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**Classicism and Humanist Ideology in
Donatello's *Gattamelata* and *David***

SHAYLA WHEAT

ART 3130-01: Early Italian Renaissance Art

Fall 2012

Dr. Caroline Hillard

Dr. Hillard notes that this work shows an impressive mastery and expression of difficult concepts, including humanism and the arts. The writing is engaging and well-organized, and Ms. Wheat's thesis is logically developed over the course of the work. The significance of each point that she makes is clearly summarized, and follow-up questions are asked to build on her findings.

Donatello was an artist renowned for his artistic innovations in the realm of sculpture; he ushered in an artistic style that relinquished the elegant, idealized Gothic style in favor of a more classicizing naturalistic aesthetic, which emphasized the humanity of his subjects. These new developments in fifteenth-century Early Renaissance art coincided with a revival of classical antiquity ushered in by a group of intellectuals known today as Renaissance humanists. Humanist thought and reform permeated nearly all cultural modes of the fifteenth century and is especially vital to the discussion of art of the time period. Therefore, when discussing a figure such as Donatello, one must consider the cultural climate that allowed for, or incubated, such advances as those he pioneered. The then unparalleled naturalism and complexity of Donatello's artistic technique, combined with the learned humanist influence of his peers and patrons, led to a new precedent in art. Works such as Donatello's bronze *David* and his *Gattamelata* echo this sentiment and showcase how humanist ideology and Donatello's mastery of sculpture culminated in the new classicizing aesthetic.

During the period of time that Donatello was active, sculptors and painters were relegated to the artisan class and occupied a decidedly lowly status in Quattrocento Renaissance society. Donatello, son of a wool carder, was of course no exception. While Donatello received formal artistic training, he lacked the erudite humanist background of contemporaries such as Alberti (Poeschke 375). It is consequently not apparent at first glance what connection there was between the humanist ideology of Renaissance intellectuals and the artistic output of fifteenth-century craftsmen, if any. While humanist scholars were primarily known for their study of Latin and Greek rhetoric, grammar, history, poetry, and philosophy, many humanists also shared an interest in the art and architecture of antiquity (McHam 9). Prominent humanist scholars and supporters such as Niccolò de' Niccoli and his friend and patron Cosimo de' Medici had collections of art that included classical works (Nauert 91). It is undeniable that the renewed interest in classicism championed by the Renaissance humanists also found its way into the art of the fifteenth century as well.

In a chapter from *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism* titled “Artists and Humanists,” Charles Hope and Elizabeth McGrath present three possible ways in which artists and humanists may have interacted. The first proposed scenario is that Renaissance artists, motivated by the ideals of the humanists, felt compelled to look to their predecessors from antiquity for inspiration. Hope and McGrath also consider the possibility that, in a similar vein, artists may have caused humanists to value not only texts from antiquity, but classical art and architecture as well. In conjunction with these theories, Hope and McGrath hypothesize the ways in which humanist ideology influenced attitudes and discourse regarding the arts as well as any direct involvement humanists might have had concerning the manufacturing of works of art through practice or patronship (Hope, McGrath 161).

Each of the three theories proposed by Hope and McGrath has merit and relevance in considering how the highly influential Renaissance humanist movement may have influenced the visual arts. With regards to Donatello in particular, accounts of his own life and work seem to give credence to some if not all of these theories. Donatello was known to “move in humanist circles” (Janson xv) and “had been involved with humanists in their study of ancient art from the beginning of the fifteenth century” (Bergstein 844). Therefore, it would not be unfair to suggest that the artist would have certainly come into contact and interacted with Renaissance humanists with some regularity (Janson xv).

One such humanist that Donatello was well acquainted with was the Renaissance polymath Leon Battista Alberti, a fellow artist among other things. Unlike Donatello, however, Alberti came from a privileged background and was well versed in the humanities. Despite this noticeable difference in class, it becomes obvious in writings by Alberti that he had an immense respect and admiration for the artistic style and technique of artists such as Donatello. Alberti refers to Donatello by name in his famous treatise on painting *De pictura*, stating, “...and in our close friend Donato the sculptor ...there is a genius for [accomplishing] every praiseworthy thing” (Alberti 17). Alberti and his works are significant on many levels, but perhaps one

of his most important roles was serving “as a personal and literary bridge between the dominant world of wealthy aristocrats and humanists, on the one hand, and the artisanal world of artists, on the other hand” (Nauert 90). Alberti not only bridged the gap between artists and humanists, but his artistic pursuits combined with his academic background and his advocating in favor of higher status for the arts marks a change in the way people viewed and thought about art in the Quattrocento.

