

David, placed in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, 1501-4
Robert Baldwin (2009)

(This essay was written in 1998 and revised slightly in 2009.)

The Civic Significance of David in Florence

Since the late fourteenth century, David has been a patriotic figure in the republic of Florence. At a time when all of Europe was governed by kings or feudal lords except the republics of Venice, Florence, and Siena, Florence used the divinely ordained victory of the little shepherd boy over the giant Philistine warrior, Goliath, as a Biblical example of their own victories over larger feudal regimes eager to conquer the Tuscan city (especially Milan. Donatello had made two sculptures of a young David before 1440, both on pedestals inscribed with patriotic words about humility overcoming pride. Florentine artists continued making more images of David in the second half of the fifteenth century including Castagno, Verrocchio, and Ghirlandaio. All of them showed the young boy described in the Bible to underscore the miraculous nature of his victory and the parallel theme of divine providence watching over Florence. Interestingly, the Florentine claim to divinely favored humility and small-scale republican virtue was pure propaganda in so far as the city was the largest in all Europe and one of the richest and most powerful in Italy. And it had a long history of annexing surrounding towns and waging war against neighboring cities (Pisa, Siena).

The Circumstances of the Commission

After the success of the *Pieta*, Michelangelo returned to Florence in 1501 to find many important commissions waiting. One was to finish a large *David* intended to go in a niche fifty feet up on the facade of the Duomo. A narrow block of marble had already been cut and the beginnings of a David carved by an earlier artist. Just as the Roman *Pieta* offered Michelangelo his first big commission in Rome, the *David* was his first important commission in his home town and he clearly decided to make a big splash by dramatically reinterpreting this traditional Florentine subject. When the Duomo committee saw the finished statue, they held public meetings to choose a much more prominent location. The top contenders were the two most important civic spaces in the city: the space directly in front of the Duomo or the piazza in front of the town hall, the Palazzo Vecchio.

The aesthetic originality of the *David* was so great that it altered the original terms and meaning of its commission and made the patrons seek a more prominent and secular location in front of the town hall. Here, at the onset of the High Renaissance, we see the beginnings of a new balance of power for the artist in relation to patrons and society, a new autonomy and freedom. While this was typical of new Renaissance ideas about art, we should remember this freedom was relative, at best especially in the sixteenth century when artists worked to please their patrons and audiences. Tolerated and encouraged by their patrons, artistic freedom and originality existed within a larger series of social values and constraints.

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Compared to Donatello's *David*, still well known to Florentine viewers, Michelangelo's *David* was gigantic not just in its predetermined size but in its heroic magnitude of form. An overly heroic pomposity was avoided through the careful, vivid study of anatomy. The overly large hands may have served purely expressive ends or they may have recalled David's reputation as "strong of hand" (*manu fortis*). In any case, the large hands remind us that Renaissance artists did not so much abandon a symbolic approach to representation as they naturalized symbolism, making it more plausible, discreet, and "true" in accord with a new, humanist measure tied to nature.

Unlike earlier artists who showed David standing on Goliath's head, Michelangelo chose the interval before the battle, the sling still hanging over David's left shoulder, the rock in his right hand. In emphasizing this time of reflection and prayer, Michelangelo reminded viewers that David won not by himself, but with the help of God. The narrow block surely contributed to Michelangelo's decision to show a rather meditative David; a dramatic figure more typical of Michelangelo was just not possible. Only the face was dramatic with its knit brows, fierce scowl, and leonine mane of hair. This fit in with Renaissance psychological thinking which always compared human types to animals; sixteenth-century observers thought the *David* was lion-like and formidable even in his quiet stance.

The Novelty of a Adult, Heroic David and the Example of Hercules

Unlike the many earlier Florentine images of David, Michelangelo sculpted a powerful, fully grown man quite capable of destroying Goliath by himself. Indeed, Michelangelo's David is Goliath-like in size and strength.

