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The Materiality of Wood in Michelangelo's Biblioteca Laurenziana: The Laurentian Staircase

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The Materiality of Wood in Michelangelo's
Biblioteca Laurenziana

The Laurentian Staircase

Florence, Italy

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 <i>History and Patronage</i>	6
Chapter 2 <i>A Chronology of Construction</i>	14
Chapter 3 <i>A Walk Through of the Laurentian Library</i>	19
Chapter 4 <i>Materiality</i>	26
Chapter 5 <i>The Materiality of Wood and the Laurentian Staircase</i>	42
Chapter 6 <i>The Laurentian Staircase</i>	53
Bibliography	61

Introduction

During the sixteenth century, Michelangelo designed a library at the Florentine monastery of San Lorenzo that was, even during its time, quite unlike any other from the Renaissance era. Though the master clearly sought to produce something dramatically different from what had already been done, library design had a long history that he would have known. Although today's libraries are most closely related to their medieval European precursors, many of the canonical elements of ancient Roman libraries have survived into the modern era. Like their medieval counterparts, ancient libraries often had separate quarters for Greek and Latin volumes and were nearly always placed in close proximity to churches and temples.¹ As Catholicism became the primary religion throughout Europe during the medieval period, the relationship between libraries and the churches and monasteries near which they were constructed was fortified significantly.

Many medieval and Renaissance popes were scholars, or, at the very least, from scholarly, educated families. This trend began with John XXI, and continued to Nicholas V, Sixtus IV, and Clement VII.² The fifteenth century saw the rise of book collectors, men who were intent on acquiring manuscripts for the sake of education, wisdom, and knowledge. Pontiffs and their families often acquired massive quantities of Greek and Latin manuscripts, from such collectors. This only served to reinforce the already resilient relationship between libraries and the Church.

By the twelfth century, every monastery had a library, and there is significant evidence to suggest that monks allowed wide circulation of their books. This practice was dismantled

¹ Kenneth M. Sutton, "From Medieval to Modern Library," *American Philosophical Society* 104.4 (August 1960), 371-2.

² Sutton, "From Medieval to Modern Library," 372.

rapidly, as abuse and neglect of these precious manuscripts became a recurring problem. The solution was to chain the manuscripts to long, sloped desks – known as lecterns – that were included in the library interiors.³ During the medieval era, these desks were sturdy and uncomfortable; as the Renaissance unfolded in Europe, greater concern for the comfort of scholars emerged, and lecterns were constructed in a significantly less rigid fashion.

In order to maximize space, library designers, starting in the fifteenth century, began organizing lecterns in two long rows flanking a center aisle, placing each desk near windows that were placed at equal distances down the length of the library. This was known as the stall system, which remains employed in even today’s libraries. Arguably, the greatest surviving example of a Renaissance library that implemented the stall system is the one Michelangelo designed at San Lorenzo, called the Biblioteca Laurenziana, which was commissioned by Pope Clement VII in 1524.⁴

Many existing analyses of the Laurentian Library focus exclusively on its physical characteristics. In particular, scholars such as Rudolf Wittkower and James S. Ackerman, in their famous analyses titled respectively “Michelangelo’s Biblioteca Laurenziana” (from the June 1934 *Art Bulletin*) and “The Library of San Lorenzo” (from his book entitled The Architecture of Michelangelo) consider primarily the designs of the library’s vestibule, grand staircase, and reading room, and how the designs of these three elements both enhance and contrast with each other. Michelangelo’s design for the Biblioteca Laurenziana was undoubtedly unique, and the quirky vestibule – often referred to by its Italian name, *ricetto* – and the comparatively conventional reading room, with the unique staircase that links the two, are indeed worthy of consideration and analysis. Both Wittkower and Ackerman have effectively explored

³ Sutton, “From Medieval to Modern Library,” 376-7.

⁴ Sutton, “From Medieval to Modern Library,” 378-9.

Michelangelo's architectural method and design program with respect to the Laurentian Library, and many of their conclusions are today accepted as fact.

Although both of these famous analyses of the Biblioteca Laurenziana are exceedingly thorough, they exclusively consider the physical forms of different elements within the structure. They engage infrequently with the notion of materiality – concern for the medium from which these elements were crafted or constructed – in their analyses. When considering a structure designed by Michelangelo, who was sensitive to the materials in which he worked, it is imperative to analyze not only the physical forms themselves, but also the material the master explicitly specified for construction of these forms. Surviving correspondence among Michelangelo, his patron, and the trusted project managers during the period of construction of the Laurentian Library reveals that the architect often had specific requests regarding the materials from which major elements of the vestibule, staircase, and reading room were to be constructed. It is for this reason that an analysis of materiality in Michelangelo's Biblioteca Laurenziana is imperative.

The four most common materials specified by Michelangelo in his letters referencing the Laurentian Library are terracotta, stucco, stone, and wood. A man sensitive to the materials in which he worked, and the iconographical and stylistic connotations associated with each, Michelangelo undoubtedly made these material specifications not randomly, but for specific purposes. Even when he was absent from the construction site, project managers present at San Lorenzo, in nearly every instance, abided by the master's strict specifications.

There is one major circumstance in which Bartolommeo Ammannati and Giorgio Vasari, Michelangelo's primary correspondents during his permanent absence from Florence beginning in 1534, directly disobeyed the architect's orders. Michelangelo originally intended for the

Laurentian staircase traversing the vertical distance between the vestibule, which was primarily constructed from stone and stucco, and the reading room, which was primarily constructed from wood, to be carved from wood. He made this abundantly clear in a letter to Ammannati dated January 1559; he even states in the letter that he believed construction in fine walnut would be far superior to construction in stone.⁵ Later that year, Ammannati made the decision to directly forgo Michelangelo's explicit instruction; the Laurentian staircase was – and certainly still is today – carved from a large block of *pietra del Fossato*.

Why Ammannati decided to abandon the material request of his superior is difficult to say. Nevertheless, Michelangelo made the material specification of walnut with respect to the Laurentian staircase in clear language, denouncing the only other option for the material of construction. He must have had a reason for preferring wood to stone. The language of his letter to Ammannati is strong and direct; Michelangelo had an explicit rationale for making this bold declaration.

Once we have considered the history and patronage of the Biblioteca Laurenziana, we can consider the general timeline of its construction, and how Michelangelo's alternating presence and absence in Florence may have affected his trustees' willingness – or lack thereof – to comply with his requests. Before studying the impact that different materials present may have had on public perception of the library, it is important to consider how a sixteenth-century frequenter may have viewed the space as he traveled from the cloister, through the vestibule, up the stairs, through the reading room, and back again. Only then can we consider Michelangelo's material specifications of terracotta, stucco, stone, and wood, and his reasons behind each. Once his rationale behind these material specifications with respect to particular elements of the

⁵ E.H. Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, 2 vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), vol. 1, 146.

Laurentian Library has been established, it is possible to focus specifically on the Laurentian staircase – the only major instance in which his requests were ignored – and why, perhaps, Michelangelo preferred that it be constructed from walnut.

In the subsequent chapters, I intend to discuss the motivation behind Michelangelo's explicit request that the famous Laurentian Library staircase be carved out of wood, how the construction of the staircase in accordance with his plans would have affected the flow from the vestibule to the reading room and back, and how the failure of his trustees to comply affected his visions for the completed structure. The master was never one to incorporate accidentally a theme, motif, element, or material. Michelangelo was certainly aware of the historical, iconographical, symbolic, and stylistic provenance associated with construction in wood, and for the staircase he explicitly preferred this medium over that of stone.

Chapter 1 – History and Patronage

Until the early fifteenth century, the constitution of the city of Florence detailed a unique and relatively balanced oligarchical structure of government. Authority was spread evenly amongst qualified candidates, and the electoral structure specifically did not allow for one singular political party or wealthy family to rise to absolute power. Cosimo di Giovanni de' Medici, otherwise known as 'Cosimo the Elder,' was the first person to gain nearly autonomous control of the city of Florence upon his return from exile in 1434. His family became a political and ecclesiastical dynasty that was at the very forefront of Florentine society for nearly three hundred years.⁶

Cosimo's extensive network of friends and associates included the renowned Florentine humanist and scholar Niccolò Niccoli, whose vast collection of manuscripts was among the largest in private hands in Florence. Upon Niccoli's death in 1437, Cosimo took possession of nearly the entire collection of Niccoli's manuscripts, and was faced with the daunting task of housing them properly. He decided to renovate the existing library at the Church of San Marco, and he hired the architect Michelozzo to draft provisions for a building to house the Medici family's ever-expanding collection.⁷ The library that Michelozzo designed at San Marco was the home of the Medici collection for several decades, and later it served as a model for Michelangelo's preliminary designs for what would become the Biblioteca Laurenziana.⁸

Lorenzo de' Medici was the eldest grandson of Cosimo the Elder. A prominent scholar, humanist, and politician, he was trained carefully by the best teachers and intellectuals before he assumed his role as the leader of Florence in 1469. Until his death in 1492, Lorenzo was the

⁶ J.R. Hale, *Florence and the Medici* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), 9-11.

⁷ John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence 1200-1575* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 330.

⁸ Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1974), 214.

patriarch and political head of the Medici family. His interest in education never waned, and his library grew to include hundreds of manuscripts.⁹ A scholar of Greek and Latin literature, poetry, rhetoric, and politics, amongst other disciplines, the manuscripts in Lorenzo's collection reflected his many interests.¹⁰ The Medici family collection was greatly enriched due to the scholarly and academic efforts of Lorenzo. Hardly a few decades after its reconstruction, the Library at San Marco was quickly becoming inadequate to house the family's impressive and expansive collection.

Michelangelo's association with the Medici family began in his adolescence. A prolific and talented student of Domenico Ghirlandaio in the mid-1480s, Michelangelo grew almost too gifted to continue to learn from his teacher effectively. According to Giorgio Vasari, when Lorenzo approached Ghirlandaio with plans to found a school of art in his sculpture garden, Ghirlandaio willingly offered to send Lorenzo several of his own students, Michelangelo included. Lorenzo, says Vasari, favored Michelangelo above nearly all of the other pupils for both his talent and his spirit; according to Vasari, it was for this reason that, in 1488, he wrote to Lodovico di Lionardo Buonarroti Simoni, Michelangelo's father, requesting permission to take the young artist into his home permanently.¹¹

Once this permission was granted, Michelangelo, Vasari claims, was treated as yet another of Lorenzo's beloved sons and was often included in the quotidian activities of his children.¹² As the head of Florence, many of Lorenzo's colleagues and acquaintances were incredibly powerful and remained relevant in Florentine politics and culture for several decades.

⁹ Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 214.

¹⁰ Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, 49-51.

¹¹ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, eds. and trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella, Peter Bondanella (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 418-20.

¹² Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, 419-21.

