

The Subject of David from Donatello to Bernini

Revised Paper

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The subject of David was a constant source of inspiration throughout the renaissance. David seemed to embody the values of Humanism in a way that few other characters could. By slaying the giant Goliath, he showed that people can control their own destiny and are not under the control of seemingly more powerful forces. This expression of free will gave David a sense of inner strength or braggadocio, that led some to describe him as a soldier armed only with the word of god (Art in the Western World, video).

In this paper, the subject of David will be discussed in three different sculptures. David has often been used as a civic symbol, and this paper will show how people idolized David and what he represented. The style in which David is represented changes significantly from work to work. However, many of the same emotions and underlying meanings remain constant throughout the statues. Regardless of the differences or similarities, every work done of David carries with it an emotional impact that lingers with anyone who has come into contact with the work.

Donatello's statue of David is one of the most provoking works done with David as a subject. Commissioned by the Medici family, this bronze statue became an important work for the city of Florence (Laurie Schneider Adams, *A History of Western Art*, Brown and Benchmark 1997, 257). At first glance, the viewer is almost shocked at the feminine nature of the work. David does not appear to be anything like a heroic warrior. David has a slim, almost adolescent look, rather than appearing to be a man with great strength. He stands in the nude over the severed head of Goliath, and David's arm is slung back with his hips and torso twisted in a contraposto form. In one hand, David holds the rock from his slingshot, and his other arm seems to lightly hold a sword at his side. With his long hair flowing over his shoulders, it is obvious that David is not supposed to represent a physically intimidating warrior (Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 257). This reinforces

the biblical description of David, while reminding the spectator that it was David's inner strength that defeated Goliath, not his physical strength.

In Donatello's statue, David appears to be weak on the outside, yet a certain self confidence or inner strength quickly becomes apparent. The statue carries with it the spirit of an underdog who has conquered a more powerful oppressor. This was similar to how the city of Florence saw itself as an underdog in constant struggles with the city of Milan (Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 257). Just as David was able to defeat Goliath, Florence was able to resist Milan, and thus David became an important symbol for the Florentine republic. Donatello's statue led the way for future works of David, which would also carry with them great meaning and emotions.

Another sculpture that became important for the city of Florence was Michelangelo's statue of David. Unlike Donatello's statue, which was placed in the Medici palace courtyard, Michelangelo's statue was placed in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, or the government seat of Florence (Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 288). This made the statue a much more public work, and thus it became much more meaningful to the city.

The unique style and meaning of Michelangelo's statue of David probably comes from the way in which Michelangelo approached his art. Michelangelo tried to represent the basic Christian tenets with beauty (The early sixteenth century, class handout). He saw his statues as figures residing in the marble, and he considered it the job of the artist to release that figure from its material prison (Terrel, lecture). When Michelangelo released David from a flawed block of marble over 14 feet tall, he brought out a nude statue which was unlike anything created since antiquity (Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 288).

Michelangelo's statue of David is depicted moments before his battle with Goliath. The tense moment can be sensed throughout the work. David's forehead is creased in concentration as he holds his slingshot over his shoulder. His muscles and veins are

bulging through his skin, as David appears ready to attack his adversary (Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 288). This statue of David is far from the relaxed David that was seen in Donatello's statue, yet it conveys many of the same feelings.

While Michelangelo's style differs greatly from that of Donatello's, the same sense of confidence or braggadocio that is evident in Donatello's statue of David is also clearly seen in Michelangelo's statue. Michelangelo's sculpture of David is not relaxed after a victory, rather, it is tense in anticipation of battle. The statue's confidence is seen in the way that David stands strong without any apparent fear of the giant Goliath. This bold stance made David a major civic symbol for the city of Florence, and led to even more dramatic depictions of David (*Art in the Western World*, video).

Gian Lorenzo Bernini took the subject of David from the relaxed form of Donatello and the tense form of Michelangelo, to a rousing form in the throes of battle. While Donatello displayed David after the moment of victory, and Michelangelo showed David moments before battle, Bernini depicted David right in the middle of an intense attack (Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 343). This vibrant moment puts the spectator right in the middle of the scene making it an experience unlike that of any previous work.

In Bernini's statue, David leans back with his weight shifted to one side as he stretches his slingshot back to fire. David stares out intensely at Goliath, making the viewer feel as if Goliath is actually there even though the giant can not be seen (Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 344). This involves the spectator, making them feel like they are experiencing the action first hand. This exciting work represents a significant change from the styles of the Renaissance.

Instead of sticking to the traditional vertical plane used by Donatello and Michelangelo, Bernini represented David in a diagonal plane that stretched from David's head to his left foot. This diagonal plane is then disrupted by David's twisted head and his

right leg (Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 257). Breaking from the conventional styles, used in earlier statues of David, allowed Bernini to express many of the same emotions of the earlier statues on a much deeper level.

David's sense of braggadocio, which had become almost common, jumped to a new level in Bernini's statue. It is one thing to appear self confident after a victory or right before the moment of actual battle, but in Bernini's statue David appears fearless at his most vulnerable moment. Nothing could convey true inner strength more effectively than the focused look in David's eyes as he stares at Goliath and fires his slingshot.

Throughout the Renaissance and Baroque era, David was depicted in varying styles (Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 257). From a feminine looking adolescent, to a strong standing conqueror, and finally to a warrior in the heat of battle, statues of David always provoke strong emotion. As different as the sculptures may look, the meanings behind them are unmistakable. David is practically the definition of Braggadocio. In every work, David appears to have the supreme confidence of an underdog who know that his purity will lead him to victory over an evil and stronger enemy. This sprit is what allowed David to be one of the most significant civic symbols of the Renaissance and Baroque era.