

The Magic of Donatello

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Sculpture in the Age of Donatello: Renaissance Masterpieces from Florence Cathedral

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The Museum of Biblical Art, lodged in a relatively small space on Broadway near Lincoln Center, is now showing nine sculptures by Donatello, one of the greatest of all Renaissance artists. Never before have so many of his best works been shown together in the United States.

Among the works on view is Donatello's large sculpture of the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. "Speak, damn you, speak!" Donatello, we are told, repeatedly shouted at the statue while carving it. The dream of a statue that can speak or breathe or move is a fantasy shared by many cultures throughout time, and the story may be apocryphal. Still, it points to the fundamental appeal of Donatello's sculptures: by some strange magic they seem to capture the phantom of life. Nowhere is this more evident than in the *Habakkuk*, which Vasari praised as "finer than anything else he ever made." Even today it is often said to be the most important marble statue of the fifteenth century.

This sublimely harrowing work is at the heart of the exhibition "Sculpture in the Age of Donatello." All twenty-three items in it were made for the cathedral of Florence in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and are on loan from its museum, the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, which is currently closed for renovation. None of the sculptures has been shown in the US before. Along with works by Donatello, the exhibition features sculptures by his contemporaries Nanni di Banco, Luca della Robbia, Giovanni d'Ambrogio, and others, as well as architectural models by Filippo Brunelleschi.

The show reminds us why Donatello is so often ranked among the greatest sculptors. Born in Florence around 1386, the son of a wool carder, he worked in his teens assisting Lorenzo Ghiberti on the bronze doors of the Baptistery, but very soon after emerged as one of the preeminent artists of the Renaissance. His most admired sculptures include the fiery *Saint George* carved for the church of Orsanmichele around 1416, the sleek bronze *David* made for the Medici, probably in the late 1430s, and the proud equestrian statue of the Venetian condottiere Erasmo da Narni, known as Gattamelata, erected in Padua between 1447 and 1453. Sources tell us little about Donatello's personality, although one writer describes him as being "rough and very straightforward." In his art, too, he favored forcefulness of expression and cared little for tradition and convention.

The objects in New York are displayed in just one medium-sized room. Since some of the sculptures are larger than life and most were intended for



'Prophet' (possibly Habakkuk), known as the 'Zuccone'; marble sculpture by Donatello, 1427–1436

placement on the exterior of the cathedral and its bell tower, this setting could have proved very unsympathetic. Fortunately, the works are beautifully lighted, and the bases are high enough to suggest their original exalted position yet low enough to allow the viewer to stand in close proximity to them. Moreover, several of the statues have recently been freed from decades of soot and grime by cleaning; for the first time in living memory they are close to their original color and luster. They are shown to better effect in New York than ever before.

A system of translucent white curtains divides the room into bays for the different sections of the show, allowing the visitor to concentrate on individual items, but also to take in the entire exhibition at a glance. The visual experience is compressed yet illuminating. Standing in one spot, simply by turning your head, you can see the evolution of art in Florence during the first decades of the Renaissance.

Continuing efforts to build and decorate the Florentine Duomo made it the most important site for the development of sculpture and architecture in

Europe in the early fifteenth century. This flourishing is all the more remarkable when we consider how sudden it was. In Florence both arts had lain dormant for much of the previous century; the few major projects there in building and sculpting had been commissioned mostly from foreign artists who came to the city specifically for the task, and often left even before the job was done. For instance, the new cathedral of Florence was begun in 1296 by Arnolfo di Cambio, a Siennese artist who had trained in Pisa, and the first bronze doors for the Baptistery, made around 1330, were designed by a sculptor from Pisa and cast by a founder from Venice. Effectively, there was no local tradition in making sculpture or architecture.

When work on the cathedral entered a new phase of high activity at the end of the fourteenth century, non-Florentines still were predominant in its creation—one leading sculptor for the Duomo was from Germany. The last instance of this tendency was the famous competition held in 1401 to make a new set of bronze doors for the Baptistery; most of the contestants were from Siena and other Tuscan towns. Yet this competition was won by the young Florentine gold-

smith Lorenzo Ghiberti, and another young Florentine goldsmith, Filippo Brunelleschi—the future architect—came in second. A new era in the history of art had begun.

