THE PIAZZA DELLA SIGNORIA:
THE VISUALIZATION OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE THROUGH SCULPTURE

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Master of Arts

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Chapter I

Introduction

The beauty and intellectualism of the Renaissance continues to capture our attention, despite the fact that almost half a millennium separates us from this period. When first learning about the Italian Renaissance, it becomes clear very quickly that Florence was an epicenter of artistic talent and influential patronage. From the architecture of Brunelleschi, the paintings of Masaccio, and the sculpture of Donatello comes a new age where the artist is celebrated for his creativity and genius. However, without their patrons, these artists would have never had the opportunity to create oeuvres that are still analyzed today. The contemporary patron Giovanni Rucellai once said he supported the arts “because they serve the glory of God, the honour of the city, and the commemoration of myself.”¹ This sentiment truly encapsulates the multifaceted intent of the Renaissance patron, who must be analyzed just as avidly as the artist himself when studying a work of art from this period.

When entering the realm of public space, analysis becomes ever more complicated, for the artwork must honor the city it is exhibited within while concurrently communicating a message for the patron. This is why the sculpture of the Piazza della Signoria (Figure 1), a public space formulated in the fourteenth century in the heart of Florence, is such a place of interest; it not only displayed the first public sculpture in Florence, but did so in a way which clarified to the public who was leading its government at that particular moment. Because sculpture has been exhibited in and created for the Piazza della Signoria for centuries, it is beyond the scope of a

Master’s thesis to fully examine each part of its artistic program. Therefore, I intend to focus on the origins of the Piazza and the first four sculptures housed within it.

To begin, I describe the history of the Piazza and Florence itself, giving a brief but detailed description of its ever shifting political and social climate. Paired with this historical context will be the analysis of some of the architecture; the Palazzo Vecchio (Figure 2), the Loggia dei Lanzi (Figure 3) and the ringhiera (detail of Figure 4), all environmental factors which helped frame the space which then formed the Piazza. The first sculptures placed within the Piazza will be addressed semi-chronologically, first with the fourteenth-century Marzocco (detail of Figure 4 and 5), then with Donatello’s bronzes, Judith and Holofernes (Figure 6) and David (Figure 7), and closing with Michelangelo’s David (Figure 8). Their functions and fluid meanings will be discussed at length, from their shrouded origins to their identities, all parts of the collective program of the Piazza. Each of these figures became a symbol for the Florentines, personifying strength and virtue, traits deemed necessary for each citizen to possess so Florence could protect itself from oppressors. The crippling factionalism of Florence, the rise and fall of the Republic, and the Medici’s continual grappling for power all lend to the Piazza’s transformation into a forum for influencing the public and promoting discourse. This thesis will attempt to articulate the proper cultural lens through which each art piece should be viewed as the Piazza’s artistic program progresses. Consequently, this viewing will begin in the thirteenth-century and end in the sixteenth, marked by the downfall of the Republic and the reinstalation of the Medici as the governmental rulers of Florence. In the mid-sixteenth century, pendant pieces were made for both Michelangelo’s David and Donatello’s Judith and Holofernes under the supervision of the Medici in the hopes of reclaiming not only the symbolism and power of the two previous sculptures, but the very space of the Piazza itself.
Chapter II

The origins of the Piazza della Signoria

According to Oderisi da Gubbio, a celebrated thirteenth-century miniaturist Dante Alighieri placed in the First Terrace of *Purgatorio*, vanity is induced by success. While it is satisfying to achieve greatness, the egotism that often accompanies it bears a heavy price. Oderisi explains to the Florentine Pilgrim Dante that “For such pride, here one pays the penalty; . . . O empty glory of the powers of humans! How briefly green endures upon the peak --- unless an age of dullness follows it.”

Though one may be a celebrated artist or even a member of a flourishing government, no one is immune to the changes brought on by innovation or the fluctuating ideals of a group of people. As a Florentine himself, Dante witnessed the ever-shifting political climate of Florence, along with its growth in the arts, before being exiled from his beloved city. While Florence became known for the artwork and literature produced within it, the city-state almost met its demise a number of times due to prideful rulers and inner governmental disputes. Through the creation and presentation of artwork, the shifting governments of Florence were able to convey a direct, visual message to the citizens. Therefore, the following chapters will not only focus upon particular sculptures, but their civil environments, for one cannot fully appreciate the one without the other.

When studying Florentine art, one must consider a number of factors in order to properly analyze a work. These factors include what period is being studied, as well as the location and medium of the work. The shifts in period style, as well as the sociopolitical environment within the city-state of Florence, must be acknowledged and addressed in order to comprehensively

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analyze its sculpture, specifically that which resided in the Piazza della Signoria. Unlike the Piazza del Campo in Siena, the Piazza della Signoria’s organization was asymmetrical and its façades varied. The one factor that unifies the structures making up the Piazza is the undressed stone from which they are all constructed, which gives the space a glimmer of uniformity. In regards to the sculpture displayed within the Piazza, researching its subject, knowing when the sculpture was created, and even recognizing its patronage, is not enough. Due to the ever-changing politics of Florence from its inception through the Renaissance, the history of the city itself must be understood in order to fully grasp how the functions of these artworks in their original context were to display wealth and power publicly, while conveying a certain message to the elite.

Understanding the transformation of the Piazza della Signoria, as well as the Loggia dei Lanzi within it, is paramount. Before Dante Alighieri was exiled in 1302, there were very few sculptures housed within churches in Florence and essentially no external works. The introduction of sculpture into the public domain indicates the artistic growth of Florence and an attempt to compete against its fellow city-states, which were home to public fountains and beautifully crafted pulpits. This new focus on urban spaces meant that many projects, such as the building of the cathedral and the Palazzo della Signoria’s communal walls, were being worked on at once and the Piazza della Signoria was still being formed as a space until the late 1300s.

All of the works discussed were at one time all together within the Piazza della Signoria. Due to the urge to protect specific sculptures, copies have replaced the originals. Works have also been moved as a result of political and social agendas, which will be addressed accordingly.


Within this second chapter, I will discuss the history of Florence to create a foundation for understanding the ever-changing powers which ruled its government. This foundation will be built upon by the detailed discussion of the first sculptural works displayed within the Piazza della Signoria, not only focusing on the impact of these sculptures upon the public, but also the analysis and understanding of each of the works on multiple levels: individually, as a part of the Piazza della Signoria, and within the city-state of Florence itself.

The true beginnings of Florence are shrouded in the mists of classical Roman antiquity, with fabled tales of Caesar’s men erecting a temple to the god of war Mars, whom they felt allegiance to as warriors. Because this area of worship is said to have later been rededicated to John the Baptist, patron saint of the city-state when the shift to Christianity occurred, citizens such as Dante believed that the spirit of Mars would forever haunt the Florentines, causing chaos and unrest. The duality between paganism and Christianity is ever-present in the lives of the Florentines. Pagan characters and superstitious beliefs continued to influence the behavior of its citizens, including their creation and treatment of art. According to recent archaeological findings, soldiers did indeed play a significant role in the founding of Florence. However, unlike the legends that locate those origins in the first century BCE, the formation began during the imperial age, sometime around the fourth century A.D.

Since the origin of the Florentine city-state in the early Middle Ages, control of Florence shifted between the evolving government and the rival factions (such as the Guelphs and

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8 Ibid., 254.

9 Ibid., 253.
Ghibellines), stemming from the need to influence the market and exchange of goods.\(^\text{10}\) After the creation of the Republic in 1250, the Piazza della Signoria formed in response to the regime's necessity for a governmental headquarters and adjacent public space, for the members of the government were meant to reside with one another.\(^\text{11}\) To be in this Republican governmental commune after 1283, one had to be an active member of a guild.\(^\text{12}\) Though this merchant-class government gave more rights and privileges to a broader segment of society than the previous aristocratic regimes of the Middle Ages, this Republican government still had its flaws, for long-standing feudal families wished to continue to play a role within the office as they had in the past. Paired with individual disputes and the guilds arguing with one another, the Florentine government remained unbalanced.

Florence had many hardships — from its failed attempt to bring in an outside ruler (Walter of Brienne) in 1342, to the Black Death of 1347 cutting the population of the city in half, and even the *Ciompi* revolt, an uprising of the oppressed class of woolbeaters in 1383 — which caused even more turmoil between the poor and the wealthy. An oligarchic government was established in reaction to these struggles. The establishment of the new government meant that the city was now being controlled by its wealthiest citizens. The “seven greater guilds” were those in power and therefore were able to pursue the commerce which would benefit them.\(^\text{13}\) This control by the wealthy set the stage for Medici intervention in 1434, when Cosimo

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\(^\text{10}\) For further insight into the origin of the city-state of Florence, see Stefano Ugo Baldassarri’s "Like Fathers like Sons: Theories on the Origins of the City in Late Medieval Florence," as well as John C. Barnes’ "Dante's Knowledge of Florentine History."


\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 40.
de’Medici used his vast fortune and diplomatic skills to not only bring harmony to the Italian peninsula, but correspondingly promoted a political strategy which pacified most of the citizens of Florence and consolidated Medici influence and power within the commune.\textsuperscript{14}

The Medici faction, working in the shadows of a Republican form of elected government, dictated the policies of the city until their exile in 1494. An episode of Republican independence from any one family ensued from 1494 until the reinstallation of the Medici in 1512. A see-saw in power between Republican and Pro-Medicean forces endured from the 1513 Papacy of Leo X Medici until 1528. In that year, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V formally aligned with the Pope and in 1531, installed Alessandro de’ Medici as the ruler of Florence.\textsuperscript{15} From 1531 onwards, the Medici ruled Florence. After 1551, they became the official dynastic rulers of Tuscany; their dynasty would be in place until the late 1700s. The Republic and the powerful Medici family are the patrons of the sculptures discussed in the following chapters. The “ownership” of Florence was often reflected by the sculpture which resided within the Piazza della Signoria. Thus, a knowledge of the sequence and patronage of the specific sculptural decoration of the Piazza is essential for understanding each successive regime's agenda. Additionally, as confirmed by the Florentine historian Sarah McHam, only by becoming familiar with the history and function of the surrounding architecture is one able to comprehend the Piazza fully.\textsuperscript{16}

The most significant structure within the eastern area of the Piazza della Signoria has gone by varying names over the centuries, but is typically now referred to as the Palazzo

\textsuperscript{14} Bartlett, \textit{The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance}, 40.

