Sculpture in the Age of Donatello: Renaissance Masterpieces from the Florence Cathedral
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The Museum of Biblical Art, lodged in a relatively small space on Broadway near Lincoln Center, is now showing nine sculptures by Donatello, one of the greatest of all Renaissance artists. Never before have so many of his best works been shown together in the United States.

Among the works on view is Donatello’s large sculpture of the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. “Speak, damn you, speak!” Donatello, we are told, repeatedly shouted at the statue while carving it. The dream of a statue that can speak or breathe or move is a fantasy shared by many cultures throughout time, and the story may be apocryphal. Still, it points to the fundamental appeal of Donatello’s sculptures: by some strange magic they seem to capture the phantom of life. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Habakkuk, which Vasari praised as “finer than anything else he ever made.” Even today it is often said to be the most important marble statue of the fifteenth century.

This sublimely harrowing work is at the heart of the exhibition “Sculpture in the Age of Donatello.” All twenty-three items in it were made for the cathedral of Florence in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and are on loan from its museum, the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, which is currently closed for renovation. None of the sculptures have been shown in the US before. Along with works by Donatello, the exhibition features sculptures by his contemporaries Nanni di Banco, Luca della Robbia, Giovanni d’Ambrogio, and others, as well as architectural models by Filippo Brunelleschi.

The show reminds us why Donatello is so often ranked among the greatest of all Renaissance artists. Born in Florence around 1386, the son of a wool carder, he worked in his teens assisting Lorenzo Ghiberti, and another young Florentine goldsmith, Filippo Brunelleschi—the future architect—among others. As a result experienced sculptors and masons were in demand all over Italy. The overseers of the Duomo had no choice but to rely more than before on a group of untested locals, many of whom had been initially trained as goldsmiths, not as stone carvers.

It is rarely remarked how very young these artists were. At the time of the competition for the Baptistery doors in 1401, twenty-one, and Brunelleschi twenty-four, Donatello was only about twenty when he began his earliest independent commission, a prophet for the cathedral, which is on view in the exhibition. Nanni di Banco, Donatello’s main rival in these years in marble carving, was also in his early or mid-twenties when he made the pendant to this figure. Their youthful freedom from the weight of tradition helped these artists to imagine the possibilities and techniques of sculpture, and the urgent demand for new work meant they were forced into continual collaboration and competition—a perfect setting for innovation. The sculpture workshop of

The Magic of Donatello
Andrew Butterfield

Europe in the early fifteenth century. This flourishing is all the more remarkable when we consider how sudden it was. In Florence both arts had lain dormant for much of the previous century; the few major projects there in building and sculpting had been commissioned mostly from foreign artists who came to the city specifically for the task, and often left even before the job was done. For instance, the new cathedral doors for the Baptistery, made around 1330, were designed by a sculptor from Venice, and the first bronze doors for the Baptistry, made around 1330, were designed by a sculptor from Pisa and cast by a founder from Venice. Effectively, there was no local tradition in making sculpture or architecture.

When work on the cathedral entered a new phase of high activity at the end of the fourteenth century, the new Florentines still were predominant in its creation—one leading sculptor for the Duomo was from Germany. The last instance of this tendency was the famous competition held in 1401 to make a new set of bronze doors for the Baptistery; most of the contestants were from Siena and other Tuscan towns. Yet this competition was won by the young Florentine goldsmith Lorenzo Ghiberti, and another young Florentine goldsmith, Filippo Brunelleschi—the future architect—among others. A new era in the history of art had begun.

Like all revolutions, the transformation of the arts in early-fifteenth-century Florence can never be fully explained; at best we can only identify some contributing causes. Stimulated in part by the city’s soaring prosperity and growing hegemony, around 1400 the wealthy merchants who ran Florence began to pour unprecedented amounts of cash into new buildings, paintings, and sculptures. They were citizens of a society that was more public things, such as buildings and the decoration of churches, for they were not simply to be the most important marble statue of the fifteenth century. This sublimely harrowing work is at the heart of the exhibition “Sculpture in the Age of Donatello.” All twenty-three items in it were made for the cathedral of Florence in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and are on loan from its museum, the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, which is currently closed for renovation. None of the sculptures have been shown in the US before. Along with works by Donatello, the exhibition features sculptures by his contemporaries Nanni di Banco, Luca della Robbia, Giovanni d’Ambrogio, and others, as well as architectural models by Filippo Brunelleschi.

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the cathedral became a laboratory of constant experimentation and advance.

The exhibition opens with an Annunciation group of the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, made at the end of the fourteenth century, and constructed by the sculptor Giovanni d'Ambrigo. It exemplifies both the sophistication and the limitations of Italian sculpture of this time. The faces are exquisitely carved and the robes wrap around the figures with consummate grace, yet the bodies are nearly lost beneath the fabric and the limbs are pressed so close to the trunk of the statue that they look stunted and inert.