Like all revolutions, the transformation of the arts in early-fifteenth-century Florence can never be fully explained; at best we can only identify some contributing causes. Stimulated in part by the city's soaring prosperity and growing hegemony, around 1400 the wealthy merchants who ran Florence began to pour unprecedented amounts of cash into new buildings, paintings, and sculptures. They were proud of the architectural splendor of Florence and saw it as a sign of the city's manifest destiny. This attitude was given voice by Leonardo Bruni, who wrote around 1403–1404 in his *Panegyric to the City of Florence*:

As soon as [visitors] have seen... the grandeur of its buildings, its splendor and magnificence, the lofty towers, the marble churches, the domes of the basilicas... they are no longer amazed by the greatness and most important exploits accomplished by Florence. Rather, everyone immediately comes to believe that Florence is indeed worthy of attaining dominion and rule over the entire world.

As the Florentine merchant and philosopher Matteo Palmieri stated some years later, it was the duty of "great men" to spend "on things that are honorable and full of glory, not private, but public things, such as buildings and the decoration of churches."

No one ranked higher in Florentine society than the members of the international wool merchants' guild, the Arte della Lana, who patronized the Duomo. Starting in the 1390s, they sought to put up more statues, on a larger scale and more quickly, than ever before in Florentine history. The scope of effort was colossal. It occurred, however, at a moment when many cities, including Milan and Venice, were also erecting enormous cathedrals and palaces, and as a result experienced sculptors and masons were in demand all over Italy. The overseers of the Duomo had no choice but to rely more than before on a group of untested locals, many of whom had been initially trained as goldsmiths, not as stone carvers.

It is rarely remarked how very young these artists were. At the time of the competition for the Baptistery doors Ghiberti was only about twenty-one, and Brunelleschi twenty-four. Donatello was only about twenty when he began his earliest independent commission, a prophet for the cathedral, which is on view in the exhibition. Nanni di Banco, Donatello's main rival in these years in marble carving, was also in his early or mid-twenties when he made the pendant to this figure. Their youthful freedom from the weight of tradition helped these artists to reimagine the possibilities and techniques of sculpture, and the urgent demand for new work meant they were forced into continual collaboration and competition—a perfect setting for innovation. The sculpture workshop of

Antonio Quattrone/Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence

the cathedral became a laboratory of constant experimentation and advance.

The exhibition opens with an Annunciation group of the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, made at the end of the fourteenth century, and commonly attributed to the sculptor Giovanni d'Ambrogio. It exemplifies both the sophistication and the limitations of Italian sculpture of this time. The faces are exquisitely carved and the robes wrap around the figures with consummate grace, yet the bodies are nearly lost beneath the fabric and the limbs are pressed so close to the trunk of the statue that they look stunted and inert.

A basic problem for many sculptors before the fifteenth century was technical, as we can see in these statues. Uncertain of the physical capacities of stone, and unwilling to risk spoiling a costly block of marble through unnecessary experimentation, artists typically carved their statues as shallowly as possible, with minimal undercutting of the limbs and drapery. As a result, sculptures of this time often appear blocky and constrained.

We are in a very different world when we stand before the prophets attributed to Donatello and Nanni di Banco, carved about ten years later, for the Porta della Mandorla, a major entrance on the north side of the cathedral. Gone is the refinement and restraint of earlier works. Instead the emphasis is entirely on movement and emotion. Donatello's *Profetino* (small prophet) is so desperate to communicate that he lurches toward us, almost stepping off his base. He juts his neck forward and raises his head, seemingly yearning for the light above, yet his eyes are directed downward and his lips are parted. He is about to speak, and the hand raised to the heart suggests that his message will be moving and grave.

The new emphasis on motion and expression was accompanied by a change in technique. Ghiberti and Donatello were possibly the first artists since classical antiquity regularly to make large sculptures on the basis of three-dimensional preparatory models in wax or clay rather than drawings. It was likely Ghiberti who devised this innovation, based on his experience working with gold, for which model-making was common, although in much smaller dimensions.

This development had many advantages. Fundamentally, it allowed artists to experiment in the design of statuary with far greater liberty. Rather than conceiving sculptures in relation to the rectilinear planes of the quarried block, artists could now, from the start, imagine their statues as figures that stood and moved freely. This innovation was noted by Leon Battista Alberti in his *Treatise on Statuary*, perhaps written in the 1430s, where he says that models permit the sculptor to depict greater movement of the limbs and more complex surfaces.

