

# Michelangelo's Aedicula for the Chapel of Leo X: Some Symbolic Considerations

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Michelangelo probably received his first architectural commission for the embellishment, in 1514, of the sole window for the tiny Chapel of Pope Leo X, in the Castel Sant'Angelo. This papal fortress, the former Mausoleum of Hadrian, overlooks the Tiber in Rome. The design for this facade (or aedicula) is usually mentioned briefly, if at all, in discussions of Michelangelo's architecture. James Ackerman and John Shearman note Michelangelo's bold manipulation of classical architectural vocabulary in this work, a point further emphasized by its occurrence both so early in Michelangelo's career and in relation to the development of Mannerist architecture.<sup>1</sup> As yet, however, there has been no close examination of this aedicula in its contemporary setting.

The following will attempt just such an examination, primarily by focusing on the aedicula's most prominent feature — its functionally overlarge, axially aligned console. Of course, Michelangelo's innovative use of consoles and brackets continued throughout his career, from the "kneeling windows" of the Palazzo Medici (ca. 1517) to the Porta Pia of 1561-65. Yet, the use of a single large console as the sole visual focus of an entire work is unique in Michelangelo's oeuvre, if not in the whole of Western architecture. Although it is not certain if such a monumental console carried any connotations for architect or patron, the study will explore the potential for such connotations, specifically in the visual language of classical architecture, and in the literature dealing with the life of Pope Leo X (the former Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici).

The changed appearance of the aedicula (Figures 1-2) is due to a well-intentioned restoration of 1909-10,<sup>2</sup> somewhat faithfully based on a drawing of about 1545 by Aristotile da Sangallo (Figure 3).<sup>3</sup> Eraldo Gaudioso argued persuasively in 1976 that the roundels (seen in Figure 2) are not part of Michelangelo's original design, and that the pre-1909 appearance probably reflects the original conception of the artist. For the purposes of this paper, Gaudioso's contentions are accepted as accurate.<sup>4</sup>

Ackerman states that this marble facade, despite its small size, achieves "monumentality without mass: grandeur is suggested by the subtle arrangement of delicate members" (Figure 4).<sup>5</sup> A projecting, pedimented central bay is flanked by narrower, niche-filled bays surmounted by lion's masks, in keeping with the work's papal patronage. Four Roman Doric pilasters divide the three bays; two engaged Roman Doric columns mask the inner pair of pilasters and delimit the projecting central bay (Figure 5).

David Summers notes the "arrogant quotation" of this Doric order from Bramante's *Tempietto*.<sup>6</sup> Yet even bolder is the articulation of the central bay. Instead of a column screen, with an opening canonically occupying the central axis in Vitruvian fashion, the axis is articulated by a support — a panelled pilaster flanked by marble half-balusters that, as a whole, seems to swell from the compression of

the large console directly above. The pediment contains an undulating ribbon motif centered by the ring with three feathers, a symbol of Medicean patronage.<sup>7</sup> This undulating effect is also evident in Giuliano da Sangallo's pediment for the Villa Medici at Poggio a Caiano, completed in the 1480s.

Gaudioso discusses the subtle interweaving of horizontal and vertical elements, in both marble and iron, and compares them to similar effects in Michelangelo's initial ideas for the facade of San Lorenzo in Florence (Figure 6),<sup>8</sup> a project to which the artist turned not long after working on the Leo X aedicula. Also notable, and evocative of the rhythms of classical architecture, is the use of half-consoles and half-balusters at the limits of the central bay.

Gaudioso points out that a bifurcated window exists behind this architecture (Figure 7). The overlaying of Michelangelo's design gives the window the appearance of having a mullion-and-transom articulation.<sup>9</sup> Michelangelo and Antonio da Sangallo the Younger (the chapel's architect) included the window and the extant vaulting of the room in their designs. Antonio did not become a full-fledged architect until 1516; his conversion of the space into a chapel (dedicated to the Medicean patron saints Cosmas and Damian) merely involved a new foundation and floor and the subsequent raising of the door. An estimate for this work dates from November 1514. Antonio supervised the construction of the exterior as well. The work fits stylistically, according to Ackerman, into the period prior to Michelangelo's departure from Rome in 1516. As a result, the date of the aedicula's execution is probably contemporary with that of the documented interior, therefore dating Michelangelo's design to some time earlier in 1514.<sup>10</sup>

As is so often the case, no finished design by Michelangelo exists. Charles de Tolnay attributes a rough sketch of a facade ground plan to Michelangelo and to this facade, while noting that the placement of columns and pilasters does not correspond to the final ground plan.<sup>11</sup> Ackerman feels that a drawing, now in Oxford, for an unidentified altar, is closest in design to the facade, even though it has nothing specifically in common with the aedicula.<sup>12</sup> Frederick Hartt believes that this drawing may be for an altar, for San Silvestro in Capite, drawn in 1518.<sup>13</sup>

It is the opinion of David Summers that the aedicula reflects a design solution that is graphic in character, a Michelangelesque *fantasia*, a *grottesco* that was born and grew out of a process of two-dimensional design, the final result being more pleasing to the intellect than to the eye.<sup>14</sup> This would be in keeping with the cultivated and refined nature of Medicean patronage; both Leo X and his cousin Clement VII had a penchant for *fantasie* and *grotteschi* in painting as well as in architecture.<sup>15</sup>

A reference to the cultivated tastes of the first Medicean pope is essential to the discussion of this aedicula. Not only would *grotteschi* and *fantasie* have been well-received by



Leo X in and of themselves, but the intelligent utilization of the classical elements of architecture would have appealed to the Pope as well. Leo X "favored the researches into antiquity . . . well understanding how much the prestige of ancient Rome would help to raise the prestige of papal Rome."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, a papal Bull in July 1515 authorized Raphael, as new papal architect and "conservator of antique marbles and inscriptions,"<sup>17</sup> to utilize ancient marbles in the building of St. Peter's.<sup>18</sup>

We find in Michelangelo's aedicula design, if not a faithful utilization of the vocabulary of ancient architecture, at least a relatively respectful one, especially in its use of a single, large console. While its role within the design is quite distinctive, its actual utilization here seems closer to an antique quotation than in most subsequent usages by the artist. Indeed, the aedicula's monumentality and gravity, its material, its location (within an Imperial mausoleum), the inspiration for its design (from classical tombs),<sup>19</sup> the patron's interests at the time, Michelangelo's residence in Rome—all point to a strong classical influence, even as the artist's design willfully violates several canons of classical architecture.<sup>20</sup>

Given this influence, we can find one predominant antique precedent for Michelangelo's employment of a monumental, axially deployed console: consoles that ornament the keystones of triumphal arches, often bearing statues of Roman deities appropriate to the iconographic program of the arch (Figure 8).<sup>21</sup> Michelangelo almost certainly studied such arches in the years immediately prior to 1514. Sven Sandström remarks on the strong similarity, in compositional structure, between the visual programs of the Sistine Ceiling and the Arch of Constantine.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Johannes Wilde notes the similarity in pose of God the Father (in the Sistine Ceiling's *Creation of Adam*) to that of hovering Victories in the spandrels of works such as the Arch of Titus.<sup>23</sup> Raphael adapted consoles for his Vatican Stanze frescoes of 1508-14. Small painted consoles adorn the fictive arches surmounting each work and bear appropriate thematic referents, such as attributes of the theological virtues.<sup>24</sup>

Even more pertinent is Leo X's utilization of the Roman triumphal entry and its concomitant architectural forms. Leo X apparently gloried in the pageantry and powerful, eidetic symbolism of the triumphal entry. For his Lateran *Possesso* of April 11, 1513, and for his *Entrata* into Florence on November 30, 1515, lavish triumphal processions took place. The triumphal route, on both occasions, was adorned with temporary triumphal arches, as many as eight in the case of the Florentine *Entrata*, according to Shearman.<sup>25</sup> Beyond mere salutatory and honorific considerations, and Leo's "personal taste for ceremony,"<sup>26</sup> Shearman finds evidence for a highly personalized, Medicean interpretation of such triumphal imagery, based largely on Leo's belief in fate:

