Improvement and Emulation of Classical Forms

As with painting and architecture of the period, sculpture in the Renaissance upheld classical principles and form. The revival of antiquity resulted in the desire to unearth, collect, and display fragments of ancient sculpture, a high stakes trade in the Renaissance. Sculptors studied the classical human forms, emulating the harmony in structure and composition as well as the geometrical proportions and realistic, yet often idealized, musculature. The Florentine sculptor Donatello (1386-1466) created the first freestanding sculpture since antiquity with his St. Mark for the Or San Michele, a common guildhall, in Florence beginning in 1411. The draperies of the figure's robes fall and fold as they would on an actual human body. In the 1440s, Donatello sculpted the first life size nude since antiquity with his bronze David, which was also free standing. Both of these compositions, as well as Donatello's St. George (c. 1415-1417) at Or San Michele, are classical in form, and the figures display thoughtfulness and determination. These sculptures reflect the influence of humanist belief in the dignity of human experience.

The classic features of Renaissance sculpture, including the free standing nudes, served to reinforce the connection between Renaissance states in Italy and their ancient Roman heritage. Renaissance sculptors also emulated the drama and emotion the bodies conveyed, especially those of the Hellenistic period associated with ancient Rome. Hellenistic style ranges from the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E. to the Octavian’s defeat of Marc Antony at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E. The Hellenistic tradition, however, continued into the period of the early Roman Empire. The most striking extant example of Hellenistic sculpture available to sculptors of the Renaissance was the Laocoön (c. 50 C.E.). Discovered in 1506, Pope Julius II added the massive composition, depicting a scene from the Trojan War, to his sculpture collection. Laocoön was a Trojan priest who warned the Trojans about the wooden horse that the Greeks sent. In retribution, Athena, who sided with the Greeks in the war, sent a serpent from the sea to punish Laocoön. The sculpture features Laocoön and his two sons unsuccessfully battling with the serpent. Laocoön’s twisting torso, curled toe, anguished face, and thrown back head is full of emotion. The huge and powerful bodies in the composition act out the drama of their demise on a grand scale.

The influence of the Laocoön can be seen in sixteenth century sculpture, especially in the later works of Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564). Two figures, originally intended for the tomb of Pope Julius II but that did not make it into the final composition, display bodily drama reminiscent of the Laocoön, which Michelangelo was said to have admired a great deal. Known as the Rebellious Slave and the Dying Slave (1513-1516), the contrasting figures both writhe with expression, standing with twisted torsos and heads thrown back as well as yielding to and struggling against their bonds. Michelangelo arrived in Rome in 1505 to begin work on the large freestanding mausoleum, but work on it was suspended in 1506. At Julius II’s death in 1513,
Michelangelo revised the original plan, scaling it back to reflect the loss of revenue. The influence of the musculature and bodily expression to convey personality and thoughtfulness of sculpted forms of the Hellenistic style in Michelangelo’s work, however, was evident before the rediscovery of the *Laocoön*. In 1501, the city of Florence commissioned one of Michelangelo’s most recognizable works: the *David*. Standing thirteen feet five inches tall, Michelangelo’s *David* is pensive, focused in facial expression, and determined in bodily posture. He stands in a paused moment, displaying his musculature and contemplating the just cause he embarks upon. Originally intended for the cathedral in Florence, civic leaders decided to put it in front of the Palazzo Vecchio near the houses of government.