’s impact on Michelangelo is most clearly shown in the Library through the use of circles. Plato spends much of his extant literature discussing the notion of Good.⁸² It is difficult to parse this notion within a modern context, as so much has been lost with translation and differing eras. However, Plato gives some overarching notions that can be utilized in order to understand this complex idea. One of these is the manifestation of Good within his *Allegory of the Cave* as the sun. The sun, which gives light to the nature of reality (or ‘Being’), is the lamp through which the path for the philosopher is illuminated once he has escaped the cave.⁸³

This is shown in the Library through the repeated use of circles through all three rooms. The circles (or suns) light the path through the three rooms, highlighting the philosophical journey of the visitor. The circles give light to the ‘Being’ of the room, which is deeply influential within the reimagined Neoplatonism of the Renaissance. The sun metaphor is not purely symbolic—the physical light of the rooms intensifies as one progresses through them. The

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⁸¹ Harris, *The Significance of Neoplatonism*., 18.
vestibule is almost a cave, and the rare book room would have caught all the possible light. As such, the walk through the three rooms would mimic the departure from the cave, into the light and into the reality of Being.

Platonic education was mainly focused on creating a mental metamorphosis from the tangible realities of the world to the purer and simpler truths that can be abstracted from them. This education reached its summit with the study of the science of Dialectics, which is known as the study of comprehensible Being. This education is likewise mirrored within the Library, as one moves from the glaringly real masses within the vestibule to the simple, abstracted lines in the planned rare book room. The Library also manifests a Platonic postulate in the Timeaus, in which Plato discusses his creation myth. His belief was that the creator (Artifice) imposed form on Chaos, which rejects and repulses all order. This Chaos is the realm from which all things arise, called a “disorderly receptacle.” The vestibule demonstrates this attempt to impose order upon chaos; the pure geometry of the space, as represented by the circles and squares, are pushed into the walls of the disorienting room, which bring a sense of tenuous order into the disorderly receptacle of the vestibule. While many of the elements inherent in both Neoplatonism and the Library were lifted directly from Plato, Michelangelo did not exactly emulate the thought of Plato.

Also included within Neoplatonic thought were ethics postulated by Aristotle. The central idea within this ethical philosophy is happiness cumulated via the pursuit of the Good. This was to be achieved by meditation and contemplation of this Good. However, the word Aristotle uses is eudaimonia, which has no English translation. While it does loosely mean

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84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 9.
“happiness,” the happiness encompassed by the notion of *eudaimonia* is one of deep contentment after cultivating a harmonious and balanced life. As such, the incorporation of this notion into the philosophy of the Neoplatonists should be understood to mean a desire for absolute fulfillment of the spirit through contemplation of the Good.

This manifests itself in the Library in the physical form of the Library itself. It literally lends itself for contemplation of the Good in the form of geometry and proportion, order and accessibility to Greek and Latin manuscripts. As the visitor entered the Library, they would have begun a subconscious meditation, as the oddity of the staircases, the flowing shapes, the order of the reading room, and the planned clarity of the rare book room would snare their attention. This would have been supplemented by the conscious intellectual engagement reading these books would require, and the total experience would assist in the elevation of the visitor. Additionally, the notion of *eudaimonia* would be expressed through the dual impact of meditation on both the conscious and subconscious mind. By the mere act of walking into and through the Library, the visitor would be striving for Good. In this, they would be achieving *eudaimonia*, leaving with a heightened, more balanced state of their soul.

While Plotinus was deeply affected by both Plato and Aristotle, he took much inspiration from his own direct experience. He speaks of this and teaches his insights, specifically the belief that an individual human is representative of the entire universe. Granted, the notion of the universe was slightly more flexible at this point, but the mystical undertones we glean now were intended at the time of writing. The fact that each individual is a condensed, microcosm of the cosmos links the human with this notion of the Soul of the World. This entity is understood to be the rational soul, a derivative of the ancient Logos. Logos, or “reason,” is the entity that

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manifests the visible universe out of the chaotic substrate through meditation on form.\textsuperscript{89}

Therefore, the highest activity of the mind is to likewise engage in logic and reason, which brings understanding and clarity to the quagmire of the internal state.