It was as a student in the Medici household that Michelangelo was first exposed to the great humanist thinkers and philosophers of the Medici court. From Angelo Poliziano, the renowned Italian humanist and a good friend of Lorenzo, for example, Michelangelo potentially learned about ancient and contemporary humanist literature and philosophy. Exposure to these types of people undoubtedly played a role in Michelangelo's formation as both artist and architect in adulthood. For several decades after completing his education at Lorenzo's sculpture garden, Michelangelo often found himself working for the Medici; his relationship continued with the ruling family for several decades after completing his formal education.¹³

Upon the death of Lorenzo de' Medici in 1492, Michelangelo moved out of the Medici house and became a full-time sculptor and painter, accepting various commissions from a multitude of different sources. The next several decades of the master's life were devoted to assorted projects such as the *Pietà*, the *David*, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and the Tomb of Pope Julius II. It was not until Lorenzo's middle son, Giovanni di Lorenzo, was elected pope in 1513, taking the name Leo X, that we begin to see again extensive Medici patronage.¹⁴

Although he tended to prefer the art and personality of Raphael, the pontiff eventually commissioned Michelangelo in November 1515 to design the façade of the Church of San Lorenzo, a request that served as a reminder to the people of Florence that the Medici were finally, legitimately in complete political and ecclesiastical control of the city.¹⁵

The death of Pope Leo X in late 1521 marked the temporary end to the new Medici patronage of Michelangelo in Florence. The artist was still involved in several projects during

¹³ Charles L. Stinger, "Humanism in Florence," in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, ed. Albert Rabil, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), vol. 1, 175-208.

¹⁴ Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 43-151.

¹⁵ William E. Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9.

the short interim reign of Pope Adrian VI, and for these twenty months he did not lack for projects or commissions to complete. Although the period of the pontiff's reign was relatively short, we see in this interval a dynamic interruption of patronage of the arts and thus a suspension of contact between Michelangelo and the Medici court. His efforts during this time were almost exclusively focused on the Tomb of Pope Julius II, a commission from the Della Rovere family.¹⁶ Until the death of Pope Adrian VI in 1523, there was little to no contact between the artist and his Medici patrons.¹⁷

The election of Cardinal Giulio de' Medici to the papacy in late 1523 brought about the rapid return of the distinguished family dynasty to the forefront of Florentine ecclesiastical politics. A primary aim of Pope Clement VII, as the cardinal came to be known, was to continue developing art and architecture in Florence, particularly works that would not only benefit the clergy, but also further the agenda of the Medici family. It was with great pleasure that the artisans of Florence received the news of the election of the new pontiff; Michelangelo himself is quoted as saying in a letter to Domenico di Giovanni Bertino Fancelli in November 1523 that a "...Medici is made Pope, which I think will rejoice everyone. I expect, for this reason, that as far as art is concerned many great things will be executed here."¹⁸

One of the first orders of business undertaken by Clement was to commission Michelangelo to erect a library at the site of the Monastery at San Lorenzo, an idea first broached in 1519 but only financially feasible after the conclave that elected Clement.¹⁹ As the Medici continued to possess significant authority in Florence, their collection of manuscripts – started by Cosimo the Elder and supplemented considerably by Lorenzo – continued to expand. The reason

¹⁶ Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 151.

¹⁷ Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, 452-3.

¹⁸ E.H. Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, vol. 1, 146.

¹⁹ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 136-7.

for the new library commission was simple. The pope knew that the library at San Marco could no longer hold the thousands of manuscripts acquired by the family over the years, necessitating the construction of a new library. Upon its completion, the Biblioteca Laurenziana, as it came to be known, with its vestibule (often referred to by its Italian name, *ricetto*), grand staircase, and reading room, became the home for many of the manuscripts once housed in the San Marco library. Many of the books found in the Laurentian Library have been identified by scholars today as humanist manuscripts originating in Cosimo de' Medici's library at San Marco.²⁰

Correspondence between Clement and Michelangelo suggests that the pontiff was a generally open-minded patron, and his requests were relatively simple. Although he and Michelangelo maintained an incredibly high level of correspondence throughout the first several years of the project, he often simply requested updated drawings whenever Michelangelo could provide them and approved or denied the sketches as he saw fit. Generally, the pope requested that Michelangelo make designs on his own and without outside intervention; he desired for the master to enjoy an element of artistic and architectural license as he worked. Although the pontiff was incredibly interested in the details of the Laurenziana, he and Michelangelo harbored a certain sort of mutual respect toward one another. Contrary to the actions and beliefs of many wealthy patrons of the time, Clement trusted his architect completely and knew when to allow the master to practice his craft uninterrupted.²¹

The design and execution of the Biblioteca Laurenziana progressed quickly once Michelangelo received the commission officially in early 1524. Michelangelo's original design

²⁰ Berthold L. Ullman and Philip A. Stadter, *The Catalogue of San Marco* (Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1972), 105-267.

²¹ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 136-7.

comprised separate Greek and Latin libraries and with a bright anteroom to be added later,²² and in the period after 1524, the plans for the Biblioteca Laurenziana proceeded apace. By 1526, nearly the entirety of both the *ricetto* and the reading room were structurally complete and awaiting decoration and furnishing.²³

Although the Medici family was in complete control of the clergy at this time, they were still incredibly tangled in Florentine politics. Clement frequently involved himself in international political affairs, often to the disdain of the Florentine public. In 1526, after making and breaking, in quick succession, international alliances to suit his family's agenda, the pontiff informally joined a league with France and Venice to resist imperialism in Italy. The results were disastrous. The Pope was forced to dishonor many of his previous commitments and, as a result, became a target of an imperialistic military campaign of Emperor Charles V.²⁴ It was during this time that Clement requested that Michelangelo immediately cease all progress with regards to construction of the Laurentian Library, presumably due to the impending political revolt.²⁵ In the subsequent battle, the 1527 Sack of Rome, the Medici were expelled from the city, and many of their supporters fled to Florence, fearful for their lives.

When news of the political turmoil in Rome reached Florence in May of that same year, a second, equivalently successful revolution took place. With much of blame regarding the death and destruction of previous battles resting on Clement's shoulders, he was taken prisoner and thus left unable to defend either Rome or Florence from the ensuing revolts. The Medici family was out of power in Florence after 1527, and several of their allies were executed for their

²² Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 212.

²³ Giulio Carlo Argan and Bruno Contardi, *Michelangelo Architect* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 187-8.

²⁴ Najemy, *A History of Florence 1200-1575*, 446-9.

²⁵ Argan and Contardi, *Michelangelo Architect*, 188-9.

allegiance to the dynasty.²⁶ They returned in 1530, when imperial troops, in alliance with the pope, assaulted the city and eventually returned it to Medici control.

Anticipating the siege of Florence in 1530, Michelangelo drafted and constructed fortifications for the city, directly aligning himself politically with the new republican government of Florence.²⁷ As “Governor General and Procurator of the Defenses,” Michelangelo was charged with defending the city he loved from imperial attack. Although he was a brilliant architect and designer of these fortifications, his provisions to protect the city began to fail.²⁸ Aware of the assaults on Medici acquaintances and afraid for his own life, Michelangelo fled Florence while the siege of the city was underway. At the same time, many of the San Lorenzo workers and *capomaestri* were forced to abandon the library project in order to help fortify and defend the city of Florence.²⁹ Acquaintances and affiliates of the family were only able to return in 1530, after the imperial forces retreated and Clement was back in absolute power, the reign of the Medici court in Florence stronger than ever.

Construction came to an abrupt halt once both architect and patron became involved in the seemingly endless turmoil of Florentine and Roman politics in the late 1520s. After the Medici regained control of Florence in 1530, completion of the project became difficult. Personal and political reasons, most notably including exhaustion with his long affiliation with the Medici dynasty, inclined Michelangelo to leave Florence for the rest of his life in 1534, immediately following the death of the pontiff. From then on, the project was supervised by a number of individuals, most notably Bartolommeo Ammannati, with assistance from Niccolò Tribolo and Michelangelo’s longtime colleague, Giorgio Vasari. Without Michelangelo’s

²⁶ Najemy, *A History of Florence 1200-1575*, 446-9.

²⁷ Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, 454-5.

²⁸ Najemy, *A History of Florence 1200-1575*, 454.

²⁹ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 182-5.

immediate presence in Florence, however, construction was slow and delayed; the doors to the Biblioteca Laurenziana were not opened to the public until June 1571, over seven years after the death and burial of the master himself.³⁰

³⁰ Wolfgang Lotz, *Architecture in Italy 1500-1600* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 91-2.

Chapter 2 – A Chronology of Construction

The election of Cardinal Giulio de' Medici to the papacy during the conclave of November 19, 1523 promised a continuation of the resurgence of Medici patronage of the arts in Florence. Pontiff for hardly a month, Pope Clement VII called Michelangelo to Rome in December of that same year to discuss the creation of designs for a structure to house the expanse of manuscripts in the Medici collection that were beginning to outgrow their home at San Marco. Negotiations over cost and labor commenced immediately, and it did not take long for official terms and conditions on behalf of both the architect and patron to be decided. Michelangelo received the official commission to draft preliminary designs and construction drawings of the Biblioteca Laurenziana in the first weeks of 1524.³¹

The period after the assignment of the official commission was defined by frequent correspondence between Michelangelo and the various associates and acquaintances connected to the project. Michelangelo and the pope, a remarkably involved and interested patron,³² often communicated more than twice per week about the status of the architect's designs. A rapid exchange of ideas, preliminary drawings, approvals, denials, and revisions define the correspondence between January and August 1524.³³

Michelangelo, in his work as an architect, typically produced organic, dynamic designs that often evolved as complications and other obstacles to original plans arose.³⁴ Rarely was the initial design directly or precisely reflected in the final constructed result. With the exception of

³¹ The chronology and dates in this paragraph come from: Argan and Contardi, *Michelangelo Architect*, 186-7.

³² One of Clement's main programs as pontiff was to continue patronage of the arts in Florence. According to Vasari, he remained similarly involved and interested in all of his commissions until his death.

³³ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 136.

³⁴ James S. Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 49-52.

the selection of the site, which was accepted on March 22, 1524, many elements of Michelangelo's design originally approved by the pope were changed over the long timeline of construction, as we shall later see. The design approved by Clement on August 2, 1524 allowed Michelangelo to begin construction, but only in a few ways did it resemble the structure that was erected in subsequent decades under his direction.³⁵

Once the design was approved, construction proceeded rapidly, even as Michelangelo's designs continued to evolve, often in response to site restrictions and requests made by the pontiff. The entire structure of the reading room took less than two years to complete. The foundations were started in July 1524 and completed by February 1525. Construction atop these foundations began soon thereafter, and the structural skeleton of the room, excluding furnishings and decorations, was complete by July 1526. In January 1526, while the reading room was still underway, construction of the foundations for the vestibule began. Nearly the entire structure, save for final details and decorations, was complete by October 1526.³⁶ The project was progressing rapidly, and Michelangelo was initially optimistic about its projected date of completion.

Clement allowed Michelangelo to spend lavishly and without restriction on construction and materials between 1524 and 1526. Because he was given explicit instructions by the pope to “not worry about the cost” and “to spare no expense”³⁷ Michelangelo produced intricate designs, ordered rich materials to craft them, and hired an extensive number of production professionals

³⁵ The chronology, dates, and information in this paragraph come from: Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 136-7.

³⁶ The chronology, dates, and information in this paragraph come from: Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 144-7.

