

Communicating Identity of Patrons Through Works of Art: Donatello's *David* and the Medici. Reflections and Interpretations

Martina MRÁZOVÁ

Abstract

This study offers a discussion about the way artworks act as communicators of identity of their patrons. It reflects upon the potential interpretations of Donatello's bronze statue of the *David* and the ways it mirrors the religious and civic aspects of the identity of its patrons, the Medici family, in light of the Quattrocento Florentine society. On the example of this statue's replacement from its supposedly original location – the Palazzo Medici to the Palazzo Vecchio in 1494 – the author argues that spatial/architectural contextualisation of pieces of art and the artworks that surround them play an essential role in the correct interpretation of the ideas they are meant to represent and in the process of communication of their patrons' identity.

Keywords: Donatello, Medici, David, identity, patrons, Renaissance, statue, bronze, communication

Introduction

The term 'patronage', often used to describe artistic commissions was a vital medium of self-expression, presentation of the patrons' position within the political and social structure, but in many cases also of their identity or prestige.¹ It was more than common in Renaissance Florence for wealthy citizens, such as the Medici, to commission artworks in order to show-off their wealth and status, hence formulating and articulating their identity. Yet these were not the only functions of artworks, as they often contained various hidden religious or political messages. This article discusses the way a work of art commissioned by a wealthy and influential family performs a task in the process of communication and formulation of its patrons' identity. Specifical-

ly, we will discuss Donatello's bronze statue of the *David* (Figure 1), which has been displayed in the Medici courtyard in Florence (Figure 2) during the 15th century.

Although considered one of the most famous pieces of art in Renaissance Italy, questions regarding the origin and the exact date of creation of Donatello's bronze sculpture of the *David* remain unanswered until this day. Due to lack of documents regarding the commission or the original location of the statue, there has been a considerable debate about the veracity of the Medici patronage over this bronze. Nevertheless, professor Francis Ames-Lewis and numerous other scholars agree that the statue was most probably commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici in the 1430 s.² His assumption lies on the first recorded location of the bronze in 1469, which was

¹ *Patronage, Art and Society in Renaissance Italy*. Ed.: KENT, F. W. – SIMONS, Patricia – EADE, J. C. New York 1987, p. 19; KENT, D.: *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*. London 2000, p. 3.

² AMES-LEWIS, F.: ART HISTORY OR STILKRITIK? Donatello's Bronze David reconsidered. In: *Art History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1979, p. 140.



Fig. 1: Donatello, *David*. c. 1430–1440. Bronze, 158 cm. Museo Nazionale de Bargello, Florence, Italy. Photo: https://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/d/donatello/1_early/david/index.html

a column at the heart of the Palazzo Medici courtyard.³ Figure 3 illustrates a possible reconstruction of what this might have looked like. This theory has been further developed by Christine Sperling, who additionally considered the spatial and architectural context of the statue's designated place. According to her, it was possibly Cosimo who commissioned the statue, perhaps for the *sala grande* of the Medici Palace.⁴ For the purpose of this article, we will agree with the earlier mentioned arguments and we will assume that the bronze sculpture of the *David* was indeed commissioned by the Medici family, possibly by Cosimo after his exile around 1434.

Visual analysis

The artist offers us the figure of the victorious *David* in its most vulnerable form – unclothed, naked. This way, Donatello, after a thousand years, reclaims the ancient Greek and Roman interest in the nude human body.⁵ This statement can be understood in the literal sense as “Donatello’s *David* is the first surviving bronze nude since Antiquity”.⁶ The naked body, which was rarely portrayed in the Gothic period, finds its rebirth during the Renaissance and there could not be a better artist than Donatello to inaugurate it.

Nevertheless, before jumping to any conclusions, it is essential not to limit ourselves with just one connotation of the male nude – the earlier mentioned vulnerability. It was the Italian Renaissance sculpture which frequently demonstrated the rediscovery of classical antiquity.⁷ The bronze *David* in the artistic form of *all’antica* embodies the idea of the naked male hero rooted in classical art which saw its revival during the Renaissance,⁸ further reinforcing the vic-

³ Ibidem, p. 140.

⁴ CRUM, R.J.: Donatello’s bronze “David” and the question of foreign versus domestic tyranny. In: *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 443. (see also SPERLING, C. M.: Donatello’s bronze “David” and the demands of Medici politics. In: *Burlington*, Vol. 134, 1992, pp. 218–224.)

⁵ Available online: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/early-europe-and-colonial-americas/renaissance-art-europe-ap/a/donatello-david> (accessed March 7, 2022).

⁶ WELLER, P.: A Reassessment in Historiography and Gender: Donatello’s Bronze “David” in the Twenty-First Century. In: *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 33, No. 65, p. 69.

⁷ BERGSTEIN, M.: Donatello’s “Gattamelata” and Its Humanist Audience. In: *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 3, p. 833.

⁸ On iconography and the male nude see for example: FULTON, CH.: The Boy Stripped Bare by His Elders: Art and Adolescence in Renaissance Florence. In: *Art Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 2, pp. 31–40.



Fig. 2: Courtyard of the Medici Palace, Florence, Italy. Photo: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palazzo_Medici_courtyard_Apr_2008_\(10\)-Palazzo_Medici_courtyard_Apr_2008_\(9\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palazzo_Medici_courtyard_Apr_2008_(10)-Palazzo_Medici_courtyard_Apr_2008_(9).jpg)

torious and heroic themes *David* represents, which will be discussed later.⁹

The relaxed contrapposto of the nude male body together with the head and gaze slightly directed downwards do not evoke an aggressive victory, but precisely the opposite – David’s humility and his gratitude to God in helping him to combat the enemy. But let us not confuse the contemplative and thoughtful face with shyness or fear. David stands

proudly as the winner of this battle, crowned with the wreath of victory, holding a sword in his right hand and with his left foot leaning on the head of the defeated Goliath. The latter gesture embodies a motif that is not distant to history of art. It can be seen similar to the Christian iconography of the Virgin Mary standing on the head of the devil, symbolising the triumph of good over evil. It is what Jan Bialostocki calls ‘encompassing themes’.¹⁰ He explains,

⁹ On the concept of heroic nudity in classical art see for example: SPIVEY, N.: *Understanding Greek Sculpture*. London 1997, pp. 105–122.; The Renaissance revival of the classical heroic male nude can also be observed in Michelangelo’s *Battle of the Centaurs* (1492).

¹⁰ BIALOSTOCKI, J.: Encompassing themes and archetypal images. In: *Arte Lombarda*, Vol. 10, p. 276.



Fig. 3: Reconstruction of the possible placement of the bronze *David* in the Medici Palace, Florence, Italy. Reproduction of photo from AMES-LEWIS 1989 (see in note 20)

“Such encompassing themes may convey a distinctly intellectual symbolism. A heroine treading a man (or a man’s head) underfoot is, as an encompassing theme, an obvious symbol of the triumph of good over evil”, adding that “representations of the Virgin Mary treading upon the serpent or upon the dragon belong to the same encompassing theme”.¹¹ Thus what links these two examples of slightly different historical content – the *David* and the Virgin Mary – is the motif, or the symbolic parallel.

Interpretations

Despite the certainty of the statue’s thematic origin in the Bible, there has been a considerable debate about its primary meaning and its correct interpretation. In light of the exposed naked male body, Peter Weller explains that a debate about “Donatello’s presumed same-sex preference” sparked in 1957 in the study of Herbert W. Janson, who

attributed it to the statue’s “alleged prurient and effeminate physical deportment”.¹² Weller further makes a relevant point, saying that Janson probably made such assumptions as he supposed that *David*’s iconography is primarily secular and not religious. If it were mainly religious, such act of eroticising of Christ’s ancestor would probably not be accepted by the Quattrocento Florentine society.¹³ Therefore, if we acknowledge the religious meaning of the statue, we could agree with Robert Williams, who takes into consideration the biblical origins of the statue and its devotional meaning. According to him “*David*’s delicacy is thus not an invitation to homoerotic fantasy, but an attempt to suggest the presence of God”.¹⁴

Medici – devout Christians or patrons of the arts?

Regarding the religious interpretation of the statue, it is essential to bear in mind that the meaning and interpretation of the bronze may have implications on its function and on the place it occupies. Interpretation and the placement of the statue are in this case co-dependent. Peter Weller claims that the reason to place the statue in the Medici cortile was in fact, in order to sanctify the space, hence highlighting its devotional meaning.¹⁵ It could be claimed therefore, that by the commission and installation of this statue in the Medici Palace, the family wanted to publicly convey their identity of “devout Christians”.¹⁶ This theory has been questioned by Mary Hollingsworth, as she argues that the reasons behind Cosimo de’ Medici’s religious projects, such as funding the construction of churches, were to fulfil his Christian duties.¹⁷ It seems that there were certain societal expectations from wealthy citizens, such as the Medici, to act as patrons of religious artworks and they seem to have fulfilled these expectations successfully. The Medici were widely famous for their art patronage in Renaissance Italy, as they decided to spend great

¹¹ Ibidem, pp. 276–278.

¹² WELLER 2012 (see in note 6), p. 43.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 43.

¹⁴ WILLIAMS, R.: “Virtus Perficitur”: On the Meaning of Donatello’s Bronze “David”. In: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 53. Bd., H. 2/3, 2009, p. 220.

¹⁵ WELLER 2012 (see in note 6), p. 74.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 74.

¹⁷ HOLLINGSWORTH, M.: *Patronage in the Renaissance Italy: From 1400 to the Early Sixteenth Century*. London 2014, p. 71.

portions of their fortune on charities, churches and religious institutions. Among the numerous religious commissions of Cosimo de' Medici in Florence one could find the rebuilding of his own prayer cell in the Dominican convent at San Marco, or the choir and Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo, constructed after his return from exile in 1433.¹⁸

In this instance I would lean towards Hollingsworth's theory, as the Medici's 'devotion to God' could have been indeed proclaimed with a work of art whose religious meaning would not be as questioned as it is the *David's* and which would not be as controversial as the supposedly eroticising bronze. It is therefore debatable whether the Medici wanted to proclaim their Christian identity through patronage of such works of art, or whether it was a way of self-promotion and prestige. In any case, both motives are relevant and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Political undertone

Nevertheless, it is possible that the religious significance of the bronze *David* may have acted as an inspiration for Cosimo to commission it. The Bible tells a story of David's exile from Jerusalem, which may evoke the exile of Cosimo de' Medici from Florence in 1433.¹⁹ Such interpretation offers us "further secondary meanings which are appropriate in the context of mid-quattrocento Medicean imagery," as put forward by Ames-Lewis.²⁰ In other words, the symbolism the *David* bears, can be seen as a reflection of the donor's social and political situation. However, in this case it is only a speculation, since there is no evidence of such an act.

Another religious interpretation of this statue comes from the fact that Donatello's both statues, *David* (Figure 1) and *Judith and Holofernes* (Figure 4) that used to be displayed together in the Medici courtyard, represent the idea of God helping the weak to overcome the strong.²¹ This interpretation



Fig. 4: Donatello, *Judith and Holofernes*. c. 1450–1460. Bronze, 236 cm. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Italy. Photo: https://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/d/donatell/3_late/judith/index.html

can be seen as a metaphor of "the archetypal biblical warrior in the service of God and country" – both *David* and *Judith*, in this case, personifying the Florentines in their battles against foreign powers.²² The

¹⁸ WELLER 2012 (see in note 6), p. 50.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 49.

²⁰ AMES-LEWIS, F: Donatello's bronze David and the Palazzo Medici courtyard. In: *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1989, p. 239.

²¹ WILLIAMS 2009 (see in note 14), p. 222.

²² KENT 2000 (see in note 1), p. 52.

plurality of the bronze *David's* interpretations indicates that it would be wrong to claim that the main and the only meaning of the statue is the biblical one. On the contrary, scholars such as Janson argue that the statue primarily symbolises non-spiritual ideals as opposed to theological principles, despite its biblical source.²³ He further points out that “the clue of the meaning of the *David* must be found in the realm of humanistic thought, rather than in that religious symbolism”.²⁴ In this case, therefore, the victory of a young boy over a tyrant can also be applied to the Florentine political problems current in the Quattrocento. It is the flexibility of interpretation mentioned above, that allows this statue to fulfil its central task, thus articulating and communicating not only the religious, but also the non-devotional aspects of the Medici identity.

As it has been mentioned previously, commissioning works of art and their patronage was widely used for multiple reasons, such as to show-off the wealth of a prominent family, but it was also a medium of self-expression and communication of one's identity.²⁵ According to Kent, the image of biblical David in the past primarily represented as a prophet, changed by the beginning of the 15th century to symbolise “the Florentine patriotic virtue, the heroic defence of the liberty of a small republican commune against larger more centralised state better equipped for warfare”.²⁶ In this case the decision to place the “emblem of Florentine republican government” – Donatello's *David*, in the palace of its patrons – the Medici, can be undoubtedly understood as a sign of their close connection to the republican regime and its ideals.²⁷ McHam

additionally argues that by appropriation of the symbol of the state by a single family, the Medici wanted to proclaim that “the true power resided several hundred meters north of the Palazzo della Signoria” – in the Palazzo Medici, declaring themselves the rulers of Florence.²⁸ The bronze *David* consequently not only represented their values and civic ideals, but most of all the political power the Medici knew they possessed and their identity as rulers of Florence.²⁹ Consequently it is safe to claim that Florentine republicanism was an important part of the Medici identity which they possibly wished to communicate through the bronze statue of the *David* and its positioning in their palace.³⁰ Since it was the Medici who were in reality controlling the government, it could be argued that the *David* accordingly served as a tool of political propaganda.³¹ Although this opinion was not very popular among the scholars, in light of the aforementioned facts, it reinforced the idea that the Medici saw themselves – just as they saw *David* – as “the defenders of Florence”.³²

In this context, the *David* symbolised the triumph of the Medici or the Republic of Florence over “the threats of foreign oppression”, as Ames-Lewis calls it.³³ What does the term ‘foreign oppression’ in this sense mean? According to Hans Baron, it was tyranny that was seen as a primarily foreign problem “arising from the recurrent Milanese threat to Florentine liberty in the late 14th and early 15th centuries”.³⁴ This notion could have been, apart from the place the statue occupied, conveyed by the ‘anti-tyrannical message’ that supposedly accompanied the bronze in the Medici Palace:

²³ WELLER 2012 (see in note 6), p. 45.

²⁴ JANSON, H. W.: *The sculpture of Donatello*. New Jersey 1979, p. 85.

²⁵ KENT 2000 (see in note 1), p. 3.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 283.

²⁷ MCHAM, S. B.: Donatello's Bronze “David” and “Judith” as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence. In: *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 83, No. 1, 2001, p. 34.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

²⁹ WILLIAMS 2009 (see in note 14), 218.

³⁰ AMES-LEWIS 1979 (see in note 2), p. 141.

³¹ BENNETT, B. A. – WILKINS, D. G.: *Donatello*. Oxford 1984, p. 85.

³² MCHAM 2001 (see in note 27) p. 43.

³³ AMES-LEWIS 1979 (see in note 2), p. 141.

³⁴ CRUM 1992 (see in note 4), p. 444.

In domo magnifici Pieri Medicis sub Davide eneo
 Victor est quisquis patriam tuetur
 Frangit immanis Deus hostis iras
 En puer grandem domuit tirannum
 Vincite cives

(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!)³⁵

Although the inscription refers undoubtedly to the biblical ‘victor’ – David, over ‘an enormous foe’ – Goliath, Crum claims that it does not carry a literal “suggestion of a military engagement” (other than the biblical), but it may have symbolically implied engagement with foreign oppression.³⁶ This message, together with the symbolic meaning of the *David* allowed the Medici family to make themselves look like the tyrant slayers, just like the biblical character.³⁷ It is therefore obvious that in this context, the *David* communicates the republican identity of its patrons, demonstrating their commitment to republican liberty in Florence.³⁸

On the other hand, considering the extent of power the Medici possessed during the Quattrocento, some may even argue that they “used the tyranny motif to neutralise suspicions of their very own suppression of Florence”.³⁹ In other words, due to the power they possessed, they themselves might have been seen by the Florentines as tyrants, which is a topic for another debate that does not come within the scope of this article.

When talking about the republican identity of the Medici, one has to bear in mind that the *David* was not the only statue that conveyed this message. Within the courtyard of the Medici Palace, it was also Donatello’s *Judith and Holofernes* which, together with the *David*, was meant to evoke republican ideas that the Medici tried to communicate.⁴⁰ Some may



Fig. 5: Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Italy. Photo: https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palazzo_Vecchio#/media/Soubor:Firenze_Palazzo_della_Signoria,_better_known_as_the_Palazzo_Vecchio.jpg.

argue that these two statues (perhaps made as a pair) “might have served to threaten or to guard”, or act as a warning sign to those who “would threaten the Medici”.⁴¹ The theme of these two warriors is very similar, as they symbolise the victory of freedom over tyranny.⁴² Yet again evoking the idea of protection against any (internal or foreign) threats. Consequently, we can argue that by installing both of these statues in the Medici cortile the family not only managed to communicate their republican identity,

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 441.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 444.

³⁷ MCHAM 2001 (see in note 27), p. 43.

³⁸ CRUM 1992 (see in note 4), p. 448.

³⁹ WELLER 2012 (see in note 6), p. 67.

⁴⁰ MCHAM 2001 (see in note 27), p. 32.

⁴¹ BENNETT – WILKINS 1984 (see in note 31), pp. 83, 85.

⁴² KENT 2000 (see in note 1), p. 52.

but by placing them together in the Medici Palace their symbolism and meaning intensified.

Accordingly, it is essential to note that a meaning of a statue can very much depend not only on its location, but also on the artworks that surround it. In this case, together with *Judith and Holofernes*, the *David* was able to communicate the identity of its patrons very adequately also thanks to its location, the seat of the then most powerful family in Florence – the Medici Palace. However, in 1494 the Medici were forced to flee Florence in light of the French expeditions to claim the kingdom of Naples and due to Piero de' Medici's poor handling of the situation. As Professor Alison Brown puts it, Piero the Unfortunate "threw himself wherever Florence had enemies, and these in turn used the Medici as instruments, a lure, in order to foment trouble in the city and uprisings in its territory".⁴³ Due to the family's exile, the bronze statues of *David* and *Judith* although stayed in Florence, changed their location and were moved from the Palazzo Medici to the courtyard of the Palazzo Vecchio (Figure 5).⁴⁴ This relocation and the circumstances surrounding it had considerable implications on the interpretation and on the symbolic meaning of these two bronze statues. The *David* no longer portrayed the Medici as the defenders of Florence and the tyrant slayers, but as the complete opposite – the tyrant Goliath himself. In the literal meaning, one could say that the Medici were no longer seen as the biblical David, but as Goliath. This argument is supported by Kent, who claims that "while a network of patronage can be an impressive instrument of political control, it is a mechanism into which is built the means of its own destruction".⁴⁵ Therefore, the anti-tyrannical message of the Medici that the *David* used to convey in the Palazzo Medici changed remarkably and suddenly the Medici family was depicted as tyrants.⁴⁶

