

# Nicola pisano and the pisa pulpit essay

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In the Thirteenth Century, Italy was beginning to flourish with art preceding the Renaissance. Gothic styled cathedrals dominated the Italian City-states, and more and more artists were being commissioned to fill the cathedrals with their works.

One of the most influential sculptors of this time was Nicola Pisano and his most famous work; the Pulpit of the Pisa Baptistery. It was Nicola Pisanos innovative style that began a unique style that was to become well known throughout the rest of Italy durring the Renaissance. Born around 1220 A. D. in Apulia, Italy; Nicola Pisano was most likely trained in the work shops of the Holy Roman Emperor Fredrick II. (Kleiner 538) It was Fredricks love of Classical Roman sculpture that influenced Nicolas style and technique. Later Nicola settled in Pisa and began his work on the Pulpit for the Pisa Baptistery in 1255.

He incorporated his knowledge of the Classical Roman style of sculpture with the Gothic style of the current times. It was this innovative combination the fostered what some say is the precedent for modern sculpture. The pulpit in the Baptistery in Pisa is a hexagonal casket that rests on seven columns; one central column with six surrounding. Three of the outlying columns rest on the backs of sculpted lions with animals between their paws. The central column rests on a pedestal surrounded by various animals and humans. Five of the columns are made of dark green granite while the other two are formed from a red breccia marble. Every column is attached between rounded trilobate arches with inlays of black marble. Each spandrel is decorated with prophets and evangelists in relief with ornate cornices below.

Above each column, dividing the arches are sculptures of St. John the Baptist, St. Michael, Hercules, and the Virtues.

The hexagonal shape of the pulpit was an innovation in Tuscany and was based on a broad range of sources as its design reflects a long series of formal experiments. (Grove) There are five panels on the faces of the pulpit sculpted in deep relief from white marble depicting the life of Christ, each separated by a small set of triple columns of red marble. The red marble also frames the top of each face and creates the railing around the pulpit. It also flows to the front corner to fashion the reading desk which lays angled on the wings of a large eagle with an animal clutched in its claws. The five faces of the pulpit divide the life of Christ into five scenes; the Nativity, the Annunciation, the Annunciation to the Shepherds are put together in the first relief, the Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation, the Crucifixion and the Last Judgment. The opening two panels are mainly inspired by late Roman sculpture, defined by the nobility of the faces, the dignified gestures, the classical draperies, and the densely packed figures; all strikingly similar to the Roman sarcophagi. (Kleiner 538) The first relief, again representing the Nativity, the Annunciation and the Annunciation to the Shepherds, is depicted on multiple planes, with all three scenes juxtaposed in a single composition which is also apparent in the sarcophagi.

On the left stands the winged figure of the Angel Gabriel with his right arm stretched towards the Virgin. The Virgin occupies, like the Angel, almost the whole height of the panel. This scene is overlapped by the representation of the Nativity, the main scene in the panel. On the left below the Angel sits

Joseph appearing to be indifferent to the scene which takes place in the foreground, where two women bathe the Infant in a basin. Above this, occupying almost the whole remaining panel, reclines the Virgin. Her head is turned away from the Child who lies sleeping in a cradle above her. Behind the cradle stand an ox and a donkey.

The rest of the panel is filled by the Annunciation to the Shepherds. (Crichton 43) In contrast with the first relief, the Adoration of the Magi, is arranged directly in a unified composition. The main figure, the Virgin, sits on the right holding the Infant with both hands. Immediately behind her appears Joseph, who again seems to be uninterested in the scene. The Infant leans forward and takes the casket offered by the king who kneels before him.

The second king, holding his gift in his right hand, also kneels behind the first. The third king stands and occupies the background between the two kneeling figures. The kings are all wearing heavy robes, and all wear crowns. The horses appear on the left of the panel. To the right of the Virgin, in the background stands an angel. (Crichton 53) Both compositions are sculpted with varied surface treatments (rough, striated, granulated, and polished), emphasizing depth and projection, which is another imitation of Classical design. However the low ratio of head to body represents a more Romanesque style rather than Classical, also apparent in the elements of portraiture and signs of ageing.

(Grove) In the third relief, the Presentation, the characters are ordered more realistically and decrease proportionally in size towards the back of the scene. They are arranged in sections related to the shapes of the buildings in

the background, giving an effect of stability and order. In the left foreground stands Joseph carrying two doves on right hand. Then come the two main figures, on the left the Virgin, robed with a veil over her head and, facing her, Simeon with the Child in his arms. The right foreground is completed by a Priest and the prophetess Anna.

(Crichton 58) Her veiled head is thrown back with an exalted expression on her face. The fourth panel shows The Crucifixion. The figure of Christ on the cross occupies the whole height of the relief which contains twenty-three other figures. An angel appears over each arm of the Cross. The figure of Christ is well proportioned and there is no trace of the torture which is characteristic of the later Gothic sculpture. (Crichton 61) The head is slightly bent to the right, the eyes are closed, the face has an expression of suffering and repose. The body is naked apart from the loin-cloth.

The legs are crossed and the feet penetrated by one nail. On the right of Christ stands St John, with hands pressed against his breast and an expression of grief. In the foreground two women support the Virgin, who has fallen over in a fainting attitude.

It is also evident that the two thieves do not appear in this panel. The fifth and final panel depicts the Last Judgment. Christ is enthroned at the top, just off center, to the right. He is surrounded by the symbols of the evangelists. This panel has sustained extensive damage over time and is missing a large portion of the heads and limbs of the surrounding characters. On the right of Christ are the Apostles, below them is the Virgin, and on the left is St John. In

the lower part of the panel, in the foreground, at Christ's left, the damned are represented in violent conflict with demons.

Both of these panels have a balanced and graduated composition, with all the elements converging on the central figure of Christ. (Grove) The Classical style of all five of the panels, clearly resembling Roman sculptures such as the sarcophagi and the Arch of Constantine, being blended with the medieval style of structure are what produce such a profound impact on the following Italian sculptors. Nicola Pisanos Pulpit in the Pisa Baptistery is truly and example of how his style influenced what was to become the great sculptures of the Italian Renaissance.