HUMANISM and the CLASSICAL TRADITION: EARLY ITALIAN RENAISSANCE
(Donatello and Early Renaissance Sculpture)
In the early fifteenth century, the two most important sculptural commissions in Florence were the new bronze doors for the Florence Cathedral Baptistery and the exterior decoration of the Church of Orsanmichele. Orsanmichele, once an open-arcaded market, was both the municipal granary and a shrine for the local guilds. After its ground floor was walled up near the end of the fourteenth century, each of the twelve niches on the outside of the building was assigned to a guild, which was to commission a large figure of its patron saint or saints for the niche.
Nanni di Banco. *Quattro Santi Coronati*, (Or San Michele, Florence), c. 1408-1414, marble
Nanni di Banco (c. 1385-1421), son of a sculptor in the Florence Cathedral workshop, produced statues for three of Oransmichele’s niches in his short but brilliant career. The *Four Crowned Martyrs* was commissioned about 1410-1413 by the stone carvers and woodworkers’ guild, to which Nanni himself belonged.

These martyrs, according to legend, were third-century Christian sculptors executed for refusing to make an image of a Roman god.

Although the architectural setting resembles a small-scale Gothic chapel, Nanni’s figures— with their solid bodies, heavy, form-revealing togas, and stylized hair and beards—nevertheless have the appearance of ancient Roman sculpture.
Their varying physiognomies and ages identify them as distinct individuals, and their unity of purpose is reinforced by their formal unity; their semicircular arrangement repeats the curve of the niche. Their gestures, serious expressions, and heavy draperies reflect the gravity of the decision they are about to make. Defying the emperor, especially one known for his tyrannical persecution of Christians, would have been identified in fifteenth-century Florence with republican sentiments.
In the relief below the niche, Nanni depicted the activities of the guild. From left to right, members construct a wall, drill a spiral colonnette, measure a capital with dividers, and carve a putto. The four guild workers appear to be the four Coronati themselves; their refusal to work for the emperor is ironically juxtaposed with their concentration in the present. By condensing time in this way, Nanni enforces the connection between defying a tyrannical emperor and the republic of Florence. The nude *putto* reflects the contemporary interest in organic nude form that was an aspect of the Classical revival.
The great genius of early Italian Renaissance sculpture was Donatello (Donato di Niccolo Bardi, c. 1386-1466), one of the most influential figures of the century in Italy.

Between 1411 and 1413, Donatello worked on the niche figure of Saint Mark for the guild of linen weavers (Arte dei Linaiuoli). The relaxed contrapposto pose, similar to that of the marble David for the cathedral, reflects Classical influence.

Here, however, the drapery is also Classical, its fold revealing the anatomy of the figure. This can be seen by comparing the stance of the saint with a Classical Athena, the Greek goddess of war, wisdom, and weaving.
Saint Mark is rendered as an introspective thinker, carrying his Gospel in a powerful, veined hand that emphasizes the relationship of the saint to his written text. In a tondo at the top of the niche, a figure of Christ holds up a book denoting the triumph of his teachings. Below, a little winged lion, Saint Mark’s apocalyptic symbol, also has a book.
The contract set the tabernacle’s price at 200 florins, but Donatello’s statue was only to be appraised at the completion of his work, revealing that whereas the ornamental niche could be evaluated in advance, the cost for a sculpted figure could only be judged upon completion. Since Donatello was usually paid between 90 and 100 florins for a figure like St. Mark, it is clear that the tabernacle would cost approximately twice as much as the figure.
Vasari explained that a sculptor should first model a clay figure in the nude. The next step was to dip sheets of cloth in what potters today call ‘slip’ (a very thin paste of water and clay), hang these masses of cloth on the clay figure until the drapery falls in a naturalistic manner, and let them harden. Then a full-scale statue in marble or bronze could be made on the basis of this draped model.

Presumably, Donatello had from the beginning calculated that he should lengthen the torso and shorten the legs to make the figure seem naturalistic when seen from street level.
Andrea del Verrocchio. *Doubting Thomas* (Or San Michele in Florence), c. 1466-1467, bronze
In 1443 Donatello was invited to Padua to produce his largest freestanding work in bronze: the *Equestrian Monument of Gattamelata*. This statue, which honored the recently deceased commander of the Venetian armies, is still in its original position on a tall pedestal near the façade of the church dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua. Like the *Marcus Aurelius*, the *Gattamelata* (a nickname meaning “Honey-eyed cat”) is impressive in scale and shares a sense of balance and dignity.

The horse, a heavyset animal fit to carry a man in full armor, is so large that the rider must dominate it by authority rather than by force. Previous Venetian *condottieri* (hired mercenary soldiers) had been portrayed in contemporary guise, in much more humble materials, and inside churches.
The *Gattamelata* was designed solely to commemorate a great soldier. But it isn’t the self-glorifying statue of a sovereign; it is a monument authorized by the Republic of Venice. Donatello therefore has united the ideal with the real. The armor combines modern construction with classical detail; the head is that of an individual yet attempts to display a Roman nobility of character.

The statue of **Erasmo da Narni** (known to history by his nickname Gattamelata, or “tabby cat”), was financed by the late general’s wife and son but made possible only by authorization of the Venetian government. The epitaph composed by the humanist Giantonio Porcello de’ Pandoni for Gattamelata’s tomb inside the Santo phrased it succinctly, “The Senate and my pure faithfulness rewarded me with worthy gifts and an equestrian statue.”
By removing Gattamelata from the present and recasting him as an ancient hero, Donatello avoided calling attention to the facts-discomforting to both parties-that Gattamelata represented the military force of Venice, which had conquered Padua, and that he was actually less successful as a soldier than the Venetians hoped he might be.

Significantly, the monument never received an inscription, which would have tied it to a specific time and place. Instead, Gattamelata is every hero, an embodiment of virtue, the noble Roman who exhibits self-control, dignity, and pride in everything he does, a model for all viewers whatever their political or ideological allegiance.

The pious pilgrim might even have imagined him as the Christian emperor Constantine, whose identity had long been confused in Rome with the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius.
In this sculpture, Donatello has merged aspects of the traditional equestrian monument with antique iconography, the function of which is to portray Gattamelata as another Platonic guardian of the state.

In contrast to the self-satisfied, relaxed character of the *David*, whose victory has already taken place, the *Gattamelata* guards the state in the present and thus is continually watchful.

The iconography on his antique armor reinforces this role, most aggressively the winged Medusa head on his breastplate. But elsewhere on his armor are numerous figures of Eros in various poses, some provocative, some playful, and some triumphal.
Donatello borrowed the kilt and short sleeves made of leather thongs from ancient Roman military costume. Victory masks and winged genii, flying or on horseback, decorate the armor and saddle. On the breastplate, a winged victory crying out in fury enhances, by contrast, the composure of the general. Virtually every element contributes to the impression of emotional and physical forces held under stern control. This is the ideal man of the Renaissance, the exemplar of Albertian *virtus*. 
Donatello. *David*, c. 1428-32, bronze

The least expected work of this period in any medium is Donatello’s nude *David* in bronze, the earliest known nude freestanding statue in the round since antiquity.

His sculpture has been the subject of continuous inquiry and speculation, since nothing is known about the circumstances of its creation. It is first recorded in 1469 in the courtyard of the Medici palace, where it stood on a base engraved with an inscription extolling Florentine heroism and virtue. This inscription supports the suggestion that it celebrated the triumph of the Florentines over the Milanese in 1428. The laurel crown on the hat and the laurel wreath on which David stands are probably allusions to the Medici family, in whose palace the work was first documented in 1469.
As a type for Christ, David has defeated Goliath-as-a-type-for-Satan.
As a type for Christ, David has defeated Goliath-as-a-type-for-Satan. As a symbol of the republican spirit of Florence, he defeats tyrants who threaten the city. As one of Plato’s “beautiful boys,” he, like the figure in the bust of a youth, is under the protection of Eros.

The latter meaning of the David is confirmed by the relief on Goliath’s helmet. It shows a group of winged putti- multiple figures of Eros- pulling a triumphal chariot.
Some modern historians have challenged the identity of the figure as David, proposing Mercury instead. Depictions of Mercury from the fifteenth century show the god with a particular hat called a petasus, similar to that worn by the David. A viewer’s position beneath the statue would have made the decapitated head barely visible and its identity as Goliath or Argo hard to ascertain.

Interpretation of the statue as a Mercury would allow the Medici to avoid the charge of appropriation of public imagery for private use, Mercury being the patron god of merchants as well as of the arts, and thus an appropriate symbol for the family. In fact, the statue did not have to read either as David or as Mercury, but could have been read as both.
The placement of the *David* in the Medici palace courtyard resonates with the marriage festivities of 1469. For the wedding feast the women were seated on the second floor of the palace, looking down into the courtyard—just as Michal, David’s wife, looked from her balcony at her husband.

This then would have transformed the *David* into Lorenzo, a youthful hero growing into a wise ruler, just as the young king in the palace chapel frescoes evokes Lorenzo’s role as courtier in the 1459 civic procession honoring the Pope and Galeazzo Sforza.

