

# SCULPTURE IN THE AGE OF DONATELLO

**Renaissance Masterpieces  
from Florence Cathedral**

**Edited by Timothy Verdon and Daniel M. Zolli**

With contributions by Timothy Verdon, Daniel M. Zolli,  
Amy R. Bloch, Marco Ciatti, Stefano Nicastri, and a  
new corpus of photographs by Antonio Quattrone





This catalogue accompanies the exhibition *Sculpture in the Age of Donatello: Renaissance Masterpieces from Florence Cathedral* organized by Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence, and the Museum of Biblical Art, New York, and on display at the Museum of Biblical Art from February 20 to June 14, 2015.



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NY 10023, USA  
Phone: 212-408-1500  
Fax: 212-408-1292  
info@mobia.org  
www.mobia.org

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Donatello, *St. John the Evangelist*, cat. 10

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Frontispiece:  
Attributed to Giovanni d'Ambrogio, *Archangel Gabriel of the Annunciation* (detail), cat. 1

Opposite:  
Attributed to Giovanni d'Ambrogio, *Virgin Mary of the Annunciation* (detail), cat. 2

Page 6: Attributed to Nanni di Banco, *Profetino* (detail), cat. 6



# CONTENTS

Foreword

*Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore*

9

Foreword

*Museum of Biblical Art*

11





**Florence Cathedral, Renaissance Sculpture,  
Sacred Scripture**

*Timothy Verdon*

13

**Donatello's Visions: The Sculptor  
at Florence Cathedral**

*Daniel M. Zolli*

45

**Lorenzo Ghiberti: From the Early Workshop  
to the Gates of Paradise**

*Amy R. Bloch*

75

**"...with immense diligence and discipline":  
Lorenzo Ghiberti's North Doors and the Opificio delle  
Pietre Dure's Conservation and Restoration Project**

*Marco Ciatti*

101

**Catalogue**

119

**The New Museo dell'Opera del Duomo**

*Timothy Verdon*

181

**Notes**

186

**Selected Bibliography**

191

**Photo Credits**

193

**Board Members and Staff**

194

**Acknowledgments**

195

**Statement from  
the Guild of the Dome**

195

**Index**

196



Daniel M. Zolli, "Donatello's Visions: The Sculptor at Florence Cathedral,"

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# DONATELLO'S VISIONS

## The Sculptor at Florence Cathedral

Daniel M. Zolli

For the main façade of the campanile of Santa Maria del Fiore [Donatello] wrought in marble...[a statue that is] now called il Zuccone. [It is] considered a very rare work and the most beautiful that [Donatello] ever made, such that whenever he wished to take an oath, to make others believe him he would say: "By the faith that I have in my Zuccone." And while he was carving [the statue], he would gaze at it and exclaim: "Speak, speak, or may the bloody dysentery take you."<sup>1</sup>

—Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 1568

## Introduction

An artist who could make mute stone seem to speak. Since antiquity writers had invoked the trope in countless celebrations of figural sculptors, but perhaps nowhere more memorably than in the above anecdote, vividly articulated by Giorgio Vasari in the mid-sixteenth century. The sculpture in question, popularly known as the *Zuccone* ("Squash Head," for its balding pate), belonged to a series of Old Testament prophets that Donatello (ca. 1386–1466) had chiseled for the bell tower of Florence's cathedral roughly between the years 1415 and 1436. By the time Vasari was writing, nearly a century after the sculptor's death, the *Zuccone* had come to stand as a paradigm of sculptural mimesis (cat. 12, detail). Here, Vasari suggests, was a creature so perfectly crafted, so persuasive in its lifelikeness, that even its *maker* believed it might speak (speech, it bears mentioning, was a prophet's central duty). While Vasari's drama of Donatello jawing away at an inert block of marble is almost certainly apocryphal, it nevertheless retains a kernel of truth. Even viewers today are struck by the extraordinary realism and psychological urgency of Donatello's *Zuccone*: his face ravaged, neck craned forward and lips parted, almost apoplectic with purpose as he delivers God's word (see pages 65–67). Confronted with this startling vision of prophetic mission, it can be difficult *not* to imagine that the figure possesses the breath of life.