³⁷ William Wallace, “Clement VII and Michelangelo: An Anatomy of Patronage,” in *The Pontificate of Clement VII: History, Politics, Culture*, ed. Kenneth Gouwens and Sheryl E. Reiss (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 190.

to construct them accurately.³⁸ Because he included incredibly ornate and detailed designs, crafted in some of the most expensive materials available, and employed dozens of highly talented craftsmen, artisans, and builders, Michelangelo's design for the Biblioteca Laurenziana represented an overwhelming expense for both the Church and the Medici family during these years. The pope did not shy away from these expenses but rather encouraged them until the completion of the walls of the vestibule in October 1526.³⁹

Construction came to an abrupt halt in early November 1526 following Clement's involvement in the political turmoil preceding the Sack of Rome in 1527. This period of time was defined by political and economic instability in both Rome and Florence; Clement instructed Michelangelo just prior to the expulsion of the Medici from Rome to cease construction immediately due to insufficient funds.⁴⁰ Prior to such intense civil turbulence, construction of the Laurentian Library was proceeding rapidly. After the Sack of Rome, construction was suspended indefinitely, and Michelangelo was forced to focus his energy on other projects, including designing fortifications to defend the city he loved.⁴¹

Although Michelangelo returned to Florence at the request of Clement once the Medici were reinstated after the siege, construction never proceeded as rapidly as it had prior to the political revolts of the late 1520s. Although he remained involved in each facet of construction in some fashion until his death, Michelangelo often outsourced his position on the site to various trusted professionals. Little is known about the progression of the work on the structure between the master's return to Florence in 1530 and his final departure in 1534. In this time, the ceilings of both the vestibule and the reading room were completed structurally and awaiting decoration.

³⁸ Argan and Contardi, *Michelangelo Architect*, 188.

³⁹ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 144-7.

⁴⁰ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 181-3.

⁴¹ Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, 454-4.

Additionally, in 1533 Michelangelo commissioned woodworkers and stonecarvers to fashion various furnishings and decorations for both the reading room and the vestibule. During this time he also commissioned a woodcarver to complete the final design for the Laurentian staircase, which was to serve as a transitory space between the vestibule and the reading room, though this was not built until decades later.⁴² Otherwise, construction proceeded very slowly – little significant progress was made on the structure in the years between 1530 and 1534.

Exhausted by his seemingly endless affiliation with the Medici family and tired of the nuances of Florentine politics, the only obligation keeping Michelangelo in Florence after the siege was the commission of the Laurentian Library. Upon the death of Pope Clement VII on September 25, 1534, Michelangelo had little tying him to the city he loved.⁴³ Leaving Bartolommeo Ammannati, Giorgio Vasari, and Niccolò Tribolo in charge of supervising the completion of the structure, Michelangelo relocated to Rome for the rest of his life, never to return to Florence.

Although not physically present in Florence for the remainder of the project, Michelangelo remained an effective participant and guiding force throughout all future active phases of construction. Correspondence between the master and Vasari indicate that his designs, while originally fluid in their creation, were honored to a great extent once finalized. While Michelangelo was preoccupied with various commissions in Rome, Ammannati, Vasari, and Tribolo focused their efforts primarily on the Laurentian staircase. Michelangelo had left behind incomplete plans for the staircase, and Tribolo's attempts to lay out each tread were becoming more and more vexing; frustrated, he abandoned the project in 1549, leaving Ammannati and

⁴² Argan and Contardi, *Michelangelo Architect*, 191.

⁴³ Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, 460.

Vasari with the daunting task of completing the Laurentian staircase themselves.⁴⁴

Out of sheer desperation, Vasari begged Michelangelo several times during the 1550s to return to Florence; each time the master refused, citing existing obligations in Rome. However, in a letter to Vasari dated September 1555, Michelangelo detailed explicitly his original plans for the Laurentian staircase. Armed with a clay model that Vasari received from Michelangelo over three years later, Ammannati completed the famous Laurentian staircase in late 1559, abiding almost entirely to the master's intentions and original designs.⁴⁵ The only difference – one that is quite significant, as I will later suggest – that exists between Michelangelo's vision and Ammannati's execution is the material in which the staircase was eventually constructed. Although Michelangelo explicitly specified that the staircase be carved from wood, Ammannati designed the structure using *pietra del Fossato*, a bluish-gray stone typical of Florentine Renaissance construction.⁴⁶ This discrepancy, I will suggest, resulted in a structure that departed significantly from Michelangelo's intentions, which hinged in part on the appearance and significance of wood.

The completion of the Laurentian staircase marked the conclusion of major construction at the Biblioteca Laurenziana. Minor repairs, changes, and decorative alterations continued to be made for over a decade after the staircase was finished. The Laurentian Library, executed with almost perfect attention to the wishes of its architect, was opened to the public in June 1571, nearly seven years after the death of the master (on February 18, 1564) and over forty-seven years after he received the original commission.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Argan and Contardi, *Michelangelo Architect*, 192.

⁴⁵ E.H. Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, vol. 2, 157.

⁴⁶ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 147.

⁴⁷ Argan and Contardi, *Michelangelo Architect*, 196-7.

Chapter 3 – A Walk Through of the Laurentian Library

In this section, it is my intention to provide the reader with a schematic idea of what it would be like crossing the entire length of the Laurentian Library as a scholar in the sixteenth century after the entire timeline of construction was completed. Much of the overall experience of frequenting the library depended on a scholar's sights and thoughts as he traveled throughout the library, completed his studies, and traversed the length of the structure in reverse. The Biblioteca Laurenziana truly had to be experienced in sections; it is important to visualize each component individually before proceeding to any sort of analysis of the building as a whole.

Site limitations forced Michelangelo to design a library suite that would comprise two rooms with roofs on the same plane but with the rooms' floors at different levels.⁴⁸ Although initially resistant to the idea, he eventually designed a structure that would house an incredibly upright *ricetto* juxtaposed with a comparably horizontal reading room, with a grand staircase to accommodate patrons traversing the vertical distance between the two in the middle. When seen in this order and then in reverse, these three elements – vestibule, staircase, and reading room – would have had a profound effect on viewers as they progressed through the structure, completed their intended study, and then departed.

Although a substantial enough fraction of construction was completed to permit public use of the Biblioteca Laurenziana by June 1571, minor alterations were made into the twentieth century. The façade first seen by a viewer entering the library from the cloister of San Lorenzo today is a turn-of-the-century addition made by Italian architects of the time. The façade that would have been seen by sixteenth-century visitors to the Laurentian Library was unfinished,

⁴⁸ Frank Salmon, "The Site of Michelangelo's Laurentian Library," in *Michelangelo: Selected Scholarship in English*, ed. William Wallace, 5 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), vol. 3, 408-10.

essentially overlooked by architect, patron, and *capomaestri*, while construction of the building and decoration of the interior were underway.⁴⁹ Although technically incomplete, viewers would have paid little attention to the lackluster exterior once they entered the comparably impressive interior.

There is little to no preparation for entrance into the library's *ricetto* (Figure 1) from the cloister. Armed with a relatively dull first impression of the structure due to its incomplete façade, a viewer would have been stunned by the interior of the vestibule. Entering the *ricetto* from the left, a visitor's first sight would have been the mammoth *pietra del Fossato* staircase, which occupies a large portion of the surface area of the square floor.⁵⁰ Sixteenth-century viewers would surely have been quickly enticed by the quirkiness of its details, the incomplete façade all but forgotten.



Figure 1 – The *ricetto* of the Biblioteca Laurenziana⁵¹

⁴⁹ Rudolf Wittkower, “Michelangelo’s Biblioteca Laurenziana,” *The Art Bulletin* 16.2 (Jun. 1934): 123-7.

⁵⁰ Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 215.

⁵¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Laurentian_Library_vestibule.jpg

As their attention shifted around the room, viewers might have noted that the strange vestibule was an excellent home for the equally strange, flowing staircase dominating it. The decorative motifs represented in the vestibule are seemingly familiar, but are actually unique. Many motifs are reminiscent of ancient Greek and Roman architecture. Michelangelo incorporated pediments, entablatures, columns, column capitals, tabernacles, friezes, and scroll-like brackets as decorative and structural elements. These foundations, although inspired by ancient Greco-Roman canonical form, are fundamentally unlike their predecessors. Each element is slightly different from the canonical structure on which it is based.⁵² An educated viewer – such as those frequenting the Laurentian Library – would have recognized these differences and parallels immediately.

Marked by an overwhelming sense of verticality, the *ricetto* of the Laurentian Library is defined by the incessant feeling of moving upwards through space. Certain details of design enhance this notion of vertical motion. The outstanding height of the room in comparison to the miniscule floor space, the inverted tabernacles flanking empty recesses that seem to move upwards on their own, and the long, inverted columns that force the eye to travel to the ceiling all would have given the viewer the feeling of moving vertically through space. This verticality would have worked with the overwhelming vastness of the footprint of the staircase to perplex and bewilder even the most architecturally savvy patron.

It is important to note that the vestibule is not a warm space. Almost entirely decorated in stone, little comfort is provided to the viewer through the materials of construction. White stucco walls are only interrupted by strips and elements crafted in bluish-grey *pietra del Fossato*,

⁵² Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 212-9.

a common stone used for building and decoration in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Florence.⁵³ Stone does not offer any sort of ease to a viewer; by using fundamentally cold, uncomfortable materials with colors producing the same effect in the *ricetto*, Michelangelo ensured that all viewers would experience the same unsettling force when entering the vestibule from the San Lorenzo cloister for the first time. A fundamentally overwhelming and intricately designed space, a viewer entering the *ricetto* of the Biblioteca Laurenziana would have been immediately preoccupied by the notion of discomfort – a notion supplemented by Michelangelo’s carefully-designed minute details.

After recovering from the initial shock of the vestibule, visitors would have ascended the grand staircase (Figure 2), perhaps hoping for a moment of peace. As constructed, the staircase, however, does not offer the sense of calmness that the viewer might have been craving. Carved from *pietra del Fossato*, there is no warmth associated with the Laurentian staircase. The cold discomfort provided by such a material would not have given the patron any sense of ease at the start of his ascent into the reading room.



Figure 2 – The Laurentian staircase⁵⁴

⁵³ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 147.

⁵⁴ <http://images.inimage.com/400nwm/iris/imagebrokerrm-252/ptg01341517.jpg>

Though it serves a practical purpose, linking two spaces, the Laurentian staircase is difficult to ascend. As a freestanding staircase, one who accesses it becomes concerned about the entire structure faltering when he or she begins the ascent up one of the flanking flights intended, as Michelangelo stated, for normal visitors.⁵⁵ The central flight of the Laurentian staircase was intended only for ascension by the pontiff. It was fundamentally more stable than either flanking flight of stairs, and also had railings for support on either side. It was meant to remind patrons of the library that they were inferior in status to the pope, especially when in a structure commissioned by a former pontiff.

The Laurentian staircase traversed a vertical distance of approximately three meters, and encompassed nearly the entire square footage of the floor of the vestibule.⁵⁶ The structure itself was massive and disorienting. Dizzy, those traversing the staircase would have reached for a railing – only to find out that there was not a railing to be found.⁵⁷ Completely dazzled and bewildered by the structures – the staircase and *ricetto* – just encountered, viewers might well have welcomed the solace offered by the reading room.

By comparison with the entranceway and staircase, the reading room is incredibly sober. After ascending the staircase, all feelings of discomfort and confusion subside. The motifs and decorative elements used in the reading room repeat themselves in a pattern several times down the length of the long, central aisle. Desks, ceiling tiles, windows, pillars, and floor patterns are the sober motifs that give the room a calming effect – especially compared to the intensity of the vestibule. A scholar, whose primary intent in visiting the structure would have been to study in this room, would probably have gladly welcomed this serenity and would have immediately sat

⁵⁵ Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, 114.

⁵⁶ Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, 106.

⁵⁷ Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 219.

down at the desk with the relevant manuscript attached⁵⁸ and commenced study. The decorations and structural elements of the reading room, although aesthetically pleasing, would not have distracted readers from their books and the process of reading.