Two aspects of this notion stand out strongly within the Library. Plotinus’ understanding of the human body as a small example of the cosmos directly reiterates Michelangelo’s theory of architecture, which has been identified as being representative of the human body and soul. Plotinus is likewise not merely speaking of the human body when he references the form, but the mind within it. Indeed, Plotinus speaks of the human body as being “a faded image of the Intelligible,”\textsuperscript{90} which includes within it Being, levels of consciousness, and eternity. While the form may decay, it houses within it that which is eternal. Here, we see Michelangelo’s base beliefs echoed, as is represented by his pious nature, his theory of architecture, and in his other works.

The second notion of Plotinus that resounds within the Library is Logos. A library is a particularly pertinent place in which to elaborate and extrapolate the notion of the logical and rational soul, as the structure houses the texts in which logic is employed. Moreover, the very nature of the Library demands the visitor to piece together the oddities and fragmentations, bringing reason to why the staircase is the way it is and why the scrolls in the vestibule are overlapping. Neoplatonic idea links the rational mind with the true self, and the puzzles within the Library are the vehicles through which the visitor is guided on the journey towards higher progression of the human soul. Once subconscious Logos is engaged by the oddity of the vestibule, the visitor is allowed to enter the reading room, where conscious Logos can flourish.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
It is understood that three is perhaps the most central motif in the Library. This has been demonstrated physically, as well as in the philosophy of Dante. This motif is also strikingly clear within Neoplatonists. Plotinus sketches out the universe as transcending from Chaos with Nature. Nature is all that is material within this world, and it is eternal. From this base level, three “hypostases” transcend. Each one is beyond this material realm, yet they grow from the previous one. These three are known as Soul, Intellect, and the Good. The Soul arises from Nature, Intellect arises from the Soul, and the Good comes from Intellect. The main goal of the Neoplatonists was union with the Good. As with Plato, we must remember that ‘Good’ is a translated term, and as such cannot be taken from our modern association with the term. Rather, the Good is incomprehensible. While it contains many ideas, such as “…Power, Will, Beauty, even Love,” the overarching feature of this Ultimate entity is its transcendent nature. Indeed, the Good is also known as the One, this unifying space in which all else can occur. The Neoplatonists desired their own human soul to reach the internal point of still, which would allow progression through the three hypostases to reach the One—the Beautiful, the Good, and the Ultimate.

The three rooms of the Library are representative of the three hypostases. The vestibule is representative of the Soul. While it much more chaotic than the rest of the Library, it nonetheless contains within it ordered shapes that bring order to the chaos of base materials. In this, Nature (represented by the stones and materials of which the Library is made) has been harnessed and transcended via the use of Form. Michelangelo meditated upon form when designing the Library, and as such brought the Soul out of Chaos.

91 Ibid., 12-14.
92 Ibid.
The reading room builds upon the Soul to attain Intellect. This is in no way surprising, as this is the room housing the texts that allow for cultivation and stimulation of the intellect. The continuation of the color scheme, as well as the opening to the vestibule, shows that the Intellect has grown from the Soul; reaching past it, but not fully cutting away from it.

The One is finally reached when one would have gone into the rare book room. There, one would have had access to truly remarkable texts, the kind of stimulation that would allow for a transcendental experience. The clear geometry and absolute simplicity of the place would have, likewise, allowed for this attainment. However, it is understood that the One is contained within all things, shattering and splintering out into both the Intellect and the Soul. This, again, is shown in the Library, with both other rooms containing the circles representative of the One.

Plotinus speaks of how a human soul is unique in that is has the ability to pass through realms of attainment. However, there is a constant struggle between one’s higher self and the more base, material qualms. It is only through intellectual engagement that one can finally find eudaimonia. Michelangelo designs the entire Library to facilitate this journey, with the ultimate goal of happiness.