One of the most revealing facets of Leo's personality was his preoccupation with Fate, and his remarkable life had certainly been marked by such reversals of fortune and such coincidences as to make them reasonable objects of his attention. When pope he took the opportunity to manipulate Fate and thus to produce further coincidences. The sequence of events following his capture at Ravenna is a case in point. That event had marked one of the lowest points in his fortunes, and his escape was

read at the time as a result of divine intervention.<sup>27</sup>

Leo's Lateran *Possesso* was arranged to occur not only on the first anniversary of his capture at the Battle of Ravenna, but on the feast day of Saint Leo as well. The irony was further emphasized by his choice of horse for the ceremony—the same white horse that he was riding the day of his capture.<sup>28</sup>

Such ignominious episodes in Leo's life as the capture at Ravenna were chosen to illustrate several of the lower borders of the Sistine tapestries based on Raphael's cartoons of 1515-17. These relief-like friezes, when linked with the main scenes and proposed lateral borders adjoining them (in Shearman and John White's reconstruction of their original placement), contain a powerful Medicean message:

The onlooker is shown in detail how each seeming catastrophe was turned to profit. He sees how, by God's will, the triumph of the just cause of the Medici, and therefore of the church, was, in the end, assured in spite of every seemingly overwhelming obstacle.<sup>29</sup>

In short, Leo is choosing to be seen in the tapestry borders as "the conqueror of misfortune," famous for "miraculous reversals of ill fortune."<sup>30</sup>

It is this belief in the divine favoring of both the Medici and the papal office that allows the elevation of Leo X's successes to the level of triumphs.<sup>31</sup> All of the relief scenes dealing with the life of Leo and the Medici culminate, according to Shearman and White, with the "ecclesiastical triumph"<sup>32</sup> represented on the altar wall (below the *Miraculous Draught of Fishes*), where Pope Leo enters Rome in 1513, and receives homage as the new pope. The pose of Roma, "the personified *Natio*"<sup>33</sup> who greets Leo, seems derived directly from the Arch of Titus, where Roma occupies a keystone console on one side of the arch.

The Medicean belief in providence manifests itself in other examples of Leonine patronage as well. One new coin commissioned by Leo in 1513, a *Giulio* (also known as a *Leone*) depicts a lion in profile crowned by a Victory.<sup>34</sup> We noted earlier the presence of Victories in triumphal imagery. They often occupy the spandrels of triumphal arches, to either side of the central console, crowning the deity there, and by implication, the returning Triumphantor (Figure 8).<sup>35</sup>

Yet even more vivid is the providential symbolism of the Medici Chapel at San Lorenzo in Florence, on which Michelangelo worked, on and off for over a dozen years beginning in 1519. Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici, Leo's nephew and brother respectively, are represented by Michelangelo as idealized *Capitani* of the Roman Church, resurrected by God,<sup>36</sup> and triumphant over death and the shifting fortunes of life on earth.<sup>37</sup> Leo X had conferred the Roman patriciate upon both in a Capitoline Hill ceremony, "among Roman triumphal trophies and Medici symbols," in the fall of 1513.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, consoles are positioned axially above the idealized figures. Borrowed from triumphal arches, they still exhibit a keystone-like tapering.<sup>39</sup>

As we have seen, the potent symbolism associated with Pope Leo is due largely to his Medicean heritage. Even if he had not been a layman, it seems doubtful that Leo would have developed a personal symbolism from the iconographic traditions of the Augustinians or the Franciscans,



for example.<sup>40</sup> While the laity and the clergy alike always harbor expectations for a newly crowned pope, the expectations surrounding the election of Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici were particularly heightened because of his name. In the wake of the divisiveness that plagued Julius II's rule, Leo's papacy was lauded in "Messianic, even soteriological allegorizing."<sup>41</sup> The talent for diplomacy and peacemaking, evinced during his cardinalate,<sup>42</sup> was assumed to be inherited from his father, Lorenzo the Magnificent.<sup>43</sup> And, of course, "There is every reason to suppose that Giovanni . . . inherited the family flair for inventing a mythology of their rule."<sup>44</sup>

Admittedly, even though we know much about Leo X's enthusiasm for distinctive visual imagery, and while the general aims of Michelangelo's aedicula design for Leo X exist in a finished work, we have no documentation to link the most distinctive aspect of the design to a specifically Leonine (or Medicean) interpretation. Perhaps Leo X selected the design solution we now see embodied in the Castel Sant'Angelo's Courtyard of Honor for a variety of reasons, some of which may have been personal. He frequently imbued his public acts and his artistic commissions with a strong sense of personal symbolism, as we have seen. If Michelangelo presented several design ideas to the Pope, it is not inconceivable that Leo X would have chosen the design which was executed because its honorific and triumphal connotations carried over into his own life and papacy, little more than a year old at the time. Certainly there can be no doubt that Pope Leo was fascinated by Roman

architecture generally and triumphal arches specifically.

