

Judith and holofernes by donatello essay



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One of the greatest Italian Renaissance artists is Donato di Niccolo di Betto Bardi, who we simply know as Donatello. He was born in Florence around 1386. He was the son of a Florentine wood carver, Niccolo di Betto di Bardi.

How he began his career as a sculptor is undetermined although it is known that Donatello was educated in the residence of the Martelli Family and got his first artistic training at a goldsmith's workshop and from one of the sculptors working at the cathedral of Florence in 1400 (Web Art). Between 1404-1407 he also worked at the studio of Lorenzo Ghiberti. And he studied and excavated with Filippo Brunelleschi in Rome which made the known as treasure seekers (Wikipedia/Donatello). Donatello's journey with Brunelleschi throughout Rome was conclusive for the development of the Italian art in the 5th Century.

It is when Brunelleschi took his measurements of the dome of the Pantheon and other roman architectures and Donatello's work was valued as supreme expressions the era and influenced the painters of that time. A marble statue of David was Donatello's first famous work, it showed artistic style of Ghiberti. The Gothic style was graceful and had soft curved lines influenced by the northern European art. Later on his life Donatello had developed his own style which is know as schiacciato which means " flattened out" (Web Art). This technique was achieved by carving throughout instead of modeling his shapes.

It was said to be like painting using a chisel. The carvings made were very shallow and created a dramatic effect of atmospheric space. Schiacciato panels depended on visual rather than tactile perception. Between 1420 until

early 1530s Donatello continued to explore different techniques and possibilities on marble reliefs, his most developed work during this time was the Ascension with Christ Giving the Keys to Saint Peter.

It was an exquisitely carved piece and its full elegant beauty can only be seen in a strong raking light (Web Art). At around the same time Donatello also became famous on sculpting bronze. One of his first bronze sculptures was Saint Louis of Toulouse where he successfully conveyed the harmonious and organic structure of the body even if it was covered with garment. He partnered with a sculptor and architect named Michelozzo, on this commission and created the niche and the framework, at this point they have left the Gothic forms and exhibited Brunelleschi's new Renaissance architectural style.

His partnership with Michelozzo lasted for two years but he also accepted independent commissions such as the Annunciation tabernacle in Santa Croce and the Cantoria. These sculptures show increased sequence of forms influenced by ancient art and the styles of Rome. His withdrawal of the Brunelleschi style resulted to damage of the two artist's friendship that was never repaired. Donatello also worked for the Medicis during 1433 to 1443 where he produced several decorations for the Medici church in San Lorenzo.

In 1443 he was about to start a pair of bronze doors for the cathedral but he enticed to Padua by a commission for a bronze statue which is the Gattamelata. Which is said to become the ancestor of all equestrian sculptures. In early 1450s Donatello was commissioned some work for the Paduan Church of San Antonio but was unpaid and the Gattamelata was not

placed until 1453. He was offered other commissions but nothing came to him at this point he was passing through a crisis.

He only produced two works between 1450-1455, which was the wooden statue of St. John, the Baptist and a figure of Mary Magdalene. Then he came back to Florence surprised by a new generation of sculptors with great skills on treating the marble surface. The taste of the Florentines had changed and all of Donatello's important commission came outside of Florence.

In 1460 Cosimo de Medici commissioned Donatello the bronze statue of Judith and Holofernes to serve as a decoration for the fountain in the garden of the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi. Together with his David, it stood at the courtyard depicting tyrant slayers. The story of Judith and Holofernes is a story on the Roman Catholic bible but not in the Hebrew or Protestant bible. There has been a controversy if it is a historical event or a fictional story due to the inaccurate geographical and chronological descriptions.

The story starts when Holofernes, an Assyrian general was appointed to besiege Bethulia, a city on the southern verge of the Plain of Esdrelon (New Advent). Famine made the city weak and they consider surrendering but Judith, a widow gave them courage and promised that she will deliver the city. She went to the camp of the Assyrians and enchanted Holofernes with her beauty, in exchange of pleasure she asked for access to his tent. One night when Holofernes was vastly intoxicated Judith went to his tent and beheaded him.

She returned to Bethulia with Holofernes' head as a trophy. They marched towards the Assyrians with Holofernes' head on her hand and drove the

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invaders away. The book closes with a hymn dedicated to God and to celebrate her victory. In Donatello's sculpture Judith and Holofernes, Judith is portrayed as a symbol of victory, liberty and virtue. She stands beside Holofernes with raised sword and holding the head of unconscious-looking Holofernes by his hair. It is believed that the granite pedestal had an inscription that says, " Kingdom fall through luxury, cities rise through virtues.

Behold the neck of pride severed by the hand of humility" (Wikipedia/Judith). It is said that the sculpture represents the metaphor of the Medici's role as protector of the liberty of Florence. A second quote " The salvation of the state. Piero de' Medici son of Cosimo dedicated this statue of a woman both to liberty and to fortitude, whereby the citizen with unvanquished and constant heart might return to the republic" (Wikipedia/Judith).

In Donatello's Judith and Holofernes possess the characteristics of Istorica. It definitely convey emotion from Judith's pose as she stands beside Holofernes with a raised sword, it shows her valiance to save her people against the Assyrians. Her body shows harmony even if it is covered with her clothing, the flow of the cloth shows detail and form. We can also call this sculpture an Exemplary Art. According to Aristotle, the best way for a human to achieve happiness is by attaining virtues.

A virtue is a kind of excellence (Module 10). Here Judith expressed her courageousness by using and giving what she has to save her city. When she found out that her people was about to give up she took the risk and used her beauty as a bait to lure Holofernes. Unlike warriors wearing armors or

women with an elegant dress her clothing is very simple which does not overpower the drama of her action and also symbolizes her virtue. It says that underneath that simple clothing she hides her courage and inner strength.

The notion of psychomachia is also present on Donatello's Judith and Holofernes. Here we can see good vs. evil, Judith as the good hero and Holofernes and King Nebuchadnezzar as the evil protagonists. The story also implies Judith's love for her city and the war that the king has started just because the people from Bethulia do not want to be under his leadership. Showing Holofernes under the influence of wine as his vice also show the opposition between him and Judith who has great courage to slay him. The sculpture was executed so well that it exceeded Donatello's expectations and this is the first time he signed his artwork with his name, the inscription reads OPVS.

DONATELLI FLOR, which means the work of the Florentine Donatello.

Donatello has spent his last years in Florence doing some commission work for the bronze pulpit of the church of San Lorenzo with the help of his students Bartolomeo Bellano and Bertoldo di Giovanni (Wikipedia/Donatello). The work produced is characterized by a rough, sketchy and somewhat unfinished feel to it—non-finito in Italian. The technique gave a dramatic effect of the scenes and accentuated the spiritual intensity of the piece.

In 1466 Donatello died in Florence and was buried in the Basilica of San Lorenzo next to Cosimo de Medici the Elder (Wikipedia/Donatello). WORKS CITED: Web Art Gallery Donatello-Biography <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>

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