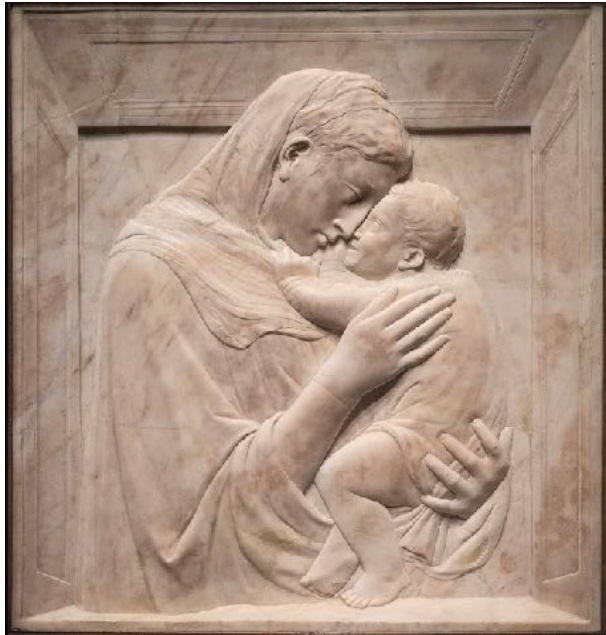


## Donatello and his Circle

Background Notes

Dr Emma Stirrup — 8 May 2024



Donatello, *Pazzi Madonna*,  
c. 1420–25



Fig 1 - *Five Florentine Men*, c. 1490s, unknown Italian master

In the Louvre painting by an unknown late-15<sup>th</sup>-century Italian artist, entitled *Five Florentine Men* (fig. 1), we find Donatello centre-stage, directly addressing the viewer – to his right Giotto and Uccello, to his left, Manetti and Brunelleschi. It is a fitting position for the most celebrated sculptor of the early Renaissance, both Donatello and his life-long friend, Brunelleschi, who were indeed at the very heart of artistic experimentation and change in Florence throughout the first half of the fifteenth century – the nexus of a group of artists who affected a revolution in art. As the Louvre painting also suggests, artists across media did not work in isolation, they moved between studios, were beholden to the same patrons, collaborated and competed with one another at every turn. Inspired by Roman sources and the intellectual community in the city, their discussions concerning art abounded. Through experimentation with perspective, they critiqued – kindly and not – each other’s work, seeking new modes of creativity, motivated by both antique examples to compete with and a great exploration of liberating naturalism. Donatello was closely connected with most of the transformative artists of the period – he was great friends, collaborator and travelling companion with Brunelleschi and Uccello; he worked for Ghiberti at different stages in his career; he partnered with Michelozzo; he worked closely with Luca della Robbia and Nanni di Banco; and he closely mentored and collaborated with Desiderio da Settignano and Bertoldo di Giovanni amongst others, the latter the tutor to Michelangelo.

In this talk we will look at the extraordinary group of artists, sculptors and architects who comprised Donatello’s artistic circle, addressing some of the key works from his oeuvre in light of his genius and each collaborator’s role in ensuring that this was indeed the case. In a

career known to span 65 years, Donatello was as creative as he was productive. He executed ground-breaking works across media – in glass, clay, stucco, stone, wood, marble and bronze. It is argued that he was ‘so inventive, that no two statues are very much alike’, his artistic style evolved throughout his career, and his list of ‘firsts’ is long and impressive. In his treatise, *On Painting*, Leo Battista Alberti singled out Brunelleschi and Donatello for their genius amongst the Florentine artists, however, little is actually known of Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi’s artistic training (known in art history by the diminutive ‘Donatello’).

The first record of his presence is dated to January 1401, when he was located in Pistoia in the company of Filippo Brunelleschi. The latter, 9 years his senior, was engaged on the silver altar of St. James in Pistoia Cathedral and it is likely that Donatello, aged only 15, was assisting him in this commission. This first record is the known starting point of one of the most important artistic partnerships in art history, and the year is also of crucial importance — 1401 is oft cited as the beginning of the era of a revolution in art, today defined as the Renaissance. Most historical academic narratives date this seismic artistic change to the sponsored competition to win the commission of a second set of bronze doors for the Baptistry building in Florence. The principal competition was between Brunelleschi and Ghiberti, and whilst much is made of whether there was a winner or in fact the result was a draw, the latter took up the full commission in earnest. Brunelleschi abandoned the idea of a collaboration with his lifelong rival and departed for Rome with Donatello – a journey to seek greater understanding of the art of antiquity.

