

Sculpture in the Age of Donatello: Renaissance Masterpieces from Florence Cathedral. Timothy Verdon and Daniel M. Zolli, eds.
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“Everything depends on context,” wrote Bernardo Davanzati in 1596 in an analysis of how Donatello adjusted his *Zuccone* for a position on the Campanile, high above the Florentine citizenry. An understanding of the importance of context is especially relevant for the theme of this exhibition and its catalogue. Virtually all the works shown and discussed were created ca. 1400 for the Florentine Duomo complex; they were brought to New York prior to being reinstalled in the enlarged Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, where they will be shown within contexts that re-create, at least in part, the settings for which they were originally commissioned. In New York, the sculptures were shown in pristine isolation, encouraging viewers to see them primarily as masterpieces from that heady period when Florentine sculpture moved hesitantly, then decisively, toward the Renaissance. It was the context of stylistic and expressive innovation that made the exhibition compelling.

The mission of the authors of the catalogue’s essays and entries was to relocate these works within historical contexts that could help explain their creation. As Timothy Verdon’s essay makes clear, many of the elements that would define the Renaissance are already present in these works: a spirit of personal and institutional competition, what Verdon calls “a creative face-off” (25); an interest in the expressive power of the human body and face; the inspiration of elements and ideas drawn from classical antiquity; and explorations of the ideals of human dignity and individuality.

Countering the twentieth-century secular interpretation of the Renaissance, Verdon challenges the historical narrative by asserting that the “dominant motivation” of the patrons and artists who created these works was “spiritual,” while also admitting that “this religious self-awareness coexisted with an equally strong historical identity” among the Florentines (13–14). To cite just one of Verdon’s many examples, he quotes 1 Peter 2:5 to suggest that the sculptures of the Duomo complex should be identified with the “living stones” that create “a spiritual edifice” (19, 21). Daniel Zolli supports Verdon’s thesis, concluding that Donatello’s works for the Duomo “shared one consistent goal: to give compelling material form — often a body — to the immaterial truths of Christianity” (46). Zolli sees Donatello’s figures not only as “emblems of civic pride”

and “ethical statements,” but also as “vehicles of communication between their viewers and God, and investments in collective salvation” (46). This broader vision of the role of the Duomo sculptures offers to readjust our ideas about the earliest phase of the Renaissance.

Zolli makes an important contribution to Donatello studies with his careful discussion of how Donatello manipulated the surfaces of his works to convey expression. To cite just one of several compelling examples, he suggests that the unexpectedly rough finish of Donatello’s *Cantoria* was created to take advantage of the fact that “marble exudes an inner luminosity, and appears extraordinarily bright,” an effect that he notes would be especially effective in the *Cantoria*’s original setting, above the torches and candles that lit the area around the main altar (70).

Amy Bloch revises our understanding of Ghiberti’s significance in early fifteenth-century Florence in her analysis of his roles as a sculptor in bronze, a collector of antiquities, the master of a well-run workshop that became a training ground for young artists, and a public intellectual. Marco Ciatti documents the cleaning of Ghiberti’s first doors, complete with postrestoration photographs that whet my appetite for a visit to the new museum. While several of the works discussed raise intriguing questions of attribution, the authors remind us that Donatello, Nanni di Banco, and the others must have recognized that, when complete, their works should fit well within the complex as a whole, making attribution of specific works more difficult. Personal expression could not have been a primary goal when future commissions could be at risk. That there are differences in opinion about attributions between the essays and the catalogue entries is not surprising.

While the reinstalled sculptures at the expanded Museo dell’Opera will surely provide revelations for scholars and tourists alike, the authors of this catalogue have established a new foundation for understanding how these works played a transformative role in the evolution of Western culture.

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