The progression of the human spirit is also represented in the accessibility of the Library. The vestibule is accessible to all humans. Anyone could wander in to look at the forms and images crafted by the space. The visual information is not exclusive. The reading room, however, consists of both visual and intellectual aspects. Only literate individuals can grasp the full meaning of the room, with the geometry and forms combining with the intellectual stimulation and engagement of the books they house. Therefore, a certain amount of progression is required for this room—which connects to a step up in the Neoplatonic progression of the soul. This is heightened in the planned rare book room. All books in the Renaissance were

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93 Ibid.
valuable—indeed, the books in the reading room needed to be chained in place to deter theft. Therefore, in order for a further differentiation between these and the books in the rare book room, the tomes housed in that theoretical space must have been extraordinary. The individuals that would have been allowed into this room would have been the extreme elite—the rare scholars capable of parsing these texts and those of status warranting access to objects of unique value. These individuals would have had the level of intellectual sophistication required for attainment of the Ultimate, the Good, and the Beautiful, in Neoplatonic terms. Likewise, they would have the benefit of the visual stimulation of form in all three rooms of the Library, which would, again, add greatly to their attainment of the Ultimate. Their intellectual sophistication would be equal to the number of forms presented for their meditation. Therefore, while the masses—which exist at the most base levels of progression—could enter the vestibule, the number of individuals decreases with each room, in accordance with the rarity of levels of attainment.

The clarity of the connection between the Laurentian Library and Neoplatonism is almost startling. It is clear that this mode of thought had a much deeper and more indelible impact upon Michelangelo than was previously thought, specifically around the time when he designed the Library. The entire space is designed to simulate and stimulate the progression of the human soul, through both intellectual and visual aids.

Evidence in Other Works

The possibility does exist that the seemingly clear links in the Laurentian Library to both Dante and Neoplatonism are nothing more than quirks of architecture; an overlooked feature of a medium Michelangelo was unused to. In order to dissuade this, we must look to evidence in his
other works, which echo the same sentiments. A close view at his portfolio reveals a plethora of such examples.

Perhaps the most similar work by Michelangelo to the Laurentian Library is the Medici Chapel. It shares much of the same history and many of the same features. It, too, was commissioned by the Medici, Michelangelo had to complete it via correspondence, and it has strange qualities. The Chapel is the final resting place of two of the Medici brothers, though neither of them was of much consequence. The initial plan was to include the body of Lorenzo il magnifico, but his tomb was never even started. The oddity exists in the non-finito nature of some of the statues, Michelangelo’s portrayal of women, and what the statues on the tombs actually mean. The figures on the tombs are intended to be some sort of allegory, yet what was being eluded to still escapes us. The popular explanation of this space is that it, too, is Neoplatonic. The proof of this is complex, yet quite similar to the proof presented above for the Laurentian Library.

The Medici Chapel serves as an external validation of the Neoplatonic nature of the Laurentian Library. However, it also furthers the notion of a Dantalian influence in both. The Medici Chapel also has the concentric circle medallions that appear in the vestibule, which are shown over draped flora; flora that look strikingly similar to a laurel wreath (Figure 26). Dante is constantly shown as being crowned in laurels, as a sign of his genius and competence (Figure 27). This was a symbol of the Ancient Greek greats. By showing the medallions with the laurels, Michelangelo is linking the motif of circles and of three with his modern genius, Dante, and their shared idols in antiquity—notably, Plato. As such, both claims regarding the Library are solidified and emphasized in the Medici Chapel.

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Perhaps the most famously Neoplatonic work by Michelangelo was the Pope Julius II tomb. This project would haunt Michelangelo and prove to be one of the biggest issues in his life. In the arrogance of youth, he promised the then pope the most magnificent of tombs—so magnificent, in fact, that there was no way Michelangelo could have sculpted it all even in his long life. The original tomb was never to reach completion, with the newly famous Michelangelo being called from commission to commission. After the death of Pope Julius, his heirs would hound Michelangelo for almost all of his life to finish the tomb.\textsuperscript{95} It exists now in a truncated shade of the planned glory. However, we still have several artifacts from this first planned venture. The sketches for the tomb remain, as do several of the started statues (\textit{Figure 28}). Most notably, Michelangelo’s slaves, which remain in the \textit{non-finito}, were originally intended to be the bottom layer of the magnificent tomb. All evidence combines to show us the vision that

\textsuperscript{95} Walla\textsc{c}e and Michelangelo Buonarroti, \textit{Michelangelo}, 188.
Michelangelo had—a Neoplatonic progression, with three layers representing the trifold progression of the human spirit. The slaves, which are bound, represent the human soul before its spiritual enlightenment. The compressed columns within the vestibule resemble this extremely closely. Furthermore, the wall upon which the columns are placed is demarked into three distinct areas, much like the tomb itself. The top, which houses the circles and the windows letting in the light, shows the Beautiful and the Ultimate. The presence of the circle is also a reminder of Paradisio, where the stars and light of heaven are set in perfectly circular surroundings.

