

David by donatello and michelangelo essay sample

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When thinking about a triumph over an unimaginable feat, the story of David and Goliath comes to mind. During the Italian Renaissance, Florence was under constant change and turmoil however David remained a consistent symbol of endless possibilities for the people. “ For the Florentines, David represented the essence of civic virtue-courage, fortitude, and faith” (Murray, 39). Various artists have revealed their own depictions of the young shepherd boy but two stand out among the masses. Donatello and Michelangelo both created masterpieces on the biblical subject although the approaches of each artist were completely diverse and caused unique reactions.

In 1404, the very powerful Medici family commissioned Donatello to create a bronze statue of David to celebrate the triumph of Florence over the larger, more powerful neighbor Milan. Made to symbolize civic pride and celebration of peace, David is represented as “ a calm boy yet triumphant and touched with glory” (Murray 40). The bronze sculpture was the first life sized nude since the Classical period; the first complete visual affirmation of the power and dignity of the human being (Hartt 116). Donatello looked back to the ancient past and did not imitate any works, but instead grew from the knowledge and creativity that had already been discovered. He generated an incomparable style that is seen in the smooth, undefined contours of the body that are very different to the established muscles of Roman sculpture. It is this style that has raised questions about the demeanor of David as he seems to have a “ curious sexual aspect” (Greenhalgh 167). There are female attributes to the sculpture, found in the curvilinear pose, the slight bulge of breasts, and the thighs even seem to be too broad to fit the male

profile (Greenhalgh 167). Another interpretation of the nakedness and undeveloped male body could be that Donatello is simply accentuating David's youth and innocence (Greenhalgh 177).

Ironically, it would be the fall of the Medici that stimulated the creation of Michelangelo's marble David. At the beginning of the 16th century, Operai dell' Opera del Duomo gave Michelangelo a large block of marble that had been discarded from a previous attempt. He was to create a sculpture of David that delineated the triumph of the Republic of Florence against the Medici Rule. Giorgio Vasari described that, " just as David had protected his people and governed them justly, so whoever ruled Florence should vigorously defend the city and govern it with justice" (qtd. in Turner). Sculpted out of a scrap piece of marble, Michelangelo depicted David before the battle with his head held high. He is shown composed, yet his every muscle is tensed and ready to face the warrior that awaits him (Nardini 68). The classical influence is very apparent in the contrapposto pose, and the clear muscle definition that seems to be inspired from Hellenistic style. David was originally supposed to be seen from below and was 17 feet high for dramatic impact. However the final resting place for the masterpiece was in a public square outside of the Palazzo della Signoria, where the statue is just above pavement level which resulted in some distortion that is very evident in the oversized head and hands (Hughes 71).

There are a lot of facts that are shared by the two sculptures. They both were created and displayed in Florence within 75 years of each other. The Davids represented victory to the Florentines and are resting in classical

contrapposto poses which was very common for the Renaissance Period. The two artists found inspiration in Classical Art and expanded their ideas onto it to develop their own styles. Each David was sculpted in the naturalistic image that their creator envisioned. They also share the commonality of association with the Medici family, a very powerful group of people that loved the arts and was said to have commissioned Donatello for the David sculpture. Later on they became too powerful and the republic forced them out of control, resulting in the creation of another David as a celebration of their triumph. The earlier David stood in the courtyard of the Palazzo della Signoria, which also happened to be the very place that Michelangelo's piece was displayed upon completion.

Despite the fact that the David's share time periods, political meanings, and origins, the two sculptures look completely different and evoke very different emotions. Perhaps the most significant difference is found in the choices made by the artists to place their sculpture before or after the battle against Goliath. Donatello's David is portrayed following the victory against the feared adversary. He is full of glory and stands on the head Goliath with his oversized sword clutched in his small hands. Michelangelo takes a different perspective and depicts David in the moment before battle with nothing but his sling in hand. This creates more of a feeling of anticipation and strength of courage. The determination in Michelangelo's sculpture's face is very apparent where Donatello creates a face that is calm and victorious. Michelangelo shows a more complex anatomy carved out of the marble, and glorified the human body.

He also used the medieval concept of the open and vulnerable side contrasted with the closed, defended side, with the eyes alert and awaiting an attack (Murray 42). Donatello used the bronze in a sensual way, luring in the viewer to stare and perhaps touch. It has soft flowing forms that are part of the reason that has lead people to believe that the sculptor was hinting at a certain seductiveness within David (Bennett & Wilkins 219). The common trait of the nude form is also handled very differently. Donatello seems to accentuate the nakedness by adding elaborate boots and a floppy hat. Michelangelo's David is completely nude and the only hint as to who he is comes from the sling found in his raised hand.

Through examining the similarities and differences of the David sculptures, it reveals more about them individually. There is no doubt that Michelangelo was aware of Donatello's sculpture but there is little influence seen in later David however the progression of theology and art is evident in their variations. There is no comparison able to be made that proves that one statue is more successful than the other due to the undeniable differences found in each. They both contain characteristics that show triumph and courage in their own ways and Michelangelo and Donatello both have such unique styles that are characterized as Renaissance Art. It can only be noted that each artist created a masterpiece that represented the heart Florence during the Italian Renaissance.

Works Cited

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