\textsuperscript{15} Levey, \textit{Florence}, xxiv.

Vecchio meaning the “Old Palace”\textsuperscript{17}. Arnolfo di Cambio is considered to be capomaestro of the project. Arnolfo has been suggested because he was named as such for Santa Maria del Fiore, the new cathedral whose construction was put on hold due to the Palazzo Vecchio.\textsuperscript{18} This town hall was in use by 1302, but fully erected between 1299-1314 with the dual purpose of being both a dwelling and place of assemblage for the representatives of the Florentine Republic.\textsuperscript{19} Edmund G. Gardner describes the symbolism of the structure and seems to agree with McHam that the complex history of Florence itself is connected with it, stating, “[the structure] may be taken to represent the whole course of Florentine history, from this government of the Second Popolo, through Savonarola’s Republic and the Medicean despotism, down to the unification of Italy.”\textsuperscript{20} The connection to these different historical periods is also reflected in the very structure, for multiple additions and renovations occurred from its creation in the late thirteenth century up until the late 1800s.\textsuperscript{21} The patronage of the Republic and the Medici is reflected in the architecture and the design of the courtyard itself. Both the Medici faction and the Republic have added decoration, including but not limited to, inscriptions and coats of arms, which were meant to emphasize whoever was in control of Florence at the time. The building is not just a historical landmark in Florence; it still serves as the city hall.

Though the current operation of the Palazzo Vecchio is similar to its fourteenth century functions, not all of the pivotal architecture from that period survived. In 1323, the stone

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} See Eve Borsook’s \textit{The Companion Guide to Florence} for insight into different titles the Piazza has been referred to as and why.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Levey, \textit{Florence}, xxi.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Edmund G. Gardner, \textit{The Story of Florence} (London: J.M. Dent & co., 1900), 146.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 146-149.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Borsook, \textit{The Companion Guide}, 14, 29.
\end{itemize}
platform, known as the *ringhiera*, was built in front of the Palazzo Vecchio and transformed the courtyard area by creating a physical, public location which directly linked the government and its people.\textsuperscript{22} Located along the palace’s façade,\textsuperscript{23} this podium was not only a location to deliver speeches, swear oaths of office, and announce decrees, but was also a place for worship and the adoration of relics.\textsuperscript{24} The *ringhiera* became a public representation of the union between the government and the Church. In the past, governmental ceremonies occurred within churches to forge connections between the priors and the clergy in an attempt to gain the support of the public.\textsuperscript{25} Having a ceremonial purpose for both the Church and the Signoria made the *ringhiera* a place of influence; a display of power within the community from which both institutions benefited.

In addition to the aforementioned functions, the *ringhiera* was used as a tool for determining the status of a visitor to the city-state. According to Richard Trexler, before an outsider was welcomed, he had to ride into Florence and was then forced to dismount his steed in a particular location. The distance the visitor chose to dismount in regards to the Loggia dei Lanzi and the *ringhiera* then gave the public an indication of his status, as well as his consideration for the Signoria, who would rise from their seats on the *ringhiera* in order to meet their guests.\textsuperscript{26} From being the location where Standard of the People was given to the *Gonfaloniere*, to the seating area of the Eight and Papal Commissioners “on the day of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} McHam, “Public Sculpture,” 159.
\item \textsuperscript{23} A. Victor Coonin, *From Marble to Flesh: The Biography of Michelangelo’s David* (Italy: The Florentine Press, 2014), 80.
\item \textsuperscript{24} McHam, “Public Sculpture,” 158-159.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 315-316.
\end{itemize}
Savonarola’s martyrdom,” the ringhiera was a gathering place for paramount moments in Florence.27 Dismantled in 1812, all that now remains of the elevated stone stage are the existing platform and stairs.28

Due to its symbolism and functionality, it is understandable that the ringhiera eventually was adorned with sculptures such as the Marzocco (original in a detail of Figure 4 and Donatello’s Figure 5) and the Judith and Holofernes.29 Florence is now considered to be one of the crucial centers for the creation and display of Renaissance artworks in public spaces (particularly sculpture). Therefore, it is surprising that for almost two hundred years (till the mid-1430s), it was highly unusual for the Republic of Florence to commission sculpture which would be displayed publicly.30 Though private commissions took place during this period, public works were not often produced. Commissioning sculpture for exterior, public areas was a tactic the Republic used in order to portray Florence as a reincarnation of Rome. Rome had a grand tradition of producing sculptures for prominent public spaces (such as the fora) to proclaim her glory. By communicating Rome to be a predecessor of Florence, Florence was seen as a conquering city-state capable of expansion (due to the far-reaching power of the ancient Roman empire), as well as prestige, for being able to lay the claim of being heir to Rome's glory. Florence wished to portray itself as a Christian community with the history and experience of an older, pagan, civilization.

27 Gardner, The Story of Florence, 149.

28 Ibid.

29 Coonin, From Marble to Flesh, 80.

30 McHam, “Public Sculpture,” 159.
Florence seems to have understood itself as a new Rome from its very earliest actions as a commune. This is apparent in the sequence of events which occurred in the late 1200s upon the complete vanquishing of the rival Ghibelline faction within the predominantly Guelph commune. The Uberti Ghibellines inhabiting Florence were followers of the Holy Roman Emperor rather than the papal state. Because the Uberti Ghibellines did not follow the pope, they were remarkably different from the majority of Florentine citizens, who not only were followers of the papal state, but also Guelphs, one of the competing factions.\textsuperscript{31} According to The Chronicle of Giovanni Villani written in the early 1300s, the extensive properties and homes of the Uberti were demolished and transformed into the Piazza, while the palace foundation was laid misaligned in 1299 so as to not be on the Uberti’s former land.\textsuperscript{32} The decision to place the palace in such a manner was superstitious and unusual. Though angling its foundation expressly claims the area for the Republic, it also departs from the typical placement of the main structure (the Palazzo Vecchio) in the center, which some contemporaries, such as Villani, thought to be inappropriate.\textsuperscript{33}

This destruction and building, paired with the commissioning of the Marzocco in the fourteenth century, emphasized the message of Florence as the new and improved Rome. Though the original is now lost and was replaced in 1812 by a similar theme created by Donatello in 1418-20, McHam indicates that this piece of statuary consisted of two well-known symbolic creatures interacting with one another.\textsuperscript{34} The first creature was the she-wolf, a maternal

\textsuperscript{31} McHam, “Public Sculpture,” 159.

\textsuperscript{32} Bartlett, The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance, 42.


\textsuperscript{34} In H.W. Janson and Jenő Lányi’s The Sculpture of Donatello, Janson goes into further detail, explaining that Donatello’s Marzocco was not on display until it replaced the broken remains of its predecessor, meaning that this sandstone work of the master was not put to use for over 300 years. This is supported by lack of documentation
symbol of Rome, as she suckled its very founders, Romulus and Remus. The image of the she-wolf was set against another figure. The second figure, the lion of Mars, is said to have been dominating the she-wolf.\textsuperscript{35} The lion, a symbol of authority and royalty since ancient times, was an appropriate choice, not only because it showed the strength of the Republic by emanating the message of control it wished to convey, but also because Mars was considered to be one of the founders of Florence.\textsuperscript{36} The Florentines were passionate about the lion as a representative of their city’s founding and they not only represented them through sculpture but even had live lions caged within the Piazza della Signoria. The lions were studied and their moods analyzed in order to gauge whether or not the Florentines would be victorious in upcoming battles as they were representations of Mars, the Roman god of war.\textsuperscript{37} This link to superstition and paganism illustrates the complex belief system of the inhabitants of the city-state, as well as their need to follow tradition.

While McHam describes the \textit{Marzocco} as a dual figure, H.W. Janson does not mention the she-wolf at all. This conflicting information may indicate that McHam and Janson are discussing different Marzocchi, as Matteo Villani claimed there were four in the Palazzo at one point, each decorating a corner.\textsuperscript{38} Janson, as well as other scholars such as Henk Th. van Veen and Eve Borsook, do not mention a dual figure but a lion who is crowned during particular

\textsuperscript{35} McHam, “Public Sculpture,” 160.


\textsuperscript{37} Coonin, \textit{From Marble to Flesh}, 80.

periods. Because the crowning was ceremonial, the *Marzocco* is not only the first sculpture placed within the Piazza, but is also the precedent receptacle of political propagandist imagery in Florence.

The act of crowning this *Marzocco* was a public celebration of the freedom of the Florentine city-state. Whether it be for the annual feast of San Giovanni, for escaping from the clutches of the Duke of Milan with their liberty intact, or twice during the month in order to welcome new members into the Signoria, the crowning of the *Marzocco* was a ceremony commemorating the achievements of Florence as an independent city-state. The crown was adorned with an inscription recorded by the Franco Sacchetti in 1377, which read “*Corona porto per la patria degna, a ciò che libertà ciascun mantegna*” (“I wear this crown for the worthy fatherland, so that everyone will maintain its liberty.”) It is evident from the inscription that the crowning was a powerful representation of the freedom of Florence. As with many customs, the tradition of crowning fell out of practice and was eventually revived by the Medici in the late sixteenth century, the newly commissioned crown being molded after the grand-ducal crown of 1576.

Furthering its propagandist agenda, the Republic realized that it could convey through sculpture not only its strength over other city-states, but its rule over Florence itself. This realization marked the beginning of the Piazza della Signoria being used as a public display for

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40 Ibid., 653.


whoever the governing authority of Florence was at that particular moment. Because of the history of factional civil war within Florence in the twelfth-century, it was probable that the pattern of discord continued.43 Disputes between the Republic and various factions, especially the Medici family, were frequent, meaning that Florence experienced a number of shifts within its ruling government. Knowing the dates of these shifts is crucial, for they directly affect the meaning of the sculpture which eventually was housed in the Piazza della Signoria, as well as the Loggia dei Lanzi. Some works were commissioned by the Republic and others by the Medici. Beginning in 1494 with the exile of the Medici and the establishment of Savonarola’s Republic, the alternation of Republican and pro-Medici governments began a game of transference, each claiming the former ruling government’s sculpture as their own to use as trophies. Therefore, with each successive regime, the initial meaning of sculptures was changed for a new political agenda. For instance, in an effort to remind the public of the Republican regime’s expulsion of Piero de’ Medici and the removal of the Medici faction from command of Florence in 1494, the Judith and Holofernes was one of the first works displayed in the Piazza della Signoria around 1495.44 By placing this sculpture in the Piazza della Signoria, the confiscation of Medici property was clear to the informed individuals within Florence, making it grossly apparent that the Republic again controlled the populace.