![Figure 27](image)

To prove that Michelangelo had unusual beliefs regarding the afterlife, we must turn to The Last Judgment. This supplemental piece done in the Sistine Chapel was completed late in his life, and is deeply demonstrative of his beliefs and frustrations.\(^96\) It displays all the major biblical figures, as well as a clear representation of both heaven and hell. The figures within it are highly metaphorical, and it is clearly extrapolated that Michelangelo was painting this as an extrapolation of his emotions towards his own inevitable judgment. Here, too, the work of Dante is strikingly obvious. His representation of hell, complete with Charon taking souls across the river in his boat (Figure 29), is almost verbatim Dante. However, issues arise when one looks at

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 184.
the rest of the painting. The Bible states that, at the last judgment, all horns will blow.

Interestingly, two angels are not blowing their horns. As this is a painting, every piece of it had to be planned and executed deliberately. Therefore, every part of it is meaningful and intentional. This angel not blowing his horn is not a mistake; rather, it is a subtle belief that, perhaps, the end is not final, and there is still hope for the poor souls in hell.
Chapter IV: Convergence

While a clear connection between the Library and Dante has been established, and another incredibly strong connection between the Library and Neoplatonism has also been established, the true fascination of the Library comes when we view their convergence. The isolated ideas speak clearly about influence and education, whereas the overlaps discuss the personal beliefs and understandings of Michelangelo. What is clear is that he was an even more complex character than is readily apparent. Fiercely intelligent, he was able to juggle differing and intricate notions, which he then incorporated into his works. We must view Dante, Neoplatonism, the Medici, and the Florentine Siege within the same lens in order to parse how these ideas sat with him, and what he ultimately believed in.

The two notions that immediately appear to be most polarizing are the finality of Catholicism and the transcendence of Neoplatonism. However, Dante and Plotinus are not nearly as incompatible as they immediately seem. While Dante does describe this horrifying, overwhelming hell, and while he literally says that the gates of hell read, “Abandon every hope, who enter here,” Dante enters and leaves. Dante, the man who makes the journey and literally climbs on Lucifer’s fur to escape, is the one Michelangelo so adores. Indeed, he has more reverence and respect for his dead countryman than he appears to have for any pope of his acquaintance. Perhaps Michelangelo did not merely admire Dante because of their similarities and extreme piety, but because of the hope Dante brings. This is ironic, given hell’s warning, but hope is precisely what Dante gives. The hope that, even when looking at Lucifer’s piteous sobbing, a human being can still find the courage to leave.

This is consistent with the Neoplatonic notion of transcendence. When Dante views Lucifer and writes extremely elaborate poetry about the experience, he is intellectually
meditating on both the visual forms and the reason behind it. Dante looks at why Lucifer is suffering so, and understands the rationale as to why he is stuck in the gap between worlds. He contemplates why each figure is being chewed in each mouth, and processes the information to the extent that he is capable of relating that information to the masses. In this small microcosmic moment of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante displays all the necessary pieces for Neoplatonic progression from the Soul to Intellect. He meditates upon these images, and turns them into poetry. He speaks of geometry within hell, and alludes to their rationale. In this, he is able to leave hell.