Figure 3 – The reading room of the Laurentian Library⁵⁹

Fine, cured walnut is the most prevalent material used in the decoration of the reading room. Both the library desks, as well as the ceiling, are constructed from this warm wood. The floors were crafted from red terracotta (per Michelangelo's design), and the walls, although made of the same white stucco and *pietra del Fossato* found in the vestibule, do not take away from the overall comforting ambiance of the reading room.⁶⁰ An environment conducive to study and thought, the reading room in the Laurentian Library was a scholar's haven.

After several hours of reading through manuscripts of various disciplines, a viewer might have risen from his desk, still deep in thought, and begun his departure from the room. The repetitive motifs in the reading room would probably not have distracted a scholar from his

⁵⁸ Lotz, *Architecture in Italy 1500-1600*, 92.

⁵⁹ <http://www.museumsinflorence.com/foto/biblioteca%20lauren/image/str1.jpg>

⁶⁰ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 147-50.

study. Upon arriving once again at the staircase, he would descend, less disconcerted than before, and arrive back in the vestibule.

The *ricetto* would still be alarming in comparison to the relative sobriety of the reading room. However, an educated patron might begin to see Michelangelo's purpose despite the initial chaos associated with the entrance and staircase. Instead of being alarmed by contradiction between Greco-Roman norms and the elements of the vestibule, visitors might have focused on the architect's homage to historical detail, while still appreciating his ability to innovate. If the viewer had just spent time reading manuscripts describing the Classical world, which was incredibly likely given the library's vast collection of ancient texts, perhaps his study would be fortified by the motifs present in the vestibule. Although nothing in the library had changed physically, the perspective of the viewer underwent a fundamental transformation upon studying in the reading room. Instead of being alarmed or taken aback by Michelangelo's nontraditional Greco-Roman design elements as he entered, a viewer may have appreciated the subtle genius behind these elements as he departed. This point-of-view continued as he departed after completing his studies.

There is a profound difference between seeing the *ricetto* when entering first from the cloister, and looking at it after several hours of studying in the reading room. Upon departing the library, thoughts would be swirling in the minds of educated patrons utilizing the resources present there. Although it may have seemed upon first inspection that the *ricetto*, staircase, and reading room were fundamentally mismatched, it became obvious to all patrons frequenting the library that Michelangelo's innovative programs of design complemented each other tremendously.

Chapter 4 – Materiality

Buildings, in particular, harbor a unique and incredibly interwoven relationship with the materials in which they are constructed. Quite unlike paintings, buildings are experienced via physical interactions. As a result, particularly with regards to architecture, materials cannot be considered separately from the objects that they comprise.⁶¹ We know with respect to the Laurentian Library that patrons were literally immersed in an environment of carefully selected materials. Materials, and the iconographical and stylistic connotations associated with them, were at the forefront of Michelangelo's mind when he designed the Biblioteca Laurenziana.

Michelangelo was, among contemporary artists, undoubtedly one of the most sensitive to the materials used in his craft. He was famous, even amongst his contemporaries, for being incredibly particular regarding his media. According to Vasari, when Michelangelo received the block of marble from which he was to carve the *David* sculpture, he was appalled at its poor quality, and he expressed his discontent very boldly in several of his surviving letters.⁶² This pattern repeated itself over the course of his career; eventually, Michelangelo began traveling to the marble quarries at Carrara himself to inspect his materials before having them transported to his studio.⁶³

Michelangelo was particular about the media in which he worked – inspection of his letters, poems, and sonnets taken from various points throughout his career indicates that he essentially detested working in anything other than marble and considered other materials to be far inferior when he was the one crafting with his own hands. Michelangelo demanded nothing

⁶¹ Ann-Sophie Lehmann, “The Matter of the Medium: Some Tools for an Art-Theoretical Interpretation of Materials,” in *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logistics, c. 1250 – 1750*, eds. Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 21.

⁶² Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, vol. 1, 11.

⁶³ Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, 243.

short of perfection with regards to anything – including materials – connected to his projects. It is very easy to deduce from his personal letters that he was aware of the iconographical connotations associated with several of the materials he used throughout his life, including the ones he directly specified in his plans for the Biblioteca Laurenziana.

Pope Clement VII was equivalently interested in the materials specified by Michelangelo for use in the construction and design of the library. Thorough analysis of the remarkably frequent correspondence between the pontiff and the architect at this time reveals the former's concern for the source, quality, and treatment of each material used in the library – particularly the wood. This indicates that the pope not only thought of materiality, but also implored Michelangelo to do so.⁶⁴

This section provides an overview of the perceptions of different materials as they developed over the period before Clement commissioned Michelangelo to design the Laurentian Library. It is my intention to offer context for the rationale behind several of Michelangelo's explicit requests for certain materials in his design. Additionally, my intent is to provide insight into the perspectives of various users of, and visitors to, the library concerning Michelangelo's choices of materials throughout the building. As I will later suggest, the symbolic and iconographical connotations of certain materials – connotations that were undoubtedly understood by the educated Florentine public and by Michelangelo – were critical throughout the architect's process of designing the Laurentian Library.

⁶⁴ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 136.

The Materiality of Terracotta

As, according to biblical text, the very first material ever used in creating art,⁶⁵ clay-based media such as terracotta have long histories of symbolic and iconographical connotations. The implications associated with the use of terracotta and other variations of clay in works of art and architecture throughout the Western tradition are often associated with humility and stories from the Bible. These suggestions probably had significant influence on Michelangelo's decision to specify this medium for construction of the floors in the library.

Sixteenth-century Florentines, including Michelangelo and patrons of the Biblioteca Laurenziana, when they consulted the Bible, probably read the Latin Vulgate rather than an Italian translation. The most significant mention of clay in the Bible occurs in Genesis, which tells the story of the creation of the earth and its human occupants. In Chapter 2, after creating the skies and the land, God decides to form the first man “of the slime of the earth”⁶⁶ (Genesis 2:7). Clay is, essentially, wet earth; therefore, God crafted man from clay. As a result, the presence of clay – or, in this case, terracotta – in the Laurentian Library vestibule can be understood as referencing the Creation narrative, one of the most prominent stories in the Bible.

Michelangelo himself referenced the connection between flesh and clay, particularly with regards to life and death. He was commissioned by Luigi del Riccio in 1544 to sculpt a bust of del Riccio's young nephew, Cecchino Bracchi, who had died early that same year. In addition to the funerary bust,⁶⁷ the patron requested that Michelangelo supply a multitude of epitaphs that could be used for the boy's grave. Michelangelo provided nearly fifty verses commemorating

⁶⁵ Guilhem Scherf, “‘Terracotta is the Concern of Genius’: Connoisseurs and Collectors of Terracottas,” in *Playing with Fire: European Terracotta Models*, ed. James David Draper and Guilhem Scherf (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 2.

⁶⁶ The Latin text reads: *Formavit igitur Dominus Deus hominem de limo terrae.*

⁶⁷ Note that Michelangelo never actually completed this bust.

the boy's short life. One of these quatrains, entitled *La carne terra*, begins with the following phrase: "Flesh turned to clay, mere bone preserved."⁶⁸⁶⁹ This indicates that Michelangelo recognized the relationship between the body and clay, the earthy material from which God sculpts man in the Genesis narrative, and actively incorporated this relationship into at least one of his works of art. Although this particular quatrain was written over a decade after the floors in the Laurentian Library were completed, it is reasonable to suggest that Michelangelo was aware of the biblical and spiritual relationship between flesh and clay when he decided to have the library's floors made out of terracotta.

The association of clay and terracotta with the human body evokes Michelangelo's architectural method. Michelangelo, as already mentioned, tended to produce designs that evolved over time and thus mimic the organic nature of human development. As structures such as the Laurentian Library were under construction, the designs that Michelangelo submitted to different patrons for approval often transformed into different buildings entirely, bearing little resemblance to the original plans.⁷⁰ The same can be said of human growth and development: plans evolve just as infants change and develop into adults. Often, fully-grown adults bear little resemblance to themselves as infants, just as Michelangelo's completed structures often bear little resemblance to their original designs. By choosing to incorporate terracotta, a material fired from clay, into the Laurentian Library, Michelangelo aligned his architectural method with

⁶⁸ Asciano Condivi, Michelangelo, George Bull, and Peter Porter, *Michelangelo: Lives, Letters, and Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 158.

⁶⁹ The entire poem reads in Italian: *La carne terra, e qui l'ossa mie, prive // de' lor begli occhi e del leggiadro aspetto, // fan fede a quell ch'I' fu' grazia e diletto // in che carcer quaggiù l'anima vive.*

James Saslow, *The Poetry of Michelangelo: An Annotated Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 359.

⁷⁰ Cammy Brothers, "Designing What You Cannot Draw: Michelangelo and the Laurentian Library," in *Michelangelo e il Linguaggio dei Disegni di Architettura*, ed. Alessandro Nova and Golo Maurer (2012).

the development of the human body from the very beginning.

As James Ackerman points out in his extensive analysis of Michelangelo's architectural method, the master tended to design structures as if they were sculpture.⁷¹ Because Michelangelo almost exclusively sculpted human figures, he was inclined also to design buildings that mimic the actions and proportions of the human body. The incorporation of terracotta into the floors of the Biblioteca Laurenziana was probably a conscious decision Michelangelo made in order to affiliate his completed design with the features of a human being. We have seen this with respect to his method of design. However, the metaphor extends even further. Although Michelangelo was involved in many projects throughout his career in various media, he primarily identified as a sculptor, particularly of the human form.

There is an organic, biological element to the Laurentian Library that very closely resembles the human form. We see this primarily in the undeniably dramatic feeling of upward motion in the *ricetto*. All elements of the vestibule – starting with the terracotta floors and ending in the tall ceiling – coerce viewers to direct their gazes strictly upward, as if witnessing the room grow right before their very eyes.⁷² The viewer of the structure sees first the terracotta floor, crafted of a material that directly calls to mind the human form, and subsequently his view rises steadily upward, as if following the typical growth of a human being. Although the rest of the vestibule is crafted entirely of stone, viewers would see the terracotta floor, remember the Creation narrative, and then – in following with the inherently vertical design of the *ricetto* – would direct their gazes upward. Genesis clearly defines the creation and growth of man. By using terracotta on the floor of the *ricetto*, which is defined by a startling sense of verticality and upward growth, Michelangelo perhaps instilled within the viewer a recollection of the story of

⁷¹ Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, 47.

⁷² Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 215-7.

Adam and Eve – which was relevant due to the library’s patronage. As doubtlessly intended, visitors to the Laurentian Library would have identified with this design metaphor implemented by Michelangelo through his use of terracotta on the floors of the Laurentian Library.

The Materiality of Stucco

White stucco is present on the walls of both the *ricetto* and the reading room in the Laurentian Library.⁷³ The use of plaster and, more specifically, stucco in fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century art and architecture was primarily motivated by both temporal and financial restraints.⁷⁴ Quite unlike stone, stucco could be mixed and applied directly on site with little preparation; additionally, stucco had comparatively little cost associated with its production, acquisition, and use compared to materials like bronze and solid marble.⁷⁵ Artists and architects who specified the use of stucco often did so to obtain the look of a high-quality material without compromising cost and efficiency.

Although relatively little effort and cost were associated with the use of stucco as a decorative material in structures such as the Laurentian Library, its presence tended to reference other, worthier materials that were much more significant from an iconographical standpoint in Michelangelo’s program of design. Stucco was the purest, whitest, and finest form of plaster available to Renaissance sculptors. It was made often from crushing and burning pieces of marble and combining the pulverized pieces until a paste was formed. The result was a shining,

⁷³ James G. Cooper, “Michelangelo’s Laurentian Library: Drawings and Design Process,” *Architectural History* 54 (2011), 77.

