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Michelangelo sketch found

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

VATICAN CITY — A long-missing Michelangelo sketch for the dome of St. Peter's Basilica, possibly his last design, has been discovered in the basilica's offices, the Vatican newspaper said Thursday.

The sketch, drawn in blood-red chalk for stonecutters, was done by the Renaissance master in the spring of 1563, less than a year before his death, L'Osservatore Romano reported.

"The sureness in his stroke, the expert hand used to making decisions in front of unfinished stone, leave little doubt, the sketch is Michelangelo's," L'Osservatore wrote.

The sketch shows that Michelangelo "on the threshold of 90 years of age, even though he wasn't coming regularly to the (basilica) construction site, continued to take binding decisions" on how the work was being carried out, the Holy See's official newspaper commented.

The sketch "now becomes the last known design of the artist," the paper said.

Michelangelo, who began working on the basilica in 1547, was in his late 80s when he did the sketch.

The sketch is especially rare, the newspaper noted, because the artist ordered many of his designs destroyed when he was an old man.

The L'Osservatore story said most sketches done by Michelangelo for the stonecutters were destroyed or lost in the cutters' workplaces, but this one survived because a supervisor used the back of the sketch to make notes about problems linked to the stone's transport through the outskirts of Rome.

Assistance in the research for the sketch came from the University of Bonn and Rome's Bibliotheca Hertziana.

Michelangelo apparently drew the sketch for the stonecutters because he was dissatisfied with how some blocks of travertine were cut, the newspaper said.

Michelangelo's design shows a spur of the dome's drum to indicate to the cutters just how much stone needed to be hewn.

Included on the sketch were three numbers — "6, 9 and 3/4" — but it was not clear what the figures referred to.

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