Bernini's David

Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *David*, marble, 1623-24 (Galleria Borghese, Rome)

Bernini's David has always reminded me of a major league pitcher winding up to throw a 95 miles an hour fastball. Have you seen that? The pitcher gathers all of his strength for each pitch and puts everything he has into it. This is what Baroque art wants from us -- it wants us to be able to relate to the image IN OUR BODIES -- not just in our minds! But to really feel it physically and relate to the image physically. Think about it! Does Michelangelo's David inspire the same physical reaction in you? When looking at Bernini's David, don't you immediately start to feel what David is feeling? This sympathy is very important to Baroque art. Bernini's David really uses the space around it -- reaching out into the space of the viewer (our space!).
It is not content -- the way Michelangelo's David is -- to remain separate from us. Remember we talked about the pyramid composition in the High Renaissance? And pyramids are a very stable shape, right? Well, in the Baroque era we see compositions in the shape of diagonal lines, as in Bernini's David. The diagonal line immediately suggests movement and energy and drama -- very different from the immobility of the pyramid shape!

Donatello shows us an early moment in the Renaissance, and the beginnings of Humanism when artists were first discovering contrapposto and the beauty of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture. His young figure of David symbolizes the Republic of Florence and its sense of being blessed by God, and so we see David victorious standing on the head of Goliath.

Michelangelo shows us a figure perfectly beautiful. And so we have the full flowering of the Renaissance idea that man is created in God's image. Man is God-like. We also have the association of perfection and beauty and harmony in mathematics and God, which was so important at the height of Humanism in the High Renaissance.
Bernini shows us David actively fighting Goliath -- with God on his side. Perhaps the way the church itself felt as they were battling against Luther.

The Path to God in the Renaissance:
I think Michelangelo is asking us to sit and contemplate the incredible beauty of David, and through contemplating beauty, and the beauty of man, God's greatest creation, we come to know God. On the other hand, there is no time for contemplation with Bernini's David, there is only time for ducking out of the way. Our reaction is in our bodies, not in our minds (the way it is with Michelangelo's). So, we could say that the path to God in the Renaissance was through the mind (this is part of Humanism as we know).

The Path to God in the Baroque Era:
On the other hand, the path to God in the Baroque era is much more direct, more emotional, more bodily, and that of course relates to the embattled position of the Church, which felt as though it needed to appeal very directly to the faithful.