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Donatello's Bronze *David*

David is one of Donatello's best-known creations. Created for the Medici family around 1440, it became an iconic image of Renaissance Florence. It depicts David after his battle with Goliath. Vasari writes in *Lives of the Artists* that the statue was first placed in the courtyard of the Medici house, and was later moved to the courtyard of the Palazzo Vecchio. The statue reflects Florentines' perception of the city during the Renaissance. It is also considered to be a representation of homosexuality.

David is a life sized statue cast in bronze. As H.W. Janson writes in *The Sculpture of Donatello*, the bronze was cast in multiple pieces. It had many flaws and holes, but was repaired in such a way that the statue's beauty was not compromised. With this work, Donatello revived the practice of creating freestanding nude sculptures, which had not been done since classical antiquity. David is nude except for his decorated hat and greaves. He stands in contrapposto with his left foot resting on the head of Goliath. His left hand rests on his hip, while his right holds Goliath's sword. A wing of Goliath's helmet extends upward along David's inner right leg to his thigh. As opposed to the statues of David created by other artists such as Michelangelo, Andrea del Verocchio, and the later Bernini as well as Donatello's own earlier marble *David*, this statue does not depict David as particularly muscular or masculine. Instead, this *David*

has a smaller, adolescent body with little muscle. His face is soft, he has long, curled hair, and the curves of his body are somewhat emphasized, giving the piece a feeling of androgyny. The statue has an overall air of sensuality that was uncommon at the time of its creation.

As Laurie Schneider writes in “Donatello’s Bronze David,” Florence was continuously under threat for the early fifteenth century. Leaders from other city-states would conquer the city-states around it and attempt to take Florence as well. One such ruler was Giangaleazzo Visconti of Milan, who conquered every other city-state. However, Florence was able to persevere and defend itself, avoiding being taken over before his death. The city’s survival of this and other such attacks resulted in its citizens having pride in its tenacity. This was likened to the perseverance of David. According to Steven Zucker and Beth Harris, the highly religious Florentines also considered the city-state’s victory against the Duke of Milan to be due to divine assistance, further paralleling David’s narrative. Therefore, the town adopted David as a symbol of itself. This symbolic interpretation was strengthened by Donatello’s *David*, which could easily be seen by many Florentines, and later was solidified by Michelangelo’s *David*. Donatello’s *David* is generally considered to be a political piece, though this is not always seen as its sole meaning.

The possible homoerotic intent of *David* is a subject of frequent debate among art historians. Many suggest that *David* represents homosexual desire and was intended to be homoerotic. Others argue that this is simply a misinterpretation of the

statue's androgyny. Those that believe the statue is intended to be homoerotic point out the femininity of the statue. This femininity was, according to Schneider, intended to represent David as homosexual. The wing of Goliath's helmet is another reason for this interpretation. The way it rises up David's leg towards his rear is considered to have homoerotic intent. Another strong piece of evidence is Donatello's own reputation of homosexuality, which Janson writes about. There are multiple accounts of Donatello's homosexuality, and he was said to appreciate youthful male beauty. This contributes strongly to the interpretation of *David* as a representation of homosexuality. Opponents of this view, such as Robert Williams in "'Virtus Perficitur': On The Meaning Of Donatello's Bronze *David*," argue that the androgynous beauty of the statue is in fact intended to represent divinity. The location of the wing was simply, according to John Pope-Hennessy, "a means of strengthening a vulnerable point in the structure of the statue." However, even with objections like these, most concede that the statue did have some homosexual meaning in addition to its political meaning.

Donatello's bronze *David* is a work of art with rich meaning. It represents Renaissance Florence's identity as a powerful and enduring city-state. The statue also represents homosexuality. Analysis of *David* should continue as views of homosexuality today evolve. The piece deserves its status as one of the most well-known sculptures of the Renaissance.

Citations

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