The constant theme of circles within the Library is also an area of overlap. The Medici family crest has six spheres on it (*Figure 31*). Six, also being a multiple of three, is a convergence of the repetition of the circles throughout the Library. This is understandable, as they are the ones who commissioned the Library. However, it also demonstrates a convergence between the Medici and Dante in the mind of Michelangelo. The six orbs of the Medici coat of arms represented the six original sons. By placing circles throughout the three rooms, Michelangelo was continuing the Dantean tradition of a political statement. Circles, or members of the Medici family, are met as the visitor walks through hell, purgatory, and the planned paradise, just as Dante encountered political figures from his generation. In this, Michelangelo is again in parallel with his idol Dante while simultaneously making a statement about the members of this complex family.
The Library links to Michelangelo’s Medici frustrations in yet another way; the plans for the jagged fortifications of Florence look strikingly similar to the ones for the rare book room. When viewed side by side, one might believe that they are merely incarnations for the same project, with the overarching triangular shape and circular details remaining constant. While the fortifications have two side protrusions, and thus look much more lethal, the overarching similarities are apparent. It is difficult to believe that the similarities were mere coincidence. Rather, they seem to be indicative of Michelangelo’s complicated relationship with the Medici. The statement about the Medici within the plans for the rare book room and their similarity to the fortifications of Florence points to a deep commentary on the part of Michelangelo. The Siege of Florence had broken up Michelangelo’s familial ties, and was doubtless one of the most emotionally traumatizing experiences of his life. Being asked—or rather, demanded—to work on the Library after the completion of the war would have been difficult for him. Some lingering resentment must have existed, and it is no far stretch to believe that this would have impacted his work. As such, it is important to understand that
Michelangelo’s relationship with his patrons deeply affected his works, and that this link speaks volumes about Michelangelo’s emotions towards them.

The rare book room is, however, representative of paradise and connection with the One. It is odd to think that he would take this sacred space and turn it into a battlefield for personal issues he had with the commissioners. By adding in the Neoplatonic and Dantean views of the Library into this equation, it seems that the possibility exists of the similarities not arising out of spite, but rather out of hope. Hope that, even with the splintering that occurred when he sided with Florence, unification was still possible of the Medici and the Florentine people, and of Michelangelo himself. Even the jagged triangles of the bafflements could not distance their fraternity in the eyes of the Ultimate.

Dante and Plato are likewise much more compatible than they immediately seem. The notion that the base level of the world is Chaos with order and form being imposed by the Artificer in Plato is almost identical to hell for Dante. Hell exists in chaos; the contents of the rings are the epitome of disorder, with no reason or justification linking them. In particular, the circle for fraud is made up of different bulges, called *malebulge.* Each pocket is full of such disarray that the word has even made its way into contemporary Italian for a particularly crowded public place, one in which no one would wish to enter. The chaos of hell is contained by the order of its structure. While the internal structure of hell is chaotic, the circles themselves are structured, clear, and distinct. This is because the divine creator, who Dante constantly describes as being manifest in perfect order, formulated hell. In this, the hell is the manifestation of order being imposed on chaos, just as in Plato, the Artificer imposes form on Chaos. Both of these convergent ideas are manifest within the vestibule of the Library. The oddity of the

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staircase, the height, and the intersecting curls are representative of barely contained chaos, an idea that strongly resounds in both of Michelangelo’s beliefs.

As Dante and Plato shared beliefs, so too did Michelangelo and Plotinus. Namely, the notion of the Good is also understood as “the infinite Principle of creation” or “the Wellspring that engenders the whole sum of existence.” This sounds strikingly familiar to Revelation 22:13 in the Bible, in which God states, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and Last, the Beginning and the End.” This verbiage is repeated throughout the Ennead and the Bible, further strengthening the connection between these two. As Michelangelo was very well versed in both documents, these similarities would not have been missed nor ignored. Rather, the notion of the Good was likely absorbed into his notion of God, furthered by his contemporaries who made claims about the similarities between Neoplatonism and Christianity. This rationale explains why both ideas and ideals were fostered within his mind; they existed symbiotically. It was only in the execution of these notions, specifically by the Catholic Church, that discrepancies existed.

For Michelangelo, the largest and most devastating disparity was the notion of hell, which fundamentally disagreed from the Neoplatonic view that the base level of Chaos could be transcended. This is a far cry from “Abandon every hope, who enter here.” This must have been confusing and conflicting, as the amygdala response of fear of hell would have sent him in the direction of Catholicism, and the seedling hope of Neoplatonism grew over time.

It is important to remember that these interests and curiosities could not have been explored openly. The Renaissance was a time in which heresy was met with swift retribution, and no one was safe. In a time rife with changing, jealous powers, being outspoken was dangerous. Therefore, it is within the subtleties that true expression resides. Something as seemingly innocent or accidental as an angel not blowing their trumpet is echoed within
Michelangelo’s Laurentian Library, and those small details scream more loudly than any clear protestation.