⁷⁴ Eckart Marchand, “Material Distinctions: Plaster, Terracotta, and Wax in the Renaissance Artist’s Workshop,” in *The Material of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logistics, c. 1250 – 1750*, ed. Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 160-1.

⁷⁵ Marchand, “Material Distinctions: Plaster, Terracotta, and Wax in the Renaissance Artist’s Workshop,” 160.

sparkly paste that, when applied to a surface, reflected light in a manner similar to solid marble.⁷⁶

The stucco of the *ricetto* and reading room exists in stark contrast to the dark bluish-grey *pietra del Fossato* that defines several of the decorative accents in both spaces. Although Michelangelo had a virtually unlimited budget for approximately the first three years of the design and construction processes, from the beginning he did call for stucco, usually considered a comparatively inexpensive material, for use on the walls. Only the flat wall planes throughout the library were stuccoed; it is possible that Michelangelo believed that such simple decorative elements did not need to be made of costly materials whose use required great labor and time and that he thus specified a cheaper material that was relatively easy to manipulate. It was a decision worthy of consideration, due to the connotations associated with the medium.

Naturally, it would have been incredibly difficult to quarry and transport massive amounts of both *pietra del Fossato* and marble to the site of the Laurentian Library. Stucco achieves a look similar to that of marble, giving to the walls whiteness and vibrancy without compromising cost or efficiency. It is perhaps for this reason that Michelangelo specified the use of this material to cover the walls of both the *ricetto* and the reading room.⁷⁷

Because stucco resembles marble in its appearance and is indeed made from it, it is important to consider the implications of the use of such a quality, expensive substance. Although stucco is a lesser-quality medium than marble, its visual and compositional similarity to marble should prompt a consideration of how Michelangelo might have drawn on the

⁷⁶ Nicholas Penny, *The Materials of Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 191.

⁷⁷ Note that we do not have any written evidence on behalf of the master that suggests he explicitly called for the use of stucco on the walls. However, we can deduce, due to incredibly strict adherence to his requirements in all cases except that of the staircase, that the craftsmen in charge accepted and implemented his suggestions without faltering. Additionally, Michelangelo was present for the construction of the walls of the *ricetto* and the reading room, which leads to the conclusion that he explicitly requested the use of stucco, and that the builders obliged.

iconography of the stone in designing the library structures.

The use of marble in both sculpture and architecture dates back to Greco-Roman antiquity. Marble has been considered different from all other types of stone as a medium ever since sculptors and architects such as Polykleitos and Kallikrates began using the stone in statues and buildings. According to Isidore of Seville, a seventh-century scholar and linguist, marble deserves esteem beyond that of other stones simply due to its brilliance of color, its natural shine, and its exceptional quality.⁷⁸ This notion persisted for several decades after he wrote his *Etymologies*; one might assume that sixteenth-century Florentines viewed marble – or visual references to marble, as in the Biblioteca Laurenziana – in a similar manner.

Patrons of the Laurentian Library were incredibly educated, particularly with respect to Classical history and culture. Many of the manuscripts in the Medici family's private collection in some way described or referenced different elements of the Classical world.⁷⁹ As such, it was probable, and even likely, that educated Florentine citizens frequenting the Biblioteca Laurenziana saw the stucco on the walls, recognized its visual and compositional similarity to marble, and drew the logical connection between the stuccoed walls and the use of marble in ancient Greco-Roman art and architecture.

Michelangelo undoubtedly intended, in his use of stucco, to draw a parallel between the Laurentian Library and the Classical world. A structure with such a function as the Laurenziana was surely often brimming with humanists and scholars, among whose primary foci included study and analysis of ancient Greece and Rome. Michelangelo knew that stucco resembles marble in a variety of ways, and that marble was of great significance in Greco-Roman culture.

⁷⁸ Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghoff, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 321-2.

⁷⁹ Ullman and Stadter, *The Catalogue of San Marco*, 105-267.

When he specifically indicated that the *capomaestri* at San Lorenzo should include stucco – a direct visual reference to marble – Michelangelo ensured that the interior of the Laurentian Library was forever associated with ancient history in the minds of all of its educated patrons.

This notion is even further supplemented by the continuing presence of Greco-Roman canonical forms throughout the *ricetto* and the reading room. Fully aware of the attitudes and study habits of the library's patrons, Michelangelo intentionally incorporated decorative elements inspired by Greco-Roman Classical art and architecture throughout the library, particularly in the *ricetto*. The presence of elements that, though nontraditional, at least partially referenced the Classical world,⁸⁰ paired with the obvious stark whiteness of the stucco visually referencing marble, would have undoubtedly reminded Laurentian Library patrons of Classical architecture. For humanists and scholars, these references would have been both bold and obvious.

As such, it is easy to see why artists who lived after antiquity, such as Michelangelo, harbored such a great appreciation for the stone. We know from his renowned appreciation for Classical art that Michelangelo greatly respected sculptors from ancient Greece and Rome. Having been trained in Lorenzo de' Medici's sculpture garden, which housed many marble sculptures from antiquity, an admiration for Classical works of art and the media in which they were crafted was instilled in Michelangelo from adolescence.⁸¹ As an adolescent, and throughout the entirety of his professional career, Michelangelo devoted himself to carving marble and understanding its physical properties and significance in the Classical world.

In using stucco, a material derived from his beloved marble, in the Laurentian Library, Michelangelo effectively aligned his designs with some of the most important iconographical

⁸⁰ Argan and Contardi, *Michelangelo Architect*, 193-7.

⁸¹ Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, 419-21.

and stylistic elements of Classical art and architecture. Because frequenters of the Biblioteca Laurenziana were scholars who probably had a basic understanding of the Classical world, this relationship would have been clear. Because Michelangelo was aware of his audience, it is inarguable that the relationship between the Laurentian Library and ancient Greco-Roman art, architecture, and culture was intentional.

The Materiality of Stone

Macigno,⁸² a green-grey stone with occasional blue accents that was quarried around Florence, was used often in construction in the city during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The term *macigno* characterized a broad group of different types of stone that existed in a hierarchy of quality. The highest quality of *macigno*, often quarried in the Apennine Mountains,⁸³ was *pietra del Fossato*,⁸⁴ a material commonly used for the decoration of building exteriors due to its resilience.⁸⁵ Despite its typical utilization exteriors, however, Michelangelo specified that the decorative elements of the *ricetto*, as well as the pilasters in the reading room, should be crafted from *pietra del Fossato*.⁸⁶ It is important to note that, in February 1559, Bartolommeo Ammannati, in direct violation of Michelangelo's specific requests, crafted the Laurentian staircase from *pietra del Fossato* as well. According to Vasari, in the original introduction to his famous *Lives of the Artists*, every element of the Biblioteca Laurenziana crafted from *pietra del Fossato* was of such great quality that "even if it were of silver, it would

⁸² English translation: "The Florentine Stone," according to William Wallace in *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*.

⁸³ Giorgio Vasari, Louisa S. Maclehose, and G. Baldwin Brown, *Vasari on Technique* (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 57-9.

⁸⁴ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 136-7.

⁸⁵ Vasari, Maclehose, and Brown, *Vasari on Technique*, 56-8.

⁸⁶ Vasari, Maclehose, and Brown, *Vasari on Technique*, 57.

not look so well.”⁸⁷

Vivid descriptions of stone fill the Old and New Testament. There are two particular narratives in the Bible in which stone is described as a central component of the narrative. These two stories, that of St. Peter and the Entombment, are central in the narrative of Christ. As such, stone, and the role it plays in the Bible, was familiar to nearly everyone in sixteenth-century Florence. In the Bible, during a discussion with his apostles concerning the identity of the Son of God, Christ asks the twelve men before him, “But whom do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). Despite apprehensive murmurings from many present that hint at an answer, the apostle Simon clearly responds, “Thou art Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Christ immediately considers this sort of confidence and conviction in Simon’s answer a sign that this information had not been revealed from a mortal being, but from God himself. Christ immediately seeks to reward Simon’s connection to the divine; famously, he responds, “Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona: because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but my Father who is in Heaven. And I say to thee: That thou art Peter,⁸⁸ and upon this rock⁸⁹ I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:17-18).

In the subsequent chapters of the Bible, Peter, as he came to be known after Christ renamed him, is one of Christ’s most loyal apostles, and Christ tasks him with leading his followers after his death. According to the Catholic Church, Peter was thus the first pope, and, having been at the very forefront of the clergy at its inception, Peter fulfills the duty bestowed upon him in the Book of Matthew – he is, for Catholics, the foundation upon which the Church, and its ensuing two millennia of history, are built.

⁸⁷ Vasari, Maclehorse, and Brown, *Vasari on Technique*, 58.

⁸⁸ In Latin, the name Peter is commonly written as *Petrus*, as in this translation of the Vulgate Bible.

⁸⁹ The Latin word used in the original version is *petram*, according to the Vulgate Bible.

According to Isidore of Seville, the name Peter (*Petrus*) was derived from the Latin word for stone or rock, *petra*. The word *petra* was not derived from the existing name *Petrus*; instead, the name came from the existing word.⁹⁰ This suggested to many that, in his decision to rename the apostle Simon, Christ explicitly intended to forever associate the future pope with rocks and stone. In this way, Christ aligned some of the most prominent tangible elements of the Catholic faith – the papacy and the Church – with the presence of stone.

The imagery in these passages of the Bible gives profound iconographical significance to stone, especially when used as a building material in Catholic churches. The very act of naming Peter a “rock” upon which Christ could build his church aligns the use of stone in a building such as the Laurentian Library with a religious program or connotation. As one of the most famous interactions between Christ and one of his apostles, nearly everyone in sixteenth-century Florence knew of Peter’s designation as a “rock” and thus his role as a foundation for the establishment of the Catholic Church.

Inarguably, the most famous and revered story in the New Testament comprises the end of Christ’s life: the Betrayal, Crucifixion, Lamentation, Entombment, and Resurrection of Christ. Considered by Catholics to be the very proof of Christ’s identity as the Son of God, this story would have resonated with, and could have been identified by, every citizen of Florence in the sixteenth century. Even the most nuanced details of these passages in the Bible would probably have been incredibly familiar and recognizable to sixteenth century Florentines, who heard such stories recounted in liturgical readings and many other popular sources.

Immediately after the Crucifixion, the disciples, accompanied by the Virgin and Mary Magdalene, remove the body from the cross, lament the death of Christ, and began making

⁹⁰ Barney, Lewis, Beach, and Berghoff, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, 168.

preparations for his entombment. His body is prepared for burial in accordance with typical practices in the Jewish faith. According to the Book of Matthew in the New Testament, after Christ is taken down from the cross, Joseph places the body “in his own new monument, which he had hewed out in a rock [*petra*]” (Matthew 27:60). The burial place of Jesus Christ was, even immediately after his death, the holiest location in all of the Catholic faith. This notion was only further supplemented by what the Bible says happened three days after his death, when “Mary Magdalen cometh early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre: and she saw the stone [*lapidem*] taken away from the sepulchre” (John 20:1). After recruiting the rest of Christ’s apostles to inspect the empty stone tomb, it is determined that, as prophesied, “he must rise again from the dead,” (John 20:9) and that he, indeed, had.

The classification of the burial place of Jesus Christ as a tomb made explicitly of stone adds iconographical significance to stone as a building material. Moreover, the resurrection of Christ, the miracle upon which the entire Catholic faith is founded, occurs from atop a stone tomb covering. For this reason, the use of stone as a building material in any structure would have resonated profoundly within the minds of sixteenth-century Florentine Catholics.