First exhibited publicly on the ringhiera, the Judith and Holofernes, a bronze masterpiece owned by the Medici and cast by Donatello, was repurposed as a direct warning for all who wished to stand against the Republic as the Medici did. This artwork produced such a strong message because it was likely originally completed for the Medici family, probably for Cosimo


44 Roberta J. M. Olson, Italian Renaissance Sculpture (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 89.
or his son Piero de’Medici. This is supported by the inscription on the base, which translates to “The salvation of the state. Piero de’ Medici son of Cosimo dedicated this statue of a woman both to liberty and to fortitude, whereby the citizens with unvanquished and constant heart might return to the republic.” The statement made by placing this artwork within the *ringhiera* with its Medician inscription is only the beginning of the patronage battle which occurred very publicly within Florence between the ever-changing leaders of the city-state. Despite its lack of pipes within the cushion, the adjoining water jets indicate Donatello designed this sculpture to be a fountain, possibly for the Medici gardens, where it was privately housed before being relocated to the *ringhiera*.

Another section of the Piazza which is pivotal to its design and function is the Loggia dei Lanzi (formerly known as the Loggia dei Priori and Loggia of Orcagna). The change of name derives from “the Swiss Lancers who were later stationed there.” The Loggia dei Lanzi was a commission given to both Simone Talenti and Benci di Cione in 1376. Commissioned from the commune and completed six years later, this hall has vaulting open to the Piazza with both Renaissance and Gothic features. The purpose of the Loggia initially was to create an outdoor location neighboring the palazzo which allowed dignitaries, government officials, and even

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46 McHam, “Donatello’s Bronze David,” 35.


49 Coonin, *From Marble to Flesh*, 79.

ordinary citizens to assemble. The Loggia also functioned as an area to simultaneously impress and greet foreign leaders and other respected visitors to Florence.51

Located to the west of the Palazzo, this space was decorated on its façade with Justice, Temperance, Fortitude, and Prudence, all placed within adorned niches. Fashioned by Agnolo Gaddi, these four virtues were thought to best represent the values of Florence.52 These values remained significant to Florentines and therefore relate to the symbolism of the sculptures later placed within the Loggia. The Loggia dei Lanzi’s function evolved to that of an outdoor gallery, displaying sculpture to the community through its three rounded arches. Sculpture such as the aforementioned Judith and Holofernes and other later works resided within multiple locations of the Loggia at various times, because its location allowed visibility and shelter concurrently. To understand the Judith, one has to not only consider its implications, but those of David, Donatello’s bronze which resided with it in the Medici gardens, and eventually, within the Piazza della Signoria.

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51 Levey, Florence, 46.
52 Ibid., 66.
Chapter III

The Jewish heroine and hero crafted by Donatello

The Piazza della Signoria was a pivotal location for public messages to be displayed for multiple reasons. First and foremost, the government invited citizens of varying status into the Piazza, meaning continual social interaction occurred there, all overseen by the ruling party. These social settings included civil ceremonies and religious events. Additionally, the Piazza della Signoria is centrally located within the city-state of Florence. Since the members of the Signoria resided in the Palazzo Vecchio for their entire term, it is logical that they would send messages to the public within the adjoining Piazza by means of sculpture.53 One of the most prominent locations for a sculpture to be placed within the Piazza della Signoria is near the entrance of the Palazzo Vecchio on the ringhiera. The ringhiera was a pivotal display area not only because of visibility to the public, but because of the civic significance of the area, as discussed in chapter one.

After the expulsion of the Medici in 1494, two sculptures created by Donatello housed in their private collection were claimed by the Republic and moved into the more communal environment of the Piazza, the Judith and Holofernes being placed on the ringhiera and the David being placed in the courtyard’s midpoint. Publicly claiming these sculptures as their own was a strategic move for the Republic, which would subsequently use Michelangelo’s David in a similar manner. Michelangelo’s David ended up replacing one of Donatello’s works, which shows not only the agenda of the government, but the incredible success Michelangelo achieved by the completion of his marble masterpiece. Through the use of sculpture, the characters of

53 For a comprehensive guide regarding the details of the Florentine government during the Renaissance, see Richard Trexler’s Public Life in Renaissance Florence.
Judith and David not only became known as symbols of Florentine liberty, but also became crucial in the battle of public opinion between the Medici and the Republic.

Records from October 9 and 14 of 1495 within the State Archives of Florence express that not only were these bronzes to be removed from the residence of Piero de’Medici, the palace of the Medici which resided on the Via Larga, and given to the operai, but that their next location would be chosen at the discretion of the operai as well. Piero was the eldest son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, whose bold political reforms, as well as cunning and flattery, brought prosperity and moments of peace to Florence. Despite being his heir, Piero did not inherit the leadership qualities of his father. Due to his lack of finesse and diplomacy, Piero’s brief control of Florence concluded sixty years of Medici rule while simultaneously losing important fortresses and dissolving alliances his father had worked endlessly to forge and maintain. In brief, Piero de’Medici had handed over territories to Charles VIII, king of France, when he and his troops occupied Florence in 1494 on their way south to Naples to lay claim to it as their domain. This capitulation was seen as an act of cowardice by the Florentine public. The rage of the citizens was so intense that it resulted in Piero and his brothers being forced to flee Florence in the dead of the night, thereby relinquishing the Medici’s claim of rule.

After the brothers’ escape and the sacking of the palace, the bronzes created by Donatello, the *Judith and Holofernes*, as well as the *David*, were placed in the Piazza della Signoria as a reminder to citizens of the triumph of the Republic over the blunders of Piero de’Medici, who was considered traitorous after submitting to the French king without a single

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54 Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello*, 77.

55 For a comprehensive guide to Lorenzo’s life, see Miles J. Unger’s *Magnifico: The Brilliant Life and Violent Times of Lorenzo de’ Medici*. 
battle being fought. The biblical characters of Judith and David are an effective juxtaposition to the actions of the surrendering Piero, for they are known for their courageous acts against tyrants who threatened their people. Only through the strength given to them by God were they able to achieve victory over their enemies and thereby liberate the Jewish people. As noted in chapter one, the message of these sculptures changed once their ownership did, for each institution had its own agenda. Only by knowing the history of these bronzes is one able to fully analyze their shifting meanings. Though these bronzes were not originally intended to be exempla of the expulsion of the Medici and restoration of the Republic, they became incredibly suited for their new purpose.

As stated in the previous chapter, the Judith and Holofernes was created by Donatello and supposedly used as a fountain for the gardens of the Medici, though its original purpose and placement, like the David, cannot be concretely stated due to the lack of contemporary documentation. Judith and the David were originally placed on pedestals in the center of what Sarah McHam calls “the first colonnade courtyard of the Renaissance,” which was not only innovative in its superseding of outer loggias, but was also a tool of propaganda, for the David could be viewed by the public outside of the palace on the Via Larga when the main entrance was opened. Furthermore, the medium itself is worth noting, for bronze is an expensive and potentially dangerous material if not cast and poured properly. Commissioning sculptures in this material and then having them gilded further illustrates the power and prestige of the Medici family.

56 Janson, The Sculpture of Donatello, 199-200.
57 McHam, “Donatello’s Bronze David,” 32.
Though its patronage cannot be concretely confirmed, it is likely that *David* was created for the Medici, its dating ranging over a 30-year span (1430s-60s) due to either the loss or nonexistence of a contract. Scholar Christine Sperling postulates that the bronze *David* was made for the Medici due to Cosimo de’ Medici’s exposure to Donatello’s marble *David* (Figure 9) in 1428 when he was appointed a Prior for the Signoria.\(^ {58}\) By 1416, Donatello’s marble *David* resided in the *sala grande* of the Palazzo Vecchio, where its residents had complete access to it during their two-month habitation. The inscription adorning this *David* was also discovered recently through research, and has been translated as, “To those who fight strongly for the fatherland God lends aid even against the most terrible foes.”\(^ {59}\) In addition to being exposed to this patriotic, religious inscription in 1428, Cosimo was also aware of the significant impact his uncle, Averardo di Francesco de’ Medici, was simultaneously making for his beloved Florence. By negotiation, Averardo was able to inspire the warring, opposing sides to sign a peace contract to end the dispute between Florence and Milan. Sperling claims that these two occasions inspired Cosimo to contact Donatello and request his artistic prowess to create an even more powerful and meaningful sculpture to represent the Medici role in the betterment of Florence.\(^ {60}\)

Despite this line of reasoning, the lack of documentation regarding the bronze *David* as well as even the loss/nonexistence of a contract requesting its commission, inspires some doubt as to when it was actually sculpted. The initial construction of the Palazzo Medici in 1444 additionally contributes to the uncertainty of when this sculpture was cast, for it may have been


\(^ {59}\) Ibid., 222.

\(^ {60}\) Ibid., 222-223.
for the aforementioned location or, if the earlier dating is accurate, a previous residence of the family. In accordance with the above evidence, Donatello scholar H.W. Janson concurs with the dating of *David* being around 1430. In particular, he uses the pedestal the sculpture once resided upon as evidence of the dating, along with the stylistic approach of Donatello, relating *David* to the *Two Angels* (Figure 10), which are a part of the Siena Baptistery Font. The *Two Angels* date to 1429 and are sculpted out of bronze and adorned with gilding, just like *David*. They also share a similar figural pose.

At a height of 158.2 cm, the freestanding sculpture of *David* was the first life-size nude sculpture in the round cast successfully since antiquity. Due to the realism captured by Donatello in this figure, specifically the sensuous, delicately formed, exposed flesh, it was difficult for even contemporaries such as Giorgio Vasari to accept that this was not cast from a living male. The nudity not only impressed viewers with its realistic texture and proportionality but also alluded to the classical tradition and therefore engaged contemporary humanists. Due to the family’s interest in antiquity, the nudity of the *David* is not as shocking, for while it could be seen by the public, this was only at the discretion of the Medici. Not only alluding to classical style, the nudity also emphasized the purity of this biblical hero.

His purity, along with his youth, are details which are corroborated by the biblical narrative. David is said to be the youngest of the eight sons of Jesse, as well as a shepherd boy in Bethlehem for his father’s flock. The inscription which originally decorated the *David* while it

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61 Olson, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, 83.


63 Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello*, 78.

64 1 Samuel 17: 12-15.
resided in the Medici gardens is documented within the Riccardiana manuscript.\textsuperscript{65} According to Christine Sperling, the inscription translates to “The victor is whoever defends the fatherland. God crushes the wrath of an enormous foe. Behold! a boy overcame a great tyrant. Conquer, o citizens!”\textsuperscript{66} This somewhat newly revealed inscription leaves little doubt of the identity of this sculptural character, for it alludes to a youth’s victory over tyranny by the grace of God. Because of the Riccardiana manuscript, we are able to confirm the identity of Donatello’s bronze youth as David. Due to the manuscript’s dating to the late 1460s, this supports the idea that not only \textit{David}, but also \textit{Judith and Holofernes}, was placed within the Medici palace as well, for its inscription is also noted within the manuscript.\textsuperscript{67}

Despite his young age, David is divinely chosen, for “The LORD said: There—anoint him, for this is the one.”\textsuperscript{68} This command not only leads to Samuel anointing him and his gaining favor with Saul, but also forces the reader to recognize David’s favor with God Himself, which foreshadows the aftermath of the monumental battle in the following chapter. After attaining Saul’s blessing to battle Goliath despite his lack of training, David is adorned with proper armor and a brass helmet. Yet, David “walked with difficulty, however, since he had never worn armor before. He said to Saul, ‘I cannot go in these, because I am not used to them.’ So he took them off,” implying that he stripped off his protective gear.\textsuperscript{69}


\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 219.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 218.

\textsuperscript{68} 1 Samuel 16: 12.

\textsuperscript{69} 1 Samuel 17: 39.
Donatello’s choice to depict his androgynous figure as nude may be an interpretation of the text, for though it does not expressly state that David is nude, it does indicate that David shed his armor. However, the presence of his hat, as well as the laurel leaves which adorn it, are likely a reference to the patronage of the sculpture, for in the narrative David was said to have worn a brass helmet. The laurel leaves of his hat and the wreath upon which he stands likely allude to St. Lawrence, as well as the name Lorenzo, both references being incredibly important to the Medici. The wreath may have multiple symbolic associations; not only used as a reference to Lorenzo’s patron saint, but also as a way to mark David not only as an accomplished harpist but also as a future poet responsible for the creation of some of the Psalms.\textsuperscript{70}

As McHam so astutely notes, before the creation of Donatello’s marble David, which is shown in a similar moment and stance to the bronze, David is typically depicted in art as royalty, the author of psalms, a predecessor of Christ, or a prophet, not as a warrior of God.\textsuperscript{71} Showcasing this part of David’s identity was a deliberate move of Donatello and likely the Medici, which will be later analyzed. Because the bronze David was moved from the palace into the public arena, many had closer access to it than they would have before the expulsion, including later artists such as Michelangelo. Michelangelo clearly took notice of this change in portrayal of the subject, which probably influenced his interpretation of David as a soldier of the Lord. Donatello’s choice to make the bronze David nude was something else Michelangelo took note of and adopted into his sculpture, the repercussions of which will be addressed in the next chapter in which Michelangelo’s David is described at length.

\textsuperscript{70} Olson, \textit{Italian Renaissance Sculpture}, 84.

\textsuperscript{71} McHam, “Donatello’s Bronze David,” 34.
Despite its initial central placement within the courtyard of the Palazzo Vecchio in 1495, Donatello’s bronze *David* seemed to lose popularity after the installation of Michelangelo’s *David* on the *ringhiera*. Replaced by a fountain in the 1550s, Donatello’s *David* moved to one of the previous locations of the *Judith and Holofernes*, which was a niche positioned by the stairs on the doorway’s left hand side.\(^{72}\) This is the point where the pedestal upon which it stood was lost. All that remains are the contemporary writings concerning it, which do not always agree on whether the pedestal was created for the *David* or another sculpture.\(^{73}\) Vasari claims the pedestal was made by Desiderio da Settignano, a follower of Donatello, decorated with “marble… beautiful harpies, and some vine tendrils in bronze,” meaning the pedestal used a variety of media and would have had to have been made after completion of the *David*.\(^{74}\)

If Vasari’s description is valid, there are a few ways to interpret the imagery. Firstly, harpies are creatures which have been identified as demons or hybrids, recognizable by features which include the breasts and faces of female humans combined with the wings and frame of a vulture.\(^{75}\) The harpies may be associated with the Christian deadly sin of avarice, the sole purpose of the creatures in this context being to bring misery to misers, a possible commentary relating to the Medici or Signoria depending upon when the pedestal was installed.\(^{76}\) The harpies may also reference classical mythology as well, which is understandable given the respect the

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\(^{72}\) Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello*, 80.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 78-80.


\(^{76}\) Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols*, 38.
Medici had for classical themes, as well the Florentine way of melding pagan and Christian imagery. The symbolism of the harpy changed over time, shifting emphasis from notions of metamorphosis and bestiality, to promiscuity (an adaptation made within the church), to then finally being seen as an image of atonement for one’s sins.  

Unexpectedly, the symbolism associated with the pedestal arguably links more to the Judith than the David. Therefore, it is possible that the original, inscribed column the David stood on was modified, the harpies and tendrils being added to bottom in order to make it more decorative and meaningful to the Medici, as well as a link to Judith. It is possible that this motif was later added to inspire connection between the two works as pendants, an idea McHam explores in other respects in her article “Donatello’s Bronze David and Judith as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence.” The idea of bestiality within the pedestal connects to the medal worn by Holofernes. The concept of promiscuity and idea of the temptress also relates to Judith and Holofernes in an unexpected manner, for Judith must act as a seductress in order lull Holofernes into a false sense of security. It is also possible that this imagery was meant to remind the viewer of the overall inferiority but potential danger of women, for harpies were portrayed as female and their capability to seduce men is what gave them the power over them. While seduction plays a crucial role in the story of Judith, it must be stated that according to the biblical narrative, her motives were unselfish and her final act of slaughter was only possible through the will of God. Her conservative dress, as well as Holofernes placement upon a cushion with little clothing him, show him to be the symbol of lust in Donatello’s piece, not Judith. Unfortunately, due to the

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79 McHam, “Donatello’s Bronze David,” 35.
loss of this pedestal, contemporary descriptions are all that is left of it, leaving its study speculative. Janson notes that if we are to believe Vasari’s assertion that the pedestal was created by one of Donatello’s followers, this suggests that *David* dates to around 1430, before his time in Padua. Otherwise, Donatello himself would have made the pedestal meant to be occupied by his sculpture, as he did with the pedestal for the *Judith and Holofernes*.

Created by Donatello in the 1450s (after his time in Padua) likely as a fountain for the gardens of the Medici, the *Judith and Holofernes* was also originally privately owned and displayed. Its function as a fountain is indicated by the spouts decorating it, and may reference the Book of Judith in regards to purity and survival. In the narrative, water is vital to the existence of the Israelites. When the spring located near the hill town of Bethulia, described as their main source of water and therefore a crucial element to the survival of the townspeople, is then threatened by the Assyrians, Judith is forced to intervene. In an attempt to take the town, Holofernes positions armed guards around the spring and forces a drought among the Bethulians. The character Judith is then not introduced to the reader until chapter eight of the Book of Judith. After her identity is patrilineally noted, Judith is revealed to be a wealthy, attractive, yet faithful widow respected due to her fear of God. While the ancients of the city plan to surrender to the Assyrians due to the imminent deaths of their people (caused by lack of water), Judith convinces them to remain faithful, for through her, the Lord would save their city. While the drought within the narrative may have been influential in linking the character

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81 According to Roberta Olson’s *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, this dating is possible due to not only the stylistic traits of this sculpture, but also documented sales of bronze.

82 Judith 7: 6.

83 Judith 8: 1-36.
of Judith with the fountain, it is also probable that the fountain is a reference to chapter twelve, in which Judith has already successfully infiltrated the Assyrian camp. She is described as bathing in the spring each of the three nights she is at the camp of the Assyrians before praying to God. The bathing described here is obviously a means to purify herself before speaking to God, another ideal the Medici would have wished to associate themselves with.

Yet another part of the narrative the bronze references is when Judith prays to God for the capability to carry out his will, pleading, “See their pride, and send forth your fury upon their heads. Give me, a widow, a strong hand to execute my plan. By the deceit of my lips, strike down slave together with ruler, and ruler together with attendant. Crush their arrogance by the hand of a female.” The initial inscription adorning Donatello’s fountain relates to this biblical text, translating to, “Kingdoms fall through luxury, cities rise through virtue; behold the neck of pride severed by humility.” For the Medici, it would seem that Judith was a symbol of humility while Holofernes represented pride and other vices. As stated in the introduction of chapter two, pride is a known downfall of Florentine citizens and leaders alike, as written by Dante in his Divine Comedy. According to Roger Crum, Donatello may have been influenced by the ideas of Dante in the Divine Comedy, the Judith and Holofernes being inspired in multiple ways by this masterful work of literature.

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84 Judith 12:7.
86 Judith 9:9-10.
88 Ibid., 24.
As previously mentioned, the *Divine Comedy* discusses the consequences of sinful pride in *Purgatorio*, as well as *Inferno*. In Canto X of *Purgatorio*, Dante the Pilgrim witnesses the punishment of the prideful, who “were indeed bent down- some less, some more- according to the weights their back now bore.”\(^{89}\) By bearing heavy loads on their backs, the prideful are unable to raise their necks, a detail noticed by Crum, who suggests that this further indicates the symbolic significance of the neck of Donatello’s *Holofernes*. This symbolic connection is supported by the previously mentioned inscription adorning it which specifically notes “the neck of pride.” Further evidence of Dante’s connection to this theme is in Canto XII of *Purgatorio*, where the Pilgrim is still on the First Terrace. Dante encounters a beautifully sculpted path which indicates imperative figures punished for their prideful actions; one of the thirteen illustrations inlaid within the path “showed the rout of the Assyrians, sent reeling after Holofernes’ death, and also showed his body — what was left.”\(^{90}\)

Dante’s mention of the demise of Holofernes suggests that the Book of Judith was a narrative the educated Florentines were familiar with and connected to, supported by her presence in manuscripts in which her story of triumph is included in “cycles of the virtues” which also connect her to the Virgin.\(^{91}\) In the previous Canto X of *Purgatorio*, he even uses David as a symbol of humility, along with the Virgin Mary and emperor Trajan, describing him as “the humble psalmist… lifting up his robe- he was both less and more than king.”\(^{92}\) This

\(^{89}\) Alighieri, *Purgatorio* X. 136-137, 93.


\(^{91}\) McHam, “Donatello’s Bronze David,” 35.

\(^{92}\) Alighieri, *Purgatorio* X. 64-66, 89.
reference in Dante supports the notion that David was a familiar biblical character and represented virtue for the medieval Florentines. Furthermore, it indicates a potential influence on Donatello, for his marble *David* is gathering the cloth of his garment in his left hand. Janson argues that once the inscription “To those who fight bravely for the fatherland god will offer victory even against the most terrible foes” was added around 1416, Donatello changed his sculpture so that the scroll was detached (a sign of his role as a prophet) and the left leg exposed to emphasize his role as a warrior, the head of the slain Goliath resting as a trophy at his feet. 93

As David was a biblical character that Donatello sculpted on multiple occasions, one of which the Medici displayed in view of the public within their palace and the other which resided in the housing of government officials, it is likely that Donatello and/or the Medici patrons themselves looked to Dante as a reference. Though the Medici were often key players within the Florentine government (which is how they were exposed to Donatello’s marble *David* in the first place), they obviously wanted their name to be associated with a free and republican Florence. Therefore, though the Medici had dynastic aspirations (which would later be fulfilled), they wished for this goal to remain hidden from the citizens, as it would place them in the role of the tyrant, not the champion of the oppressed. The evolutionary shift of the *David* being depicted as a warrior rather than a poet, writer of the psalms, or even a king, is a clever political choice which began with the marble *David* and transitioned even more significantly within Donatello’s bronze.

Donatello emphasized David’s heroic feat, the giant slayer brandishing Goliath’s sword in one hand and clutching the stone within the other, all while triumphantly standing upon

93 McHam, “Donatello’s Bronze David,” 34.
Goliath’s head. Victoriously posed, *David* is obviously the savior of his people, despite his downward glance, youthful countenance and thin frame.\(^9^4\) By displaying *David* in a courtyard the public was able to view, the Medici associated themselves with the glory of battles won in order to aid the oppressed. While this message may have been clear to the public, the Medici likely had another agenda in mind with *David*. The Medici wished to almost imperceptibly remind the public of their success over other factions who had attempted to rule Florence, and in doing so plant the seed that they were the rightful rulers, a stepping stone for transitioning into the goal of dynastic rule. Crum argues that the *Istorie fiorentine* is a document that was likely influential in the creation of Donatello’s *Judith and Holofernes* as a work to prove the achievements of the Medici and the downfalls of the Albizzi.

Written by Giovanni Cavalcanti, the text of the *Istorie fiorentine* describes the beginnings of Medici rule, emphasizing the dispute which occurred between Cosimo de’Medici and Rinaldo Albizzi, which resulted first in the temporary exile of Cosimo in 1433, and concluded in the permanent exile of Rinaldo in 1434, who then joined forces with Milan in an attempt to bring down Florence.\(^9^5\) The prideful Rinaldo and his vendetta are a prime example of how the vanity of men can not only be self-destructive, but also a time bomb for the destruction of once beloved cities and the liberty of their citizens, a theme which correlates directly with the *Judith and Holofernes*. Another correlation between *Judith and Holofernes* and the *Istorie fiorentine* is a particular conflict occurring in 1424, which Cavalcanti describes in detail in order to remind his

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\(^9^4\) The downward glance of *David* may be misinterpreted now as a lack of confidence, as it once stood on a column and therefore would be looking in the direction of the viewer rather than downcast. It could also be another way in which Donatello wished to communicate David’s humility.

informed readers of the former faults of the Albizzi family.96 The Florentines find themselves in combat against enemies who are following a female general. This general is self-described as being similar to the biblical Judith, for she too wishes to liberate her people and save them, in this instance, from the Florentines. Like Judith, the general is successful in her mission and defeats the Florentines, a message Cavalcanti uses to recall the Albizzi involvement in the war which led to the disunion of the commune.

While there is a gap between the battle Cavalcanti describes and the dating of the *Judith and Holofernes*, Crum asserts that the relationship between the Albizzi and the Medici, specifically the parallels between the issues of the 1420s Albizzi and the 1450s Medici, is strong evidence to support the claim that Cavalcanti’s general inspired Donatello’s subject.97 Crum attests that this general was meant to be a symbol of the failures of Florence due to factional discord, specifically of the Albizzi. By adopting Cavalcanti’s idea of the “General Judith”, Donatello would be adding contemporary depth to the sculpture, along with a cautionary tale of the consequences of domestic unrest. This iconographical complexity is supported by Cosimo’s political approach, which allowed him to mask his true intentions by speaking eloquently and favorably to those he wished to flatter in order to promote the Medici agenda. Therefore, the *Judith* may be an effort to distract the public from the issues concerning the Medici at the time, commending them on their humble and devout nature while subtly snubbing the Albizzi and reminding the public of their downfall, Crum arguing that Holofernes may represent Rinaldo specifically.98


97 Ibid.

98 Ibid., 27.
While it is arguable that Holofernes represents Rinaldo and the Albizzi, it is evident that he is a symbol of pride and other vices. Of such other corruptions, one which is illustrated on his person is that of bestiality. On the medal adorning Holofernes is an indication of this depravity, symbolically depicted by the behind of a galloping centaur or horse (Figure 11). If it is indeed a centaur on the medal, it is likely an additional reference to the egotism of Holofernes, for centaurs are considered prideful by Dante, which is why they are unable to be great leaders.

Crum draws a correlation to Psalm 73:6 where “the wicked wear pride like a necklace and violence wraps them round.” As the medal is hung around Holofernes’ neck and has shifted to his back due to the damage done by Judith’s already swung scimitar, this biblical verse describes the moment well. By adding scenes of drunkenness and immorality to the reliefs below the sculpture (Figure 12), the viewer is reminded of the biblical narrative and what is seemingly a heinous act by Judith is transformed into a moment of divinely inspired strength and heroism over evil. The inscription discussed above alludes to the moment of the narrative Donatello chose to capture, which is the very act of Judith beheading Holofernes.

With scimitar raised, Judith appears transfixed and incredibly focused. The fingers of her left hand are immersed in the flowing locks of Holofernes, an intimate and often sensual gesture which alludes to the act of seduction that led to the defeat Donatello displays within his sculptural group. In the Book of Judith, by using her beauty and her cunning, Judith is able to enter the camp of the Assyrians by assuring them victory over the Israelites, whom she labels as

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99 Olson, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, 90.

100 McHam, “Donatello’s Bronze David,” 42.

101 Crum, “Severing the Neck of Pride,” 27.
sinful. This proclamation, coupled with her fine clothes and jewelry, not only allowed her admittance into their site, but also evoked admiration from the soldiers. Holofernes himself became entranced by her, which gave her the opportunity to be without a guard in his tent. By tricking him into being comfortable enough to drink copious amounts of alcohol in front of her, Judith is able to take control of him and deliver two deadly blows to his exposed throat.102

Donatello illustrates the intense moment between the initial strike and the one which will decapitate Holofernes, the first and last large scale sculpture to ever do so.103 He captures this not only with the outpour of blood from Holofernes’ wound, but also by his body language. While it is clear he is near death due to his sagging body, Judith still uses her feet to keep control over him, the right close to his genitals and left on his wrist, indicating she has not yet completed her mission.104 Only by beheading him is she able to guarantee his demise, and also secure the safety of her people by having proof of his defeat. The placement of her foot near his genitals may again be in reference to the sexual temptation which left him exposed to her attack and the fact that she is in total control of this powerless man. It may indicate that as a woman she is physically weaker and therefore needs to be ready to defend herself against a counterattack, despite the fact that she wields a weapon. Her foot on his wrist may have a similar purpose, as well as referring to the life she is about to extinguish, slowing and even crushing his very pulse.

103 McHam, “Donatello’s Bronze David,” 35.
104 Her foot placement on his wrist, as well as her put together appearance, may be another reference to her purity. This is because in medieval imagery, a man grabbing a woman’s wrist indicated rape, as well as her clothes and hair being disheveled. For further reference, see Diane Wolfthal’s Images of Rape: The "Heroic" Tradition and its Alternatives.
By appropriating this sculpture and its theme, the Republic changed the private, personal message of the Medici to a public one concerning the citizens of Florence. By placing this sculpture in a public forum in 1495 after the expulsion of its owners, the Republic not only celebrated its victory over the Medici, but also forged yet another connection to the Roman empire, an empire Florence desperately wished to emulate.105 The Republic looting the Medici palace after their expulsion can be compared to the looting of the cities the Romans overtook in their quest to expand the Empire. One such act is celebrated on the Arch of Titus (Figure 13), whose reliefs tell the story of the aftermath of the looting of the Second Temple.

On the inner reliefs of this triumphal arch (Figure 14), the viewer bears witness to Roman soldiers carrying booty such as the menorah in a procession, communicating the Roman victory over Jerusalem. The Greeks too used sculpture to remind the public of important historical events. In Athens, there was a bronze group of Harmodios and Aristogeiton that was a representation of the men who attempted to overthrow tyrannical rule, which eventually led to Athens becoming a democracy.106 Though only Roman copies exist today, the original bronze Tyrannicides (Figure 15) were highly revered and displayed within the agora, the law being that no other sculptures could be erected too closely to this group due to its significance to Athens and the role the men played in the city-state’s freedom.107 The emulation of the Roman and Greek practice of using art as a means of propaganda is evident in the entire practice of displaying public sculpture within the Piazza della Signoria. As the Romans used the fora and the Greeks the agora, so those controlling Florence (the Medici or Signoria) used the Piazza della

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105 Olson, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, 89.


107 Ibid., 37.
Signoria as a political stage where they were the playwrights, the citizens were the audience, and the artworks were the performing cast. In this way, Florence was able to attempt to establish itself as the new Rome, alluding that it too would achieve success, power, and the capability to exude its influence over the ages.

