

**RENAISSANCE
FLORENCE: DONATELLO**



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Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Donatello's place in early Renaissance Florentine society, both in terms of the importance of his own artistic creations, especially his statue of David, and his link to and possible influence on artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo who came to prominence in subsequent generations.

Subjects

Art
European History
World History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Uffizi Museum, Florence
- Basilica di Santa Croce, Florence
- Orsanmichele, Florence
- Bargello Museum, Florence
- Basilica di San Lorenzo, Florence

Essential Questions

Who was Donatello?

What was Donatello's place in Renaissance Florence?

How might have Donatello influenced other later artists in Renaissance Florence?

Why is Donatello's famous bronze sculpture *David* important to understanding the development of Renaissance art in Florence?

Academic Summary

Donato, who was called Donatello by his relatives and wrote his name thus on some of his works, was born in Florence in the year 1403. Devoting himself to the arts of design, he was not only a very rare sculptor and a marvelous statuary, but also a practiced worker in stucco, an able master of perspective, and greatly esteemed as an architect; and his works showed so great grace, design, and excellence, that they were held to approach more nearly to the marvelous works of the ancient Greeks and Romans than those of any other craftsman whatsoever. Wherefore it is with good reason that he is ranked as the first who made a good use of the invention of scenes in low-relief, which he wrought so well that it is recognized from the thought, the facility, and the mastery that he showed therein, that he had a true understanding of them, making them with a beauty far beyond the ordinary; for not only did no craftsman in this period ever surpass him, but no one even in our own age has equaled him. For the Guild of Armorers he made a most spirited figure of S. George in armor, in the head of which there may be seen the beauty of youth, courage and valor in arms, and a proud and terrible ardor; and there is a marvelous suggestion of life bursting out of the stone. It is certain that no modern figure in marble has yet shown such vivacity and such spirit as nature and art produced in this one by means of the hand of Donato.

... In the courtyard of the Palace of the said Signori there is a life-size David, nude and in bronze. Having cut off the head of Goliath, he is raising one foot and placing it on him, holding a sword in his right hand. This figure is so natural in its vivacity and its softness, that it is almost impossible for craftsmen to believe that it was not molded on the living form. This statue once stood in the courtyard of the house of the Medici, but it was transported to the said place on the exile of Cosimo. In our own day Duke Cosimo, having made a fountain on the spot occupied by this statue, had it removed, and it is being kept for a very large courtyard that he intends to make at the back of the palace, that is, where the lions formerly stood. In the hall where there is the clock of Lorenzo della Volpaia, on the left, there is a very beautiful David in marble; between his legs, under his feet, he has the head of the dead Goliath, and in his hand he holds the sling wherewith he slew him.

... So great was the love that Cosimo bore to the talent of Donato that he kept him continually at work, and Donato, on the other hand, bore so great love to Cosimo that he could divine his patron's every wish from the slightest sign, and obeyed him in all things.

It came to pass about this time that the Signoria of Venice, hearing of his fame, sent for him to the end that he might make the monument of Gattamelata in the city of Padua; wherefore he went there right willingly and made the bronze horse that is on the Piazza di S. Antonio, wherein are perceived the panting and neighing of the horse, with great spirit and pride, most vividly expressed by his art, in the figure of the rider. And Donato proved himself such a master in the proportions and excellence of so great a casting, that he can truly bear comparison with any ancient craftsman in movement, design, art, proportion, and diligence; wherefore it not only astonished all who saw it then, but continues to astonish every person who sees it at the present day.

His death caused great grief to his fellow-citizens, to the craftsmen, and to all who knew him when living. Wherefore, in order to honor him more after death than they had done in his life, they gave him most honorable obsequies in the aforesaid church, and he was accompanied to the grave by all the painters, architects, sculptors, and goldsmiths, and by almost all the people of that city, which continued for a long time to compose in his honor various kinds of verses in diverse tongues, whereof it must suffice us to cite the few that are to be read below.

In short, it may be said that every man who has sought to do good work in relief since the death of Donato, has been his disciple. He was resolute in draughtsmanship, and he made his drawings with such mastery and boldness that they have no equals, as may be seen in my book, wherein I have figures drawn by his hand, both clothed and nude, animals that make all who see them marvel, and other most beautiful things of that kind. His portrait was made by Paolo Uccello, as it has been said in his Life.