The iconographical relationship between Catholicism and the use of stone as a building material is particularly relevant for consideration in the Biblioteca Laurenziana. As previously discussed, the Laurenziana was constructed at the site of the monastery of San Lorenzo, and was commissioned by a Medici pope. Although it was a structure with primarily scholarly utility, the Laurentian Library’s affiliation with the clergy was both pronounced and undeniable. The biblical connotations associated with building in *pietra del Fossato*, a Florentine stone, were relevant and significant in the minds of patrons frequenting the library. Michelangelo was always sensitive to the audience who would view or experience any of his works; undoubtedly

he actively pondered the biblical connotations of construction in stone prior to requesting it as a building material in the Laurentian Library.

The Medici considered themselves very important in the political and ecclesiastical structures of Florence. They often searched for ways to display and outwardly express their dominance, particularly with respect to the creation of art and architecture within their city. Their presence and rule was almost unwavering – with the exceptions of the family’s expulsions from the city in 1433-34, 1494-1512, and between 1527 and 1530 – for nearly three hundred years.⁹¹ The Medici might well have wished to present themselves as the rock upon which the city of Florence flourished during these centuries, even if in truth their rule was hotly contested.

Given the family’s attitude, it is not impossible that Michelangelo was asked by the Medici Pope Clement VII to acknowledge the power, and therefore the wealth and luxury, associated with the Medici dynasty. *Pietra del Fossato* was costly and of incredibly high quality. Indeed, its cost and luxury made it comparable to marble.⁹² As such, the two types of stone harbor similar connotations with respect to luxury and, subsequently, the impression they give of wealth and power. These implications are naturally relevant in the case of the Biblioteca Laurenziana due to its history and patronage.

In the sixteenth century, locating, quarrying, and transporting stone such as *pietra del Fossato* was an incredibly complex process, particularly when large blocks were needed. The process required a large financial commitment in order to ensure that enough care was taken in acquiring these blocks of stone for artistic and architectural endeavors. On-site work was nearly as complex. According to William Wallace, construction at the Laurentian Library required

⁹¹ Hale, *Florence and the Medici*, 8.

⁹² Vasari, Maclehorse, and Brown, *Vasari on Technique*, 58.

hundreds of *capomaestri*, artisans, craftsmen, and builders, many of whom devoted their days to crafting the detailed decorative elements of the Laurentian Library from *pietra del Fossato*.⁹³

This very obviously represented an immense cost to the Medici and thus indicated the wealth of the family. However, the mobilization of such a large labor force to quarry and work so much of the bluish-grey stone not only indicates the immense wealth of the Medici family, but also points to the incredible amount of power they held in the city of Florence. The decision made by Michelangelo to specify stone⁹⁴ for use in the Laurentian Library was a direct, obviously intentional reference to the wealth, power, and luxury that defined the Medici family.

As a sculptor of high-quality marble, a devout Catholic, and a longtime associate of the Medici family, Michelangelo was undoubtedly aware of the symbolic effect of specifying expensive, quality stone for use in crafting the decorative elements of the vestibule and the reading room. The stories in the Bible that involve stone as a primary narrative device are among the most famous in the Bible; given this, Michelangelo, and the undoubtedly devout frequenters of the Laurentian Library, were probably quite aware of the religious connotations and meaning of the use of stone in the *ricetto* and the reading room. This is significant due to the patronage and site of the Laurentian Library. Commissioned by a Medici pope on the campus of a monastery, any material that harbors biblical and religious significance served to remind educated scholars that the structure, despite its primary scholarly utility,

Similarly, the wealth and power of the Medici family, who lived lives of immense luxury, was well known to all sixteenth-century Florentines due to the leading dynasty's virtually

⁹³ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 150.

⁹⁴ This request was made in a letter to Giovanni Spina in Florence, dated August 8, 1524: "...per conto della pietra forte ch'egli à tolto a cavare per la Libberia di San Lorenzo..."; see Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Lettere*, ed. Enzo Noè Girardi (Arezzo: Ente Provinciale per il Turismo, 1976), 151.

constant position at the forefront of the city's political and ecclesiastical landscapes. It was common knowledge that *macigno*, and in particular the high-quality *pietra del Fossato*, required an exorbitant amount of money and labor to utilize effectively in construction projects, especially in the amounts required by Michelangelo's designs for the Biblioteca Laurenziana. Because he was in charge not only of the architectural design program, but also often of the organization of labor forces used to quarry stone,⁹⁵ Michelangelo knew of the cost associated with construction in *pietra del Fossato*. Therefore, Michelangelo and the audience he was considering when drafting designs for the Laurentian Library were consciously aware of the implications of wealth, power, and luxury associated with construction in *pietra del Fossato*.

We have seen that, due to the iconographical and symbolic connotations associated with terracotta, stucco, and *pietra del Fossato*, it seems likely that Michelangelo explicitly requested each material. Michelangelo was famously, throughout his career, very aware of his audiences – with respect not only to architecture, but also to painting and sculpture. The use of terracotta, stucco, and *pietra del Fossato* stimulated frequenters of the Biblioteca Laurenziana to draw educated conclusions about the library and the Medici – an effect quite possibly intended by its patrons, the political and ecclesiastical leaders of the city of Florence.

Now that we have considered the significance of terracotta, stucco, and stone as materials in the Laurentian Library, it is possible to analyze the final – and as I will later argue, most important – medium used exclusively in the reading room. The presence of fine walnut within the Biblioteca Laurenziana provides a new level of iconographical, historical, and symbolic significance that has been hitherto unmentioned. We will consider the materiality of wood – particularly walnut – and its relevance within the Biblioteca Laurenziana in the next section.

⁹⁵ Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 137.

Chapter 5 – The Materiality of Wood and the Laurentian Staircase

In a letter addressed to Bartolommeo Ammannati dated January 14, 1559, Michelangelo Buonarroti detailed his specific requests pertaining to the construction of the Laurentian staircase. Specifically, he wrote the following: “It is my opinion that if the said staircase were made in wood – that is to say in a fine walnut – it would be better than in stone, and more in keeping with the desks, the ceiling, and the door.”⁹⁶ It is evident here that Michelangelo must have considered the repercussions of constructing the famous staircase in the Biblioteca Laurenziana in both wood and stone, and, after careful consideration, explicitly preferred construction in wood.

In this section, we will consider the first half of this sentence – the clause that indicates that Michelangelo preferred the Laurentian staircase be constructed in wood. I would like to propose that Michelangelo’s rationale behind such an explicit request was a direct result of the iconographical, historical, and symbolic connotations associated with construction in wood that are otherwise lacking for other materials. Later, in the next chapter, we will address the second half of this sentence – Michelangelo’s statement indicating that, in the case of the Laurentian staircase, construction in wood would be better than in stone in order to maintain continuity with other elements crafted of wood. Additionally, we will discuss how these implications influenced Michelangelo’s vision for the Laurentian Library, and how construction of the staircase in *pietra del Fossato* violated the master’s plan.

Wood, particularly fine walnut, like stone and terracotta, harbors religious connotations that cannot be ignored due to the library’s history and patronage. There is symbolism that is

⁹⁶ Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, vol. 2, 186.

This is the original sentence written by Michelangelo in Italian (taken from Girardi, *Lettere*, 312): “Ò openione che quando detta scala si facesse di legname, cioè d’un bel noce, che starebbe meglio che di macigno e più a proposito a’ banchi, al palco e alla porta.”

unique to wood alone – wood harbors a particularly unique relationship with humanity on both a conscious and physical scale that was undoubtedly present in Michelangelo’s mind when making this explicit, bold declaration in his letter to Ammannati.

Originally, scholars often thought that construction in wood was a preference based almost entirely on availability, ease of transport, and cost efficiency. However, extensive analysis has yielded several different rationales on behalf of artists and architects alike with respect to the use of wood as a medium in both sculpture and architecture. Artists use wood because of its religious symbolism, its connections to the consciousness of knowledge and wisdom in man, and the nature and results of physical interactions with wood.⁹⁷

There are religious connotations associated with the materiality of wood that would have reminded viewers of the building’s site and patronage – ones that probably resonated profoundly in the minds of educated Florentines. These biblical and spiritual references are not limited to construction in wood in general, but refer specifically to construction in walnut, which was the precise material specified by Michelangelo in his letter.

Some of the most vivid mentions of wood, in the Western tradition, come in the Bible. According to the Gospel of John, Christ, after he was sentenced to death, was responsible for bearing the weight of his own cross as he traveled to Golgotha, the site of his crucifixion.⁹⁸ Because the Bible says that it was possible for a single man to transport its weight, many readers must have deduced that the cross upon which Christ was crucified was made of wood – the only material available in the first century CE that was light enough to carry. As such, wood had

⁹⁷ Christina Neilson, “Carving Life: The Meaning of Wood in Early Modern European Sculpture,” in *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logistics, c. 1250 – 1750*, ed. Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 223.

⁹⁸ Vulgate Bible, John 19:17 (“And bearing his own cross, he went forth to the place which is called Cavalry, but in Hebrew Golgotha.”)

Christian significance. The specific species of tree used in manufacturing the cross was debated for several centuries since the first texts of the Bible were distributed – though walnut was generally not considered to be a possibility. As one of the most important events in the entire Bible, the Crucifixion established a permanent spiritual connection between the body of Christ and the cross, made of wood, upon which he dies.

In his letter to Ammannati, Michelangelo not only specified that the Laurentian staircase be crafted of wood. He also made the request that the staircase be crafted of a particular species of wood – “that is to say in a fine walnut.”⁹⁹ This demand harbors significance not only due to its incredible specificity, but also due to the relationship between walnut trees and the Catholic faith. Although not explicitly defined in the text of the Vulgate Bible, there is an undeniable link between nuts, walnuts, walnut trees, and the body of Christ.

First, a walnut, from a botanical standpoint, comprises three parts – an outer hull, a woody shell, and a kernel. In a 55-volume medieval epic poem detailing the nativity of Christ entitled *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi*, Christ in the flesh is compared to a nut.¹⁰⁰ The poem states the following:

“The nut is Christ; the husk of the nut
is the crucifixion of his flesh,
the shell is the bony body;
deity covered with flesh
and the gentleness of Christ
is signified by the kernel.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, vol. 2, 186.

¹⁰⁰ Christina Neilson, “Carving Life: The Meaning of Wood in Early Modern Sculpture,” 238.

¹⁰¹ The original Latin reads: *Nux est Christus: // cortex nucis // Circa carnem poena crucis, // Testa corpus osseum, // Carne tecta deitas // Et Christi suavitas // Signatur per nucleum.*” Guido Maria Dreves, Clemens Blume, Henry Marriott Bannister, *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi*, vol. 54 (Leipzig: Fues’s Verlag, 1907): 154. For the translation, see Adam von Sankt Victor, *Samtliche Sequenzen*, ed. and trans. Franz Wellner, *Sequence on the Birth of the Lord*, <http://people.bu.edu/robbe/splendor.htm>

This poem, which was written centuries before Michelangelo received the commission for the Laurentian Library and was therefore likely common knowledge amongst educated library patrons, directly correlates the three parts of a nut with the three parts of Christ – the outer hull representing the flesh, the woody shell representing the cross upon which Christ was crucified, and the kernel representing the divinity within the flesh.¹⁰² There is a direct correlation between the form of a nut and the body of Christ that, due to knowledge of the *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi*, could have been known to educated Florentines, perhaps even to Michelangelo.

