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Making the Encounter with Sculpture

'it may be said of this man that he worked as much with his judgement as with his hands'.¹

When he wrote this of Donatello in the mid sixteenth century, Giorgio Vasari was drawing from his own observations of sculptures still in situ. He goes on to claim what he can never have seen, but only intuited: that Donatello's creations would have appeared half as good when they were still in the workshop as when finally installed. Put another way, his practice was always governed by foresight of an end effect. Latterday material analysis of Donatello's works under conservation and physical examination from revealing if undignified viewpoints, has tended to confirm the sculptor's material ingenuity as well as Vasari's insight.² Drawing on both, this essay characterises some of Donatello's methods as radical means towards exceptional, site-specific encounters. Through materials, handling, scale, colour and reflectivity, Donatello expanded the expressive range of sculpture in step with a deep understanding of the human condition. That what follows is a rather loose concatenation of works, linking across different materials, periods, types and qualities, results in part from addressing the oeuvre of a sculptor who scarcely ever repeated himself, even for broadly similar kinds of object. Every work was approached as a fresh challenge, producing new solutions and, no doubt, constant surprise from his contemporaries.

The variety in both the facture and finish of Donatello's sculpture is dramatic. Sometimes this might owe to the character of local materials that invited different approaches, or to the varied expertise available in the cities where he operated. Time constraints and countervailing controls on quality by commissioning bodies were also determining as to levels of finish.³ But it must be remembered, too, that for tasks like large-scale casting of copper alloys there were no ready-made solutions.⁴ Lorenzo Ghiberti, in whose Florentine workshop Donatello is recorded in 1404-7, was, of necessity, finding new means and effects in the production of bronze reliefs for the Baptistery doors. Whereas Ghiberti's casts show a steady commitment to refinement, with a limited number of separate parts

¹ 'Onde di costui si può dire, che tanto lavorasse col giudizio quanto con le mani.' Vasari ed. Milanesi, vol. 2., p. 401; English translation Vasari ed. de Vere, vol. 2, p. 242.

² Recently, Nante and Mercalli 2015; Paolozzi Strozzi (ed.), 2008; Paolozzi Strozzi (ed.) 2005.

³ The records of the Santo High Altar commission in Padua document all these factors in operation (Gloria 1895, pp. 5 ff; Janson 1963, pp. 162-167).

⁴ Sénéchal 2013; Motture 2019, pp. 34, 47-55, 76-7, 117-118.

and an immaculate finish, Donatello's would vary more widely in thickness and surface character and were notably dependent on the casting skills of collaborators.⁵ The statues and reliefs for the High Altar of the Santo in Padua, for example, are documented as cast by the local coppersmith Andrea dalle Caldiere, with Donatello's assistants charged to 'clean' and complete their surfaces to perfection before they would be judged ready for gilding.⁶ Casting flaws were hard to avoid even for works cast in several parts, betraying especially the struggle of pouring a work 'in the round' like the *David*.⁷ With a workshop often active on simultaneous commissions and heavily in demand, a comparative lack of finish could be construed as the price to be paid for completion. But, as Vasari perceptively observed of the 'roughed out' carving of the dancers on the cathedral organ loft (**fig. 1** detail), this was rather a deliberate choice that enhanced an effect of lively movement when encountering the work high above the sacristy door.⁸ In this respect then, lack of finish shares something with its opposite - those signs of perfection like selective gilding or silvering that we find laid on to the architecture of the shallow bronze narrative reliefs on the Padua altar (**fig. 2**). In both cases Donatello had an eye to how the work could address its viewers more effectively when installed at a distance, with surface textures and colours lending both legibility in space and animation in light.⁹

We can catch Donatello's own voice as a maker concerned with the implications of material and visual choices in Spring 1451 when he was responding to the commissioners of a public statue of Duke Borso d'Este for Modena. Answering to the city elders he suggested that the work should be made not, as proposed, of marble but of gilded bronze.¹⁰ His pitch referred to important practicalities: bronze would allow the sculpture to be self-supporting and gilding would protect it from the elements. But other interests must also have been in play. Gilt bronze was an elevated and

⁵ Motture 2019, p. 119-21

⁶ Janson 1963, pp. 163-4, and p. 152 for the same Andrea *calderaio* casting the equestrian statue of Gattamelata. For Andrea see Calore 1996 and Motture 2019, p. 108; p.245, n.189 for full refs for the altar and n. 193. Johnson 1999, p. 648 for the effect of such gilding under the candlelight surrounding it..

⁷ Paolozzi Strozzi 2008, esp. Siano et al. pp. 168-183; also Siano and Agresti 2015, p. 311

⁸ Vasari, ed. Milanesi, vol. 2, p. 401; Martinelli 1968, pp. 180-183 noting that Vasari's remark draws on the Libro di Antonio Billi.

⁹ For other kinds of anticipated 'optical correction' in his sculpture, see Munman 1985.

¹⁰ Bertoni and Vicini, 1905, Doc. III; Rosenberg 1973, p. 149.

‘ancient’ choice, offering the possibility of larger scale and civic visibility of the kind the commissioners themselves were keen to ensure.¹¹ Donatello would have been able to back his proposal with experience, including the distinction of being one of the only modern sculptors to have designed a permanently gilded monumental cast sculpture.

This, the towering *St. Louis of Toulouse*,⁷ made already in the earlier 1420s (**fig. 3**) for the then powerful pro-papal Guelph Party had to be assembled from constituent parts.¹² A whole, thick-walled, bronze figure on this scale could never have been manoeuvred into a furnace to burn off the mercury in the process of fire gilding. For observers, the sculpture preserves a touching sense that Louis himself is ‘made’ as a saint, and not just as a sculpture, from the sum of his weighty episcopal garments. But he was also designed to gain a sense of otherworldly presence by placement in a purpose-built *all’antica* niche that dramatically framed the head and would also have disguised awkward views and evidence of assembly of the body. That an assemblage gained its coherence *in situ* is especially manifest in those works where contrasting materials, colours and finishes are designed to articulate or enhance one another, like the marble tomb monument of Baldassare Cossa (1422-28). Here the perfectly chased and engraved bronze effigy, apparently cast (and certainly fire-gilded) together with the pall cloth, is installed near the apex and picked out by burnished gold over the figure alone.¹³ Vividly realised as a portrait, it appears beneath a stagily mimetic, ‘draped’ marble canopy, and gives the impression of a body brilliantly transfigured, as at the future moment of the resurrection of the dead.¹⁴

The impulse to cover up, restage or enhance a primary sculptural material – turning it to gold, colouring or contrasting it with other materials - seems to be born not only of Donatello’s expertise as a trained goldsmith but his desire to make effects that are meaningful in temporal and thematic terms.¹⁵ The life-size wooden *Magdalen* also at one time displayed in the Baptistry, is a particularly expressive instance. Carved in poplar wood left unhollowed, it is layered over by a differentiated gesso surface thick enough to model the hair and parts of the body. It is also fully painted, but the

¹¹ Bertoni and Vicini, 1905, Doc. V.

¹² For the cast Teodori and Nicolai 2012; Siano and Agresti 2015, pp. 308-9; Wright 2020, pp. 138-143; Bloch 2022, p. 70.

¹³ Wright 2020, p. 145; Goldenbaum 2018, pp. 172-8 for qualities of finish.

¹⁴ Wright 2020, pp. 143-9.

¹⁵ [Reference across to Amy Bloch’s essay in this catalogue and Timothy Verdon’s for the *Magdalen*.](#)

effect is far from the colour palette of the majority of Italian wood figure sculpture of this date.¹⁶ In tune with the humility of the penitential subject, it preserves a predominantly brownish, woody, hue. Yet, typically, Donatello did not stop there. The Magdalen's ragged clothing of hair still hints that it was once transfigured with long, brilliant highlights of mordant gilding, flowing over her wasted frame like a mantle of grace (fig. xxx). Rather than leave his desiccated saint as a figure of pity, the surface working elevates her long-suffering body as both source and symbol of spiritual transformation.