We can only wonder about the significance of the design for Michelangelo. At the time, he was immersed in the 1513 project for Julius II's tomb. Also, he had signed a contract for a *Resurrected Christ*, to be placed in Santa Maria sopra Minerva.<sup>45</sup> Given this, how much time did the artist devote to the Leonine project? Did he feel that future papal commissions hinged on the success of this initial one? And why did Leo X give the artist an architectural problem as his first commission when Michelangelo had never worked as an architect? Should we see the "arrogant quotation"<sup>46</sup> of the Roman Doric order from Bramante's *Tempietto* as precisely that, given the strained relationship between Michelangelo and the ailing papal architect?<sup>47</sup> Moreover, to what extent was Michelangelo's use of the monumental console intended to be symbolic? This question, as well as the others, cannot be answered fully at this time. Of course, Michelangelo did use massive consoles on the final 1545 version of the Tomb of Julius II in a way that could be seen, symbolically, as consistently antithetical to the triumphal interpretation of the aedicula proposed here: inverted consoles, placed low in the tomb's elevation, replaced the bound captives of earlier projects.<sup>48</sup>

While proposing more questions than it has answered, this study was completed in the desire to draw Michelangelo's aedicula design closer to the fascinating period of its creation and away somewhat from its more frequent historical role as precursor of the artist's later architectural works.

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1 Ackerman, II, 2; J. Shearman, *Mannerism*, Baltimore, 1967, 71.

2 Ackerman, II, 1.

3 Gaudioso, 34-35.

4 Gaudioso discovered documentation for a refurbishing of the papal fortress in 1544-47 in which the ceilings of the apartments overlooking the aedicula were to be raised. A corresponding vertical stretching of the papal chapel also was proposed, but never carried out; ultimately, only the wall behind the aedicula was heightened. It now holds a circular niche with a bust of Antoninus Pius based on a Roman original. Aristotile da Sangallo's drawing was a proposal for modifying the aedicula (he was involved with the general refurbishing). Hence the renovation is ill-founded, according to Gaudioso, 7-10 and 37-45.

5 Ackerman, II, 2.

6 Summers, 162.

7 Ackerman, II, 1.

8 Gaudioso, 18.

9 Gaudioso, 15-17; Tolnay, IV, 31; Ackerman, II, 2. Gaudioso and Ackerman note Tolnay's linking of this type of articulation to a popular, late Quattrocento window type—the Guelphic cross.

10 Ackerman, II, 1-2.

11 Tolnay, IV, 31-32.

12 Ackerman, II, 2. See Ackerman, II, 1, for other, less tenable attributions; also, Gaudioso, 29-37.

13 Hartt, 1970, 160.

14 Summers, 162.

15 *Ibid.*, 153.

16 A.M. Brizio, "Raphael," *Encyclopedia of World Art*, English ed., London, 1966, XI, 857.

17 A. Marabottini, "Raphael's Collaborators," *The Complete Work of Raphael*, Introd. by Mario Salmi, New York, 1969, 200.

18 G. Becatti, "Raphael and Antiquity," *The Complete Work of Raphael* (as in note 17), 496.

19 Ackerman, II, 2.

20 A. Schiavo, *Michelangelo Architetto*, Rome, 1949, 89; Summers, 153.

21 It was at Frederick Hartt's suggestion that this exploration of both a Leonine interpretation for the aedicula's console, as well as its possible connection to antique precedents was undertaken. The transition from unwieldy seminar report to this more focused study is due largely to Professor Hartt's guidance, and is gratefully acknowledged.