Alberti was only one of many humanists who Donatello came into contact with, as there are accounts of humanist scholars visiting Donatello’s workshops in both Florence and Padua to observe and marvel at his works (Nauert 91). Not only did the humanists of the Quattrocento admire Donatello’s works of art, but it would also seem they revered his opinion on their own collections of art as well. According to Nauert, “There were several cases where humanists sought the opinion of Donatello on the artistic quality of ancient works” (91). A letter written in 1430 by the humanist Poggio Bracciolini verifies this assertion; in the letter, Bracciolini boasts of an encounter with Donatello in which the artist praises his classical statuary: “Donatellus vidit, et surme laudavit.’ (Donatello saw it and praised it most highly.)” (Bergstein 844).

It is irrefutable that Donatello was familiar with followers of humanism and their espousal of classicism, but there is still the question of how his indirect relationship to humanist and classical ideology would have shaped the artist’s work, if at all. To answer this question one must begin by examining the influencing forces, subject matter, and context of Donatello’s work. Donatello worked as a sculptor and is known for his innovative use of his materials, but it can be argued that it was a renewed interest in classicism that set the stage for such advances. Nearly all of the surviving works from antiquity were in the realm of sculpture or architecture, thus it is no coincidence that, as Janson asserts, “the first examples of what we term Renaissance art emerged in those media” (Janson 9). Even the renewed interest in and demand for works cast in bronze owe a debt to this growing taste for classical artistic conventions. Not only had the literature and ideology of classical antiquity been revived, but the

aesthetic had been as well (McHam 9). Donatello was one of the foremost artists involved in the revival of classicism, and his work was groundbreaking in its resurrection of ancient Greco-Roman artistic techniques and conventions.

One of Donatello's most famous works, his bronze *David*, shows evidence of classicized elements. There are no records relating to the original location and commission of the sculpture, which makes attributing an exact date to the work difficult. Many scholars believe the work to have been commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici, but this also is not completely certain (Janson 77-81). The figure depicted is the biblical hero David, having slain the giant Goliath. While the subject matter of the piece is decidedly biblical, it appears to draw inspiration from antiquity. David's physical appearance resembles Greco-Roman or even Etruscan sculptures of youths, such as the Roman *Idolino di Pesaro*. The *Idolino di Pesaro* is a Roman copy of an earlier Greek work and shares many of the same qualities as Donatello's *David*. The most obvious of these similarities are the choice of bronze as a medium, the freestanding nature of both statues, the figure's *contrapposto* stance, in addition to the nudity and youthfulness of both subjects. The similarity of Donatello's work to ancient works such as the *Idolino* makes for compelling evidence regarding the classical origins of the artist's aesthetic. Although the *Idolino* was yet undiscovered in Donatello's lifetime, it is a good example of the sort of nude youth statues or statuettes he might have come into contact with during his expeditions (McHam 43). Moreover, the triumphal scene depicted on Goliath's helmet has been identified as a variant of an ancient sardonix from the Medici collection (Janson 84). The *contrapposto* stance, nudity, and free-standing nature of Donatello's bronze *David* were each conventions that derived from the art of antiquity. Free-standing statuary had been abolished by the early Church as these types of statues were reported to be "the dwelling places of demons" and pagan idols, an attitude which prevailed throughout the Middle Ages (McHam 43). Thus, free-standing bronze nude statuary was a positively groundbreaking development in the Quattrocento.

Once again, it seems that the rise of humanist thought which allowed for a resurgence and acceptance of classical motifs made way for works such as *David*, which might have been seen as sacrilege in a prior age. This work would seem to owe more to models from antiquity than anything else, though its Old Testament theme and the fifteenth-century garb (Janson 84) worn by the biblical hero are distinctly contemporary. In fact, one of the major developments in the art of Early Renaissance was a reconciliation of “humanism and Christianity [which] together stimulated the development of religious imagery that was increasingly similar in the models and formal language to precedents in Greco-Roman art” (McHam 10). According to noted scholar H.W. Janson, the allusions to classicism and humanism do not end at the stylistic qualities of Donatello’s *David* but also permeate the content and context of the work. Janson ascertains that “the meaning of David must be found in the realm of humanistic thought, rather than in that of religious symbolism pure and simple” (Janson 84). He also notes “a strong relation to antiquity, not only aesthetic but in content as well, is suggested by its pervasive classical air” (85). Janson here refers to a reading of this work according to which David, presented as a nude, androgynous adolescent, alludes to the ancient practice of pederasty. Janson notes that the creation of the work coincides with the publication of an infamous work titled *Hermaphroditus*, written by the Sieneese humanist Panormita, which advocates the practice of pederasty. He also goes on to say that humanists defended *Hermaphroditus* on the grounds that all offense was neutralized by the poetic nature of the work (85). Janson remarks that in some humanist circles the interest in the subject matter of *Hermaphroditus* went beyond the intellectual: “*Hermaphroditus* is symptomatic of a cultural and moral climate in which the praise of *voluptas*, physical or spiritual, was not merely an intellectual exercise” (86). However, like so many details surrounding Donatello’s bronze *David*, the context of the work too remains ambiguous; but if one is to accept Janson’s theory that the work is perhaps an “ode” to adolescent male beauty, that too would represent a sect of humanists who took part in the practice of pederasty. At any rate, more than a few observers have noted a

perceived sensuality present in the work, which some have described as “provocative” or even “uncomfortable” (McHam 91).