Probably completed in 1435–36, Donatello's scowling prophet was among the last assignments that he would tackle for the Opera del Duomo, the body in charge of supervising the construction and embellishment of Florence's cathedral (its members were called "operai"). The affiliation spanned nearly four decades of the sculptor's career, and it was the making of him. From his formative years as an apprentice to his full-fledged artistic maturity, Donatello built his reputation through a steady stream of projects for the church's



interior and exterior, its bell tower, and baptistery (see fig. 1). These commissions, while apparently wide-ranging in function and subject, shared one consistent goal: to give compelling material form—often a body—to the immaterial truths of Christianity.

During the period in question—the “age” to which this exhibition’s title refers—no task could have seemed more important. Completed during protracted conflicts with rival cities, amidst increasing factionalism in Florentine politics, and against the constant threat of plague outbreak, these works offered hope to a world framed by uncertainty. Indeed, the very choice of sculpture signaled the seriousness and public nature of the church’s message. For unlike the altarpieces within the cathedral, these sculpted similitudes of divine figures, their lives and deeds, were largely displayed *outside*. Visible in the world, this race of new sculptures “spoke”—was voluble—to anyone who entered the center of the city, regardless of social station or rank. That many of these works, like the *Zuccone*, mimicked the volumes, masses, and even scale of human forms made their appeal to viewers more powerful still. To call Donatello’s works decorative, then, does not begin to countenance the vital role that they played in the life of every Florentine. They were emblems of civic pride, ethical statements, vehicles of communication between their viewers and God, and investments in collective salvation.

What follows is an overview of Donatello’s activities at Florence’s cathedral complex. Given the content of this exhibition, I focus mainly on the sculptor’s work in marble, although, as we shall see, these undertakings drew on sensibilities that he developed in other media such as wax, clay, gold, and bronze. To discern the appeal of Donatello’s sculptures—both to his contemporaries and to later viewers—we must attend throughout to how he *made* them. The decoration of Florence Cathedral was an ongoing project, subject to continuous redesign, and Donatello often had to work within constraints that he inherited from its earlier phases. Each assignment posed unique challenges that affected Donatello’s design, his techniques, and his choice of materials. Focusing on key considerations that structured Donatello’s approach to each commission—e.g. site, scale, style—this essay is meant to introduce his practice in carving marble, tracking its evolution, its negotiation of tradition and novelty, the sculptor’s triumphs and failures. For this it is necessary to glimpse beneath the patina of myth at Donatello’s beginnings.

## Beginnings

Long before posterity would crown him as Florence’s patron saint of sculpture, Donatello was known simply as Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi, son of a wool stretcher (*tiratore di lana*). His father’s professional background distinguished Donatello from others in the cohort of artists highlighted in this exhibition, for unlike his slightly older peers Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378/80–1455) and Nanni di Banco (ca. 1380/85–1421), who trained in workshops run by their families, Donatello found his way to sculpture from the outside.

Regrettably, few details exist concerning the route by which Donatello arrived at the sculptor’s trade. It is reasonable to suppose that he first entered the profession as an apprentice in his early teens, as was common, although available documents are completely silent on the matter.<sup>2</sup> The earliest reference to Donatello, from 1401, alerts us to one possible trajectory.



It locates the teenager in nearby Pistoia, where he was arrested for a skirmish with one Anichino di Piero, whom he bludgeoned with a stick.<sup>3</sup> Beyond its psychological interest, the episode hints at a potential link with Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446), who was then completing a silver altar for Pistoia's cathedral, and who may well have employed the young Donatello in his shop.<sup>4</sup> That the two developed an affinity early on is well attested. Indeed, should Brunelleschi's later biography prove reliable, the pair even traveled to Rome together in 1402–3, where they embarked on an exhaustive study of ancient architecture and sculpture, while supporting themselves with a steady stream of goldsmithing assignments.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it is plausible that Donatello instead—or also—trained in stone carving, as a later payment record implies.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the case, there can be little doubt that when Donatello returned to Florence, around 1404, he encountered a scene flush with professional opportunities. Foremost among these, both in importance and scope, was the commission for a new set of bronze doors for the east portal of the cathedral's baptistery, famously won in a public competition of 1401–2 by Ghiberti, and begun the following year (on the history of the project see pages 75–81). This was the city's most ambitious undertaking in bronze in nearly a century. To fulfill the task Ghiberti—then only in his twenties—had to enlist swarms of assistants, who would aid him in completing the doors' projected twenty-eight panels and massive framework.<sup>7</sup>

It is within this context, as one of the eleven assistants comprising Ghiberti's initial shop crew, that Donatello first enters the light of history.<sup>8</sup> Donatello probably joined the *bottega* sometime between 1404 and 1406, and initially he may have performed routine tasks for Ghiberti, such as maintaining the master's tools and equipment, or acquiring his materials. There is reason to believe, however, that the teenager quickly proved himself able beyond his years, for after Ghiberti signed a new contract for the project in 1407 Donatello received an annual salary of seventy-five florins; several others drew the same wage, but among Ghiberti's twenty-one (!) assistants nobody made more.<sup>9</sup> What this suggests, at least circumstantially, is that in a matter of months the young sculptor had graduated to some of the shop's most important tasks, and was being compensated on a par with much more experienced hands.

What sorts of responsibilities fell to the younger sculptor? A glance at the *Nativity*, among the roughly four panels completed during Donatello's assistantship, helps one to



Fig. 18  
Lorenzo Ghiberti  
North Doors of Florence  
Baptistery, 1403–24:  
panel with the  
*Nativity*  
Bronze with gilding,  
52 x 45 cm  
(20½ x 17¾ in.)  
Museo dell'Opera del  
Duomo, Florence





Cat. 5, detail

appreciate how diverse his activities must have been (fig. 18).<sup>10</sup> After experimenting with drawings and preliminary models, Ghiberti and his assistants would have translated their composition into wax, filling the field within the quatrefoil design with figures, rocks, and trees (on the division of labor see page 77). The completed ensemble was then cast, cleaned, chased, and its surface textures differentiated. The torsos of the shepherd boys were polished with abrasives, for instance, while the jagged outcrop and foliage were left relatively coarse.<sup>11</sup> Certain details were then picked out with tools (called "cold working")—the delicate calligraphic lettering on Mary and Joseph's robes, for example, or the plumed wings of the angel that irrupts from the relief's ground. While Ghiberti surely modeled and finished many of the relief's most prominent features, as his contract stipulated, there is little reason to doubt Donatello's participation in every stage of its realization.<sup>12</sup>

It is tempting to peruse these early panels for traces of Donatello's hand, to attempt to identify in this or that detail the tremors of an emerging artistic persona. That such exercises invariably prove futile is telling. Indeed, one of Ghiberti's guiding concerns seems to have been that his assistants hewed closely to his style the better to bring overall cohesion to the doors. That Donatello's specific contributions could be so lost within the doors' overall design attests not only to the success of Ghiberti's approach, but to how thoroughly the younger sculptor had assimilated his master's lessons.

His tenure in Ghiberti's shop schooled Donatello in activities that he would fall back on throughout his career: among them drawing, casting bronze, and modeling and finishing sculpture.<sup>13</sup> But it also versed him in a style that well suited other projects underway in the cathedral complex. The decorative elegance of Ghiberti's reliefs, and their artful fusion of naturalism and lyrical grace, were hallmarks of the International Gothic idiom that had inundated Florence from the north in the late Trecento.<sup>14</sup> Where sculpture was concerned, the other great manifestation of this style in the city was on the northern entrance to the cathedral, known as the Porta dei Servi (it was only later dubbed the Porta della Mandorla).

The first burst of activity at the Porta spanned roughly the years 1391–97, when the Opera enlisted hoards of stone carvers to populate the great door's jambs with thickets of foliate ornament and half-length figures of angels (five in each reveal), and mythological figures. By 1404, the Opera had shifted its attention to the arch above the door, which continued the decorative program from the previous decade (on the chronology of the program, and its participants, see pages 20–21).<sup>15</sup> It is in connection with this second phase of activity that Donatello is first recorded as a marble sculptor. That his name appears in the Opera's account books as early as 1406 suggests that he may have begun working on cathedral projects while still a member of Ghiberti's shop, which Donatello seems to have left in early 1407.