In addressing Donatello's polychrome sculpture, Jim Harris has likewise revealed the impulse to frame and transfigure 'humble' materials in two works made for the Franciscan basilica of Santa Croce: the *Crucified Christ*, which was designed to be detached from its cross on Good Friday, and the monumental tabernacle altarpiece of the Annunciate Virgin.¹⁷ In the former, the exposed Cross is, paradoxically, painted with wood graining in order to 'show' its own material character and emphasise its status as an object of devotion.¹⁸ In the latter (**fig. 4**), the local grey sandstone, *macigno*, which was generally used for architectural membering and furnishings and not religious images, makes up both the main scene and its integral frame. The relief is visibly composed of two massive upright slabs meeting along a central seam, as if to evoke the leaves of a closed door (one of the many epithets of the Virgin Mary). *Macigno* seems here to be a choice in contrast to refined white marble, one that was in keeping with the meekness of the Virgin who becomes the chosen 'tabernacle' of God as she accepts the archangel's message. It is, surely, to acknowledge this momentous transformation of her body by the Holy Spirit that Donatello deliberately transfigured the stone (once lightly tinted) with gilded ornaments.¹⁹ Christ's salvific incarnation is further suggested on the base that, bending as it were to God's will, supports a large, veined roundel of ancient red jasper framed in a triumphal, winged garland. Flanked by 'bowing' arms of the Cavalcanti family it, in turn, tilts downwards towards the altar and tombs of the family dead. Taken together, the materials and ornament of the tabernacle, which came to be known as the 'Annunziata del

¹⁶ Petrucci 2016, esp. catalogue no. 2, p. 164.

¹⁷ Harris 2010, Chapters 2 and 5; Johnson 2020 for the Crucifix in liturgical use.

¹⁸ Harris 2010, esp. pp. 190-193 and 202-205.

¹⁹ Wright 2019, pp. 209-11; for the polychromy and gilding Vaccari, Manni, Andreoni and Kumar 1995, pp. 185-92 and Vaccari 2003, pp. 26-7.

Sasso' or 'Stone Annunciate' contain and effectively embody the Virgin's pliancy to salvation history as she becomes mother of God.²⁰

When carving marble that was meant to be seen close to, Donatello was able to invoke seemingly impossible effects of cloud and diaphanous veiling. But it is telling that when given to design and execute one of the pair of marble organ lofts for Florence cathedral in Carrara marble (**fig. 5**), he transforms the surfaces with bold projections and repeat ornaments that produce sharp contrasts of light and shadow.²¹ Drawing on the massive features of late Roman architectural sculpture, ornaments that scroll and blossom are combined with coloured hardstone, brilliant enamel and gilded glass or ceramic insertions. Though less polished, Donatello's marble loft is also comparable in its ornaments to the exquisite Florentine Trecento shrine to the Madonna, whose coloured glass and gilt inserts glittered in the half-light at Orsanmichele.²² The frieze of boisterous spirits and its colonnettes received more direct light and, for them, Donatello used a bolder technique applying gold leaf over small glass roundels in red, green, yellow and lilac (**fig. 1**). Coloured glass paste was familiar enough in the working of vitreous enamels and fake gems, but here, cemented into recesses in the marble, they appear like iridescent coins impressed into a yielding surface. The less-than-precise alignment also serves visually to break up the stone ground, making the reliefs appear still more energetic and setting the pipe-like colonnettes visually vibrating.²³ By contrast, the base of the monument has a more sonorous 'voice' and denser colours. The pair of expressive bronze heads, with their parted lips and powerful projection towards the viewer from the centre of coloured stone roundels seem to invoke the age-old speech of the prophets.²⁴

At the time he was working on the organ lofts in the 1430s, Donatello was also offered the prestigious commission to produce bronze doors for the cathedral sacristies below, but progress halted after the provision of models.²⁵ Instead he completed the pair of much smaller copper alloy

²⁰ Wright 2019, pp. 213-17.

²¹ For the work's dismantling and various reconstructions Becherucci and Brunetti 1969, vol. 1, pp. 277-82; Agnoletti et al. 2013, pp. 202-3.

²² Diane Finiello Zervas, *Orsanmichele di Firenze/Orsanmichele Florence* (Modena 1996) pp. for the shrine

²³ Bloch 2019, at pp. 910-12 for a more specific sonic implication of the *spiritelli*.

²⁴ The heads were oil gilded in 1456, the red stone is not original. Agnoletti et al. 2013 for the heads; Bloch 2019, p. 908 and pp. 912-13; Verdon and Zolli 2015, cat. 13-14. Pfisterer 2002, p. 206 also sees the heads as prophetic.

²⁵ Herzner 1976.

doors internal to the sacristy of San Lorenzo (**fig. 6**). Commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici, these were framed with assertive marble door surrounds and stucco overdoors within what was Brunelleschi's centralised, domical and more restrained interior. Donatello's additions are, metaphorically speaking, noisy and make few concessions to the latter's refined aesthetic of harmonic measures. Indeed, Amy Bloch has argued that the use of a high tin 'bell metal' for the doors may even have been intended to enhance the resounding clang of the doors when in use.²⁶ The doors' relief panels show pairs of male martyrs and apostles in vociferous dialogue. While the sculptor-architect Filarete saw their movements as indecorous, vividly likening them to the cut and thrust of 'fencers', it seems equally possible to find here Donatello's playful sensitivity to function.²⁷ The movements of the pair of door leaves are mimicked in Donatello's figures as they advance or recede from one another in great variety across a foreground plane. The saints in their expressive robes give life to the doors in an entirely novel way, reimagining their daily openings and closings in terms of adversarial or cooperative performance.

The solitary Magdalen reminds us that sculptural drama depends only on a sense of encounter with the viewer, but paired figures were a stimulus to invention and a feature of several works made by Donatello for the Medici family. The *Judith slaying Holofernes* made in his later years for the Medici palace garden (**fig. 7**) was the most highly developed of these in formal and psychological terms and the most challenging in terms of making. The contrasted bronze bodies are ingeniously fitted to one another with a disturbing intimacy and appear as if they were cast together even though actually assembled from several parts (three major sections for the two bodies, further casts for the limbs and the triangular base). That Vasari should admire the 'subtlety and great beauty' of the cast and take pleasure in the curvilinear pedestal 'full of grace', is also a tribute to the coherence achieved in the assembly of the whole.²⁸ The pedestal sets one baluster, shaped like a vessel, over its inverted twin in a way that is purposefully designed for the story of reversal it supports. An exemplary scene of female fortitude, the Israelite heroine is shown upright and brimming with virtue, while overturning the might of the Philistine general, left sagging and lifeless. As she raises her sword, his dead weight bears down on a bulging cushion that signals to his sensual weakness. Holofernes' naked and enebriated body, already partially decapitated and the limbs falling at deliberately

²⁶ Bloch 2019, pp. 913-915.

²⁷ Filarete eds Finoli and Grassi, vol. 2, p. 659.

²⁸ Vasari ed. Milanesi, vol. 2 pp. 404-5. Caglioti 2000, Chap. 3 for the pedestal, see also Wright 2019, pp. 77-79.

awkward angles, is shown at the very moment of death like an emptying wine sack. Here the idea of the sculpted body and, especially, the cast bronze figure as a vessel that can contain life (the spirited Judith) or see it drain away (Holofernes) seems to draw on the very process of making. Direct metal casting involves burning out of a wax model to allow a pour of 'live', molten metal into the gap left in the mould.²⁹

Working with moulds as well as models, casting also involves thinking in terms of negative or concave forms as much as positive or salient ones. Donatello left us a clue as to how this formal and conceptual relationship could shape a potential for future castings: in the *Chellini Madonna* (fig. xxx), he took the imaginative leap of making a bronze form that was simultaneously model (masterwork) and mould. A small devotional image in the unusual form of a shallow dish, the roundel seems to have been produced experimentally in Padua, but was subsequently given by Donatello to his doctor in Florence along with the intriguing advice that its reverse side could be used as a mould from which to cast copies in glass.³⁰ Marian reliefs were already being produced in versions, with copies in different materials derived from moulds applied to the front, but Donatello's conception of a specially-designed back that cut out any intermediary was entirely novel. Adding value to the bronze, this allowed for its owner to 'father' future multiples from it and ones of a distinctly otherworldly beauty. Marian theology presented the virgin mother as a pure 'vessel' (*vas*) for the incarnation of Christ and, like glass, transparent to the spirit of God that passed into her body yet left her 'immaculate'.³¹ Moulded glass, as translucent sculpture impressed with an image, would represent, and behave as, the very stuff of Mary.

The play between metaphor, matter and animation – in this case between moulded vessel, glass and Holy Spirit – is especially rich in Donatello's sculpture and it can be traced in another, much larger Marian tondo issuing from his workshop (fig. xxx) Now heavily restored, the terracotta *Piot Madonna* is ornamented with an assertive ground of repeat rings within which rows of antique 'Marian' vases alternate with winged heads [corrected].³² These motifs, that are also a prehistory to the Adoration of the Child, are surprisingly fashioned in wax - white on a red – and would originally have been enclosed under clear glass to allow the colour both to show and shine. Moreover, traces

²⁹ Stone 2001, argues that the *Judith* involved an initial mould made from a cloth-dressed model that was burned out, allowing a subsequent wax model to be made from the mould and cast directly.

³⁰ See catalogue no. xxx and Motture Paolozzi Strozzi and Bormand (eds) 2013, p. 436.

³¹ For the Marian symbolism of coloured light see Meiss 1945; Bloch 2010.

³² See cat. no. xxx. Boucher 2001, pp. 114-116; Bormand 2008, pp. 11-14

of gilding found even on the Virgin's skin suggest that, rather than contrasting with a matte clay, as now, these gem-like insertions would have seemed to be set in gold. Though doubt remains as to who actually modelled the Virgin and Child, the work's peculiar aesthetic, in which bold material, formal and optical effects are tied to meaning, stamp it as Donatello's conception.³³ Perhaps too, the visual-verbal play attaching to the little bird (the phallic '*uccellino*') pressed between Christ's legs is not beneath his humour.³⁴

As for many later Florentine artists, the 'tondo' format was one that offered Donatello inventive stimulus as designer and maker and it is telling that in this format Donatello's consciousness of eventual setting produced new ways to dramatize the act of looking itself. The Chellini roundel incorporates a perspective on to the 'underside' of its own integral frame that enables the object to transform from handleable dish to open oculus through which the Virgin, 'window of heaven', is seen devoutly from below. But the idea of looking up at a roundel that offers a vision through was established long before in the Medici sacristy (**fig. 8**). The pendentive (hanging) roundels had to follow a concave surface so were made directly on the wall, ingeniously modelling at speed in damp stucco pressed against nail heads to prevent the low relief from dropping.³⁵ Variouslly tinted with integral brick dust or paint, they are rough, tactile and painterly, with figures 'cut off' as though glimpsed beyond a hole in the wall. In the *Ascension of St. John*, the last of four scenes from the Evangelist's life, the daring upwards perspective that acknowledges a radically low viewing angle, is staked out using snap lines in the rose-coloured medium of the buildings. The figures, legible in pure white stucco, include many who gaze up in wonder - like the roundel's own beholders - as John's soul escapes into heaven from the complex net of 'Roman' arcading. Donatello was aware of the use of *cocciopesto* stucco in antiquity, but in terms of rapidity and dramatic command of architectural perspective, the roundels are unlike any architectural sculpture, ancient or contemporary. Their colouristic and dramatic inspiration was registered instead in fresco painting, above all that of Donatello's friend Uccello (**fig. 9**).

³³ For a critical appraisal, Avery 1976. The type of clay suggests a Florentine rather than Paduan origin, see Bouquillon et al. 2012, pp. 67 and 68

³⁴ The bird is omitted from surviving variants of the composition while retaining the teething ring. For the slang meaning of *uccello* see Grieco 2010, esp. pp. 91-93.

³⁵ Danti 1986, esp. pp. 47-51 and Danti in Elam 1987, pp. 25-28.

The challenges of site, visibility and longevity faced by Donatello in the Old Sacristy were the same that would be addressed by Luca della Robbia (**fig. 9**). Indeed it is his early glazed terracotta roundels that remind us the 1430s and 40s were productive more generally of developments in sculpture technologies towards new colouristic and optical ends.³⁶ Luca's shining *terra invetriata* (high tin, glazed terracotta), achieved marmorial whiteness and glassy purity against celestial blue and even verdant foliage. Tolerant to outdoor conditions, his terracottas ultimately prepared a long future for cheaper, more durable and adaptable sculpture.³⁷ The success and repeatability of the technique also regularised workshop practice, enabling Luca's nephew Andrea to produce everything from coats of arms to altarpieces, including multi-part works for easy export. It was such unity of method and variety of product that enabled the Della Robbia family, and Benedetto Buglioni, to exploit their manufacturing breakthrough for generations. Donatello's artistic legacy is, by contrast, secured above all by a transformative series of site-specific or peculiar one-offs and its coherence lies precisely in its restless ambition. Inspired by a re-imagined antiquity that was a stimulus to modern licence, Donatello rethought relations of figure and ornament and twinned human with material drama. Though enormously influential, Donatello's sheer range, and his endless challenges to the beholder, proved inimitable.

³⁶ Gentilini 1992, [pp](#); Boucher 2001, pp. 13-16.

³⁷ See also Abigail Hykin in Cambareri 2016, pp. 129-143.