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Donatello's David: The Putti Speak

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* As the first approaching life-sized, freestanding, sensuous, bronze nude since Antiquity, Donatello's bronze David is a critical monument of the Italian Renaissance. It is also one of the most enigmatic. David is nude, but not completely unclothed, wearing a feminine-looking hat and knee-high boots. David holds a rock and a sword, while standing suggestively, on the head of Goliath. He stands in a relaxed *contrapposto* stance. His left hand, held to his hip, holds a stone. His right hand is resting on an oversized sword, which points downward to the helmet of Goliath, between the feet of David. As Zuraw pointed out in a talk at the 2000 *Renaissance Society of America Meeting*, we see different points in the narrative of the story of David and Goliath: holding the stone, before making the fatal sling shot strike, and standing on the decapitated head of Goliath after the kill. (1) The image of David slaying Goliath was rare in art before Donatello, who created an earlier David in 1408 – 16. Before Donatello's images, David was usually portrayed as a prophet, psalmist, or ancestor of Christ. (2)

The nudity of Donatello's David is certainly not unique, but the nudity of the later David by Michelangelo, as an example, does not seem as strange as the nudity of Donatello's. The nudity is not just a response to Donatello's study of classical art, but also is a literal representation of the

biblical text, that Saul armed David, but David “put off” the armor. * David's floppy, feminine-looking hat and knee high fancy boots accentuate his nakedness, as does the feather on Goliath's helmet which tickles the inside of David's thigh. * One part of the sculpture that is easily overlooked is the *putto* relief on Goliath's helmet, to which David's sword points – and which I will later address.

Donatello's bronze David has been plausibly dated to c. 1440 (3) by Pope-Hennessy due to affinities with Donatello's Paduan bronzes of the mid 1440's, especially the Paduan Crucifix.(4) The David is 5' 2 1/4" high, and is located in the Bargello Museum (Museo Nazionale) in Florence. * The date of this work has been disputed. It has been dated to as early as 1428, and as late as the 1460's. The first mention of David was in 1469, (5) when it was located in the courtyard of the Medici palace in Florence. With reference to David's androgynous features and his apparent consciousness of his own sensual beauty, Janson recalls Donatello's reputation for being homosexual, as mentioned in a group of anecdotes compiled in the 1470's and published in 1548 in Florence.(6) (These anecdotes about Donatello number seven, and were written fifteen years after his death. Three had odd remarks about his apprentices. They are certainly not proof of his sexual orientation) (7)

The rare nudes previous to Donatello's David during the Proto-Renaissance and Early Renaissance were all small reliefs - * i.e. the personifications of Fortitude as Hercules by Nicola Pisano on the Pisa pulpit, 1260; by Giovanni Pisano on his Pistoia Pulpit of 1302 - 12; attributed to Giovanni D'Ambrogio of 1391 - 95 on the Porta della Mandorla of Florence Cathedral, and Nanni di Banco's nude in the predella of the Quattro Santi Coronati .

* Most scholars feel that Donatello's David does not simply represent the Jewish boy who slew the Philistine giant, Goliath, and later became king of Israel. By the fifteenth century David had come to have an allegorical meaning relating to Florence. The Florentines considered themselves to be like David, in that brain triumphed over brawn in the match between David and Goliath and between the republic of Florence and her enemies. Florence resisted tyranny and fought for liberty during the fifteenth century, first against Giangaleazzo Visconti, who died in 1404, and later King Ladislas of Naples, who died in 1414. After his death, the Florentine economy flourished. The Florentines had a new threat between 1423 - 28 from Filippo Maria Visconti.(8) David was an appropriate symbol for Florence, since he "slew an oppressor of the Chosen people,"(9) and was for Florence a symbol of freedom as the underdog shepherd boy, who triumphed over the giant, Goliath. * Donatello's earlier marble David of 1408-9 (also in the Museo Nazionale, Florence), was in fact, changed in 1416 from the simple representation of a Biblical prophet holding a scroll to a more heroic representation of the giant-slayer holding a sling.(10) Some of the interpretations of Donatello's David follow.