The three parts of a walnut have alternative interpretations with respect to the Catholic faith. It has also been said that these three parts together are representative of the Holy Trinity, a particularly powerful theological tenet of Catholicism. Additionally, because the woody shell is embedded in a thorny husk, a walnut is also sometimes considered a reference to the crown of thorns that was placed on Christ's head prior to the crucifixion. Finally, because the walnut tree itself regenerates rapidly once planted, it often is said to symbolize the resurrection of Christ, which is the only instance of human regeneration in the Catholic faith.¹⁰³ There are several biblical connotations associated with construction in walnut that may have been evident to both Michelangelo and frequenters of the Laurentian Library.

The religious connotations associated with the use of wood – specifically, walnut – for construction in the Laurentian Library perhaps served to remind patrons that the building, despite its secular function, was in fact commissioned by a pope. Although stone harbors incredibly

¹⁰² This entire notion was taken from Christina Neilson, "Carving Life: The Meaning of Wood in Early Modern Sculpture," 227.

¹⁰³ Neilson, "Carving Life: The Meaning of Wood in Early Modern Sculpture," 227-8.

powerful religious connotations, wood possesses a depth of spiritual meaning surpassing that of all other building materials.

Additionally, there is an age-old relationship between wood, and the living trees from which it comes, and human wisdom. Wood, before it is cut down, is an organic, biological medium, one that lives and – in a sense, via photosynthesis – breathes. We know that Michelangelo, as an architect, often modeled his designs after the proportions of the human body.¹⁰⁴ It is logical to deduce, therefore, that he considered the relationship between his designs and the typical structure of the human body when drafting provisions for the Biblioteca Laurenziana. Living trees operate like human bodies, with veins and complexions. As a tree ages, the inside of its trunk gains rings around the center, signifying its age, and essentially, when considering the comparison to a human body, its wisdom.

When an educated human being interacts with wood in the form of a manuscript written on paper, he or she propagates the relationship between wood and human wisdom. Reading enforces and manifests knowledge, which enhances wisdom. When considering the materials to be used in the reading room, Michelangelo undoubtedly preferred media that would create environments conducive to study and thought, or those that might manifest wisdom. There is no better material to choose than wood to supplement the act of learning in accordance with the very function of the space.

Construction in wood not only harbors spiritual and conscious symbolic significance, but also communicates physical importance, particularly with respect to architecture. Paper, as opposed to vellum or parchment, was commonly used for manuscripts starting in the mid-

¹⁰⁴ Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, 38.

fifteenth century, well over a century prior to the opening of the Laurentian Library.¹⁰⁵ The transition between vellum or parchment, the standards in manuscript production throughout the Middle Ages, and poor-quality paper was a long process that was at its peak just a few decades before Michelangelo was born in 1475. Paper – quite obviously – is a manuscript medium that comes from wood. There are several iconographical connotations associated with construction in wood that form a direct link to paper and the manuscripts with which they were made.

The Laurentian Library was finally opened to the public in June 1571. At this point, the reading room had already been filled with manuscripts from all over Florence – including, but absolutely not limited to, the remnants of the Medici collection from the library at San Marco. Although many of the manuscripts present in the reading room would have undoubtedly been made of parchment, vellum, and other, older materials, it is logical to assume that by this point in time many manuscripts in the library would have been made of paper.

It is safe to say that Michelangelo was aware of the increasing use of paper in manuscript production and – considering its source – its obvious association with wood. It is probably partially due to this reason that he specifically requested the use of walnut in the reading room. Manuscripts were chained to the desks at which they were placed,¹⁰⁶ forming a literal, physical link between the pages and the desks at which people sat to study them. By crafting the desks out of wood, Michelangelo additionally established a symbolic link between them and the stairs. In establishing this literal and figurative relationship, he then probably decided to incorporate the fine walnut in other parts of the reading room in order to maintain an element of continuity – one that will be considered further.

¹⁰⁵ Mary A. Rouse and Richard Rouse, *Authentic Witnesses: Approaches to Medieval Texts and Manuscripts*, 54 vols. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), vol. 27, pp. 450-2.

¹⁰⁶ Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 215.

Decisions about materiality are most commonly made with the function of the proposed space in mind. There is a physical relationship between people and the architectural spaces they frequent that is significantly more potent than the relationship between viewers and other types of art. As such, physical interactions with architectural spaces are profoundly affected by the materials used in their construction. Specifically, the physical interplay of Florentine scholars and the elements of the reading room – the desks and, if it had been crafted as intended, the staircase – is entirely defined by the material from which they were, or might have been, fashioned.

Wood, in all of its forms, bears the evidence of its use. This is true of both paper and solid wood, the two most relevant forms with respect to the Laurentian Library. As more people utilize things made of wood in some form – for the sake of this argument, consider manuscripts, the desks, and the Laurentian staircase as Michelangelo intended it to be crafted – more traces of human touches are left on the surface. There is a continuing awareness and perpetuation of history associated with the use of wood as a medium in any of its forms, since its surface reveals its age and frequency of use.

First, consider the physical act of reading a manuscript. Patrons frequenting the Laurentian Library were unable to check out materials as can be done today at a library. Because the manuscripts were chained to the desks at which they were placed, scholars were forced to move around the room in search of different topics. As a result, many people came in contact with the same manuscripts in the same location.

There is a natural wear-and-tear resulting from the use of manuscripts made from any material, including paper. As more and more people frequented the Laurentian Library, more hands came in contact with the manuscripts, and more notes by different hands were scribbled in

the margins of books over the decades. An exchange of thoughts and ideas occurred when each person sat down with a particular manuscript – an exchange that was facilitated by the very medium from which manuscripts were constructed. Finger oils from each scholar would rub off on the manuscript sheets. While paper is no longer technically wood, it too bears the evidence of its use.

The very act of reading a manuscript allows scholars to understand the ideas of their predecessors, since they can read the notes and ideas in the margins of the pages. Patrons would see not only the evidence of the manuscripts' past use in a physical sense, but also the evidence of the ideas of the manuscripts' past users. There is a perpetuation of history associated with the act of reading manuscripts. Much of the process of creating knowledge is heavily based on awareness of previous discoveries. As such, because manuscript paper bears the evidence of its past use, there is an even greater fortification of knowledge associated with reading and study in the Laurentian Library reading room.

The act of ascending and descending a wooden staircase, such as the one that should have existed in the Biblioteca Laurenziana had it been constructed in accordance with Michelangelo's specifications, should be considered in connection with the act of reading. The staircase that was constructed from *pietra del Fossato* looks little different today than it did upon its completion in 1559. This is primarily due to the material in which it was constructed. Stone, in particular, does not bear the evidence of its use in any measurable fashion. Centuries of hands gliding over the railings and feet traipsing up the treads have resulted in only marginal discoloration of the finish. The Laurentian staircase, as it was constructed in 1559, basically maintains all of its original shine and complexion, despite nearly five centuries of regular use.

As such, there is no perpetuation of history associated with traversing the length of the Laurentian staircase. Twenty-first-century patrons of the library, if they were able to ascend the staircase today, would have a virtually identical experience to that of sixteenth-century patrons who utilized the staircase just after its completion. Had the Laurentian staircase been crafted from fine walnut as Michelangelo intended, this notion would be reversed because wood most certainly bears the evidence of its use. As natural oils from human hands continuously smooth over the surface of wood, eventually one will begin to see discoloration and a diminution of the natural varnish and surface of the wood. This is seen most clearly in the carved desks in the reading room, which were crafted of the same fine walnut Michelangelo intended for the staircase.¹⁰⁷ It is easy to see the effect that nearly five hundred years of use has had on the wood finish. Upon superficial inspection, one can see the discoloration and missing varnish, as well as worn and uneven pages of the manuscripts that were chained to the wood.

The most drastic discoloration seems to have occurred where one would naturally rest his or her arms at a tilted desktop. Scholars seated at these desks over the course of history have noticed this phenomenon and added to it. Because the reading room desks were crafted of a fine walnut, scholars from later centuries would have recognized the rich history of the room in which they were studying. Current knowledge builds upon the knowledge of our predecessors, and this recognition of history and the past would have reinforced and enriched the act of reading. Particularly with regards to a staircase, oily hands tend to gloss over the same spots – for example, down railings, when available for use. Because the railings present in Michelangelo’s designs were there for the explicit intent of stabilizing important patrons as they ascended the startling structure, they would have been touched extensively. A similar

¹⁰⁷ Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, vol. 2, 186.

phenomenon can be noted with respect to foot traffic. When scholars ascended and descended the Laurentian staircase, their feet would have touched the treads in similar spaces each time. If the treads were crafted from a fine walnut, we would see discoloration and the diminution of natural varnish in two general areas on each tread – one for each foot. This same phenomenon would have been obvious to later patrons of the library. Once again, use of the staircase would have made people aware of its history had it been constructed from wood.

Wood bears the evidence of its past – it allows the present to have privileged access to a little bit of history. We do not see evidence of repeated use upon inspecting the structure that exists today because it was fashioned in stone. As a structure with scholarly utility, many of whose decorative elements relied at least in some fashion on Greco-Roman canonical forms and whose manuscripts frequently considered myths, theories, ideas, and histories regarding the Classical world, it would have made sense for the most fundamental elements – in the case of the Laurentian Library, the desks and the staircase – to have been crafted from a material that perpetuates history. The only medium that does this rapidly enough to produce visible changes in a short period of time is wood.¹⁰⁸ Wood quickly bears the evidence of its use, and thus construction in wood is associated with the fortification of knowledge and the propagation of history. In a space such as the Biblioteca Laurenziana, for this reason, there is no more appropriate material for construction.

The staircase, had it been constructed from the fine walnut explicitly indicated by Michelangelo, would have perpetuated the same fortifying notion. However, because it was crafted from *pietra del Fossato*, the sense of history associated with traversing the Laurentian staircase is virtually lost. When one ascends this flight of stairs today, it is difficult to determine

¹⁰⁸ Metal also bears the evidence of its use; however, the process is much longer, and much less obvious. Wood finish deteriorates much more rapidly than metal finish.

whether he or she is the first person to traverse its length, or the millionth. Because it was constructed in stone, there is no difference between the two. Michelangelo, who so greatly regarded humanism, education, the Classical world, and history, perhaps regarded this blatant disregard for his specifications as a tragedy of design.

There are a variety of iconographical, symbolic, and stylistic connotations associated with construction in wood, particularly walnut, that were probably apparent to both Michelangelo and educated Florentine citizens alike during the period of construction of the Laurentian Library. These connotations, rooted in theories of religious imagery, human mentality, and the physical interplay between bodies and the spaces they inhabit were undoubtedly relevant in Michelangelo's mind when making this material specification. Because patrons of the Laurentian Library were the most educated citizens in all of Florence, they too would have perhaps recognized these connotations and the connections drawn from them as they frequented the space.

In the next section, I will discuss the intended relationship among the vestibule, the reading room – the primary place of study – and the staircase in the Biblioteca Laurenziana. Although much of the scholarly utility of the library exists solely in the reading room, I will argue that Michelangelo, in his explicit request for the use of fine walnut, intended to draw a visual and thereby conscious intellectual link between the reading room and staircase. This link was undoubtedly a function of the material specified.