Conclusion

To summarise, I believe that it would be wrong to claim that the Medici commissioned the bronze statue of the *David* just for its aesthetic appeal.⁴⁷ Given the symbolic and ideological connections of the statue with its patrons – the Medici family, Donatello's bronze statue of the *David* unquestionably performs its central task in formulating and communicating the identity of its patrons. Due to its flexibility of interpretations, the bronze statue not only communicates their identity of devout Christians (possibly how they wanted to be seen), but the bronze also reflects the identity of the Medici as the rulers of Florence and as the defenders of Florentine liberties. As has been argued by Crum, it could have been precisely this ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings, that were "sometimes more important to the Medici in commissioning works of art than were singularity and absolute clarity of meaning".⁴⁸ Ames-Lewis further develops this point by stating that the bronze statue of the *David* was probably made to be capable of reinterpretations according to the changing Florentine society in the late Quattrocento.⁴⁹ This has proven to be the case especially with the 1494 Medici exile from Florence following the political turmoil between the French King Charles VIII and Piero the Unfortunate. It is therefore important to note that the identity of the patrons, as well as other ideals the artwork represents, can further be highlighted and even completely transformed by the choice of placement of the artwork and by its contextualisation with other works of art. In this case it was the decision to install the *David* and *Judith and Holofernes* together in the Medici cortile that highlighted their anti-tyrannical message and their relocation to the Palazzo Vecchio diametrically changed their meaning and symbolism. Consequently, the placement as well as the surrounding artworks, among other elements, can have direct implications on the statue's meaning

⁴³ BROWN, A.: *Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici and the Crisis of Renaissance Italy*. London 2020, p. 231.

⁴⁴ BENNETT – WILKINS 1984 (see in note 31), p. 83.

⁴⁵ KENT – SIMONS – EADE 1987 (see in note 1), p. 77.

⁴⁶ HOLLINGSWORTH 2014 (see in note 17), p. 128.

⁴⁷ BENNETT – WILKINS 1984 (see in note 31), p. 83.

⁴⁸ CRUM 1992 (see in note 4), p. 441.

⁴⁹ AMES-LEWIS 1989 (see in note 20), p. 251.

and interpretation. It was undoubtedly the spatial, architectural as well as historical contexts of the statue that encouraged the viewer “to read the bronze in

different ways, and to deduce a range of moral and philosophical messages according, perhaps, to his individual intellectual temperament”.⁵⁰

Communicating Identity of Patrons Through Works of Art: Donatello’s *David* and the Medici. Reflections and Interpretations

Résumé

The bronze statue of the *David* was likely commissioned by Cosimo de’ Medici and was created during the first half of the 15th century by Donatello. Despite being one of the most famous and debated pieces of art of the Italian Renaissance, it still leaves numerous unanswered questions. The aim of this study is to discuss the way Donatello’s *David* communicates the identity of its patrons – the Medici family. In the introductory part the author acknowledges that the Medici patronage over the bronze sculpture can be questioned, due to lack of documents. Nevertheless, opinions and evidence of various scholars such as professor Francis Ames-Lewis are taken into account in assuming its veracity. This is followed by a visual analysis of the bronze sculpture, with references primarily to its

biblical origin. There has been an ongoing debate about the correct interpretation among art historians, mainly whether it is the civic or the religious ideas this bronze reflects. In this article, the author makes a parallel between this discussion and the way the statue communicates the identity of its patrons. The debate is divided into two parts – firstly discussing the identity of the Medici as devout Christians and secondly taking into consideration the political and social aspects of their status, in light of the Quattrocento Florentine political situation. This article stresses the importance of architectural, spatial as well as historical contexts surrounding this bronze sculpture – concepts, that are crucial in its correct interpretation and in the understanding of the symbolism it bears.

Martina Mrázová, M.A.

Centrum vied o umení SAV
org. zložka Ústav dejín umenia
Dúbravská cesta 9, 841 04 Bratislava
e-mail: mrazova.martina@hotmail.com

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 251.