The world remained so full of his works, that it may be affirmed right truly that no craftsman ever worked more than he did. For, delighting in every kind of work, he put his hand to anything, without considering whether it was of little or of great value. Nevertheless it was indispensable to sculpture, this vast activity of Donato in making figures in every kind of relief, full, half, low, and the lowest; because, whereas in the good times of the ancient Greeks and Romans it was by means of many that it became perfect, he alone by the multitude of his works brought it back to marvelous perfection in our own age. Wherefore craftsmen should trace the greatness of this art rather to him than to any man born in modern times, seeing that, besides rendering the difficulties of the art easy, in the multitude of his works he combined together invention, design, practice, judgment, and every other quality that ever can or should be looked for in a divine genius. Donato was very resolute and ready, executing all his works with consummate facility, and he always accomplished much more than he had promised.

Excerpts from Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Artists, 16th century

Secondary Summary

Florence, Italy was the center of Renaissance art, architecture and humanist thought during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Walking through the city today is like visiting a living museum, where around every corner visitors can see priceless works of art. The museums like the Uffizi and the Academia are filled with priceless paintings and sculptures that are the envy of places around the world. The Piazza della Signoria, Florence's central square and the political hub of the city since the days of the Medici family, contains priceless statues such as the Rape of the Sabine Women by Gianbologna and Cellini's masterpiece Perseus with the Head of Medusa, which have stood open to the public since their creation in the 16th century. Even the buildings themselves, many of them constructed during Florence's golden age, were designed to be expressions of artistic beauty. People around the world learn the names of artists, architects and writers associated with Renaissance Florentine society: Michelangelo, Donatello, Giotto, Raphael, Machiavelli and Brunelleschi. Florence is even associated with the ultimate so-called "Renaissance Man" himself: Leonardo da Vinci.

Arguably the most important artist of them all was Donatello. Without him, there may never have been an artistic renaissance in Florence at all.

Born Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi in Florence around 1386 (the exact date has

been lost to time), Donatello, like many artists of the time in Florence, was originally trained as a goldsmith, but by age 17 the young artist decided to strike out on his own. He was fascinated by the sculptures and figures of ancient Rome, and by his early twenties, Donatello had quickly gained a reputation as an up-and-coming sculptor. At first, like many other late medieval artists, he worked in stone, and his early work (such as his marble David statue designed in 1408) shows a grace and statue often associated with late gothic art. Unlike his contemporaries, however, Donatello began to turn away from the elongated idealistic style of gothic sculpture and towards a more realistic and naturalistic design so often seen in the sculptures of antiquity. In doing so, Donatello sought to capture the spirit of human emotion many times lost in Medieval Gothic art.

The most famous, and perhaps the most important, of Donatello's many sculptures in Florence is a bronze statue of the biblical David from the 1440s (in the Bargello Museum today). Not to be confused with Michelangelo's much later and more famous marble statue of the same name, Verrocchio's work portrays David as a cocky younger man who has just slain the giant Goliath. The sculpture was important for a number of reasons. There are many statues of David in Florence, as the biblical story was a favorite of the Medici family (and thus Florence) because of its message that David was more powerful than he seemed (they saw Florence under their leadership in much the same way). This one, however, was the first freestanding nude male bronze statue created since the days of antiquity, allowing viewers to see the image from all angles. The figure itself, created for Cosimo di Medici, shows an expression of confidence, almost to the point of cockiness and arrogance. Looking at the piece, one almost gets the impression that David always knew the outcome of his epic fight with the great Philistine warrior. Later artists would look to Donatello's famous work for inspiration, both in form and in style. Above all others, this single piece ushered in the Renaissance.

Studying Florentine Renaissance art necessitates studying the great artists of the time, and it is natural for students to be drawn to Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael and others, but it is also important to remember that these great artists did not just wake up one day, pick up a paint brush or a chisel and start producing masterpieces. Each studied the craft for years before they were ready to strike out on their own. Each generation draws inspiration from previous teachers. By the time Donatello died in 1466 (when Leonardo was a 12-year-old apprentice and Michelangelo's birth was still 9 years away), the great artist's reputation was secure. Today he is seen as the paramount sculptor of the early Renaissance. He was a prolific artist, and Italy is littered with his sculptures. Donatello's works would go on to inspire later generations of artists for centuries to come. It might even be argued that without Donatello, there would not have been a renaissance in Florence.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Donatello's place in early Renaissance Florentine society, both in terms of the importance of his own artistic creations, especially his statue of *David*, and his link to and possible influence on artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo who came to prominence in subsequent generations.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain Donatello's place in Renaissance Florentine society in terms of his own artistic creations, focusing on why he is called the "father of modern sculpture."
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain Donatello's place in Renaissance Florentine society in terms of his link to and possible artistic influence on subsequent generations of artists, and in particular how his work might have inspired Michelangelo and Leonardo.