22 S. Sandström, "The Sistine Chapel Ceiling," *Michelangelo: the Sistine Chapel Ceiling*, ed. by Charles Seymour, Jr., New York, 1972, 212.

23 J. Wilde, "Eine Studie Michelangelos nach der Antike," *Mitteilungen des kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz*, IV, 1932, 63; citation brought to the author's attention by Frederick Hartt.

24 For instance, above the lunette fresco depicting the cardinal and theological virtues in the Stanza della Segnatura, a putto bears an attribute of the theological virtue Hope—a torch.

25 J. Shearman, "The Florentine *Entrata* of Leo X, 1515," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XXXVIII, 1975, 139.

- 26 Shearman, 1972, 15.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 28 White and Shearman, 212.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Of course Leo X was not the first to adopt the symbolism of the triumphal entry. See Shearman, 1972, 87, where earlier precedents are discussed as well as the various Advents associated with the Imperial Epiphany. The imagery of Advents such as the *Adventus regis pacifici* became assimilated into the ritual of papal entry by the Middle Ages. It is significant that the *Rex pacificus* was a role shared both by Christ and Leo X.  
A fine general study of the evolving role of the triumphal entry is E.B. Smith, *Architectural Symbolism of Imperial Rome and the Middle Ages*, Princeton, 1956; see Smith's opening essay, "The City-Gate Concept," especially 19-37.
- 32 White and Shearman, 212.
- 33 Shearman, 1972, 87.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 35 See the discussion of the Arch of Titus (citation above, n. 23). Such Victories also occur on the Arches of Septimius Severus (Fig. 8) and Constantine.
- 36 See Hartt, 1968, 174: Leo X, upon hearing of the death of his nephew Lorenzo in 1519 (the last legitimate descendant of Cosimo the Elder), reportedly exclaimed, "Henceforth we belong no more to the House of Medici but to the House of God!"
- 37 This study relies implicitly upon the interpretation by Frederick Hartt of the meaning of the Medici Chapel's visual program, which is that the program was based on the Resurrection. See Hartt, 1968, 168-83.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 174.
- 39 The author is grateful to Douglas Lewis for the observation of the tapering of the consoles, and thus their probable source.
- 40 Shearman, 1972, 90.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 17 and 75. This largely paraphrases Shearman's discussion.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 17. It might be useful to mention the frequent usage of architectural metaphor in the commentary on Pope Leo's rule. Christ was often referred to as the Cornerstone who joined the two sides (Shearman, 1972, 79); by extension, Leo was proclaimed in this way in at least three Lateran orations of 1513-15 (Shearman, 1972, 80-82). Certainly both Michelangelo and Raphael must have been aware of the use of such metaphors of peace and unity. Shearman notes as example the architectural character of Raphael's Sistine tapestries (1972, 81).  
While the aedicula's console is only indirectly related to keystones, which are at best functionally related to cornerstones, it is at least conceivable that Michelangelo had such a metaphor in mind when he designed the aedicula. After all, directly above the console is the ring with three feathers, which may be interpreted in two ways, both associated with the themes of peace and unification. First, this symbol of the Medici may be linked easily to the *Christus medicus*; "Leo was the new *medicus* who would cure the ills of the Church" (Shearman, 1972, 77). Secondly, the ring—as part of the Leonine *impresa*—is explained in one ecclesiastical dictionary as a symbol of unity since "the ring unites, the yoke is easy" (Shearman, 1972, 87); admittedly, the metaphorical interpretation (peace and unity) in application to this specific console is predicated on fragile connections.
- 45 Hartt, 1970, 399.
- 46 See the discussion, n. 6 citation.
- 47 A. Bruschi, *Bramante*, English ed., London, 1977, 179-81.
- 48 Frederick Hartt has pointed out the symbolic and expressive potential which Michelangelo could impart to these architectural forms. In a Nov. 6, 1981 symposium paper on Michelangelo delivered at Virginia Commonwealth University (soon to be published), Hartt demonstrated that the inverted consoles of the final version of the tomb not only replaced the bound captives of earlier, more ambitious projects, but may well have been carved from the very blocks that originally were to become the captives.

