

# Ancient Signatures Found at Sistine Chapel Choir Loft

The choir loft in the Sistine Chapel (1470) is a small nook carved into the stone of the chapel wall. For the first three-and-one-half centuries of the chapel's history, only singers were allowed inside. Hundreds of signatures carved into the wall were uncovered during the Vatican's 1997 restoration of the loft, including that of Josquin, one of the greatest composers of the Renaissance, who carved his name about a foot above the singer's bench.

German Klaus Pietsmann first wrote in 1999 about the signatures. Two years later, Oxford University Press put out a collection of essays with a color image of the loft graffiti

on the cover. The cover photograph fascinated Harvard graduate student Evan MacCarthy. "I looked at this and thought, 'There are hundreds of other names. I wonder who else is there.'"

Using a grant, MacCarthy traveled to Rome in 2004 to visit the chapel's choir loft, where Vatican security locked MacCarthy inside, allowing him just three hours to work. The loft was a dark mess of markings; layer upon layer of names, messages, lyrics, and dates had been carved in the stone. "There were Latin and German names from 1570 or 1625, then, from the 1700s, English names," he says. Even the stairwell leading to the choirloft was blackened with graffiti.

Diaries and Vatican pay records exist, so scholars are familiar with some of the singers who scribbled their names in the loft

during their tenure. But the records are incomplete, especially in the earlier years.

"The wall carvings will likely give us new names that we'll want to identify," says MacCarthy, such as singers who were not on the official paybooks. The signatures may also give up new information. Can one, for example, tell what voice part a singer had from the location of their signature?

And most exciting, says MacCarthy, is that there are musical phrases carved in the wall that have never been documented. "Were the singers also composers?" he wonders. "Did they sign a signature part instead of their name?"

MacCarthy plans to return to the Sistine Chapel soon, armed with a better camera and more lighting equipment, to document every inch of the graffiti so that it can be studied in closer detail. He will bring a list of names from the 16th-century diaries of the Cappella Sistina singers to compare to the names carved onto the walls to better date when these names were carved and who the graffiti artists were.

"I'm sure someone at the Vatican could, or even perhaps has done this work. But it hasn't been published or shared with scholars... who would find this information interesting and useful."

—Lesley Bannatyne



Josquin, one of the greatest composers of the Renaissance, carved his name (shown above) about a foot above the singer's bench (left).