In a time where the Church itself was yet another link to Rome, religious imagery was the perfect subject matter. Still accepted by the Church as a biblical heroine, Judith is a character who derives her power specifically from God in order to protect her people of Bethulia from the tyranny of the Assyrian general Holofernes.\textsuperscript{108} While Judith’s victory is over an individual, its effects are felt throughout the entire city of Bethulia, as well as within the Assyrian army. Therefore, the aforementioned inscription has a direct link to the virtuosity necessary for growth and success while still alluding to the scripture. The second inscription not only hints at the specific patronage of \textit{Judith}, but the ideals which she stood for; translating to “The salvation of the state. Piero de’ Medici son of Cosimo dedicated this statue of a woman both to liberty and to fortitude, whereby the citizens with unvanquished and constant heart might return to the republic,” a communication not only meant for the Medici family, but for the Florentines.\textsuperscript{109} While this message originally connected the propagandist ideas of liberty and courage with the Medici, who considered themselves to be leaders of the populace, by the Republic appropriating this sculpture, they not only laid claim to \textit{Judith}, but furthermore to ideals she represented.

Though \textit{Judith} would continue to be a symbol of liberty for the Florentine people, she would change locations multiple times within this outdoor venue, the first time being replaced by

\textsuperscript{108} The Book of Judith is now considered apocryphal by Protestants and is completely excluded from the Torah.

\textsuperscript{109} McHam, “Donatello’s Bronze David,” 35.
the celebrated *David* by Michelangelo. One reason for this was that the *David* was created for and commissioned by the Republic, and that a marble sculpture that colossal had not been produced since antiquity. Another reason for this is a political agenda led by First Herald of the Signoria Messer Francesco Filarete. In the discussion to determine the final placement of Michelangelo’s *David*, Francesco suggested it replace one of the aforementioned bronze sculptures of Donatello, for he believed both were problematic in their own right.\(^\text{110}\) To him, the problem of the bronze *David* was its left leg, which he deemed was “*schiocha.*” According to A. Victor Coonin “*schiocha*” has recently been translated as “imprudent” or “tasteless.”\(^\text{111}\) Due to the contemporary discussion concerning the sexual overtones of this work, it is unsurprising that the Signoria also interpreted it as such and that it was deemed inappropriate for public display, which was not its original intention. There is also the possibility that Francesco and his contemporaries did not care for the effeminate appearance of the bronze *David*. This misogynistic note is echoed in his distaste for the *Judith and Holofernes*.

A translation of Francesco’s statement reads, “The Judith is a deadly sign, and it isn’t good…that the woman kill the man, and moreover it was installed under a bad constellation, because from that time to this, things have gone from bad to worse, plus we have lost Pisa.”\(^\text{112}\) While this superstitious notion did align correctly with particular downfalls of the Florentine state, it also brings to the light the issue of a woman dominating a man. Though there were a number of other contemporary artworks, such as Botticelli’s *Return of Judith from Bethulia* (Figure 16), which depict Judith’s triumph over Holofernes, most were privately displayed and

\(^\text{110}\) Coonin, *From Marble to Flesh*, 81.

\(^\text{111}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{112}\) Ibid., 82.
not used as public spectacles meant to exhibit the power of the Republic. Botticelli’s painting does not show Judith when she is physically overpowering Holofernes as Donatello’s does but rather chooses to show her after the act, with her servant carrying the head of Holofernes. By showing Judith after the violence occurred with only her weapon and Holofernes’ head as a reminder, Botticelli is referencing the murder without emphasizing the brutality of a beheading. No blood is seen on Judith’s conservative dress and she looks as if she is reflecting over her actions. This depiction of Judith would be easier for the general public to accept because it does not portray Judith as stronger than Holofernes and focuses upon her beauty and chastity rather than her role as the enforcer of the Lord.

The misogynistic tone that the meeting took regarding Donatello’s interpretation of the story, in addition to Michelangelo’s David being well received, are the reasons that the Judith and Holofernes was replaced by the David, for though David does not explicitly portray death in the manner of Donatello’s Judith, the general public would be familiar with the biblical story and its implications. The Judith would be first put into the courtyard of the Palazzo Vecchio. Then, in 1506, it was moved into the Loggia dei Lanzi’s west arch, becoming the first sculpture to be displayed within the Loggia, which would eventually become quite the outdoor gallery for sculpture. Though it moved later to the southwest arch and recently was moved indoors, the Judith and Holofernes remained within the heart of Florence for hundreds of years, continuing to be a symbol of victory over tyranny, despite its relegation to a less prominent location. Both it and the bronze David continue to be analyzed by scholars, for there are still many questions left to ponder.

Chapter IV

Il Gigante: the ambiguity of Michelangelo

Arguably the most recognizable sculpture in the world, Michelangelo’s *David* is not only beautiful and indicative of the notion of fortitude overcoming a seemingly more powerful enemy, but it is also a creative marvel in regards to process. The way in which Michelangelo chooses to depict *David* in this colossal sculpture is quite different from the *Davids* created previously. Like Donatello with his *Judith*, Michelangelo chose a different moment of the biblical narrative than what was typically seen and used his aesthetic to create a memorable sculpture. The intention behind the creation is not enough to fully understand the work, for the story of the block of marble itself not only enriches the narrative of the *David*, but makes its completion that much more astonishing.

The block of marble the *David* was carved from was originally from the Fantiscritti quarry in Carrara, which is the same quarry much of the marble came from during the reign of the Roman empire. The marble's source of origin suggests that it was not only of a highly prized quality, but that it also had a connection to the Roman classical world, a bond which the Florentines tried again and again to forge in order to promote their own city as successful. Though the *David* was commissioned originally as a part of a sculptural program of twelve prophets meant to adorn the Florence Cathedral, it did not end up being placed there.\(^\text{114}\) If placed in its intended location, the access for the viewer would have been very limited, for it was meant to be housed on a high spur above one of the buttresses radiating from the dome above.\(^\text{115}\)


\(^{115}\) Coonin, *From Marble to Flesh*, 21, 37.
Besides the issue of limited access for the viewer, the *David* also weighs about 5,800 kg, which made it very difficult to move from Michelangelo’s workshop and onto a base, which brings to light the complex engineering which would have been required to hoist it up onto a spur of the Duomo.\(^{116}\)

Due to the issue of its weight and considerable quality, the patrons alone did not decide the final placement of the *David*. A committee was established and after intense dialogue between a number of Florentine citizens, where final locations such as the Loggia dei Lanzi and Palazzo Vecchio were debated, the collective determined that the *David* would replace the *Judith and Holofernes*, taking its place near the entrance of the Palazzo Vecchio as the new representation of Florentine liberty.\(^{117}\) Michelangelo’s *David*, nicknamed *Il Gigante* by its Florentine viewers due to its colossal size and ambiguous identity, became a symbol of the Republic, showing the reestablished government to be heroic and fair yet intimidating, just as the sculpture appears.\(^{118}\) Being placed on the *ringhiera* near the *Marzocco*, the guardian of the Florentines, only intensified the *David*’s role as protector of the Florentines against all foes.

Contrary to the myth, Michelangelo was not the only sculptor who encountered this block and it was far from flawless, despite the admiration it has received since its unveiling.\(^{119}\) According to Michelangelo, Agostino di Duccio, the artist chosen first to carve the block, was responsible for most of the damage inflicted upon it. While the injury done to the marble may


\(^{119}\) Coonin, *From Marble to Flesh*, 20-21.
seem an insignificant detail due to the current state of the sculpture, it is crucial because Michelangelo would likely have never been granted the chance to carve the block in the first place if it was uncarved. When the marble block had been quarried forty years previously, it was of incredible value, not only because of the quality of the stone, but the cost accumulated by transporting it. However, the longer a quarried block remains uncarved, the more difficult it is to work with. The stone becomes stiffer and more likely to break when carved, making transformation a daunting task.\(^\text{120}\) Though the marble was damaged and thinned, the massiveness of the block is what enhanced its worth; Florence had not housed any stone this gigantic since antiquity.\(^\text{121}\)

Originally commissioned in the early 1400s, this block had a significant history tied to the city; therefore, the completion of the *David* was incredibly powerful in representing the agenda of the Republic, which was to not only look back on past achievements, but to allude to victory over the tyrannical Medici and a new golden age for Florence.\(^\text{122}\) Despite Donatello’s *David* being portrayed as nude, it was still uncommon artistically to do so, not only because of *David*’s identity as a biblical character, but also due to the grand scale of this sculpture. However, since Michelangelo lived briefly in the Medici palace in his youth due to Lorenzo the Magnificent being his first well-known patron\(^\text{123}\), he would have had access to Donatello’s *David* and likely studied it, along with the ancient sculpture housed in their private collection.\(^\text{124}\)

\(^{120}\) Wallace, *The Treasures of Michelangelo*, 17.

\(^{121}\) Coonin, *From Marble to Flesh*, 30-48.


\(^{123}\) Seymour, *Michelangelo’s David*, 5.

\(^{124}\) Wallace, *The Treasures of Michelangelo*, 17.
influence of Donatello, one of the only sculptors Michelangelo openly respected, as well his affinity for the classical and the popularity of humanism at this time, seem to be some of the main reasons for the choice of a nude *David*. Like Donatello’s bronze *David*, Michelangelo’s marble version was also notable for the progression of sculpture. While Donatello’s *David* is known for being the first freestanding bronze nude since antiquity, Michelangelo’s *David* made its own historical impact by being carved from an enormous single block of marble. Standing at almost nine *braccia* after its completion, this colossal sculpture has quite the presence even without a tall column for a base.\footnote{Seymour, *Michelangelo’s David*, 3.}

While *David* was praised by many, it still received some backlash. Some have argued that this is because the sculpture was indecent, due to its size and nudity. The Church, as well as the public setting, had to be considered by Michelangelo while creating the *David*, since it was originally meant to decorate the outside of a cathedral. As his later work suggests, Michelangelo had a fascination with creating anatomically accurate figures, studying male models intensely in a number of poses in order to portray the musculature believably. Yet, Michelangelo chose to display the genitalia of *David* on a smaller scale than a real man in order to be respectful towards the Church and not draw attention to *David’s* sexuality, which is not the focus of this piece.

Despite this conservative action, upon its movement into the Piazza della Signoria, the colossus had stones thrown at it as a form of protest. Some argue that this was the work of Church zealots who not only felt that it was distasteful to depict a biblical figure as nude, but that to portray this on such a large scale in a very public location was an abomination and sin against
the sacred nature of the Word. Another more likely possibility was that this stoning was the work of Medici sympathizers, who realized that the Republic was sending a clear message of dominance with the creation and placement of this sculpture in front of the Town Hall. David not only replaced the Judith and Holofernes, a sculpture emblematic of Medici rule, but was adjusted so that his gaze faced Rome, the location the Medici were thought to have gone to after their banishment.