Donatello returned to assist Ghiberti with the doors, and it is known through payment logs that his role was considerably more highly rewarded than that of a mere apprentice, despite his young age, and speaks of a recognition for his talents very early on. In 1406 Donatello transitioned from the Ghiberti workshop – an experience that convinced him to avoid running a major studio, and instead, he sought collaborative relationships with other sculptors throughout his career – and began working in the Opera del Duomo (Florence Cathedral workshop). The Opera was conducted under an

atmosphere of friendly competition amongst the group of sculptors employed there – an environment deliberately set to encourage artistic invention. Naturally, the primary medium for the cathedral adornment was stone, and Donatello's talent in this field was quickly recognised. By 1408 he had been given a notable commission on the Porta della Mandorla.

In 1411 he received his first commission for a sculpture for Orsanmichele, a building that would become an extraordinary public gallery displaying the talents of Florence's young sculptors to its citizens. Donatello completed several major works, all considered revolutionary in design. His first, a marble figure of St. Mark for a niche, caused a sensation when it was unveiled (fig. 2). We will address why this work is broadly considered the first true Renaissance work of art, and, with the later statue of St. George, we will consider his experiments with perspective and his novel, exquisite technique of 'rilievo schiacciato' – creating a shallow modelled relief that would expand the possibilities of the sculptural medium (figs. 3 & 4).



Fig 2 - Donatello, *St. Mark*,  
1411-13



Fig 3 - Donatello, *St. George*,  
c. 1415-17



Fig 4 - **Donatello**, *St. George*, relief,  
c. 1415-17

In 1415 Donatello received the first of his important commissions for sculpted figures of the Prophets to adorn the Campanile – including the famous *Zuccone* – in which he drew on the ideals of classical sculpture and married them with a new realism, achieving “a marvellous suggestion of life bursting out of the stone” as noted by Vasari – and reputedly the sculptor himself (fig. 5). Along with his interest in realism and an unprecedented understanding of human anatomy, Donatello produced the first free-standing male nude since antiquity, the Biblical figure of David – considered one of the most complex works in his oeuvre. We will discuss the piece in the context of its exhibition as a Medici commission and its political significance for Florence, in addition to its art historical importance in figurative sculpture (fig. 6).

Another first since antiquity was the revival of the Roman equestrian monument. It is known that Donatello and Paolo Uccello consulted both on the Sir John Hawkwood fresco for the Duomo and on the Paduan commission of Erasmo da Narni, ‘*Gattamelata*’, the magnificent bronze statue begun in the 1440s and completed in 1453 (fig. 7). Donatello put his name to few works for posterity, but one such is another work in bronze, *Judith and Holofernes*, c. 1456. Judith, the other Biblical figure most closely identified with Florence, was considered the female counterpart to David (fig. 8).



Fig 5 - **Donatello**,  
*Habbakuk, Lo Zuccone*,  
c. 1423-25



Fig 6 - **Donatello**,  
*David*, c. 1434-40



Fig 7- **Donatello**, *Gattamelata*,  
1444-53



Fig 8- **Donatello**, *Judith and  
Holofernes*, c. 1456

It is said of Donatello that his artworks adorn the city of Florence, both the interiors and exteriors, more than any other artist still to this day – and whilst his works in marble and bronze are most celebrated, we see Donatello’s greatest expressive power as a sculptor in a work that has little documentation of patronage or location, his *Mary Magdalene*, c. 1438, a polychrome and gilded wood, free-standing figure (fig. 8). Donatello’s unorthodox representation of the Magdalen, showing all the signs of human suffering, presents the figure as a universal symbol of repentance, and insists on an inescapable emotive relationship between the work of art and the individual human observer. On his death in December 1466, his body was placed in the crypt of San Lorenzo, near to body of his most important and devoted patron, Cosimo de’ Medici, an extraordinary privilege for an artist, but one that demonstrates the esteem in which he was held during his lifetime.



Fig 8 - **Donatello**,  
*Magdalene*,  
c. 1438

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