* Doebler interprets the iconography of the David as portraying the victory of virtue over vice. David, in this interpretation, is a type of Christ wearing a boy's hat and the boots of a warrior, stripped for a contest of faith to prove his manhood(11) Laurie Schneider Adams, who called the David's meaning "elusive," interpreted the David in a Freudian/political manner relating to contemporary Florentine events. She sees David as both a symbol of liberty and a personal statement of sexual preference by the sculptor. The two political events cited in Schneider Adams' interpretation are the 1414 death of the enemy of Florence, King Ladislas of Naples, whose despotism they had resisted, and the Florentines' successful resistance to the Visconti threat in 1423. The effeminacy of David is explained by

Schneider Adams as a reference to a passage in Plato's Symposium about Eros inspiring "soldiers to bravery when they are lovers in the Platonic sense." Pausanias' subsequent speech discusses Athens' laws involving lovers, that Athens was different from cities ruled by tyrants who discouraged relationships brought about by the "celestial Eros" - love between men. Schneider Adams feels that the David makes a parallel between Athens and Florence - that Florence was like Athens, not ruled by a tyrant.(12)

Another hypothesis is one that was first proposed by Jenő Lányi, and later expounded upon by Patricia Ann Leach, and echoed by Pope-Hennessy. That is that the David is actually a David/Mercury with Goliath's head also functioning as that of Argus.(13) Leach sees physical resemblances between David and certain images of Mercury. She believes that David is a symbol of victory over the Visconti threat, and dates it accordingly to 1428 - 30. Her interpretation follows:(14)

The David, with its allusions to Mercury, may be understood as a moral allegory portraying the triumph of Christian and Classical heroic virtue over vice. As an historical allegory, it may commemorate the end of a war waged by the Republic of Florence against the imperialist claims of Milan. In civic humanist terms, it may celebrate, through its allusion to Mercury their guardian, the triumph of the arts and letters permitted to flourish under the protection of a republican government and the triumph of republican liberty in the face of a tyrant that would enchain them. Finally, a more unusual significance may be understood. Donatello's bronze figure suggests a triumph of Peace over the brutality of War through its depiction of Victorious David, slayer of the tyrant Goliath with his imperial and martial helmet, and through its allusions to David's classical counterpart, Mercury the Argicide, Peacemaker and Divider of Serpents.

I do not see compelling evidence to link Mercury and David. Leach presents no evidence of any document that would suggest this, nor is there any evidence of humanist interest in Mercury in 1430 or earlier. Also, I find the wing on Goliath's helmet/ Mercury sandal wing fusion hypothesis tenuous at best. Sperling's discovery of the text of an inscription on the statue's base ("The victor is whoever defends the fatherland. God crushes the wrath of an enormous foe. Behold! A boy overcame a great tyrant. Conquer, o citizens!) This verifies that this statue is clearly David, not a David/Mercury hybrid. (15)

Both Schneider and Leach, in their studies, take into consideration the *putto* relief on Goliath's helmet , * a significant part of the sculpture which has been overlooked in other interpretations of this statue. The fact that David is nude is so startling that, at first examination, the *putti* on Goliath's helmet are easily overlooked. However, David's sword points to the relief scene of *putti* riding a chariot, which would seem to indicate that they were of some importance to the iconography of the whole.

