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Donatello: The hand of enlightenment in the time of darkness

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When you are in a place, too dark that you cannot see anything but you know that at the very position you are standing you are safe. But you do not know that if you take a step you maybe no longer safe, you are afraid and do not want to move. What are you going to do? You will just stand there and wait for help and that “help”, should be reliable. In this case, you need a warm enough hand to hold and guide you, which encourages you to start taking a step. In Middle Age, there were a lot conflicts, changes and also misperceptions of the world. And in the Late Middle Age, people started to turn their heads away from those misconceptions into the enlightenment period. These people were artists, scientists and merchants. Donatello was one of those artists, his works demonstrated the realistic ideas (a warm enough hand) in the time of idealism (the safe but dark position that you are standing), which later led people out of the church and trust in their own values, trust in realism, and trust in the capability of mankind.

Donatello or Donato di Niccolo di Betto Bardi was one of the very first renaissance artists, specialized in sculpting. He was born in 1386 and died in 1466, in

the Middle Age¹ when Catholic Church ruled almost everything in Europe. There were many reasons why the Church was very powerful, in the early middle age, a lot of barbarian invasions occurred which got people killed, robbed and enslaved, they had nowhere to go that will keep them safe. They turned into the church, nothing to do but pray. Later in High Middle Age and Late Middle Age, Catholic Church is the center of the western world. Meanwhile the Gothic style of art² reached its peak. Gothic works were all commissioned by the church because Gothic art emphasized on ideal aspects, then it demonstrated the prosperity and the greatness of the Catholic Church by putting materials altogether to make each work luxurious, those materials, usually go too far and make the work lack of reality. Each work became an ideal piece but the church loved it that way. They used Gothic art to picture the written legends in both the old and the new testaments into some touchable sculptures so people can easier get access to god.

We all know the world's most famous sculpture "David" by Michelangelo, but not so many know that it is not the first David on this planet, Donatello's one was, and both versions are very different. Donatello's David³ contains some hidden messages in himself that if you look closer, you will found it incredible. Even the story of David is one of the legends in The Old Testament, here are some remarks. In the story David was just a boy brave enough to fight the Giant Goliath, then he was

¹ Gemma Wiseman. "European history: Barbarian invasions of the early medieval period". Helium.com. 14 Sep 2007. <<http://www.helium.com/items/449129-european-history-barbarian-invasions-of-the-early-medieval-period>>

² Wikipedia contributors. "Medieval Arts". Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 15 Sep 2012. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medieval_art#Gothic_art>

³ Unknown author. "Donatello's David". Italian Renaissance. 15 Sep 2012. <<http://www.italianrenaissance.org/donatellos-david/>>

blessed by god and he beheaded Goliath, but by Donatello's aspects, he was sculpted by bronze in the nude. It was quite a big surprise that in the era of god and soul, he confidently presented the nude and that was not a biblical representation.

Furthermore, David sculpture was the first nude, free-standing statue of the world, that means he did not have to be put on the niche of any cathedral, he was free to go. This is the first time when sculpture had been separated from architecture, and when sculptures no longer depend on architecture, which in that time was mostly about churches and cathedrals, people started to find some ideas that do not have to fit churches and cathedrals so they found a lot of natural, wonderful and humanistic things in the world instead of those legends in the old and the new testaments.

Another remark that should be mentioned is that David wears a shepherd hat with laurel leaves on top, altogether, the nudity and laurel leaves represent Greek-Roman Art⁴ that had been lost for a thousand years. Donatello did not just use the techniques of Greek-Roman Art, it turned out that he gave a rebirth to it. People, not just artists, started to look back at those ancient times, when the philosophy, politics and democracy were born. The reborn Greek-Roman Art gradually replaced the luxurious, almost messy and unreal style of Gothic Art. Meanwhile, people believed in their capability, and believed in what is real more than ever.

Later in his life, Donatello was commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici to sculpt another biblical heroine, Judith⁵, Jewish woman who overhears that the city will surrender to the Assyrian general, Holofernes, she decides to sneak into the Assyrian

⁴ Various authors. "Greek and Roman Art". International World History. 15 Sep 2012. <<http://history-world.org/arthist.htm>>

⁵ Unknown Author. "Judith and Holofernes". Artble.com. 15 Sep 2012. <http://www.artble.com/artists/donatello/sculpture/judith_and_holofernes>

camp, use her beauty to seduce Holofernes until he gets drunk and she slays him. It is said that there were two inscriptions written on the granite, the first one as “Kingdoms fall through luxury (sin), cities rise through virtues. Behold the neck of pride, severed by the hand of humility. ” and the second inscription was written as “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.” Both inscriptions are no longer visible to read.

Even both biblical heroes seem to represent biblical beliefs but they were sculpted in Donatello’s own aspects. In case of Judith and Holofernes, extremely represents liberty, virtues, and victory over tyrant, this sent some messages to people, encouraged them to fight for their own lives and pursuit of happiness.

David and Judith, by Donatello, have been the inspirations for following-generation artists and philosophers in that time. Artists and philosophers no longer depend on old beliefs. Donatello’s works is a warm enough hand (help) that holds the hand of people and encourages them to walk instead of standing in the dark. Then they find the world so beautiful to live. They start to invent things, create things, or we can say that they “revolute” and take the world into the new era, the era of enlightenment and knowledge. Whether it seems like Donatello’s works do not mean that much to the world, actually the start of something new is the most important part of its success. Even Michelangelo’s David is more famous, even later Judith of some sculptor is more famous, the original source is much more important. Without Donatello’s David, Michelangelo might not have inspiration to sculpt his David or even he had, he might sculpt him using Gothic Art, never going to show the very concept of humanity. Without Judith, people might not easily get the concept of

fighting for freedom. Without Donatello, who knows? People might not know what they are capable of doing or the world could be in a much less-civilized status, where there is no logical philosophy, democracy, highly-academic education, or even no peace at all.