One explanation might remember that the traditional Florentine republican ideology always went beyond descriptions of the city as an innocent, virtuous, unspoiled, little guy defeating tyrannical "Goliaths". From the start, Florentine republican writers also represented the city as a new Roman republic, founded originally by Roman heroes and displaying the same invincible courage and military prowess in subduing all of central Italy and beyond. Bruni's *Panegyric on Florence* was a typical example, praising Florence as an invincible republican empire.

... When men actually have seen Florence their amazement at its [military] achievement ceases. ... As soon as they have seen the city and inspected with their own eyes its great mass of architecture and the grandeur of its buildings, its splendor and magnificence, the lofty towers, the marble churches, the domes of its basilicas, the splendid palaces, the turreted walls, and the numerous villas, ... , everyone immediately comes to believe that Florence is indeed worthy of achieving dominion and rule over the entire world. ...ⁱ

For the fact that the Florentine race arose from the Roman people is of utmost importance.... . Their [Roman's] dominion was equal to the entire world, and they governed with the greatest competence for many centuries, so that from a single

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city comes more examples of virtue than all other nations have been able to produce until now. ... if you seek extent of dominion, there was no people on this side of the ocean that had not been subdued and brought under Rome's power by force of arms. Therefore, to you, also, men of Florence, belongs by hereditary right dominion over the entire world and possession of your parental legacy. From this it follows that all wars that are waged by the Florentine people are most just, and this people can never lack justice in its wars since it necessarily wages war for the defense or recovery of its own territory.

In the most interesting passage for Michelangelo's *David*, Bruni compared victorious Florence to a powerful Greek boxer

*... this image of a very strong man would necessarily come to mind, showing his powerful body and graceful movements and the strength of his members. In like fashion, once this magnificent and splendid city is seen, it dispels all doubts about its greatness ...*ⁱⁱ

Commissioned by the magistrates for the second most important civic building in Florence, the *David* was conceived from the start as another republican image of Florentine strength, sanctity, victory, and divine providence. Once the statue was finished, the magistrates realized they could extract far more political significance from this unusual, adult *David* by moving it to a more prominent location. Its adult strength made it ideal for the most important civic building at a time when Florence was still celebrating the expulsion of the Medici ten years earlier and eager to set up warnings to that family, then plotting their return to power.

Given the political significance of *David* as a Florentine emblem of republican strength, determination, and triumph, it is easier to see why Michelangelo might have abandoned pagan models of shepherd boys and androgynous youths which informed earlier Florentine images of *David*.

Of great importance for Michelangelo's invention of an adult, heroic *David* was the rise of large-scale classical mythological representation in Italian Renaissance art. This development began in Florence with Pollaiuolo's cycle of large paintings of the Labors of Hercules for the Medici Palace in the 1460s (now lost) and accelerated in the 1470s and 1480s as seen in the mythologies of Botticelli and the many smaller paintings and statues of Hercules executed later by Pollaiuolo. It was the revival of the heroic classical nude in Florentine art and the omnipresent example of Hercules which inspired Michelangelo to redo *David a l'antica*.

Indeed, Hercules had long been important as a Florentine patriotic emblem, a more pagan counterpart to the humble shepherd-warrior, *David*. As an emblem of Florentine republican strength and virtue, Hercules had appeared as early as 1400, a decade before the Renaissance style began, in, ornamental sculptures on a portal of the Duomo and on the lower exterior of the campanile (bell tower) alongside the Duomo. Eight

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years before carving the *David*, Michelangelo had already made a statue of *Hercules* for Lorenzo de' Medici (now lost) in which appeared all the essential elements of the later *David*.

With the dramatic revival of mythological painting and sculpture in Florence after 1450, the imagery of Hercules took on new currency as a classical parallel to Biblical heroes such as David and Samson. Humanist writers increasingly described David and Samson as a "Christian Hercules". Given these parallels and the surging fashion in Italy for classical subjects and aesthetic forms, it is not surprising that a pioneer in the revival of classical forms who had already transformed the *Pieta* with a classical nude was also willing to dramatically remake a century-old Florentine tradition for representing David. In doing so, Michelangelo gave republican Florence a more assertive, confident self-image as a powerful republic determined to safeguard its precious autonomy.