We can see exactly what Alberti means when we look at the Abraham and Isaac made by Donatello and a young assistant, Nanni di Bartolo, in 1421 for a niche on the cathedral's bell tower, the Campanile. The first monumental multifigure sculpture of the Renaissance—it is over six feet tall—it depicts the moment when Abraham, hearing the angel of the Lord, relents in

his sacrifice of his son. With one hand Abraham still grasps Isaac's hair at the back of his head, but with the other he turns the blade away from Isaac's neck, and his grip on the knife has begun to relax. The sculpture's strong illusion of movement was aided by drilling clear through the block of marble at several points so that Abraham's massive arms can appear to swing free of his torso, and the right legs of Abraham and Isaac can be posed in front of their bodies. Since the end of classical antiquity nearly a thousand years before, no Italian sculptor had tried anything so bold in the carving of marble sculpture.



Donatello: Abraham and Isaac, 1421

One of Donatello's favorite subjects was the depiction of a holy person who had suffered an acutely painful religious experience and had thereby won divine wisdom beyond the limits of human understanding. Examples of this from his late works include his painted wood Mary Magdalene of about 1455 (also in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, but alas not in the show), in which she is represented as a toothless crone praying in the desert, or his *Resurrection* on the pulpit of San Lorenzo (1460–1466), where a haggard Christ in a filthy winding sheet looks like he still stinks from the grave. Donatello's portrayal of sacred subjects was completely at odds with the usual approach of the time: most artists depicted saints as beyond the reach of suffering, even when they were shown undergoing martyrdom.

Among Donatello's first attempts to represent a holy person in this way was the marble of *Habbakuk*, which he carved for the Campanile likely between 1427 and 1436. It represents the prophet whose short book in the Old Testament concerns the rise and advance of the Chaldeans against the Jews in the seventh century BC. The sculpture is commonly called *Lo Zuccone* ("the pumpkin") because of his large bald pate. Created three decades after the *Profetino*, it was the last marble statue Donatello ever made; thereafter he worked chiefly in bronze.

The first word of the book of Hab-

vine vision: "When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself." Donatello's statue embodies the sense of spiritual and physical terror in the biblical account.

There is a tendency in the study of Donatello to praise his classicism and naturalism, but looking at *Habbakuk* one must acknowledge how inadequate and misleading such terms are in any account of his art. The massive drapery of the figure, for example, is only loosely related to that of ancient sculpture, and the head with its mesmerizing eyes is far distant from the restraint of a Republican or Imperial bust. Even philosopher portraits from the so-called "age of anxiety" in the third and fourth centuries AD look placid and serene by comparison. Donatello, no doubt, studied ancient sculpture with passion, but he felt wholly unbound by its conventions; he was only interested in how it could help him achieve greater vitality and expressiveness.

According to a tradition repeated in Vasari, *Habbakuk*'s features were modeled on those of a Florentine citizen, and partly on this basis some art historians have credited the statue's power to its element of realism. But as with so many of Donatello's works, the credibility of this sculpture—its eerie vividness and palpable sense of presence—has as much to do with the distortion of actuality as with its imitation. As we can see in *Habbakuk*, Donatello was always significantly exaggerating the size of the most expressive features, especially the eyes, mouth, and hands. Another example of this in the show is in the *Saint John the Evangelist* made for the façade of the cathedral between 1408 and 1415; Donatello gave this statue massive hands and ferocious eyes as well. Furthermore, to overcome the lifelessness of marble or bronze, he made the outlines and surfaces of his sculptures undulate in irregular, uneven, and asymmetrical shapes so that the figure would look as if it were caught in a moment of change, like a living thing.

Historians like to celebrate Donatello for groundbreaking achievements such as making the first bronze nude statue since antiquity in his *David* for the Medici, or devising a way to apply the rules of single-point perspective to sculpture in his relief of Saint George and the Dragon. These were accomplishments of great significance for the development of art, but still they were secondary to his principal artistic ambition: to show the power and the drama of the human response to contact with the divine. Throughout his career, he depicted holy persons, rapt in religious ecstasy and transfixed by revelation, not only because his commissions required him to, but because experience of the sacred was what he yearned for personally. In art he was a naturalist but one whose idea of nature included the unseen and the unearthly as well as the visible and the mundane.

In the Bible Habbakuk warned against those who would seek to make idols, "Woe unto to him that saith to the wood, Awake; to the dumb stone, Arise." Yet this seems to be exactly the kind of command Donatello gave his *Habbakuk*. Like a Renaissance magus, he believed the world was full of spirits, and he wanted his sculptures to palpitate with life. □

Antonio Quattrone/Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence