MICHELANGELO AND BERNINI: THE ART OF BATTLING GIANTS

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This paper compares and contrasts the progressive ingenuity of Michelangelo's and Bernini's renderings in marble sculpture of the recurrent mythos of David. Michelangelo's David honours classical antiquity yet departs to imbue a Renaissance idiom of 'man as the measure of all things.' Michelangelo's sculpture released from stone a thinking man with the fortitude to metamorphose from famed religious hero to Florentine civic political symbol of strength. However, in Baroque Rome, nearly a century later, the Catholic artist Bernini created his David in the climate of religious conflict with the Reformation's iconoclasm and subsequent backlash of the Counter-Reformation. Reinventing David's religious idolatry with artistic alchemy, Bernini shifted marble to embody a dramatic theatrical event and in doing so, ingeniously propagandized a religious symbol to mass appeal.

Killer of tyrants, saviour of nations and protector of liberty, the Old Testament's hero, David, is the underdog that embodies fortitude and prefigures Christ. As such, David had been a prolific muse for artists in religious painting and sculpture. Particularly as the Renaissance gave rise to widespread imitation and emulation as artists cultivated compositions in the recognizable narrative.[1] Combined with a Renaissance resurgence of interest in the past was another emergent trend: the belief of the artist's autonomy in their work.[2] An elevation of the artist to scholar and genius in the Renaissance carried through into the Baroque era driving innovation as "it was the art that led the way."[3] Despite developments, Renaissance and Baroque society still had little freedom of action and even less of speech however, "only in art and science was [there] a more guarded freedom."[4] Therefore,

[1]Paul Strathern, *The Medici: Power, Money, and Ambition in the Italian Renaissance* (New York: First Pegasus Books, 2016), 250.
[2]Strathern, *The Medici,* 238-239.
[3]Strathern, 238-239.
[4]Strathern, 238-239.

varied interpretations of common narratives were conducive to each artist as well as to the whims of patronage, location, and era of production.[5] Michelangelo and Bernini exemplify the recurrent religious mythos of *David* in their marble sculptures, however, they ingeniously and radically diverge expressions in how they portray human form, in how their portrayals address respective political climates, and in how they increase meaning as they push the boundaries of classical sculpture.

Prior to Renaissance and Baroque art, medieval sculptural focus was largely limited to reliquaries, the receptacles for holy relics, with nudity in human form a rare medium.[6] Early in the mid-thirteenth century, a rediscovery of Greco-Roman culture to embrace figures based on antique models began appearing in Italy. Fully reincarnated symbols emerged by the mid-fifteenth century restoring the human physique to the heart of creative endeavour. For Florentine artists of the early Renaissance, representing the idealized body became "the preeminent site for the exercise and display of artistic knowledge and virtuosity."[7] During this time, in an unorthodox display of nudity, Donatello idealized the proportions of a Greek athletic youth to produce a life-sized bronze *David.* Depicting post-victory over Goliath, Donatello's young, proud "biblical hero [is] dressed in classical guise."[8] Michelangelo produced the next century's *David*; this early sixteenth century version was again conceived as a nude, but of colossal scope.[9] The artist concentrated his expressive purpose on the human figure. To him, the body was beautiful, not only in its natural form, but also in its spiritual and philosophical significance as a manifestation of the soul.[10] The nude, reminiscent of antiquity in Michelangelo's *David*, emerged from out of the stone as the very essence of fortitude elevating the naked body to religious hero by reflecting the perfection of the ancient deities cast in human form; like a god, *David* had nothing to hide.[11]

Although a fascination with the classical nude predated Michelangelo's sculpture, his interpretation was bold given the political climate at the time of the creation of *David,* c. 1501-1504. A theocratic government had gained popular leadership under

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[5]Ibid, 238-239.
[6]Edward J. Olszewski, "Michelangelo's David: Full Frontal Nudity in the Age of Savonarola." *Notes in the History of Art* 35, no. 1-2 (2015):120. https://www.jstor.org.exproxy.langara.ca/stable/sournotehistart.35.1-2.118.
[7]Estelle Lingo, "Draping Michelangelo: Francesco Mochi, Gianlorenzo Bernini and the Birth of the Baroque Sculpture," National Gallery of Art, YouTube video, 55:54, posted July 26, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1G1VF5b2in0.
[8]Jean Sorabella, "The Nude in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance," *In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.* New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/numr/hd_numr.htm.
[9]Sorabella.
[10]Fred S. Kleiner and Helen Gardner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective Volume II* (Australia: Cengage Learning, 2017), 503.
[11]Olszewski, 120.

a Dominican fundamentalist, Savonarola, who heralded a puritanical and apocalyptic style of preaching and governing.[12] Savonarola alienated the Florentine oligarchy,[13] casting a shadow of religious conservatism that heightened concern for modesty by challenging artistic tradition and sculpture in particular.[14] With the expulsion of the Medici, the wealthiest art-centric patrons of Florence, the climate for art became increasingly precarious;[15] Donatello's nude bronze of *David* was removed from public display and many other works were destroyed.[16] Thus, Michelangelo moved to Rome. When Savonarola was subsequently executed, Michelangelo returned to Florence in the year 1500. The former glory of the republic was lost and now the city was in a pitiful state; once proud, a disgruntled populace was impoverished with lawlessness in the streets.[17] To bolster the weakened society, Michelangelo was commissioned to sculpt a massive *David* to adorn the city's cathedral.[18] Despite the brutality of recent conservatism,[19] he boldly unveiled a distinctive presentation of the classical nude.[20] Although blatant nudity may have been less obtrusive positioned high on the cathedral, as intended, the reaction to his colossal figure was such that *David* was positioned to a new prominence in the Palazzo Vecchio, the town hall, albeit "kilted with a girdle of twenty-eight gilded leaves."[21] The compellingly idealized, powerful figure rendered renewed hope and meaning to the floundering republic of Florence. Beneath the facade and tower of the Palazzo, the giant prophet, a Christ-type saviour, seemingly transformed from to become almost human.[22] *David* flaunted itself as an embodiment of the defender of civic strength and justice;[23] a representation of Florentine victory over tyranny.[24]

While transforming the religious icon to a political saviour, Michelangelo pushed beyond classical sculpture revealing a new expression of form in his *David.* From a previously used block of marble in "distressingly mutilated condition,"[25] Michelangelo uncovered a groundbreaking figure; his *David* (see figure 1) hails to Greek artist Polykleito's classic *Doryphoros*, yet deviates to unique expression.[26]

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[12]Partridge, 113.
[13]Ibid, 113.
[14]Lingo.
[15]Olszewski, 118-121.
[16]Ibid.
[17]Strathern, 234.
[18]Partridge, 116.
[19]Olszewski, 118.
[20]Lingo.
[21]Olszewski, 120.
[22]Strathern, 237-8.
[23]Partridge, 117.
[24]Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art* (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008), 48.
[25]Partridge, 116.
[26]Ibid, 116.

At two times larger than life, Michelangelo's version is a lankier figure combining attributes of *David's* 'classical athlete' of the past and 'the adolescent' of Renaissance Florentine tradition.[27] With an unusually wide stance, *David* stands like Hercules on the city's civic seal. The "non-weight bearing left foot over the edge of the pedestal ahead of the weight-bearing foot" results in a diminished expression of the movement that is characteristic of classical contrapposto.[28] This lesser dynamic stance presents a new narrative; Michelangelo's *David* is alert and pensive, his slingshot poised behind his back as he "sizes up the Philistine giant *before* the battle."[29] Positioned in front of the town hall with his gaze poised on the southward threat of Rome, Michelangelo's *David* is thus embodied as the protectorate of Florence. Also, more prominent than in classical prototypes is an enlarging of *David's* hands emphasizing tendons and veins as if to underscore the meaning of "strong of hand."[30] An exaggerated head size, perhaps to correct visual foreshortening for the original placement site high on the cathedral tribune, would serve to suggest *David's* intellect and reason as he calculates his plan of action for a momentous looming conflict.[31] The combination of classical Greek athlete and Roman imperial bust also revive a "classical leonine personality" with a curly mane, "fierce penetrating eyes, and knit brow" a further association with "the prototypical lion man" symbolic to Florence.[32] The mythic Hercules, much admired for strength and virtue, was projected onto *David* as if he were to "metamorphose into ferocious action."[33] Adolescence seemingly melding into manhood with a virility beyond classic example, the flamelike hair on his head also suggests a Christ-like humanity and spirituality.[34] Classical nudity combined with restraint is filled with living force to produce a profoundly humanistic result. Michelangelo's *David* represents a magnificent celebration of humanity whilst offering something transcendent in the expression of the figure; thus, the statue achieves an almost Platonic ideal.[35]

As Michelangelo' *David* celebrated a Renaissance classical expression of the human figure, Bernini's Baroque sculpture, too, held a central focus on the human form with a unique approach.[36] In contrast to the Renaissance, Baroque art is higher pitched in its realism with theatrical, dramatic gestures designed to appeal to

[27]Partridge, 116.
[28]Partridge, 116.
[29]Ibid. (emphasis added).
[30]Ibid.
[31]Ibid.
[32]Ibid.
[33]Ibid.
[34]Ibid.
[35]Strathern, 237.
[36]Sorabella.

emotions. Verging on caricature, facial expressions of rage, pain, pity, or ecstasy are explicitly rendered.[37]

Despite seemingly exaggerated, such commonplace gestures were abundant in the populous of seventeenth century Italy and still utilized by Italians "with effect and wit to this day."[38] Bernini's evolved style of intensity incorporated a psychological and a physical realism that insisted on "the credibility of the actions and emotions depicted."[39] Following fellow Baroque artist Caravaggio's new vision on "how to move the flock,"[40] Bernini, an extremist in his art, cast no remote saints. In the shock of theatre, he produced earthly passions to transform torment to ecstasy.[41] Even partially clothed, Bernini's *David* pressed the "drama of the flesh not even Michelangelo made so gripping."[42] A radical break from the Renaissance, Bernini shattered the language of the body;[43] he rendered the statue capable of acts of violence.[44]

Bernini's radical expression of human form was born, as was Michelangelo's thinking *David,* under conditions of religious conservatism and radical scrutiny. The Roman Catholic Church, in response to the Protestant Reformation's attack on religious art, energized the Counter-Reformation's quest for new ideas on sacred art. The idol was being "knocked down" and, as a "figure in the round" that could be elicited as idolatrous, sculpture bore the burden of this shift.[45] Wielding enormous temporal power within the Papal States, but sharply curtailing beyond its borders,[46] the papacy's zeal to communicate the Catholic message to the populace drove Baroque art, especially in Rome. The holy metropolis was buzzing with worldly ambition and in the church aristocracy it was not just the money that counted, but also the art.[47] Artists angled for patrons as patrons did artists, questing for "the next prized genius" to put forth the theatre of Catholicism brimming with drama of human emotion.[48] Rome, where the artist had lived and worked all of his life as a pillar of the Catholic establishment and friend of popes,[49] was Bernini's city.[50] In the climate of religious reform and social change born of the Council of Trent, Bernini led sculpture into an era of a new naturalism.[51] A pious Catholic,

[37]Robert Wallace, *The World of Bernini: 1598-1680* (New York: Time Life Books, 1977). 11,12.
[38]Ibid, 11, 12.
[39]Ibid.
[40]Lingo.
[41]Ibid.
[42]Ibid.
[43]Ibid.
[44]Simon Schama, "Bernini" 4, *Power of Art* (UK: BBC, 2006).
[45]Lingo.
[46]Wallace, 33.
[47]Schama.
[48]Ibid.
[49]Schama.
[50]Wallace, 9.
[51]Ibid, 11-12.

Bernini's world was of religious fervor; his mission was religious persuasion and beautification.[52] Above all else, he wanted to convince viewers of the teachings of the Church.[53] To achieve maximum potency, he used aspects understood by ordinary men where it was necessary to touch emotions, not dry reason, for greatest effect.[54] Familiar human gestures and images of expression were not cliché, but original in Bernini's time.[55] In a profound new way, Bernini recreated the human body under the prevailing religious imperative and in capturing an instant masked its connection to the past: "everything had to change so that everything could remain the same."[56] His sacred sculpture seemingly subdued its identity to become closer to a painting by optical effect.[57] It is Baroque, therefore, constantly and theatrically convulsed by a "rebellion of the parts of the elements which make it up."[58]

Bernini transitioned the religious idol by imparting a "marvellous softness, making the marble, so to say, flexible" to transform the classical sculpture to capture a spectacle of theatre and emotion (see figure 2).[59] Represented on a strong triangular base is a violent, pivoting diagonal motion of a figure in combat; an electrically charged space of wound dynamic tension in maximum action.[60] The youthful warrior, with the look of a back-country shepherd, grimaces with determination as his every muscle is tensed at the precise moment the fatal stone is to be released. His muscular legs are firmly planted, straddling rejected body armour as *David* has placed his faith in the Lord.[61] As an extra touch of realism, his muscular foot is tensely gripping the base, ready to "kill his enemy right now, this minute."[62] Varying textures in the leather sling, the coarse goatskin pouch, the smooth drapery, the flesh, and the tousled hair reinforce an impression of reality. The most remarkable feature is Bernini's use of space; *David*, about to sling his stone past the spectator, provides a clear sense of direction, angle, and height by extending his ferocious gaze to where the unseen Goliath would be situated. Therefore, "like the biblical hero, we turn our heads to sight Goliath and like *David,* we, too, become

[52]Ibid.
[53]Ibid.
[54]Ibid.
[55]Ibid, 12.
[56]Lingo.
[57]Lingo.
[58]Ibid.
[59]Charles Scribner III, "The Real Bernini: Lecture by Charles Scribner III" *Met Museum,* 56:57, May 26, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wH4D_9GJ68gFINISH.
[60]Scribner III, "The Real Bernini."
[61]Kleiner, 586.
[62]Wallace, 19, 27.

potential champions against the Philistine;"[63] Bernini has drawn the spectator into the drama and in doing so, the segregation of spectator and statue is abolished.[64]

The mythos of David was reinvented by both Michelangelo and Bernini whose styles in human form, whilst adhering to classical roots, provided new meaning and boldly addressed respective contemporary political climates. Both artists elevated the human form to new dimensions. Quintessential Renaissance artist Michelangelo emulated classical antiquity and idealistic beauty, adding the quality of psychology to advance the movement of sculpture. However, Baroque Rome's consummate sculptor, Bernini, created compelling realism pushing classical sculpture to impart emotion, relatability, and theatricality to ensnare the spectator into a profound sense of the now. In combatting the challenges of the socio-political climates of their times, both artists innovated the human form superseding respective barriers. Michelangelo's *David* exemplified and appealed to his society's yearning to experience the divine nobility of man with all his beauty, strength, rationality, and righteousness; a figure poised as a platonic ideal.[65] Equally important, Bernini's *David* ingeniously presented religious iconography to transcend its material form and, in doing so, intensely engage the soul.[66] Both *David's* being victorious in their battles.

[63]Joy Kenseth, "Bernini's Borghese Sculptures: Another View," *Art Bulleton* 63, no.2 (1981): 194. http://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1981.10787872.
[64]Wallace, 19.
[65]Barnet, 48.
[66]Wallace, 18, 19.

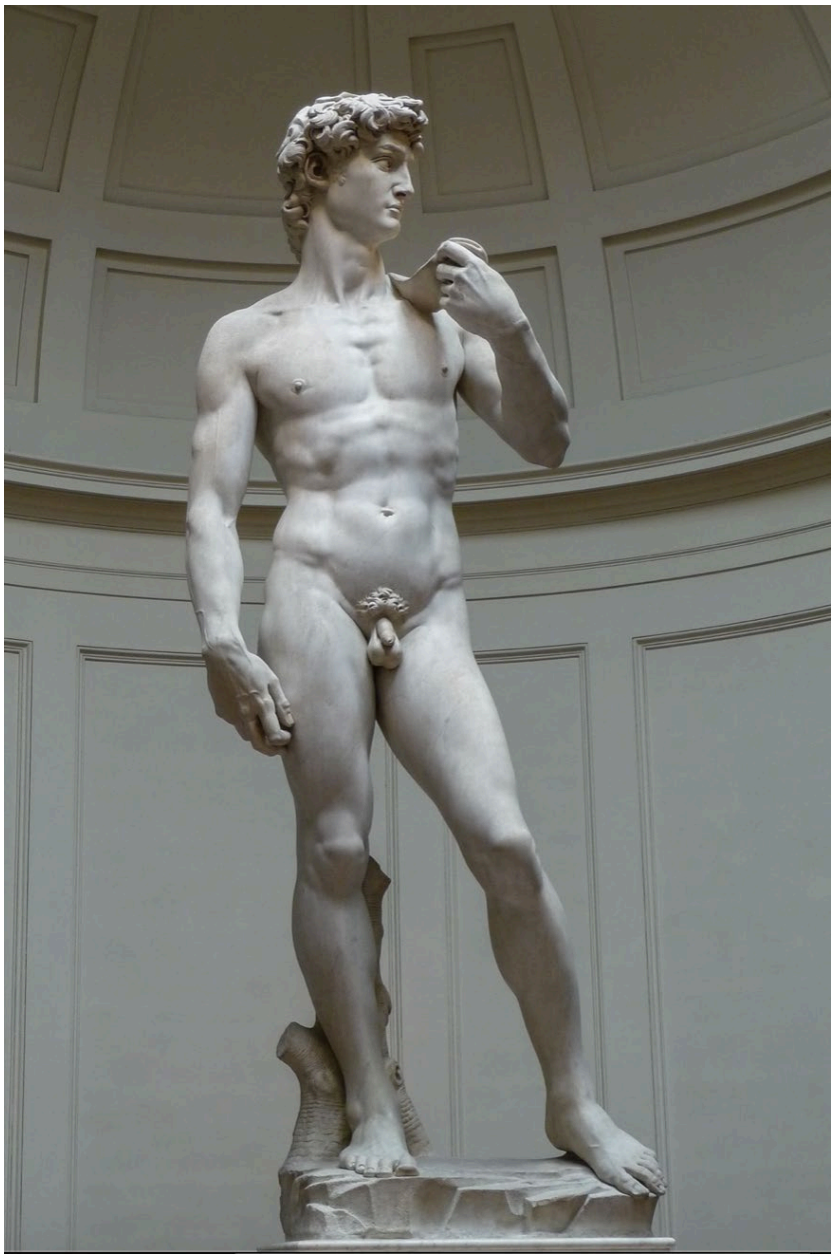

Figure 1: Michelangelo, *David,* 1501-1504, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, Italy.
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/24/%27David%27_by_Michelangelo_JBU0001.JPG

Figure 2: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *David,* 1623-24, Galleria Borghese, Rome. https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gianlorenzo_bernini,_david,_1623-24,_02.jpg

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