David is a creation of genius, for he is not only a relatable figure with realistic male forms but is simultaneously an idealized, almost untouchable hero due to his sheer size and fierce demeanor. John Paoletti suggests that Michelangelo’s mastery all connects with the moment being captured. Unlike other depictions of David, the moment Michelangelo chose is before his battle with Goliath, meaning David has not yet proven himself to be the hero who saves his people from oppression. Unlike Donatello’s bronze and marble Davids, Michelangelo’s David stands as though contemplating action and appears as a young man, rather than a boy. Though Michelangelo was influenced by the nudity of Donatello’s bronze David, he does not imitate its depiction of the moment after battle, where David is unmistakably and physically victorious. Nor does he choose to create a boyish physique. Rather, the moment captured is one of psychological turmoil; David not only anticipates what he must do in order to protect his people, but what the outcome will be if he fails. His left hand is thought to be readily grasping the sling, the weapon he used to defeat Goliath. However, the engagements of his right hand are a little more difficult


\[127\] McHam, “Public Sculpture,” 164-165.

\[128\] Paoletti and Radke, Art in Renaissance Italy, 327.
to describe, as both the front and back of the hand needs to be looked at for a proper interpretation to be made. Often, David’s right hand is described as holding a stone to load into the slingshot, just as Donatello’s bronze David’s left hand does. However, as Coonin pointedly notes, this is a grave error, for it is actually his left hand that is likely the one holding a parcel filled with stones, in addition to the sling. The recorded misconceptions often associated with the right hand may only be amended by viewing the sculpture from behind.

Upon close inspection, it is apparent that David’s right hand is not holding ammunition for his sling, but rather its handle. While this may seem confused, Coonin argues it was a deliberate choice by Michelangelo. This is supported by Michelangelo’s decision to begin another strap on David’s back but leave it unfinished. If he had completed this strap, the carving would have been a more accurate representation of an actual working weapon. The unfinished look of the back of David may also be because Michelangelo considered that given its original intended location, his back would not be seen by the viewer. Yet, the great deviation from past depictions of David may be the culmination of Michelangelo’s very style. He often chooses to simplify his figures in order to allow them to be more readable to the viewer, the focus shifting from their symbolic elements to their very form. David is stripped to the bare essentials; the iconic sword and head of Goliath which typically accompany him are not found here. The lack of symbolic ornamentation may additionally be attributed to the thinness of the block and its fragility when Michelangelo gained access to it. However, the aforementioned argument concerning making the form the sole focal point of the sculpture is in agreement with some of his later works, such as the Rondanini Pietà (Figure 17) and the Dying Slave (Figure 18), for both of these sculptures focus less on

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129 Coonin, From Marble to Flesh, 109-110.
ornamentation and more on the human figure and its proportions and movement, a stylistic
decision Michelangelo adapted from the ancient Greeks.

Although Michelangelo carved the *David* without distracting attributes, it is important to note
that after its installation, some changes were made. Gilding was added onto the tree trunk, and a
copper, silver gilt leaf belt was made to be fitted around his waist; a letter written to
Michelangelo documents that the belt adorned the *David* until at least 1545. A crown may have
been a part of this added ornamentation, although this is not definitive due to the lack of clarity
within the multiple contracts commissioned to make these changes a reality. The crown would
have been symbolic of *David’s* kingship, a reference which may have helped contemporary
viewers identify the figure more easily, or furthered its ambiguous nature due to its iconographic
complexity. These gilt additions not only followed the gilding of the bronze *Davids* made for the
Medici, but marble sculpture from Greek temples as well. Both Greek freestanding and relief
sculpture were not only originally painted to be more lifelike, but were also adorned with metal
features such as weaponry or symbols that alluded to the identity of the figure, making the
narratives easier to read. Because the *David* appears differently now than it did originally and is
seen within an alternative context, its features sometimes have multiple interpretations.
Therefore, while Coonin promotes the previously mentioned theory regarding what *David’s* left
hand is grasping, John Paoletti has a conflicting interpretation which takes into consideration the
established influence of classical sculpture on the young Michelangelo.

Due to the revival of classical tendencies in art, *David’s* left hand may be actually bunching
together fabric rather than holding a parcel filled with ammunition for the sling. Paoletti argues

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that Michelangelo did not merely position the hand as such to create a sturdier sculpture, nor to follow the work which had been done previously on the block, but to emulate the bunching of fabric often seen in Roman male nudes.\textsuperscript{131} Though the Romans followed the Greek example of using the male nude form to promote heroism, godliness, and strength, they also used clothing and armor as an additional layering of iconography, as seen in \textit{Tivoli General} (Figure 19). Fabric in the shape of a toga often adorned these Roman (almost) nudes, the bunching of fabric specifically over the left shoulder indicative of might and high social status.\textsuperscript{132} While Michelangelo may have been unaware of the exact iconographical reference, it is certain that he would have seen and studied these ancient sculptures, using them as a reference point for his own developing style.

The massive scale of \textit{David}, as well as his nudity, are likely also references to classical heroic sculptures from antiquity, whose style and characteristics Michelangelo assimilated into his approach to sculpting. Despite the evidence of inspiration from antiquity, the hands and head of \textit{David} are oversized, especially in comparison to classical proportions. The head and hands being oversized has been interpreted as a representation of strength and knowledge, two traits the Florentine Republic would like to associate themselves with.\textsuperscript{133} As the Renaissance was a “rebirth” of the classical, Michelangelo absorbed past tendencies and made them his own, possibly using a new sort of hierarchic scale in order to emphasize the parts of \textit{David} he deemed the most crucial to the narrative, in a way using symbolism without having to distract from the anatomy of the form. The hands of the biblical David were not only important in reference to his

\textsuperscript{131} Paoletti, \textit{Michelangelo’s David}, 142-144.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 144.

\textsuperscript{133} Coonin, \textit{From Marble to Flesh}, 103.
warrior persona, but also that of his Psalmist, where the right hand is mentioned multiple times as a connection to the might of God.\textsuperscript{134} This reference to the right hand also presents the possibility that the right hand of David is not holding the handle of the sling as Coonin suggests, but rather a scroll, which Paoletti defends as being a way to identify David as the prophet he becomes in his adult life.\textsuperscript{135} If this iconography is correct, it may explain why Michelangelo chose to depict David as a more mature man and why he was often misidentified by those visiting Florence. What remains clear from Michelangelo’s contract with the Operai and the recorded proceedings of the committee assembled to determine the David’s final location, is that the identity of the sculpture was definitely meant to be the biblical hero.

While sculpting the block, Michelangelo would not only have considered the intended identity of the figure, but also its original intended location. Part of this process would have included taking into account the perspective of the viewer. The David’s original intended location would change the appearance of the figure because the viewer would be glancing at it from below at a great distance. Hence, Michelangelo adjusted the scale accordingly to fit his artistic vision. Known as optical correction, this theory is based upon the notion that Michelangelo was originally sculpting David for a part of the Cathedral which would be much higher up than the viewer.\textsuperscript{136} Therefore, the head of David is large, allowing the viewer to notice his facial expression, which would have to be exaggerated to be seen from the exterior of the cathedral.\textsuperscript{137} Because this placement did not occur, the viewer gains a closer look at the

\textsuperscript{134} Paoletti, Michelangelo’s David, 82-83.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 77.

\textsuperscript{136} Coonin, From Marble to Flesh, 101.

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 104.
incredible terribilità, one of David’s most noted features, an expression often said to be the creation of Michelangelo. This intense gaze alerted the viewers to the severity of the combat ahead, as well as David’s determination. The symbolism of the gaze is crucial, for it supports the notion that David is the protector of Florentine liberty, able to conquer all of their enemies, despite their size or seeming supremacy. The direction of the gaze is also critical, for, as previously noted, David’s location on the ringhiera positioned his head towards Rome, the city the Medici were said to have fled to, further emphasizing the true power behind it.

The idea of machismo has likewise been associated with the David, particularly because it replaced the Judith, a similar biblical hero. Edward Muir discusses the complex notion of masculine honor in Italy from the fourteenth all the way to the sixteenth century in his essay The Double Binds of Manly Revenge in Renaissance Italy.138 While Muir himself does not discuss this theory in relation to art, I posit that because of the impact these double binds had upon societal customs, they were influential to the entire Florentine populace, including Michelangelo, as well as members of the Republican government, and may therefore have impacted the way in which he chose to depict David. The first connection between the David and this theory is in regards to the ideal of machismo, which Muir notes was ever-present during the Renaissance.

Machismo was characterized by a man’s ability to maintain control over women, as well as their success against other men, either physically or mentally.139 Yet, knowing these two ideals was simply not enough, for “biology alone never quite makes the man. Culture asks him to prove


139 Ibid., 67-68.
This act of proving oneself in a public forum is ingrained within the story of David’s battle against Goliath. However, for the men of Florence in this age, to act out these scenarios in the public sector brought about the issue of the double bind, for public violence could provoke governmental involvement and punishment. According to Muir, as the Italian populace became more “civilized,” it deemed vendetta killing, a common practice during this period, to be an unfit action for an honorable man. The act of vendetta killing was both brutal and somewhat ineffectual, due to its ability to promulgate the cycle of violence indefinitely, for there was always a murder which needed to be avenged. In addition to these issues, vendetta killings were problematic due to their effect upon patrimonies, and their very ideology conflicting directly with civil behavior and governmental action. While David was an example for these men, his seemingly virtuous actions could not always be followed due to the varied potential outcomes doled out by the judicial system of Florence, and therefore this is where the double bind lies. If a man chose to take justice into his own hands, he could be imprisoned. If he looked to the courts for justice, he may never receive it due to the divisiveness of the city-states, and therefore would lose his honorable status.

Just like David, the ideal honorable man of this period acted openly and appropriately to defend his family and people by gaining revenge in a way which does not further violence but solidifies his own status. The “good” man also protects his own above all, an ideal which is not only expressed in the narrative of David, but in his representation as a symbol for Florentine

140 Ibid., 68.
142 Ibid., 67.
143 Ibid., 75-80.
liberty above all other city-states and outside forces. Yet, while this Christian iconography may represent the eventual death of a tyrant, as noted earlier in the chapter, it lacks the gruesome imagery of Goliath’s decapitated head, as well as his sword. Therefore, it is possible that Michelangelo chose to depict a moment before the battle not only to vary his imagery from what had been previously done, but also to show the psychological angst the double bind caused Florentine men. Additionally, the battle between David and Goliath can be referred to as a type of duel, which is the system that ended up replacing vendetta killing, for it was seen as more honorable and an actual end to violence rather than continuing its cycle.  

