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Michelangelo's *David*: A Reflection of Cultural Identity

Works of art, created at various points in the history of humanity, serve as key elements of cultural representation. One of the more famous examples of such pieces is *David*, created by the renowned Italian artist Michelangelo between the years 1501 and 1504. Made of marble, the statue is a massive, 17-foot tall figure that weighs over 6 tons. The work is a depiction of the biblical hero David, commissioned for the city of Florence. *David* reflects various aspects of 16th-century Florentine society, establishing a reflection of the city's cultural people of the day.

David, commissioned in 1501, has an extensive history stretching back to almost a century before its development, an element that establishes its immediate civic and political context. Its commissioning traces back to a long-standing sculptural program of Old Testament prophets begun in 1408 for decorating the north buttress area of the Cathedral of Florence (Paoletti 2015). This sculpturing program would provide an important historical ground for the development of *David*. The highly influential and powerful Wool Guild commissioned 26-year-old Michelangelo to craft the sculpture to celebrate the city's escape from the iron rule of the Medici family and the creation of the newly established Florentine Republic (Wallace 2017). The city decided to install the completed work of art in front of the Palazzo Vecchio rather than on top of the cathedral's buttress as originally planned, with the sculpture acquiring a new identity as the symbol and guardian of the new republic. This

history shows that *David* gained prominence and societal importance immediately after its completion.

David somewhat deviates from the norms of its historical period. For instance, the figure is fully nude, a relatively rare occurrence in medieval art (Olszewski 2016 121). The stark nakedness of the statue additionally seems to contrast with the artwork's subject matter, that is, the representation of a biblical hero, as well as with the original intent of the ones commissioning it, that being to serve as an ornament on a cathedral. Yet, male nudity was a typical aspect of life in Florence at the time of the sculpture's commissioning. Records indicate that Florence featured various scripted civic festivals that involved public nakedness, especially for sporting or military purposes (Paoletti 2015 186). In this manner, *David* likely serves as a window into the life of Florence during the period.

While representing the biblical hero, *David* also gave the artist free rein to express various aspects of his own creativity, allowing for different interpretations of its meaning. For instance, the statue does not conform to any of the biblical descriptions of David. It does not portray the pubescent male featured in the Bible or the conventional visual traditions prior to and contemporary with the fifteenth century; nor does it express any of the typical attributes assigned to the man such as the severed head of Goliath and the giant's sword (Paoletti 2015 76). This marked difference gives the statue an ambiguous identity that precludes its function as an example of iconography, with the Florentine society ascribing their commonly held regard for art by transforming *David* into an emblematic figure.

Other factors may have played a role in influencing the structure of *David*. For instance, Michelangelo's personal preferences or the technical demands of the massive sculpture may have influenced the artist's handling of the image of *David* as a mature male, differing from the decidedly youthful figures portrayed during the second half of the fifteenth

century (Paoletti 2015 76). It was during the Medici family rule that society contextualized the representations of *David* as a youthful figure. This common mental image may have resulted from the need to exhibit a more domesticated illustration of earlier heroic presentations of biblical warriors that paralleled a “cult of youth” under Lorenzo and Savonarola; They concentrated on young males to spearhead the reform of public morals and education of the young from 1492 until his execution in 1498 (Paoletti 2015 76). Therefore, Michelangelo may have deliberately abstained from utilizing the imagery of a young David to contribute to the ongoing reform of society related to the Medici reign. In this manner, *David* would further serve as a reflection of the sociocultural environment of the city at the time.

David performed an important symbolic function in the newly established Florentine republic. The artwork, upon its completion, became a part of an extended symbolic imagery of civic power merely by its placement on the ringhiera in 1504, just a few feet away from the first courtyard of the Palazzo della Signoria (Paoletti 2015 142). The statue, alongside that of Michelangelo’s hero Donatello and two other bronze figures recovered from the exiled Medici family, came to represent a collective model of emulation for those who governed the city, announcing in no uncertain terms, from the entrance to the inner chambers of the building, the power of the renewed Republic (Paoletti 2015 142). In this manner, the statues came to symbolize the recent ideals of post-Medici Florentine society, especially regarding the city’s leadership, as indicated by their placement. Considering this perspective, the nakedness of the figure seems to suggest an additional attribute of openness and transparency expected of the city’s new leadership contrasted with that of the exiled Medici rulers.

Michelangelo’s *David* serves as a reflection of Florentine society and culture during the work’s commissioning and creation. In several ways, the statue mirrors some of the

mores, expectations, and regards of the Florentines expressed through structure and symbolism. The statue, carefully and creatively constructed, shows aspects of gracefulness and movement that continue to involve wonder and admiration centuries after its creation. The various individual aspects of the statue, such as the proportions and musculature of the torso, the definable tendons and veins distended from the skin of the hands, the folds and creases of flesh, and the apparent softness of the surface of hard marble, all convey a vivid sense of a palpable human body. With all of its elements collectively considered, the statue represents various ideals discernible to the viewer through individual interpretation. In this manner, the statue serves as an important part of Florentine culture and history.

Works cited

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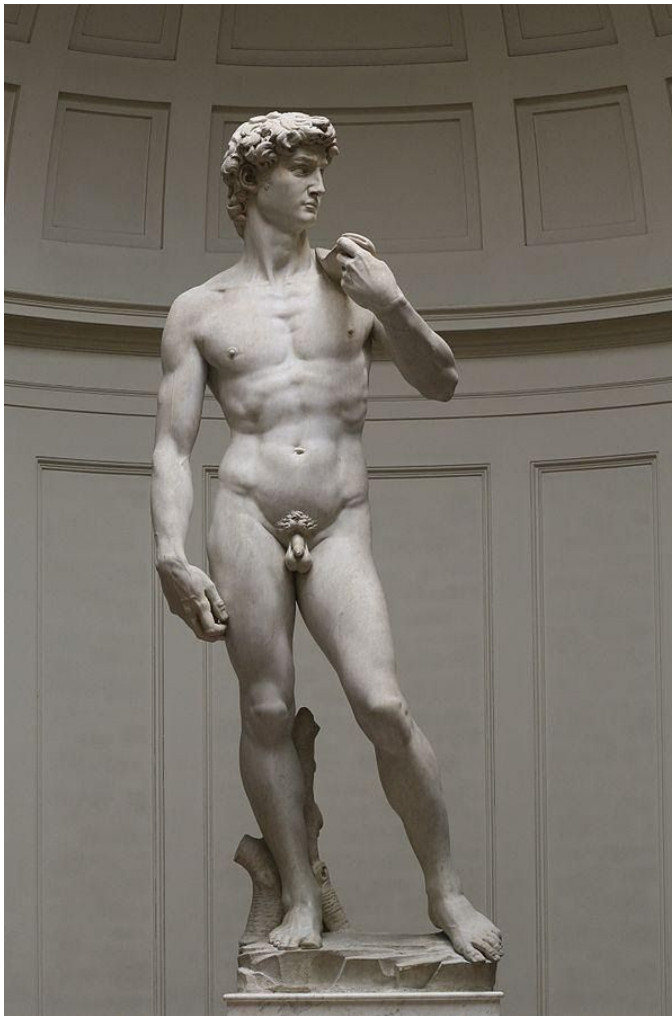
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Figure 1



Michelangelo's, *David*, 1501–1504, marble. The *David* sculpture, originally placed at the Palazzo della Signoria, is extensively intertwined with the history of Florence, reflecting cultural trends of the time, such as the public nakedness that played an important role in the military and political lives of the people.



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