Perhaps the most overtly classicizing of Donatello’s works is the equestrian statue depicting Erasmo da Narni, better known as *Gattamelata*, who served as a Renaissance *condottiere*. It is believed the statue was commissioned, with the permission of the Venetian doge, by the family of the deceased general as a memorial to the general. The *Gattamelata* was installed in 1453 in the Piazza del Santo of Padua but was possibly completed earlier. This work is completely secular in its subject matter, bearing no trace of Christian iconography. The faux mausoleum doors on the pedestal of the *Gattamelata* were likely inspired by Roman sarcophagi as there are no equivalent examples in the tradition of Christian burial chambers (Janson 159). The *Gattamelata* is the first bronze equestrian statue since antiquity and is believed to have been modeled on classical works such as the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius or the *Regisole*, two works which Donatello would have feasibly had access to. A prominent feature that the *Gattamelata* shares with the now lost *Regisole* is the horse’s raised leg resting on a support, a cannonball in the case of the *Gattamelata* (Poeschke 398). The battle armor worn by the general is anachronistic, resembling nothing contemporary; the lack of a helmet would have been especially uncustomary of fifteenth-century armor. *Gattamelata*’s armor does, however, have classicizing elements such as the Gorgon’s head on the general’s breastplate. While the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius and the *Regisole* do not wear garments like those worn by *Gattamelata*, there are examples of similar apparel in the statuary of antiquity, such as the statue of the Roman commander Marcus Holconius Rufus (McHam 57). The *Gattamelata* has a commanding presence evocative of the illustrious military career and eminence of the man portrayed; Donatello could not have found a more fitting subject to model after the emperors and generals of antiquity.

In her article titled “Donatello’s “*Gattamelata*” and Its Humanist Audience,” Mary Bergstein offers possible connections the *Gattamelata* might have had to humanism and humanist intellectuals and insists that “Donatello’s ten year residence in Padua was enriched

with a humanist audience of the most sophisticated order” (Bergstein 865). Bergstein suggests that the prominent humanists and associates of Donatello such as Ciriaco d’Ancona and Leon Battista Alberti may have provided the artist with inspiration regarding aspects of his *Gattamelata*. Bergstein focuses on “the configuration of intellectuals surrounding Donatello at the time of his Paduan production” (862). One such intellectual who frequented the workshop of Donatello was the aforementioned humanist Leon Battista Alberti. Alberti was involved with an equestrian sculpture of his own at the time Donatello was working on the *Gattamelata*; out of this process came a treatise by Alberti on the living horse titled *De equo animante*. Bergstein suggests that Donatello’s equestrian statue was an inspiration to Alberti and vice versa: “A decade after Alberti recognized Donatello as “our great friend Donato the sculptor” in his treatise on painting, the two men seem to have collaborated on ideas of equestrian physiognomy, proportion, and decorum that are manifest in the equestrian *Gattamelata* and the *De equo animante*” (862). The proportions and physicality of *Gattamelata*’s horse, along with its unification with its master, parallel ideas outlined in Alberti’s treatise on the living horse. Similarly, Bergstein relays an account in which Ciriaco d’Ancona visited Donatello at his workshop in Florence around the time d’Ancona was to write the dedication for the *Gattamelata* monument in Padua; she then speculates that the two men may have conversed on the topic of ancient and contemporary statuary (854). In addition, d’Ancona, also an antiquarian, may have consulted the artist on the *Gattamelata*: “Donatello would have worked up the themes in wax, fleshed it out to the humanist’s approval, and incorporated it into the *Gattamelata* monument” (857).

By undertaking an analysis of Donatello’s works and the context and environment in which they were created, we find that [note: “the influence of humanism” does not undertake the analysis] the influence of humanism in setting the tone and aesthetic of these works becomes quite evident. Though it is incontestable that Donatello owed a large part of the inspiration behind works such as his bronze *David* and *Gattamelata* to classical antiquity, one cannot discount the artist’s own skill, with which he was able to translate

these classical motifs and themes and which earned the admiration of his peers, craftsmen and scholars alike. Certainly it took an artist who possessed Donatello's mastery combined with an artistic environment conducive to such efforts. The humanist influence on Donatello's work is not only corroborated by documented interactions he had with contemporary humanists but also by aspects of the works themselves. Donatello singlehandedly revived bronze, free-standing, equestrian, and nude statuary, all techniques which had been dormant since antiquity. Armed with an aesthetic and technique rooted in classicism and an acute awareness of humanist ideals, Donatello's statuary marks a drastic change in both the intellectual and artistic climate of the fifteenth century, which culminated in the movement that came to be known as the Renaissance.

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