Regarding *putti*,

Donatello did not invent the *putto* form – the naked winged boy derived from Greco-Roman representations of Eros or Cupid – nor was Donatello the first Renaissance artist to utilize it. However, Donatello made a distinct contribution to art in restoring the classical Eros/Cupid form to a level of respectability that it had lost in the centuries intervening between the classical age and the time of the Renaissance by using it in a positive fashion, and often as a primary motif. He achieved this in some cases by infusing the form with Christian meaning and using it in new contexts – such as musician angels, attendants at the Incarnation of Christ and at his death, and as onlookers to sacred scenes and commentators on historical stories. In other cases he made the *putto* a more visible motif by using it as a major protagonist in sculpture. *Putti* abound in Donatello's works, finding their way into about half of his large oeuvre. Many of his uses of *putti* were new and influential inventions. (16)... Though in some

cases Donatello used the *putto* in a decorative fashion, in most cases the *putto* is meaningful (17)

As is the case with the David. The scene to which David points could be read as the "moral" of the story. To interpret the moral, though, the iconography of this relief is problematical. On Goliath's helmet is a chariot pulled by two nude, winged *putti*. One unwinged figure is enthroned on the chariot receiving gifts and attention from two *putti*. Behind the enthroned male is another unwinged man who is fat and nude. Behind the fat man is a jug. The scene has been identified as a free variant on an antique carved gem, a sardonyx depicting a triumph of love enacted by *putti*, or a triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne,(18) which eventually became part of the Medici collection.(19)

The *erotes* would fit well into Schneider Adams' Neo-Platonic interpretation of the David if they represent a triumph of love. Schneider Adams relates the good looks of David to one of Plato's "beautiful boys," and sees the sculpture as consciously displaying David as a homosexual, one who was loved by Saul and Jonathan in the Bible.(20) This Neo-platonic interpretation relates to Wittkower's article "A Symbol of Platonic Love," in which he interprets the medallion of a youth in a chariot of the Bust of a Youth *as relating to Plato's notion of the celestial Eros as a "guardian of beautiful boys."(21) Schneider concludes that David was "defending those (Athenian) laws which encourage 'Platonic Love,'" (22) and that the David was a statement of sexual preference to Donatello. However, considering the illegality of homosexuality and punishment for such acts in Florence at the time, the flaunting of homosexuality by a highly visible figure such as Donatello would be neither prudent nor plausible.

Concerning the *putto* relief, Leach identified the figure being pulled in the chariot by *putti* on Goliath's helmet as Bacchus (the Greek Dionysus) accompanied by Silenus, noting also that one of the *putti* offers a goblet to Bacchus,(23) making this scene a triumph of Bacchus, rather than a triumph of Love.(24) Upon close examination of details of the relief on Goliath's helmet, I believe that Leach has accurately described and identified the scene. Leach sees the influence of bacchic sarcophagi (which frequently contained erotes) intervening to suggest to Donatello the change from an erote victory to a bacchic one.(25) (There is also a roundel in the Medici courtyard, attributed to Donatello, of a Bacchic triumph.) On her iconographic interpretation of the relief I, however, disagree with Leach who writes:(26)

...one is tempted to believe that the "Triumph of Bacchus" was not meant to be seen as a symbol of Christian sacrifice and triumph alone but as a political emblem signifying the triumph of Liber and thus Florentine *libertas* as well.

The *putto* victory is on Goliath's helmet, not associated with David, *per se*. David points to it with his sword as though it is the moral of the story . A similar iconographic program is found in Donatello's later Judith and Holofernes, *which portrays Judith triumphant over the drunken Holofernes. Like the David, this statue is a first – the first - and only – monumental sculpture of Judith in the act of decapitating Holofernes (27) On the base of this statue, on which Holofernes slumps, are revelling, bacchanalian *putti*. * The *putti* in the three scenes portray the negative effects of wine: drunkenness, sleep, impolite behavior and the unleashing of the drinker's inhibitions. Through classical imagery the *putti* explain Holofernes' downfall. In a moment of weakness, intensified by his drunken state, the powerful general fell victim to a temperate woman.

McHam postulates that the David and Judith and Holofernes were commissioned as pendant pieces by the Medici, both having been in the Medici palace garden and courtyard by 1469 – in adjoining locations - where they remained together for thirty years, in the most public places of the palace (28). McHam relates the statues to the Athenian tyrannicides, associating David and Judith with Florentine liberty, and by extension, the Medici as tyrant-slayers (29).