A basic problem for many sculptors before the fifteenth century was technical, as we can see in these statues. Uncertain of the physical capacities of stone, and unwilling to risk spoiling a costly block of marble through unnecessary experimentation, artists typically carved their statues as shallowly as possible, with minimal undercutting of the limbs and drapery. As a result, sculptures of this time often appear blocky and constrained.

We are in a very different world when we stand before the prophets attributed to Donatello and Nanni di Banco, carved about ten years later, for the Porta della Mandorla, a major entrance on the north side of the cathedral. Gone is the refinement and restraint of earlier works. Instead the emphasis is entirely on movement and emotion. Donatello's Profetino (small prophet) is so desperate to communicate that he lurches toward us, almost stepping off his base. He juts his head forward and raises his head, seemingly yearning for the light above, yet his eyes are directed downward and his lips are parted. He is about to speak, and the hand raised to the heart suggests that his message will be moving and grave.

The new emphasis on motion and expression was accompanied by a change in technique. Ghiberti and Donatello were possibly the first artists since classical antiquity regularly to make large sculptures on the basis of three-dimensional preparatory models in wax or clay rather than drawings. It was likely Ghiberti who devised this innovation, based on his experience working with gold, for which model-making was common, although in much smaller dimensions.

This development had many advantages. Fundamentally, it allowed artists to experiment in the design of statuary in a way previously unknown. This enabled artists to represent a holy person in this way was the marble of Habbakuk, which he carved for the Campanile likely between 1427 and 1436. It represents the prophet whose short book in the Old Testament concerns the rise and advance of the Chaldeans against the Jews in the seventh century BC. The sculpture is commonly called Lo Zuccone (“the pumpkin”) because of its large bald pate. Created three decades after the Profetino, it was the last major statue Donatello ever made; thereafter he worked chiefly in bronze.

The first word of the book of Habakkuk can be translated as “burden,” and never has the trial of prophecy been more vividly represented than in Donatello's statue. The artist portrays the holy man as bowed and ravaged by the revelation that he has seen and must now convey. Wrapped in massive drapery that is at once weighty and floating, Habbakuk hovers and stares, a visitor from a realm where mere mortals dare not go. His gigantic mouth, cut deep into his head and wide across his face, is open to speak and the words that it will emit are sure to be fearsome. The fiery text of his speech in the Bible is a call of warning and despair, as much as a prayer. It begins, “O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear? evencry unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save!” Near the end the book tells in brief but agonizing detail of what he has suffered for his divine vision: “When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself.”

Donatello's statue embodied not only spiritual but also physical terror in the biblical account. There is a tendency in the study of Donatello to praise his classicism and naturalism, but one must acknowledge how inadequate and misleading such terms are in any account of his art. The massive drapery of Habbakuk is only loosely related to that of ancient sculpture, and the head with its mesmeric eyes is far distant from the restraint of a Republican or Imperial bust. Even philosophic portraits from the so-called “age of anxiety” in the third and fourth centuries AD look placid and serene by comparison. Donatello, no doubt, studied ancient sculptors, but he felt wholly unbound by its conventions; he was only interested in how it could help him achieve greater vitality and expressiveness.

Another tradition repeated in Vasari, Habbakuk's features were modeled on those of a Florentine citizen, and partly on this basis some art historians have credited the statue's power to its element of realism. But as with so many of Donatello's works, the credibility of this sculpture—its eerie vividness and palpable sense of presence—has as much to do with the distortion of actuality as with its imitation. As we can see in Habbakuk, Donatello was always significantly exaggerating these of the most expressive features, especially the eyes, mouth, and hands. Another example of this in the show is in the Saint John the Evangelist on the façade of the cathedral between 1408 and 1415; Donatello gave this statue massive hands and ferocious eyes as well. Furthermore, to overcome the lifelessness of marble or bronze, he made the outlines and surfaces of his sculptures undulate in irregular, uneven, and asymmetrical shapes so that the figure would look as if it were in a moment of change, a living thing.

Historians like to celebrate Donatello for groundbreaking achievements such as making the first bronze nude in antiquity in his David for the Medici, or devising a way to apply the rules of single-point perspective to sculpture in his relief of Saint George the Dragon. These were accomplishments of great significance for the development of art, but still they were secondary to his principal artistic achievement: to show the power and the drama of the human response to contact with the divine. Throughout his career, he depicted holy persons, rapt in religious ecstasy and transfiguration, not only because his commissions required him to, but because experience of the sacred was what he yearned for personally. In art he was a naturalist, but he believed the power of nature included the unseen and the unearthly as well as the visible and the mundane.

In the Bible Habakkuk warned against those who would seek to make idols, “Woe unto him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou art nothing; a work, and there is none that understandeth’: Woe unto to him that saith to the image and to the work thereof, ‘Thou are...