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Fig. 1, Aedicula, Chapel of Leo X, pre-renovation (Gaudioso, pl. 2)

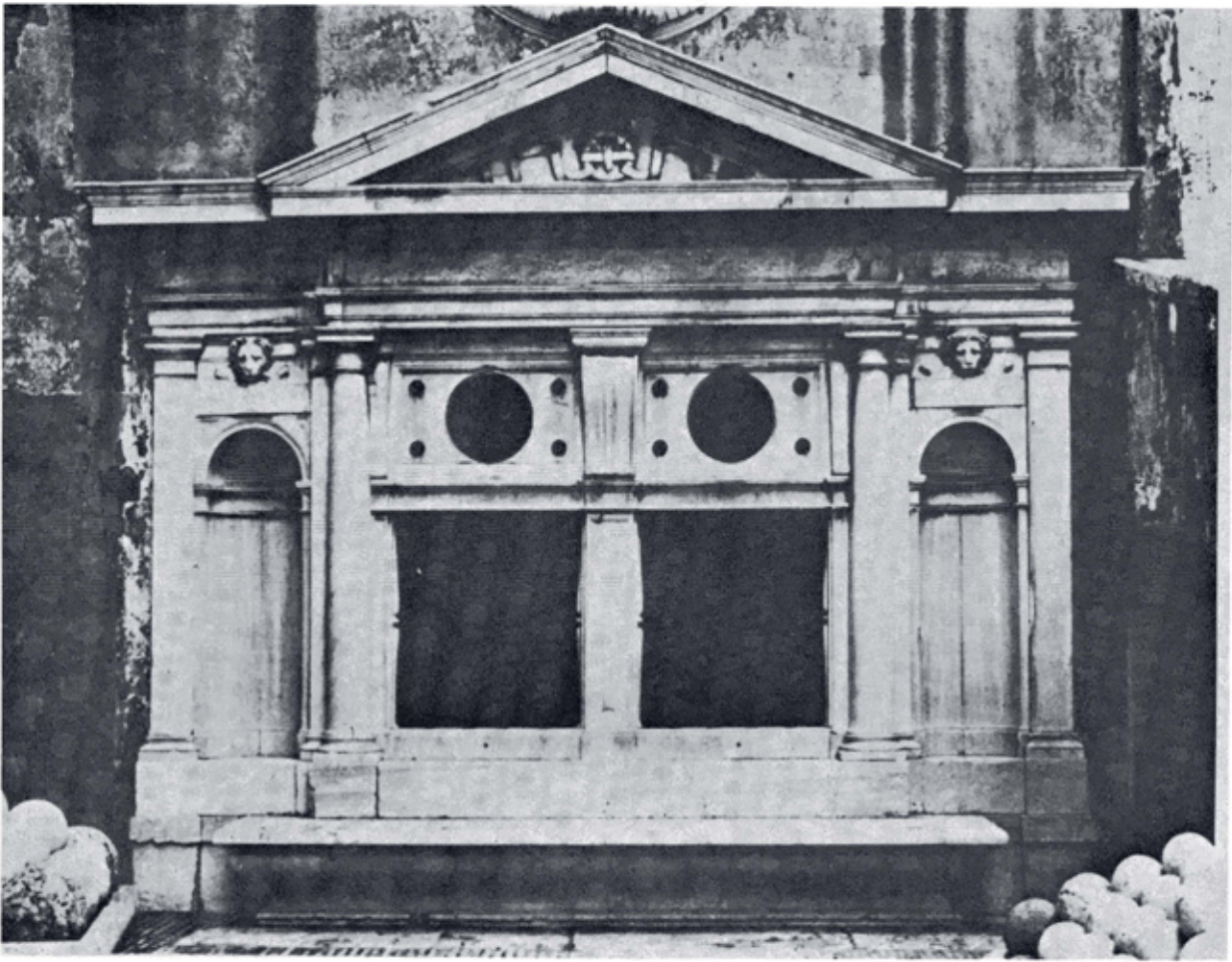


Fig. 2, Aedicula, Chapel of Leo X, after renovation (Gaudioso, pl. 1)

