

The *Davids*

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Throughout history, artists have endeavored to recreate biblical stories into life-like figures. Donatello, Michelangelo and Bernini were three sculptors that were successful in this endeavor. In my paper, I will demonstrate the way in which they were affected by the societies in which they lived as well as the works of one another and how this was manifested in their portrayal of *David*.

The story of David and Goliath is found in 1 Samuel 17 in the Old Testament. David, a young boy shepherd is sent by his father to deliver food to the Israelite army which is in battle with the Philistines. David hears of the abuse by a giant, Goliath, promising that whoever wins a dual, their nation would become the other's servant. David presents himself to King Saul who is very doubting of David's capabilities. David explains to Saul that he has come in the name of the Lord and will overcome the giant who is fighting against the children of the Lord. Saul agrees to let him fight Goliath. Saul adorns David with heavy armor which David rebukes because he says he has not proved it yet. Now naked, David finds five smooth rocks which he places in a small shepherd's bag and having only a sling, runs to meet the giant. With the first blow Goliath falls to the ground, David takes the giant's sword (because he is without his own) and smites off his head which he presents to the people and to the King. No doubt this fearlessness toward danger and

the rejection of armor is a prime example of divine aid which would later become an inspiration for many artists (The Holy Bible: King James Version 405-408).

Donatello's *David* is the first life size, freestanding nude figure since antiquity. Although "naked" would be a term that is more appropriate implying that it is a figure that was once clothed but for some reason has been stripped of clothing (Janson 312). *David* was cast of bronze and commissioned by the Medici family. It was placed in the Palazzo courtyard where it was viewed by only a select few. Donatello very carefully chose to represent the boy in a young, pretty, almost girl-like stage, instead of the classical Greek's style who were so enthralled by swelling muscles. The fact that the figure is naked except for ornate military boots and a rather fancy modern hat, would suggest that it did not serve as a religious piece, as many sculptures were of that time, but rather as an extraordinary garden art piece.

Donatello's *David* is a prime example of early renaissance sculpture. *David* stands contrapposto, with attention given to correct scale and realism. One extraordinary aspect of this sculpture is the psychological insight Donatello has portrayed in the face and stance of *David*. The face of *David* looks very elated and almost arrogant as if he is showing off this wonderful thing he has done. The contrapposto stance of *David*

gives a very pretty, showing-off look to *David*. No doubt he is responding to the cheers and praise of the Israelites who owe to him their freedom.

Donatello, by placing *David* in the position he has, has given a very balanced look to the sculpture. *David* was meant to be viewed at five-six feet above the ground and Donatello created him as such. As seen from the front the way it was meant to be seen, *David* looks right at the viewer. There is wonderful contrast produced as one hip creates a straight line vertically while the other hip is swayed out to the side. As viewed from the left side, the rock in his left hand lines up with his shoulder and his left foot; the elbow protrudes from the same plane. From the back, we see the hair falls squarely between his shoulder blades and the left upper arm parallels the position of the sword in his right hand. Clearly the wing from Goliath's helmet was created as an architectural support for a weak spot in the sculpture. From the right profile we see that the right forearm creates a diagonal with his left thigh and the right leg and sword appear parallel. *David* with his left foot on Goliath's neck and along with his right foot and sword, is standing on a laurel wreath—a symbol for victory (Pope-Hennessy 150).

Michelangelo believed that art should be a worship of God, and what better way to worship him than to recreate what he has

already made perfect—the human body (Janson 358).

Michelangelo's *David* was approximately 17 feet tall; it was made from 1501-04 of marble. *David* was originally designed to be placed on top of one of the buttresses of the Florentine Duomo. Michelangelo came to possess the large piece of marble for the statue after several failed attempts by other artists to carve a statue of David (Seymour 21-25). Michelangelo's *David* became one of the earliest statues of the High Renaissance.

The design of *David* is especially important because Michelangelo had just returned from time spent in Rome where he grew to love Hellenistic sculpture. He was very impressed by the emotional muscular scenes of the period. The super human power and beauty of the sculptures became part of Michelangelo's style. Although the Hellenistic style would have the emotion of the spirit being acted out through the body, *David* is clearly calm and meditative. *David* very clearly shows action-in-repose that is so characteristic of Michelangelo, as *David* stands very still and tense, awaiting the battle that is about to occur (Janson 359).

The early history of the large block of marble that *David* was freed from began during the life of Donatello. Donatello played a huge part in the making of large statues for the Prophet-program or Florentine Tribuna Prophets. The purpose for the statues to be placed on the buttresses of the Duomo was to

direct the eyes of the people away from the city-states and up to God. An underlying reason might have been the ongoing battle between Florence and Milan who began the same Prophet-program on their own Cathedral (Seymour 27).

The block of marble had been taken from a quarry in the mid 1400s specifically for a statue of the Prophet David. Many artists mistakenly began the statue but realized that they just couldn't do it. The early work of the "Giant" came to a halt with Donatello's death in 1466; the interest in the Prophet-program seemed to diminish as well. Michelangelo's attempt to carve the great "Giant" was the fourth. Luckily, this attempt was successful. Michelangelo was not just finishing the work of a few relatively unknown sculptors, but was finishing Donatello's vision of the marble as well. "The young Michelangelo was given the challenge of completing what Donatello had imagined but had been unable to see finished" (Seymour 45). The 26-year-old Michelangelo had become identified as the equal of Donatello but knew that he had to surpass him (Seymour 46). And he did.

Although Michelangelo had surpassed Donatello's vision of the marble *David*, he had not yet met his match. The leader of Baroque sculpture was Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini. He too looked toward the Hellenistic period for inspiration, but he saw another side of the Hellenistic sculpture. Michelangelo took

from it the massive Herculean figures with little motion and a more pensive action; Bernini found inspiration in movement of figures—motion and emotion (Janson 410).

The increased psychological depth in the mind of the biblical character David is accurately portrayed in the body and face of the marble sculpture and draws the viewer into every aspect of it. Bernini carefully sculpted the marble in a spiraling motion that deeply intrudes into the viewers space (Stokstad 759). The boundary between the figure and the viewer has been eradicated (Wittkower 5). From any side of *David*, the viewer consumes every aspect of the sculpture and the care and skill at which it was carved. "Although the movement in depth and the rich spatial qualities of the David naturally lead to a number of subordinate views, only from the correct standpoint is the movement entirely homogeneous and the great sweep fully effective" (Wittkower 5).

What makes *David* baroque is the *implied* presence of Goliath. Bernini sculpted *David* as if he were one half of a pair. One would think that there should be a statue of Goliath situated in the path of *David*. *David* sees the enemy; right where he is looking and aiming is right where Goliath is so there is no need for a second sculpture—the viewer knows exactly where he is. Bernini has sculpted *David* so well that "if we stand directly in front of this formidable fighter, our first

impulse is to get out of the line of fire." (Janson 410) Just by looking at the sculpture you can feel the tightness of the sling, the tension in his muscles, the ache of his lips from biting them so hard—you can see the action taking place as if he were made of flesh and bone.

These three *Davids* were all sculpted from the same story, yet they were created very differently. There are many factors that could attribute to this. One is that fact that the three artists created these sculptures during different periods of time. Donatello created his bronze *David* during the Early Renaissance when art was becoming more realistic. Michelangelo sculpted *David* in the shadows of Donatello during the High-Renaissance and the aggrandizement of the papacy. His *David* was very grand, standing as a witness of the power of God to the people during the reformation. Bernini created his *David* during the Baroque period during the counter-reformation, when art became more of a light and inspiration to the people rather than to scare them into submission and obedience.

At the same time, each piece of art was commissioned for a different purpose. Donatello's *David* was commissioned by the Medici family as an art piece for a garden—something to be admired, contemplated and discussed (Pope-Hennessy 147); Michelangelo's was to be symbol of faith high above the ground—although it was so beautiful they decided to display it

at ground-level (Janson 359). Bernini's *David* was commissioned by Pope Paul V for his nephew and left to Bernini the decision as to how it would be portrayed (Stokstad 759). The body sizes and types were fashioned according to the artists vision.

Another major difference in the sculptures is the point in the story at which the artists decided to portray *David*.

Donatello's *David* is portrayed at the point right after David has slain Goliath and smote his head off. David is very impressed with himself at this point and is portrayed somewhat arrogant. Michelangelo chose to portray *David* at the point right after he has taken the armor off before he slays Goliath. In this sculpture, *David* is very pensive and anxious which is so wonderfully displayed in his facial expression. Bernini, most courageously portrayed his *David* within the action of slinging the rock. He accurately captured the difficulty of the action and the energy *David* used to complete this victory.

All three statues were sculpted with masterful skill. Each artist was able to create out of material their own essence of the story of *David*. Within the style of the artist are the evidences of the time period in which they lived and the influences by which they created their masterpieces.

Works Cited

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