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Short Writing Assignment #1: Pisano and Ghiberti

In this paper, I examine two strikingly different relief sculptures and examine their respective cultural contexts. Andrea Pisano's *The Baptism of the Multitude*, a Florentine relief from the mid-14th century, is a memorial depicting the life of St. John the Baptist in the French Gothic style (Stokstad & Cothren, 546). Ghiberti's *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, created by a young artist for the Florence Cathedral later in the 15th century, exemplifies the strength and imaginative character of the Renaissance through its dramatic imagery. Ghiberti's work is similar to Pisano's in as many ways as it is different. Commissioned by religious organizations, both artists illustrate and foster devotion to God via an illusionist approach that makes ample use of atmospheric and overlapping perspectives (Stokstad & Cothren, 609). Both of these elegantly-made works of art can be understood through their cultural and temporal contexts. In particular, I examine how and why Pisano and Ghiberti convey their message of pious devotion whether it is through stories of calm and calamity, unique styles conveying peace and conflict, or through their unprecedented goldsmithing techniques that prove their merit in the era of artistic rebirth brought about by the Italian Renaissance.

Both of the artists design their reliefs within a quatrefoil frame. They craft them using the medium of gilded bronze, placing special emphasis on humanoid depictions of men. A high relief projects from a dark grey or green background in order to support these men, draped in heavy cloth, who gain three-dimensionality through the artists' careful attention to the curvature of the folds and creases of their robes. The application of a warm, shiny gold hue advances these figures forward from the cooler grey background (Stokstad & Cothren, 548-610).

Pisano indicates depth by physically extending the rocky setting outward from the background to support the figures. Just as Ghiberti depicts his characters in layers and includes a horse whose outward glance seems to beckon the viewer, Pisano's figures among the multitude are overlapping and face outward; this technique enhances the illusion of a three-dimensional still image. The bricks spaced at regular intervals outside the quatrefoil frame help to bring the viewer's gaze in an inward direction toward the baptism. The visage of St. John, the bowl held in his hand, and the deciduous tree on the mountainside captivate the eye of the viewer with their centered position and low shadowing. Pisano truly conjures the image of a multitude of disciples by shrouding all the men in nearly identical robes (Stokstad & Cothren, 548). *The Baptism of the Multitude* truly is a relief that deemphasizes physical virtues and the achievements of the individual in favor of modesty and piety. This approach to religious devotion is not atypical of the early Renaissance era but it becomes less prevalent as time marches onward.

As part of a series on human virtues, Pisano's relief is simple and makes ample use of empty space in the background. St. John's disciples carry solemn expressions – their eyes are closed, their long hair is drawn back over their scalps, and they face downward toward the earth. The baptizer and the baptized lean slightly forward. St John wears a voluminous garment with a brush-like texture. His forearm extends to grasp a bowl of water while his upper arm remains modestly close to his chest. The leg of the man being baptized matches the skeletal hue of the stone and follows its curvature quite nicely to indicate harmony with nature. The shininess of the gold under the light is balanced by the pattern of wear that has developed on the bronze figures' robes. Pisano pays close attention to the creases within their robes, and this indicates his portrayal of shape and three-dimensional volume. The patterning of the men's long hair is

intricate as well and shows the cleanliness of the figures. Pisano structures the mountain in a similar fashion to an amethyst crystal, showcasing a flower-like tree with three branches. This adds to the overarching theme of holiness and simplicity. The subject of the baptism clasps his hands in prayer (Stokstad & Cothren, 548).

Both Italian artists demonstrate a remarkable attention to detail both in the symbolic and literal sense. In *The Baptism of the Multitude*, plants are scattered about the ground near St. John's feet. A gilded bird on the mountain indicates a holy presence, the ascent toward heaven, and an overseeing presence in the relief. Even though the mountain plays a passive role, it complements the piety, cleanliness, and holiness of the events transpiring through a linear simplicity that respects the spiritual sanctity of the baptism. Even the postures of the men imbue the scene with clarity; St John the Baptist gently bows forward in dedication and devotion to God and his followers, his left-hand gestures upward, and all look downward in piety (Stokstad & Cothren, 548). Ghiberti's *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, on the other hand, is consumed by an emotional strife between the love of father and son and their mutual love of God. The ripples that define the rocky structure of the mountain lend a stormy air to the relief that suggests Abraham's unwillingness to dwell on his duty. The holiness of the event is emphasized by the contrast between two primary scenes. On the left, two men face each other intently – their legs are slightly bent and crossed, and the crossed arms of the man in the forefront indicates that they are in casual conversation. The cordon between the two unaware men tending to the horse and the sacrificial altar on the right is done quite expertly. The dark bronze of the mountain is very significant to the sculpture, flowing down in a dark torrent that emphasizes the fast pace of the events transpiring. A lizard on the rocks near Isaac's thrown-off clothing symbolizes the speed

and magic of God in a scene marked by such alacrity and emotion. The horned sheep on the top slope symbolizes sacrifice itself. Just as the figures are engaged, the artist Ghiberti engages the viewer by giving a sense of the exact turning point between the life or death of Isaac (Stokstad & Cothren, 610).

Both Ghiberti and Pisano abdicate petty human interaction in order to show the triumph of God's will over the desires of earthly beings. However, the artists do this differently. Ghiberti emphasizes devotion to God and its benefits in a much more dramatic and individualist way – the most sacrosanct bond between father and son is broken violently, as Abraham firmly grasps the neck of Isaac and engages him in an abrupt confrontation that is indicated by the explosive motion of the cloth behind his arm. The angel's intrusion on the scene is also quite sudden, and complements the act with the miracle of divine intervention. Although the father and son are a long distance away on the other side of the mountain as indicated by Ghiberti's advanced sculptural technique using depth and shadows, Isaac has complete faith that God is doing the right thing. Isaac has his hands bound and his clothes cast off before him, yet he retains a measure of dignity and fearlessness – his physique exhibits a Classical strength and nobility that highlights the value of this sacrifice as he gazes not at Abraham but in the direction of the sky (Stokstad & Cothren, 610). All things considered, Ghiberti's portrayal of the binding and sacrifice of Isaac conveys valor and dignity not only through its artistic portrayal of the scene but through the idea that a young, relatively unknown artist can create something great under the competitive environment of the Renaissance. Both artists contribute a special quality to their work that makes Florence a better place and prompts the audience to contemplate the sense of

individualistic passion and purpose that was rescued from Classical civilization and brought forth through their work.