With this recasting of a Florentine icon, Michelangelo also placed himself boldly in front of the town hall as one of its leading citizens. Unlike the Roman *Pieta* which needed the signature of its largely unknown author, the *David* needed no signature, nor would any work by Michelangelo after this. Indeed, it made Michelangelo overnight the most famous man in Florence and announced his genius to all the world. When the Medici bribed their way into the papacy and raised an army to besiege Florence, it was Michelangelo who took charge designing modern fortifications to defend his republic.

The Reinterpretation of the Statue under Medicean Rule

If the *David* was set up before the town hall to warn off the exiled Medicis, the forces of history were arrayed against republics everywhere in Europe and they all disappeared by 1540 except Venice. In 1513, the Medici pope, Leo X, lay siege to Florence, overcoming Michelangelo's fortifications and placing a price on his head when he fled. After suffering another expulsion with the death of Leo X, the Medici returned in the 1530s, taking full control over the city. To add insult to injury, they moved into the town hall and decorated it with hundreds of paintings and sculptures glorifying Medici virtue and power. They also set up a half-dozen giant statues in the town square including Ammanatti's *Neptune*, Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa*, Bandinelli's *Hercules and Cacus*, Giambologna's *Rape of the Sabines*, *Hercules and the Centaur*, and *Cosimo de' Medici on a Horse*. To punish Michelangelo, they forced him to erect a large monument to their glory in the *Medici Chapel*.

For the next 175 years, the Medici reigned supreme in Florence with the republican political significance of Michelangelo's *David* long forgotten. Indeed, the statue's heroic scale and Herculean power fit in nicely in with the grand statues of classical heroes and gods set up to celebrate Medici power (including two statues of Hercules).

Since the Medici rulers carefully removed unacceptable republican statues like Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* from this charged civic space, the decision to retain

Michelangelo's *David* was not taken lightly. By leaving Michelangelo's statue guarding what was now the Medici palace, the city's new rulers effectively reinterpreted Michelangelo's work. Had Michelangelo stuck with a more traditional image of the small shepherd boy, this would have been impossible. But he made their job easier by transforming David into a conquering hero, like Hercules or like the Medici dukes themselves.

Despite his strong republican leanings, no artist was more instrumental than Michelangelo in creating a new, "Roman" language of powerful, dominating forms in painting, sculpture, and architecture. This language of Roman classicism would be the preferred aesthetics of court power for the next four hundred years until the final collapse of courtly regimes with World War I. After that, Roman classicism would still continue, in increasingly sterile, rigid forms, in the aesthetic language of twentieth-century totalitarianism in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Stalinist Russia, and their later imitators all the way to Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The point of these remarks is not to blame Michelangelo for later developments or to equate his highly original and subtle art to the increasingly formulaic nature of nineteenth-century academic art much less to the crude propaganda of twentieth-century dictators. I mean simply to underscore the tension between the new Herculean classical language developed in Michelangelo's *David* and the traditional republican values extolling ordinary citizens and the virtues of modesty, humility, the small-scale and the familial.

In fashioning a more heroic, classical aesthetic for the Florentine republic, Michelangelo unwittingly moved art beyond republican aesthetic values and created a new language of power more suited to courtly rulers and high church officials. Among these was Julius II, the first of many popes to understand the political significance of Michelangelo's new "Roman" aesthetic language. By commissioning Michelangelo to painting the ceiling of the pope's private chapel, Julius II used Michelangelo's heroic aesthetic to glorify the papacy as the ruling center of a universal "Roman" Catholicism. Paul II would later call on this same grandiose Roman imperial classicism in choosing Michelangelo to design a new town square in Rome with an equestrian Marcus Aurelius at its center. Christian art would never be the same.

ⁱ p. 143

ⁱⁱ p. 144