Donatello, Embodiment of the Renaissance

Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi, more commonly known as Donatello, was arguably one of the greatest and most innovative sculptors during the Italian Renaissance. The epitome of “uomo universale” or Renaissance man, Donatello was able to successfully bridge the gap between classical art and modern ideas of the Renaissance through his sculptures. Through his artistic styles and his desire to be an individual, Donatello embodied the spirit of the Renaissance.

Donatello’s artistic style exemplified the Renaissance ideal of a return to antiquity. As stated by Giorgio Vasari: “His works possessed so much grace and excellence and such a fine sense of design that they were considered to be more like the distinguished works of the ancient Greeks and Romans than those of any other artist who ever existed.”¹ In his sculptures, Donatello made a conscious effort to emulate the sculptures and statues that were made by the Greeks and the Romans; even going so far as to travel to Rome in order to study them further. He seemed to hold to the idea held by many artists during the Renaissance that much of the ideology of the ancients had been lost, and like many others, he did what he could to bring back that which was lost through his sculptures. As a result of his desire to emulate the ancients but still retain his individuality as an artist, Donatello developed a skill in bas-relief, or creating a sculpted image on a shallow surface. His use of this effect along with the use of perspective on his sculpture in the baptistery in Florence caused Vasari to write “Thus, no other artisan surpassed him in this field, even in our own times, there is no one who is his equal.”²

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² Vasari, Lives, 147.
One thing that set Donatello above other artists of his day was his versatility. Roberta J.M. Olson states: “His highly individualized works show that he was a chameleon, changing with the commission, to achieve a variety and freedom matched by few other artists.”³ He worked with a variety of mediums, including: bronze, wood, stucco, and stone. He became skilled in each medium that he worked with and he gained renown. His sculptures crafted from bronze have become some of the most celebrated of the period; most notably his David sculpture. This sculpture, like many others that he created are known for their realism. During the time of Donatello the concept of realism was innovative. Donatello was known for putting life into the figures that he sculpted as stated by Roger Tarr in his article “Brunelleschi and Donatello: Placement and Meaning in Sculpture”.⁴ During his lifetime Donatello created over thirty different sculptures and as Vasari put it he “by himself brought sculpture back to a level of perfection and magnificence in our century with the abundance of his works.”⁵

Like many artists during the Renaissance, Donatello strove to gain recognition and set himself apart as an individual. Because of this he took a lot of pride in his work. In one instance that shows his individuality Donatello was told that he would not be able to erect one of his sculptures because, as Vasari put it, the people viewing it “lacked understanding.” Donatello managed to convince them to let him keep working in it, to which they agreed. As Vasari states, “Once they agreed, he covered it up for fifteen days and then, without retouching it in any other way, he uncovered it, filling everyone with amazement.”⁶ Through refusing, albeit subtly, to

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³ Roberta J.M. Olson, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 91
change what he had created, Donatello proved that he embodied the spirit of individualism. He created art for the sake of art.

In another instance when Donatello received a commission from a Genoese merchant to create a bust the merchant insisted that Donatello was asking too high a price for this bust and tried to bargain with Donatello to lower the price. Donatello was so offended by the actions of this merchant that he threw the bust on the ground and destroyed it completely telling the merchant that “he proved himself more accustomed to bargaining for beans than for statues”\(^7\) and he refused to recast it, even though Cosimo de’ Medici urged him to recast it. This instance proved that at times Donatello’s pride overruled his want for money. Because this merchant did not fully appreciate his art for what it was worth, he was entirely unwilling to sell it to him. This action mirrors the ideology of many of the artist during the Renaissance. Although these artists needed to sell their art in order to live, they above all wanted others to appreciate their art and their genius. In this Donatello was no different. He sought fame, but he would not sacrifice his pride for it.

Another thing that make Donatello unique to other artists during the Renaissance was his relationship with his patron, Cosimo de’ Medici. Donatello worked almost exclusively for him for a number of years and in exchange Cosimo offered a commission and inexpensive rent. What made their relationship unusual was that it went beyond patron and artist. As Vasari states: “Cosimo’s love for Donatello’s talents was so great that he wanted to keep him working for him constantly, and in return, Donatello felt such affection for Cosimo that he could guess exactly what Cosimo wanted from the slightest indication, and he always responded to his wishes.”\(^8\) By giving him work Cosimo aided Donatello in increasing his skill and through Cosimo’s generous

patronage Donatello was able to expand his individuality. Cosimo’s biographer Vespasiano da Bisticci wrote about an instance when it was difficult for sculptors to find work. He states, “Since in this time the art of sculpture suffered some lack of employment, Cosimo, to prevent this happening to Donatello, commissioned him to make certain doors which are in the Sacristy, and gave orders to his bank to allow him a certain sum of money every week.”

The Medici family financially took care of Donatello for the rest of his life. What is especially unusual about Donatello’s relationship with Cosimo is that even though he was under a patron he was able to retain his individuality and set himself apart from other artists of his day.

Donatello emulated the spirit of the Renaissance through his innovative works, his sense of individuality, and his return to antiquity. Many artists that came after him were influenced in part by his style and innovations. Avery put it perfectly when he stated: “Donatello’s statements are so singular and so sincere that they secure him a place among the great artists of all time, who transcend the epoch in which they live and speak to men in every age.”

Through the brilliant pieces that he made, Donatello achieved everything that every artist wanted inevitably to achieve: immortality through their art.

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10 Avery, *Donatello*, 110
Bibliography