The multiple meanings evoked by the *David* typify the complex interweaving of personal and public imagery in Medici commissions.
The statue is softly sensuous, like the cult statues of the Roman youth Antinous. *David* resembles an ancient statue mainly in its contrapposto. If the figure has a classical appearance, the reason lies in its expression, not anatomy. The lowered gaze signifies humility, which triumphs over the sinful pride of Goliath. It was inspired by Classical examples, which equate the lowered gaze with modesty and virtue.
David's pose is languid and his expression dreamy, neither of which seems to express the narrative moment.

A pre-pubescent boy could not be expected to have the muscular development of an adult, but the softness of his body and the emphasis on his lower stomach strike most viewers as surprisingly effeminate.

The nudity can be explained by David's refusal to wear armor in his confrontation with Goliath, as well as by references to classical heroes, but the fact that he wears a hat and boots makes no sense in terms of either the Biblical narrative or the classical connection and tends to make his lack of clothing seem strange.
The strangeness of the figure has been interpreted in a variety of ways. One has been to suggest that Donatello was homosexual and that he was expressing that sexual attitude through this statue. (The figure bears a resemblance to the mythological youth Ganymede, who was abducted by Zeus disguised as an eagle.)

A second is to suggest that the work refers to homosocial values in Florentine society without expressing Donatello's personal tendencies. During Classical antiquity, homosexuality had been something that was practiced regularly, and men believed that they could only achieve great love with other men.

However, during the time of the Renaissance, when the statue was created, sodomy was illegal, and over 14,000 people had been tried in Florence for this crime.
Donatello. *Judith and Holofernes*, late 1450s, bronze with some gilding

The bronze sculpture *Judith and Holofernes* (1460), created by Donatello at the end of his career, can be seen in the Hall of Lilies (Sala dei Gigli), in the *Palazzo Vecchio* in Florence. A copy stands in one of the sculpture's original positions on the Piazza della Signoria in front of the Palazzo Vecchio.

It depicts the assassination of the Assyrian general *Holofernes* by *Judith* and is remarkable for being one of the first Renaissance sculptures to be conceived in the round, with its four distinct faces.

The statue was commissioned by *Cosimo de’ Medici* as a decoration for the fountain in the garden of the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi. It may have stood in this palace together with Donatello's *David*, standing in the courtyard, both depicting tyrant slayers. These two statues are among the earliest freestanding Italian Renaissance statues.
In 1494, after the Medici were expelled from Florence, the statue was placed in front of the Palazzo Vecchio as a symbol of the victory of freedom over tyranny. What originally had been an image of Medici republicanism, therefore, came to stand for rebellion against Medici tyranny.
Donatello’s statue depicts the moment when a determined Judith raises the scimitar a second time, having broken Holofernes’ neck with her first blow. Judith’s victory over Holofernes was compared with that of Mary over sensuality (*luxuria*), which is thought to derive from pride (*superbia*), the first sin and source of all others. Judith’s purity in the face of Holofernes’s flattery as he tried to seduce her is compared to the virginity of Mary.

A medallion inscribed ‘SUPERBIA’ is slung over the back of the neck of Holofernes, identifying him as having fallen through the sin of arrogant pride.
As with several earlier sculptures, Donatello included iconographic elements derived from antiquity that indicate the underlying meaning of the *Judith*. Each side of the triangular base supporting Holofernes’s wineskin depicts an orgiastic scene in which putti engage in bacchanalian rites.

The *Laws* of Plato, which were well known to the Medici circle of artists and intellectuals, decry drunkenness as a poor foundation for the ideal state. As such, Plato’s political message is in accord with aspects of the apocryphal story, in which a powerful general is weakened by drink. Merging form with content, Donatello’s sculptural base coincides with the weak foundations of Holofernes’s tyrannical army.
In 1427, the year in which the *catasto* was instituted in Florence, Leonardo Bruni, who believed in the principles of republican government, became chancellor of the city. He, like his predecessor, Coluccio Salutati, was a humanist and had been the one to coin the term *humanitas*, referring to the humanist curriculum.

Bruni translated Classical texts and was the author of the *History of the Florentine People*. Along with Alberti, Bruni believed that history is a dynamic process, largely determined by human character. In his commitment to historical dynamics, Bruni’s ideas corresponded to Alberti’s notion of *istoria* in the visual arts.
His marble tomb, commissioned by the city from Bernardo Rossellino (1409-1464), became the paradigm of the monumental humanist tomb. It is located on the right nave wall of the Franciscan church of Santa Croce, combining aspects of Bruni’s biography with Christian and Classical motifs and references to its civic context.