Janson interpreted the meaning of the Judith and Holofernes in the medieval psychomachia tradition, in which the triumph of virtue over vice is acted out by personifications. In this view, the heavily draped Judith, savior of her people, represents sanctimonia (piety) or continentia (continence) standing triumphically over the vice luxuria (lust or excess) or superbia (pride) - Holofernes, in contrast to the heavily clothed Judith, is nearly nude (30). Janson asserted that whether or not the Medici commissioned this piece, when they acquired it, they would have adapted the meaning to their own by equating monarchy with luxuria, and city republics, such as Florence, with virtue. (31)

There are several inscriptions associated with the Judith and Holofernes, one, which no longer exists, was placed below the statue, then in the Palazzo Medici, which read:

Kingdoms fall by lust, rise through virtues;

behold the neck of pride severed by the hand of humility.”

(Regna cadunt luxu surgent virtutibus urbes

caesa vides humili colla superba manu.) (32)

Presumably, between 1464 and 1469 Piero de’ Medici added yet another inscription:

“Piero son of Cosimo Medici has dedicated the statue of this woman to that liberty and fortitude bestowed on the republic by the invincible and constant spirit of the citizens.”

(Petrus Medices Cos. Fi. Libertati simul et fortitudini hanc mulieris statuam quo cives invicto constantique amino ad rem pub. Redderunt dedicavit.)

These inscriptions, added after Donatello completed the statue, do not necessarily tell us Donatello's original intent, but they do let us know what meaning was attached to the Judith and Holofernes in Donatello's own time. Allegorically, the story of Judith and Holofernes is well suited to the meaning of "the neck of pride severed by the hand of humility," and Donatello's *putti* and their activities were wisely chosen to enhance the message of the story.

Donatello's Judith and Holofernes and his bronze David have both been related to the theme of civic virtue. They also both consist of good triumphing over evil in a two person bronze ensemble, and both incorporate *putti* in a meaningful manner.

The small detail on Goliath's helmet, which includes *putti* – Donatello's distinctive trademark – is not merely decorative. Donatello always used *putti* for a meaningful purpose. Once you get past David's shocking nudity and sensuousness, you can clearly see that David is indicating the relief on Goliath's helmet – a tiny representation of the Triumph of Bacchus, whose viceful traits are mirrored in Goliath. Goliath, who has, in turn been defeated by David, the tyrant slayer and symbol of virtue. David is monumental and beautiful, Goliath mutilated, his power gone. The Triumph of Bacchus, in Donatello's bronze David, in my opinion, represents the vice of lust or *superbia* (arrogant pride), vices to be associated with Goliath (and by extension the enemies of Florence - tyrants), and show the virtuous David (and the Florentine Republic and Medici) triumphant. The moral of the story, that the Medici promoted, was that in Renaissance Florence, like in the Bible, good triumphed over evil.

NOTES

1 Zuraw, Shelley E, "A Redundancy of Attributes: Reading Donatello's David," Renaissance Society of America Annual Meeting, Florence, 2000.

2 McHam, Sarah Blake, "Donatello's Bronze David and Judith as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence," in Art Bulletin, Volume 82, March, 2001, 34.

3The dating of the bronze David is discussed in note #5. On the David see Meyer, Donatello, 1904, 93 - 96; Kauffman, Donatello, 1935, 159-176; Janson, 1963, 77-85; Pope-Hennessy, 1985b, 249f.; Schneider, Laurie, "Donatello's Bronze David," in Art Bulletin 55, June 1973, 213-213; Dixon, J.W., Jr., "The Drama of Donatello's David. Re-examination of an `enigma,'" in Gazette des Beaux-Arts 93, 1979, 6 - 12; Greenhalgh, 1982, 166-180; Leach, Patricia Ann, Images of Political Triumph: Donatello's Iconography of Heroes, 1984; Bennett and Wilkins, 1984, 81-90; Ommagio a Donatello, 1986, 195 - 199. 1985b, 259f.