Chapter 6 – The Laurentian Staircase

In the centuries immediately after the completion of his *Moses* statue for the tomb of Pope Julius II, critics of Michelangelo often lambasted the famed and revered sculptor's decisions regarding the statue's bodily proportions, the positioning of the naturally cascading drapery, and its physical anatomy. When looking at the *Moses*, argued critics, it was obvious that Michelangelo's typical genius must have faltered during his execution of the sculpture. Further analysis, however, revealed that these critics were drastically incorrect. When considering the *Moses* in situ, or in the environment for which it was originally intended, analyses revealed that Michelangelo explicitly considered lines of sight and continuity of visual elements when determining these seemingly problematic proportions.¹⁰⁹ Because viewers of the tomb would have been able to view the *Moses* from only one particular vantage point, namely from below, Michelangelo adjusted the proportions so that the statue would make sense when examined in this way.

This artistic – and later architectural – preoccupation with lines of sight and continuity affected Michelangelo's designs throughout the remainder of his career. A review of his letters from various stages throughout his career indicates an increasing awareness for the vantage points of viewers and patrons alike. This also holds true when considering the decisions made by Michelangelo with respect to the plans and designs for the Laurentian Library.

In his 1559 letter to Ammannati, Michelangelo writes the following: “It is my opinion that if the said staircase were made in wood – that is to say in a fine walnut – it would be better

¹⁰⁹ Earl E. Rosenthal, “Michelangelo's Moses: Dal Di Sotto in Sù,” in *Michelangelo: Selected Scholarship in English*, ed. William Wallace, 5 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), vol. 4, 20.

than in stone, and more in keeping with the desks, the ceiling, and the door.”¹¹⁰ We have already considered the reason for Michelangelo’s request for wood, particularly fine walnut, in the first half of this statement. This decision was rooted in awareness of the iconographical, symbolic, and stylistic connotations associated with construction in this medium. The *ricetto* is crafted entirely in stone, prompting one to ask why Michelangelo, a man incredibly sensitive to materiality and lines of sight, insisted that the Laurentian staircase be crafted of a medium foreign to the vestibule. Additionally, we might ask why he explicitly stated that, in his opinion, wood would be better for the construction of the staircase than stone, the material that surrounds it today. These are the questions I will consider in this final section, which will be a reconstruction of what never was.

The exterior façade of the Laurentian Library as it stood during the sixteenth century was incomplete and therefore quite lackluster. It did not leave any remarkable impression on potential patrons of the library. Any sort of expected formal exterior façade or entryway that would have served as preparation for the startling *ricetto* was not present.¹¹¹ As such, a library patron’s first impression of the Laurenziana upon entering this magnificent space from the left side of the cloister at the monastery at San Lorenzo is the overwhelmingly powerful presence of stone. This is only the case because the staircase – a structure that occupies nearly the entire floor – was also crafted of *pietra del Fossato* instead of walnut.

The primary function of the vestibule in the Laurentian Library, as is typical of all vestibules, was to serve as a transitory space for preparation for entry into another room. The primary purpose of a staircase is, similarly, vertical transition. The staircase itself embodies the

¹¹⁰ Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, vol. 2, 186.

¹¹¹ Staale Sinding-Larsen, “The Laurenziana Vestibule as a Functional Solution,” in *Michelangelo: Selected Scholarship in English*, vol. 3, 359.

purpose of the entire room as a transitory element. In order to serve this purpose properly, the *ricetto* should have transitioned gradually to the reading room, a space in which wood dominates, in order to maintain an element of continuity.

Had the staircase been constructed of walnut, a library patron would have entered the *ricetto* entirely unprepared for what appeared inside the vestibule due to the lackluster exterior façade. He would have seen and recognized the presence of reddish terracotta on the floors and the use of white stucco and bluish-gray *pietra del Fossato* on the walls and decorative accents. However, due to its mammoth proportions and otherwise foreign material of construction, a viewer's main focus would have been the walnut staircase. The scholar would have seen the diminution of varnish and the discoloration associated with the use of the staircase by his predecessors and thus would have begun to consider the past. This would have served as mental preparation for entry into the reading room. As he ascended the wooden staircase on either of the flanking flights, he would have recognized the visual, physical continuity between the wooden staircase and the predominately wooden reading room. He would have entered the space prepared to learn; the function of the vestibule and staircase were thereby fulfilled.

Upon his departure, the patron would have undergone a similar experience. After having completed a day of studying from a variety of manuscripts at several wooden desks in a sober room with wooden ceilings, the scholar would have prepared to leave. He would have risen from his desk and made his way toward the door at the top of the staircase, which is directly between the *ricetto* and the reading room. After reaching the halfway point of the central aisle of the reading room, a scholar would have seen only a white, stuccoed wall plane – the vestibule's end wall – through the door between the two rooms. This blank plane (Figure 4) – the only major undecorated surface in the entire vestibule – was not immediately noticeable upon entering the

ricetto initially, because one enters the space from the left.¹¹² It was only immediately apparent when exiting the reading room. By focusing the doorway between the two rooms on the only sober part of the vestibule, Michelangelo forced patrons of the Laurentian Library to focus on the continuity between the reading room and the vestibule; the sobriety of the reading room is reflected in the sobriety of the visible blank wall seen through the doorway. Additionally, framing and thus highlighting this plain, unimpressive wall in the doorway forced patrons to focus on the only other element visible through the door upon their departure – that is, the Laurentian staircase. Had the staircase been constructed in wood, exiting the reading room would have forced scholars to note *only* the continuation of wood and sobriety from the reading room as he went down the stairs and out into the cloister of the monastery.



Figure 4 – The white stuccoed, blank wall plane that can be seen in the vestibule upon descending the Laurentian staircase from the reading room¹¹³

¹¹² Ralph Lieberman, “Michelangelo’s Design for the Biblioteca Laurenziana,” in *Michelangelo: Selected Scholarship in English*, vol. 3, 372-3.

¹¹³ https://www.yatzer.com/sites/default/files/article_images/2908/massimo-listri-for-yatzer-22.jpg

This desired element of continuity could have been manifested in a variety of ways. However, it is evident that Michelangelo intended to preserve this notion by creating a continuity of materials throughout the library due to his explicit requests in his letter to Ammannati. When Michelangelo, in his letter, made a material specification that, from a visual standpoint, isolated the staircase from the rest of the vestibule, he made it clear via this contrast that the staircase was a primary and essential feature of the *ricetto*'s design.¹¹⁴ Because the Laurentian staircase was crafted of *pietra del Fossato* instead of walnut, the function of the *ricetto* as a preparatory entryway and the continuity of lines of sight were lost.

Because the Laurentian staircase was crafted of *pietra del Fossato*, in keeping with the other decorative elements present in the *ricetto*, there is a dynamic interruption between the two rooms that dismantles the very function of the vestibule. When a sixteenth-century patron entered the vestibule, he would have seen a room entirely crafted of stone. Upon ascending the staircase, he would have left behind nearly all evidence of the use of stone and entered the reading room, a space almost entirely defined by the presence of fine, carved walnut. His descent was similarly unimpressive; because the doorway frames only stucco and stone when looking into the vestibule, the intended continuity is lost. Because of this drastic difference in materials that is immediately evident to even the most oblivious viewer, it seems as if these two rooms are entirely unrelated.

As such, the vestibule fails in its function as a preparatory entryway. Because these two spaces are perceived as entirely disparate, there is a clear distinction between the vestibule and the reading room. Essentially, due to this effect, the reading room does not have a vestibule. The *ricetto*, as it stands today, does nothing to prepare a scholar for entry into the wooden

¹¹⁴ Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, 113.

reading room. Although a viewer must have traveled through the vestibule to access the reading room, the design of the entrance space – most essentially supplemented by the design and execution of the staircase – armed him with little to no preparation for what was to come.

This lack of continuity harbors not only visual implications as we have already discussed, but mental implications as well. The vestibule was not only intended to serve as a physical preparation for entry into the reading room, but also, paired with a staircase crafted of fine walnut, would have allowed scholars to mentally prepare for the studies that would be taking place in the reading room. Patrons of the Laurentian Library were educated and devoted to their studies – as such, it is inarguable that these studies were intense and laborious, and therefore probably required an element of preparation. The perpetuation of history associated with construction in wood would have been significant for scholars intending to prepare for entry into the reading room. Because scholars were not afforded this experience, the architecture did not help prepare them for their study. In a space in which sharpness of thought and attentiveness to history were most prominently respected and revered, this lack of continuity perhaps affected subtly scholars' cognizance of the past.

A similar effect can be noted with respect to the departure of a scholar from the reading room. As previously discussed, the entire design of the reading room was made with the intent of enforcing the study and flow of ideas that would have occurred within its walls. The manifestation of knowledge and wisdom that transpired with the study of manuscripts should have continued well beyond the space itself. After the completion of his studies for the day, a scholar, had the staircase been constructed as intended, would have descended via a wooden structure after departing a predominately wooden room; this element of continuity would have been relevant to enforcing the importance of maintaining knowledge after study. He would have

experienced the perpetuation of history associated with construction in wood. He would have perceived in the architecture the evidence of his predecessors – as he did while sitting at the wooden desks – as he descended from the reading room.

Since this is not the case, there is a dynamic interruption of continuity in the space and thus a dynamic interruption of Michelangelo's intended program of design. According to Ackerman, the two rooms of the Laurentian Library must be seen together for viewers to appreciate the full effect of the tension associated with entry into the quirky *ricetto* and the subsequent release associated with entry into the comparatively sober reading room.¹¹⁵ Because, due to the change in material for the staircase, the two rooms seem almost entirely disparate, and it is significantly more difficult to appreciate the effect of the tension and release with respect to the structure as a whole. Construction of the Laurentian staircase in *pietra del Fossato* instead of walnut effectively rendered obsolete the intended functions of the *ricetto* and reading room in the library. Without any sort of material continuity, the entire crux of Michelangelo's program of design for the Biblioteca Laurenziana was lost or, at the very least, obscured.

The Laurentian staircase was not the only project in Michelangelo's career that was not completed according to his original plan. The tomb of Pope Julius II, which, according to Vasari, Michelangelo considered "the bane of his life," was a project accompanied by similar frustrations – and it too was realized in a version much different from what Michelangelo initially envisioned.¹¹⁶ The program of the original commission, developed in 1505 in accordance with the wishes of Julius, would have allowed Michelangelo to exercise his genius as

¹¹⁵ Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, 118.

¹¹⁶ Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*,
https://www.oneonta.edu/faculty/farberas/arth/arth213/michelangelo_vasari.html.

a sculptor on a colossal scale; the agreement requested that Michelangelo create a massive freestanding structure that was to house over forty sculptures. Frustrating interruptions throughout the decades caused by a variety of different circumstances forced him to produce a smaller, simpler tomb.¹¹⁷ Having had the opportunity to work freely on a much grander project, Michelangelo was disappointed when his vision, once magnificent and defined, did not come to fruition.

In the library, Michelangelo's vision for the completed space was compromised when Ammannati chose to craft the staircase from stone instead of wood. Although he was never able to see the completed Laurentian Library, this change in materials rendered effectively obsolete his vision for the vestibule, staircase, and reading room. The story of the tomb of Pope Julius II was arguably the greatest tragedy of Michelangelo's career, all because his magnificent vision for such a grandiose project was compromised in favor of an easier, simpler alternative. A similar interruption of his very specific vision for the Biblioteca Laurenziana occurred when Ammannati chose to make this change. We may never know why he decided to do so. However, given the master's reaction to the varied fortunes of the Julius tomb, we can only deduce that Michelangelo probably would have regarded Ammannati's disregard of his instructions as a blatant, incredible tragedy of design.

¹¹⁷ Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*,
https://www.oneonta.edu/faculty/farberas/arth/arth213/michelangelo_vasari.html.

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