However, a counter-argument presents itself in the form of the classical interpretation of the Library as Mannerist. Mannerism was a style of art that arose at the end of the Renaissance, which plays with notions inherent in classical design to add tension and oddity within the works, rather than the serenity and perfection seen in the art of antiquity and the early Renaissance. The vestibule does share many of the main identifiers of Mannerism, as it most definitely disorienting and tenuous. The labeling of the entire Library as Mannerist, however, is inappropriate. The reading room is particularly within canon, as it almost exactly mirrors the precedent laid forth in the reading room of the library of San Marco. This room was likewise set on a second floor, with ample light, and extreme symmetry. Michelangelo’s reading room does not derivate from this model in a way consistent with Mannerist works. Likewise, what can be parsed from the rare book room plans also does not appear to be a classically Mannerist design. The only similarity seems to be in the vestibule, and the strangeness inherent within. However, the Mannerist reading does not negate this Dantean/Neoplatonic interpretation. If anything, it strengthens it. The fact that there is no consistent Mannerist thought throughout the whole building points, again, to an unexplained inconsistency. The fact that this break happens between the vestibule and the reading room underscores this notion of exiting chaos and entering order. This difference in style between these two rooms remained a point of mystery even in a Mannerist context, and the Dantean/Neoplatonic reading offers an explanatory framework that houses this enigma.

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Furthermore, Michelangelo’s life seems to validate the reading of the Library as his personal struggle with impending oblivion rather than merely an exploration of a new style. His poetry regarding fear of death, combined with his friendship with known reformers, allows us to understand that Michelangelo was strangely obsessed with the afterlife. He does not reject either Neoplatonism or Catholicism, nor is he completely divorced from Mannerist thought, but rather looks for the connections between them. This manifests in the central idea, the calmness and the omnipresence, to which the human soul can connect. Indeed, this also manifests within the rare book room, which, never being built, must remain a mystery—like death itself. Furthermore, Michelangelo has been credited with his major contribution to Mannerism being a God-like mastery of his forms and materials, which also ties back to the central ideas presented here. The Laurentian Library became the battleground for this man’s internal wars, which were fought over the course of the many years he worked on it. His plasticity in design allows us to see how he achieved even a modicum of peace, with varied treaties and the finality of inescapable surrender in death.

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100 Shearman, Mannerism., 75.
Chapter V: Conclusion

Michelangelo was an extremely tormented man. However, the question remains as to why. He suffered greatly, and while he produced extraordinary works, always seemed to be at odds with himself internally. He desired to be religious, and yet was also deeply ambitious about his fame and glory. With time and distance, it is easy to remove the human component from Michelangelo as an entity. His life has been mythologized, and in that, he managed to achieve the fame and glory he so yearned for. This came at a price; Michelangelo was always deeply isolated. Living with an insatiable hunger for art and achievement left him peerless, and his long life proved to be as much curse as blessing in that he outlived the few who managed to make it into his confidence. All the while, Michelangelo was aware, as every human is, of the call of oblivion.

By viewing the Library within the context of Michelangelo as a man, not a myth, we are afforded the opportunity to form an empathetic link with him. He was neither the first nor the last human to feel torn from all sides, and he was likewise not alone in fearing the unknown and having questions about what happens after death. It is a bittersweet irony that this questioning, the thing that kept him gagged during his lifetime, is the very doorway through which modern humans have to connecting compassionately with Michelangelo the man.

The Laurentian Library displays the personal beliefs and curiosities of Michelangelo Buonarroti. Within the two existent rooms and the planned one, he teased out differing beliefs to find the overlaps. What was discovered was no surprise—life is complicated and muddled by fear and intrapersonal influence. We are never really free, as the very beat of our hearts within the bars of our ribcage is nothing but a timer counting down towards oblivion. However, relief can be achieved when we can, for one moment, allow ourselves to contemplate something
bigger. Whether that is reason or learning or God or the One—none of that matters, so long as it helps with the weight of living. By creating this building with swirling shapes and confusing steps, Michelangelo allows the visitor to rest against his backbone for a moment. We understand that no matter the difference in age or language or fame, we are one and the same. In this moment of compassion across time, Michelangelo is finally able to transcend to the One, and, so too are we.
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