



Donatello (1386 or 1387-1466)

by Patricia Simons

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The most inventive, prolific sculptor of the early Renaissance, Donatello was both technically versatile and adept at powerfully expressive effects. His varied oeuvre includes figures of beautiful male youths imbued with homoerotic sensuality.

Son of a wool-carder, Donatello was born Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi in 1386 or 1387. He moved up through the ranks of artisans working at the Florentine cathedral complex so that by 1408 he was carving full-size statues. Soon thereafter, guilds commissioned statues for another civic monument, the granary of Orsanmichele.

Florence's leading citizen Cosimo de' Medici became a patron and friend, enabling Donatello to make contacts with humanists and Italian courts. His renown spread and over a long life he catered to a variety of patrons, chiefly in Florence, Siena, and Padua.

Contemporaries praised Donatello for equaling the ancients and also singled out the vivacity and "lifelike" qualities of his figures. Much of the work was religious, and most figures were male, though he produced reliefs of an affectionate Madonna with the Christ child and carved in wood a harrowed, penitent Magdalene.

Whatever the subject, Donatello endowed narratives with great drama, and his figures were charged with a strong sense of presence as well as intense character. Many are introspective, brooding figures, put to mental and spiritual tests, though Donatello also produced groups of boyish spirits fervently engaged in music playing and dancing.

While contemporaries noted that Donatello was unmarried and childless, paid no attention to his appearance, and spurned "over-showy" clothing, such comments were made in the conventional context of establishing the sculptor's single-minded devotion to his artistic practice.

Evidence about Donatello's sexuality comes from the sculptures themselves and from anecdotes collected around 1480, sometimes attributed to Poliziano. Seven of these anecdotes concern Donatello, who was renowned for a sharp wit and called "very tricky (*intricato*)" by the Duke of Mantua.

Three anecdotes eroticize Donatello's relations with apprentices. He hired especially beautiful boys, and "stained" them so that no one else would find them pleasing; when one assistant left after a quarrel, they made up by "laughing" at each other, a slang term for sex. Two of these anecdotes were omitted from some sixteenth-century editions, and the one on laughter was glossed as "licenzioso."

H. W. Janson was the first scholar to relate these quips to the artist's sculpture. In 1957, he suggested that they illuminated the "strangely androgynous" bronze *David*.



Donatello's *David* (top)
and *Amor Atys* (above).

The first life-size nude statue of the Renaissance, the *David* is today often considered a homosexual icon. Whereas James Saslow in 1999 called it "a milestone in gay culture--a pederastic hymn to pagan ideals of bodily beauty and grace," fifteen years earlier another gay scholar John Pope-Hennessy wrote that homosexual interpretations left a "trail of slime on a great work of art."

Such extreme, anachronistic views are often applied to the statue, whether informed by notions of Freudian perversion or post-Stonewall identity politics. Homophobic and gay friendly readings alike tend to regard the youth as cruelly punishing an aging, sodomitical Goliath.

Mainstream opinion focuses on the work's political valence, seeing it as celebrating republican liberty opposed to external tyranny, or proclaiming the Medicis' patriotic virtue. Others regard it as a syncretistic combination of Mercury with David, a Neoplatonic allegory of divine love, an epicurean statement about pleasure, or a purely spiritual and aesthetic object. First documented in the courtyard of the Medici palace during a wedding in 1469, even its dating remains uncertain, ranging between the late 1420s and the mid 1460s.

The bronze *David* is not isolated from Donatello's other work, nor is its eroticism unusual. Donatello's characteristic merging of classicism with naturalism is evident in the statue, as is an emphatic interior life. The youth luxuriates in a triumph equally seductive, religious, and political. The nudity, signifying divinely ordained victory against the armored foe, is accentuated by sensual use of bronze and by such elements as a large wing rising from Goliath's helmet, caressing David's thigh and ending at his buttocks.

In his *David* Donatello created a creature aware of his erotic power. A near-contemporary intimated uneasy recognition of this effect in 1504, calling the leg with the teasing feather "awkward" or "silly." Rather than any one aspect being exclusive of other possibilities, the statue is a multivalent mix of civic, dynastic, pious, philosophical, and erotic themes, ones that many female viewers could also appreciate.

More attention should be paid to sensuality in Donatello's other works, such as his exuberant putti, and the so-called *Atys/Amorino* (ca 1440), a laughing boy faun with exposed genitals. Clothed youths with a sensual appeal include the marble *David* (1408-1416), *St. George* (ca 1415-1417), and *St. Louis of Toulouse* (ca 1418-1422). In the mid-sixteenth century, the Florentine poet Lasca praised the *St. George* as an ideal substitute for a living boyfriend, providing constant amorous pleasure to his gaze.

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