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Can older generations influence or inspire people today? If so, how? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Donatello (20 min)
- Video – Donatello (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about Donatello. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: What was Donatello's place in Renaissance Florentine society, both in terms of the importance of his own artistic creations, especially his statue of *David*, and his link to and possible influence on artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo who came to prominence in subsequent generations? (20 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: In detail, explain Donatello's place in early Renaissance Florentine society, both in terms of the importance of his own artistic creations, especially his statue of *David*, and his link to and possible influence on artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo who came to prominence in subsequent generations.

Extension

On tour: Orsanmichele, Florence

While on tour, students in Florence can visit the Orsanmichele (Kitchen Garden of St. Michael) where they can see for themselves one of Donatello's most famous marble statues, *St. Mark*. The Orsanmichele, a church constructed on the site of a kitchen garden of the Monastery of San Michele (now demolished), was built in the 14th century and was a chapel used by Florence's powerful trade and craft guilds. The outside of the church had 14 architecturally designed external niches, each owned and maintained by one of the guilds. The guilds in turn commissioned different artists to create religious statues representing their individual trades or status in Florentine society. Donatello carved *St. Mark* for the linen weavers' guild. Created around 1411, and thus one of Donatello's earlier works, the statue shows the beginnings of a stylistic departure away from the unrealistic symmetry of medieval art. Students with a keen eye will notice veins in St. Mark's hand and the way that his clothes seem to drape off the man, almost as if they are caught in a slight breeze. The statue outside the Orsanmichele is a copy. Donatello's original is inside the church (now a museum as well).

On tour: Bargello National Museum, Florence

While on tour, students in Florence can visit the Bargello National Museum, where they can see for themselves famous works of art from many Florentine Renaissance master artists. Michelangelo is well represented in the museum, as are Ghiberti, Giambologna and Brulleneschi and Verrocchio and others. Two of Donatello's *David* statues are in the museum, one in marble and the other in bronze (the bronze one was the first freestanding bronze cast during the Renaissance). The two statues are very different, both in style and in "emotional feeling." Each has been the subject of debate since the 15th century.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariDon.html
Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists: Donatello (primary source)
- www.artble.com/artists/donatello
Donatello (website). Good basic resource on the artist. Website has a general biography, a list of Donatello's major works, and his influence on Renaissance art.
- employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth213/donatello_david.html
Donatello's David (website) – from Dr. Allen Farber, Associate Professor of Art at SUNY Oneonta
- arthistoryblogger.blogspot.com/2011/10/sculpting-david-donatello-and.html
Sculpting David: Donatello and Michelangelo (website / blog) – from the Art History Blogger
- www.slideshare.net/jadechen/donatello-presentation
Donatello (PowerPoint)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kUUJJV_MNA
Donatello, David, bronze, c. 1440s (video). From Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, Art History teachers at Khan Academy.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UZuG3XpAd0
Donatello, Mary Magdalene, c. 1455 (video). From Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, Art History teachers at Khan Academy.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KXTRF4QWws
Donatello, "David" and the "Feast of Herod" (video). From Professor Kenney Mencher, Department of Art, Ohlone College (CA). 15-minute video, highly recommended for all students and teachers.

Background Information

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donatello
Donatello – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_\(Donatello\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_(Donatello))
David (Donatello) – Wikipedia article
- passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/florence
On the Road: Florence – from Passports Educational Travel
- passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/florence_sightseeing
On the Road: Florence Sightseeing – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-botticelli-birth-of-venus
Renaissance Florence – Botticelli: Birth of Venus
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-brunelleschi-dome-on-the-duomo
Renaissance Florence – Brunelleschi: Dome of the Florence Duomo

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-donatello
Renaissance Florence – Donatello
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-giotto-father-of-renaissance-art
Renaissance Florence – Giotto
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-machiavelli-the-prince
Renaissance Florence – Machiavelli: The Prince
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-medici-family
Renaissance Florence – Medici Family
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-michelangelo-david
Renaissance Florence – Michelangelo: The David
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-verrocchio
Renaissance Florence -- Verrocchio
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-leonardo-overview
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: An Overview
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/renaissance-europe-leonardo-da-vinci-mona-lisa
Renaissance Europe – Leonardo da Vinci: Mona Lisa
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-italy-leonardo-last-supper
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: The Last Supper
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-last-judgment
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Last Judgment
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-sistine-chapel-ceiling
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Sistine Chapel Ceiling
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-pieta
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: The Pieta
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-raphael-school-of-athens
Renaissance Rome – Raphael: School of Athens

Key Terms

- Apprentice
- Biblical David
- Bronze cast
- Donatello
- Florentine
- Renaissance
- Sculpture