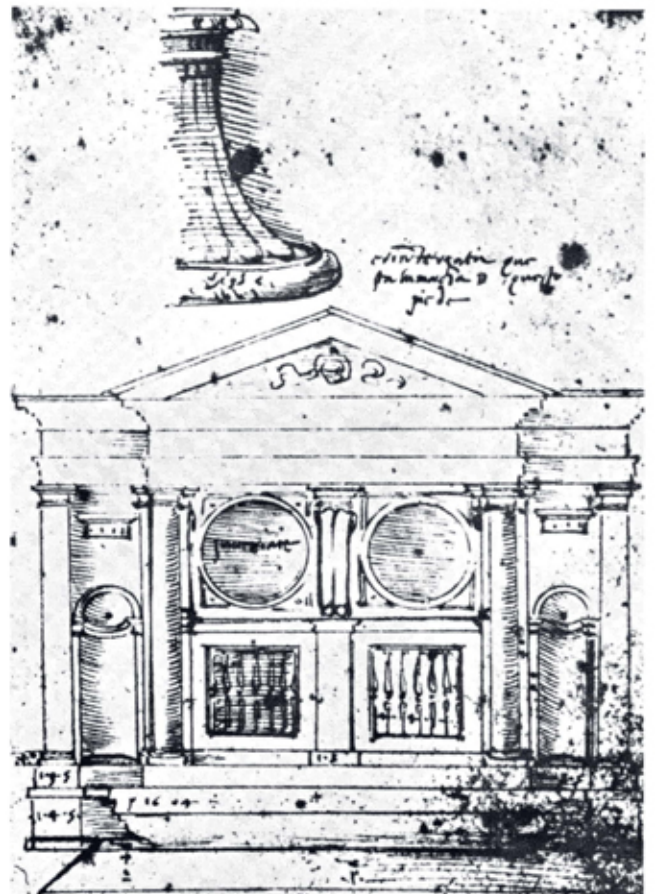


Fig. 3, Aristotile da Sangallo, study for aedicula, Chapel of Leo X, Lilles, Musée des Beaux Arts (Gaudioso, pl. 32)