4Pope-Hennessy, 1985b, 264.

5There are no known documents concerning the date of the creation of this statue. The first document dates to 1469 when an eye witness mentions seeing the bronze David on a column in the Medici courtyard during wedding festivities (Janson, 1963, 77.) The document that Janson cites is Delle nozze di Lorenzo de' Medici con Clarice Orsini nel 1469; informazione di Pieri Parenti fiorentino, Florence, 1870, which is based on an eye witness account by Cosimo Bartoli in ms II, iv, 324 in the Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence.) The David has been assigned various dates, depending on writers' opinions on where it fits in the progression of Donatello's style. Tschudi, 1887, 13; Reymond, Marcel, La Sculpture Florentine, Florence: 1897, 119, Crutwell, Maud, Donatello, 1911, 83, and Janson, 1963, 77 all date the David to the early to mid 1430's based on the stylistic affinities to the Siena baptistery putti of the late 1420's. Milanese, Gaetano, Catalogo delle opere di Donatello, Florence: 1887, 296f and Kauffman, Hans, Donatello, Berlin: 1935, 159ff see the David as falling into the late 1450's, relating it thematically to the Judith as part of a Medicean scheme. John Paoletti dates the David even later, its conception to 1463 - 4. He feels that it was the model for a cathedral buttress figure which was never completed, and that Agostino di Duccio cast the existing figure after Donatello's death. See Paoletti, John, "The Bargello David and Public Sculpture in fifteenth-century Florence," in Collaboration in Italian Renaissance Art, 1978, 100 - 103. Leach, 1984 dates the David to about 1428 based partly on the stylistic relationship to the Siena Baptistery putti, and partly to move it closer to the time of the Florentine triumph over the Visconti threat. Paoletti, 1978, 99 - 112 believes that the David was designed by Donatello but executed by Agostino di Duccio between 1463 - 1469. This writer dismisses this theory.

6Janson, 1963, 85.

7 Dixon, J.W., Jr., "The Drama of Donatello's David. Re-examination of an 'enigma,'" in Gazette des Beaux-Arts 93, 1979, 9.

8Schneider, 1973, 215; Janson, 1978, 37.

9Bennett and Wilkins, 1985, 83.

10, Janson, 1963, 4.

11 Doebler, John, "Donatello's Enigmatic David," in Journal of European Studies V. 4, 1971, 339.

12Schneider Adams, 1973, 213., Dixon, 1979, 9f. panned Schneider's Neo-Platonic interpretation, disputing its basis and balking at the "homosexual" interpretation.

13This idea was first formulated by Jenő Lányi in a lecture in London at the Warburg Institute, cited by Janson, 1963, 83f. See Leach, 1984.

14Leach, 1984, 156f.

15 Sperling, Christine, "Donatello's bronze David and the demands of Medici politics," The Burlington Magazine Vol. 34, April 1992, 219. Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, ms. 660, fol. 85r.

16 Struthers, Sally A, Donatello's Putti: Their Genesis, Importance, and Influence on Quattrocento Sculpture and Painting, Doctoral Dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1992, 3.

17Ibid., 5.

18Leach, 161f.

19Janson, 1963, 84; Dixon, 126f. notes that Furtwangler in 1900 identified the subject as Dionysus and a young satyr. In a recent catalog of Medici gems it is identified as a Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne.

20Schneider, 1973, 216.

21Rudolf Wittkower, 1938, 260f.

22Schneider, 1973, 215.

24Leach, 1984, 121-2.

25Ibid., 127.

26Ibid., 129.

27 McHam, 35.

28Ibid.3 32.

29 Ibid., 43.

30 Janson, 203.

31Ibid.

32Ibid., 198.

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