In the story of David and Goliath, before the Philistines and Israelites go into combat, Goliath announces, “‘Why come out in battle formation? I am a Philistine, and you are Saul’s servants. Choose one of your men, and have him come down to me.’” This challenge seems to be the beginnings of a duel, not a vendetta, for after this call for an opponent, Goliath claims, “if he beats me in combat and kills me, we will be your vassals; but if I beat him and kill him, you shall be our vassals and serve us.” The terms of combat Goliath presents indicate that rather than promoting the cycle of slaughter, the losing opposition must submit itself to the winner of the battle, as well the army he is associated with, thereby honorably ending the violence with little bloodshed, as a duel was meant to do.

Though there was clearly a precedent for using the duel in a combat setting against an opposing military force, the social constructions of the Florentines complicated the dueling process. There were rules these elite men had to follow, as they were not only upper class

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144 Muir, “The Double Binds of Manly Revenge,” 78.
145 1 Samuel 17: 8.
146 1 Samuel 17: 9.
citizens but also often associated with the government. With this new system of honor came different rules, which included a man being judged not only by what he wore, but by his bodily, facial, and spoken reactions. A man was supposed to repress his negative emotions within his daily life and save them for the duel, which was societally speaking his only outlet, for he was responsible for managing the impressions of those around him, which included the complex practice of lying with finesse.\textsuperscript{147} The channeling of emotion falls in line with the intense expression of the \textit{David}, who does not look calm and even indifferent as his previous counterparts. Rather, \textit{David} expresses the emotions of anger and fear, those that men were otherwise meant to internalize during this period, lest they lose their honor and hurt their image. This externalization of the suppressed emotion of Florentine men would have been relatable as well as appropriate, given that \textit{David} was not a visualization of a contemporary subject, but of a biblical young man whose actions led him to being favored by God and eventually to being a king.

Due to the uncertainty surrounding the sculpture, another possible explanation for the \textit{David}'s lack of symbolic elements is that Michelangelo purposely wanted his identity to be fluid; interpreted as multiple characters at once without any definitive substantiation. A character that is often discussed as both an alternative identity of the \textit{David} and an inspiration for it is the mighty Hercules, the Roman demi-god. A character full of strength and virtue, \textit{Hercules} was an obvious predecessor for \textit{David}; he was a pagan image of courage and might in the face of adversity and more powerful enemies. Decorating the Florentine seal since the thirteenth century, the imagery and symbolism of Hercules was adopted into Christian themes within the city-state.

\textsuperscript{147} Muir, “The Double Binds of Manly Revenge,” 80-82.
as well. This adaption into Christian themes means that depictions of Hercules likely influenced both Donatello and Michelangelo in their Davids. In Michelangelo’s formative years, he carved this pagan subject before creating David and though it is now lost, we have drawings of later artists to give a general idea of the marble Hercules’ appearance (Figure 20).

While it was not a colossal sculpture like the David, the emphasis on the musculature of the nude is quite similar, though the Hercules seemed to have a thicker build. In his left hand, he clutches fabric, which may be a cloak or the iconic lion’s skin, and in his right the club. The placement of the left hand and the balanced contrapposto pose look like a mirror of the David, whose right side Michelangelo would have wanted to emphasize because of the association with godliness. The tree trunk at David’s feet is not only an obvious support to the marble, as it is in Roman antiquity, but may reference one of the narratives involving Hercules. Hercules is forced to choose between the path of vice, which is blooming and welcoming, and the path of virtue, which is described as unfruitful and rocky, a description that applies to the gilded tree stump and barren flatness of David’s base. Whether these details are meant to add to the ambiguity of David’s identity or merely to associate him with the virtuous nature of Hercules’ pagan character is undetermined. However, the Republic clearly had a similar idea in mind when determining that the David needed a pendant sculpture, the righteous counterpart Hercules.

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149 Coonin, From Marble to Flesh, 128.

150 The seemingly thicker build of the Hercules may be due to a number of things, including, but not limited to, the perception of Rubens, the thinness of the marble David block, or Michelangelo’s wish for David to appear more youthful.

151 Paoletti, Michelangelo’s David, 96-97.
Although Michelangelo had carved a sculpture of *Hercules* before, he is thought to have been eager to complete another colossus, this time with a block which had been quarried specifically for his purposes. Though the block was ordered by Piero Soderini after the commission was determined in 1506, it was not delivered till nearly 20 years later, when the Republic was no longer in power. Despite Michelangelo’s good rapport with the Medici, the commission originally intended for him was given to Baccio Bandinelli. While Bandinelli was a talented sculptor and Michelangelo had a number of other commissions for the Medici at the time, it is likely that the commission was not taken from him for these reasons, but because the *David* still remained such a substantial symbol for the Republic.\(^{152}\) During the brief three year return of the Republic after the sack of Rome in 1527, Michelangelo was given back this commission and wished to change the theme from Hercules, creating models representative of *Samson and Two Philistines*. However, the revival of the Republic was short-lived, and the Medici again returned to power in 1530, bringing with them the completion of the *Hercules and Cacus* (Figure 21) by Bandinelli, as well the work of other artists to promote the Medici agenda. Despite Bandinelli’s efforts, his sculpture was met with a significant backlash, furthering the appreciation and status of the *David*, which would continue to stand in its paramount location until 1873, when it was moved into the more-sheltered Accademia Gallery.\(^{153}\)

While the *David* has not always been revered as the epitome of perfection Vasari claimed it to be, it remained in the public eye of Florence for almost four hundred years. The uncertainty of who the colossus is really meant to represent, as well as the meaning of its few adornments, were not only discussed by contemporaries of Michelangelo but continue to be delved into by modern-\(^{152}\) Ibid., 160-161.  
\(^{153}\) Coonin, *From Marble to Flesh*, 130-131, 135.
day scholars, not reaching ad nauseam due to new research and theories, such as that of A. Victor Coonin and John T. Paoletti. Though it seems we may never be able to converse about the *David* with complete certainty, this complexity only adds to its allure and mythical status, raising with it Michelangelo’s perceived artistic genius. A part of a multifaceted sculptural program, the *David* is only one of the pieces of many which lead to a broader understanding of not only the Piazza della Signoria, but of the city-state of Florence itself.
Chapter V

Conclusion

Through the centuries, the Piazza della Signoria has become an outdoor gallery space for sculpture; each piece adding new meaning and complexity to the overall artistic program. Due to the additions and movements of sculptures, including copies replacing original artworks so that they may be more safely housed, the Piazza no longer looks the way it did to the early sixteenth-century Florentines. After the fall of the Republic in 1512 and their final submission to Medici rule in 1530, the program of the Piazza shifted to reflect the reinstated Medici and their command over Florence.154 The Medicean program commenced with Bandinelli, who was given the block to create the Hercules and Cacus, a commission Michelangelo was originally assigned by the Republic.

Completed as a pendant for the David in 1534, the Hercules and Cacus was placed on the opposite side of the stairs on the ringhiera. According to contemporary writings, it was received harshly by the public, partially because it was considered to be of poorer quality than the David, and also because it was seen as a rather direct warning to the Florentines of the consequences of opposing Medici rule.155 To amend this negativity and attain a new ideal image, the Medici next commissioned Benvenuto Cellini in 1545 to cast the Perseus and Medusa (Figure 22), a contrived counterpoint for the Judith and Holofernes.156 While both Hercules and Perseus were classical images of victory, the Perseus received a much more welcoming public reception; poems were written about its beauty and its ability to heroically honor Duke Cosimo I.157

154 McHam, “Public Sculpture,” 166.

155 Paoletti, Michelangelo’s David, 161-162.

156 McHam, “Public Sculpture,” 169.

157 Ibid., 170.
Additionally, the sculpture amended the superstition caused by the “inappropriate” subject matter of the *Judith*; the violent image of a woman slaughtering a man considered to be in poor taste. By using the same materials as Donatello and a similar composition, the *Perseus and Medusa* corrects this misogynistic view much more directly than Michelangelo’s *David* did.

Originally, this thesis was going to contain chapters not only devoted to the study of the *Perseus* and *Hercules*, but also to Giambologna’s *Rape of the Sabine* (Figure 23), Ammanati’s *Fountain of Neptune* (Figure 24), and a few other works which were later added to the Piazza. However, my ambition was unrealistic for a Master’s thesis, which I came to realize as I became engrossed in my research about the Piazza. There are still many unanswered questions about this space due to lack of documentation and as I pursued answers, I came across conflicting theories or holes in research. Though I read essays and books devoted to the analysis of selected artwork of the Piazza, I did not come across an in-depth study of each work. The nonexistence of this text is probably due to the sheer magnitude of research and effort it would take to achieve such a task, as well as the difficulty of forming a cohesive argument throughout.

While I did not accomplish my initial intention, I did begin to reconstruct and analyze the origins of the Piazza, noting how the space formed and giving the necessary historical context to appreciate this transformation. The identity of Florence as the new Rome, the development of its government, and the continual presence of factionalism are just a few of the key factors which influenced the Piazza becoming a stage for political propaganda through artwork. Although Donatello’s bronze *David* and *Judith and Holofernes* were not initially intended for the Piazza, they served pivotal roles in its artistic program as symbols of the expulsion of the Medici and victory over tyranny. Within the analysis of these bronzes, I have established the potential
connection of the imagery of *David’s* lost pedestal to the iconography of the *Judith*, along with the definitive understanding of each character as a biblical conqueror.

The symbol of David and the Piazza as a whole developed more after Michelangelo’s *David* was installed; the forced removal of the *Judith* from its formidable location on the *ringhiera* to the less visible orientation in the Loggia dei Lanzi being particularly meaningful. While Michelangelo was praised for his skillful rendering of the Florentine hero, his depiction is quite ambiguous, devoid of the overt iconographical imagery often associated with *David*. Instead, Michelangelo focuses on the human form and the emotionally charged moment before battle, which I connect to the theory of the double binds of manly revenge in Renaissance Florence. By acknowledging this theory, the *David* becomes even more of a reflection of the elitist society he was produced within. Finally, despite its proportional anomalies, the *David* gains an even higher status after the installation of the *Hercules and Cacus*, showing the disdain and hesitancy of many Florentine citizens in accepting the new Medici regime as victory over tyranny.
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