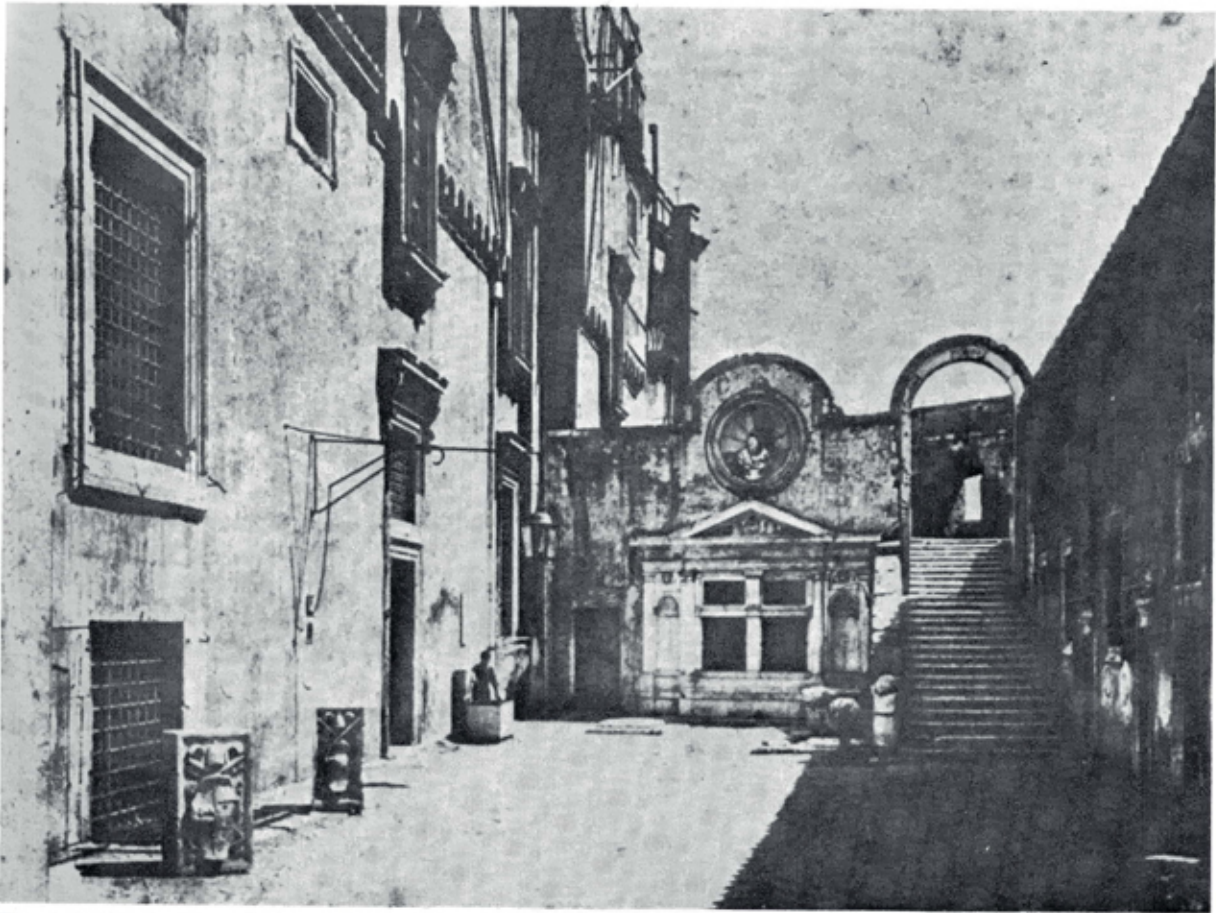


Fig. 4, Aedicula, Chapel of Leo X, View from the Courtyard of Honor (Gaudioso, pl. 53).

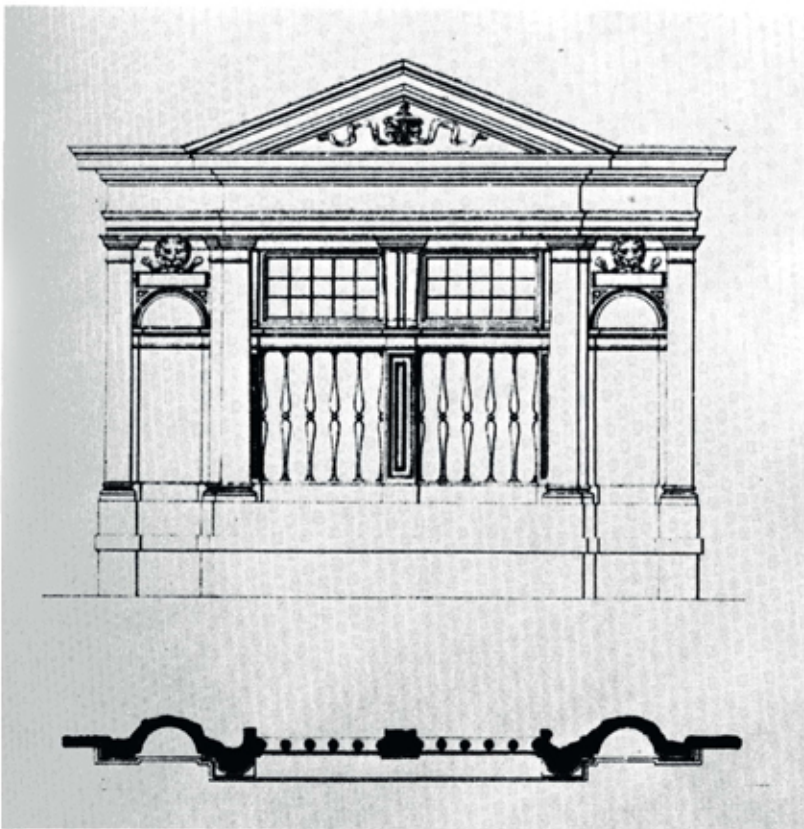


Fig. 5, Aedicula, Chapel of Leo X: elevation, ground-plan, cross-section (Gaudioso, pl. 28)





Fig. 6, Michelangelo, sketch for facade of San Lorenzo, Florence, Casa Buonarroti (Gaudioso, pl. 12)



Fig. 7, Chapel of Leo X, interior view (Gaudioso, pl. 36)





Fig. 8, Arch of Septimius Severus, detail (Brilliant, pl. 33).