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Michelangelo: The Medici Chapel

James Beck, Antonio Paolucci, Bruno Santi

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When Michelangelo left Florence for Rome in 1534, the Medici tombs were unfinished, but there was no question of another sculptor being brought in to complete them. They were already icons of artistic perfection, which it would be sacrilege for anyone else to touch. That eminence they retain to this day. The two seated Medici Dukes and the reclining figures of Night, Day, Dawn and Dusk are among the most famous sculptures in the world, endlessly copied and universally recognisable. Yet however familiar these images are, this collection of photographs by one of Italy's leading photographers of sculpture allows us to view these works of art in detail. It is now possible to actually imagine Michelangelo's chisel at work, and to marvel afresh at the sheer physical power that made him almost superhuman for his contemporaries. Bruno Santi, Director of the Medici Chapel from 1982 to 1992, and the art historians James Beck and Antonio Paolucci provide the historical background to the Chapel, essentially the Medici's family mausoleum, and explain how the concept changed over the 15 years Michelangelo worked on it. Originally envisaged as commemorative for members of the family, it was eventually confined to only two - who would now be forgotten but for their monuments. They make the little building that contains them as important in the history of Mannerist architecture as the figures are in the history of sculpture: indeed, no other location, not even the Sistine Chapel, captures the essence of Michelangelo's genius so intensely.

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