The deceased lies on the catafalque (a supporting framework) in a long gown. He rests his head on a pillow and turns toward the Florentine citizens who visit the church. He holds a book, probably to be identified as his History of the Florentine People, which, together with the eagles, was a reminder of the Roman origins of the city’s republican character. The laurel wreath around his head is the ancient symbol of triumph and immortality, and, like the History, denotes his fame. Rossellino’s skill in portraiture is evident in Bruni’s distinctive features and air of stately dignity. It is even possible that, like the sculptors of ancient Roman portrait busts, Rossellino carved the head from a wax death mask.
On the sarcophagus below the bier, two airborne Victories carry an inscription stating that ‘history mourns and eloquence is mute; both the Greek and Latin Muses are unable to restrain their tears’. Supporting the sarcophagus at either end is a lion’s head on a lion’s paw. Like the eagles, the motif of the lion had ancient associations relevant to contemporary Florence.

Another lion’s head recurs in the small tondo at the base of the tomb; it is flanked by six putti (three on each side) with fruit swags and is vertically aligned with the lion in the tondo above. The repetition of lions is embedded in the identity of Florence— as its symbol— and in the ancient tradition that because lions never sleep, they guard sacred spaces and royal precincts.
Desiderio da Settignano (c. 1430 – 1464) was an Italian sculptor active during the Renaissance.

It is rather surprising that he would have received such an important commission as the *Tomb of Carlo Marsuppini* early in his career. Apparently, his design capabilities and sensitivity to the tactile qualities of marble had already been recognized.

In composing this wall tomb for the Basilica of Santa Croce, Desiderio relied upon the precedent set only a few years earlier in Bernardo Rossellino's *Tomb of Leonardo Bruni*. Carlo Marsuppini replaced Leonardo Bruni as chancellor of Florence and undoubtedly sought to compete with Bruni’s legacy with this memorial. Despite being located in a church, everlasting fame appears to hold greater sway than salvation for Marsuppini.
Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) was born in the Tuscan town of Caprese and grew up in Florence. At thirteen, he was apprenticed to the painter Domenico del Ghirlandaio, in whose workshop he learned the rudiments of fresco painting and studied drawings of classical monuments.

The original commission for this sculpture of David of 1501 was intended for the exterior of Florence Cathedral. But when the statue was finished in 1504, it was decided instead that it would replace Donatello’s *Judith and Holofernes* at the entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio. This politically motivated decision reflected the importance of the biblical David as a symbol of Florence.
Michelangelo’s faith in the human image as the supreme vehicle of expression gave him a sense of kinship with Classical sculpture closer than that of any Renaissance artist... The young artist’s mind was decisively shaped by the cultural climate of Florence during the 1480s and 1490s, even though the troubled times led him to flee the city for Rome in 1496. Both the Neo-Platonism of Marsilio Ficino and the religious reforms of Savonarola affected him profoundly.

These conflicting influences reinforced the tensions in Michelangelo’s personality, his violent changes in mood, his sense of being at odds with himself and with the world. Just as he conceived his statues as human bodies released from their marble prison, so he saw the body as the earthly prison of the soul—noble, perhaps, but a prison nevertheless. This dualism of body and spirit endows his figures with extraordinary pathos. Although outwardly calm, they seem stirred by an overwhelming psychic energy that has no release in physical action.
The proportions of the *David* are atypical of Michelangelo's work; the figure has an unusually large head and hands (particularly apparent in the right hand). These enlargements may be due to the fact that the statue was originally intended to be placed on the cathedral roofline, where the important parts of the sculpture would necessarily be accentuated in order to be visible from below.
Left: Andrea del Verrocchio. *David*, c. 1465-70, bronze

The pose is unlike that of any earlier *David*; Donatello and Verrocchio had both represented the hero standing victorious over the head of Goliath.

The contrast between his intense expression and his calm pose perhaps suggests that David is represented after he has made the decision to fight Goliath but before the battle has actually taken place. The majority of his weight is on his back leg, staying consistent with the Renaissance practice of depicting its subjects in recoiled, calm positions, just prior to action. It is a representation of the moment between conscious choice and conscious action.
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(Donatello and Early Renaissance Sculpture)
ACTIVITIES and REVIEW
STUDENT PRESENTATION #1:

Who created these works? Discuss some possible explanations for why this sculptor returned to the classical tradition as a source of inspiration in the creation of these works.
STUDENT PRESENTATION #2:

Who created this statue and where was it originally believed to have been located? Discuss probable reasons the sculptor had in fashioning this Biblical subject in accordance with a revived classical tradition.