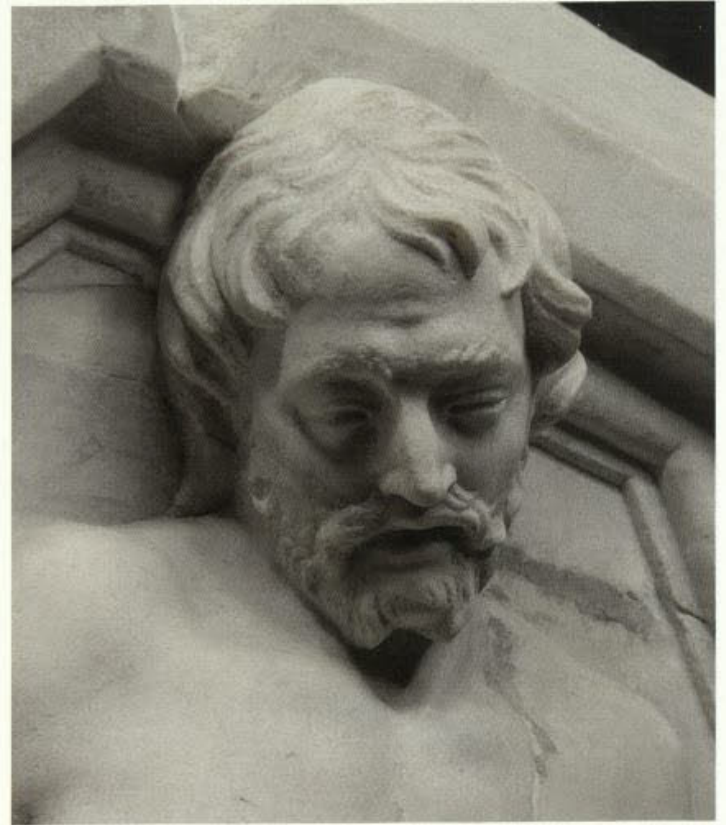
There is every reason to believe that Donatello's activities at the Porta della Mandorla ranged widely, but the available documentary evidence, unfortunately, makes it difficult to say precisely what they were. Nor is it easy to attribute works to Donatello on stylistic grounds alone. Like Ghiberti's doors, the decoration of the Porta was an ongoing project, and individuals were often asked to imitate the style of more established hands to ensure consistency in the program's many parts. Aiming at uniformity, the Opera even levied fines on those whose work strayed from the Porta's master design.<sup>16</sup>



Individual sculptors nonetheless expressed, in places, their own stylistic tendencies. A significant portion of the sculptural decoration is deeply influenced by the International Gothic style, but the program also teems with classicizing elements, most notably a series of *all'antica* figures punctuating the door's inner reveals and archivolt (the figures were begun in the 1390s, and finished by 1409). The *Hercules* on exhibit here might serve as representative of the general stylistic traits of this group (see cat. 4). The figure's dependence on ancient Roman sculpture is palpable: not only in its classical subject, but in its deftly modeled musculature, its near-accurate proportions, and its *contrapposto* pose. It might strike today's reader as strange that the Opera would allow such seemingly varied stylistic forms to enter into its program. Such eclecticism was common in early fifteenth-century Florence, however, and the Opera would not have viewed it as detrimental to the Porta's appearance of unity. Donatello's presence at the Porta would thus have allowed him to engage with a plurality of styles.

Examination of the two works most commonly ascribed to Donatello during his years at the Porta della Mandorla helps to focus the issue. The so-called *Profetino*, probably carved around 1406–9, is unmistakably Ghibertesque in character (cat. 5, detail).<sup>17</sup> Its torpid expression, the rippling folds of its cloak, and the use of drapery to reinforce the figure's corporeality, all have strong precedents in the early reliefs for the North Doors.<sup>18</sup> The statue's debt to Ghiberti becomes more pronounced still when one compares the piece to its companion, also a "small prophet," here given to Nanni di Banco (the figures were installed, respectively, atop the door's left and right finials no later than 1422). The assured stance of Nanni's boy-prophet, and the thick—almost vortical—masses of cloth that invest its right leg differ markedly from the rhythmic grace of its counterpart. What we see here, in other words, are two alternative stylistic orientations: where Nanni's statue is conspicuously un-Ghibertesque, its sibling appears to adapt the goldsmith's lessons to a larger scale.

An entirely different style obtained in the keystone for the arch above the door, it, too, carved around 1408 (for the relief's placement see fig. 8). The relief's subject is a three-quarter-length figure of Christ, depicted as Man of Sorrows, here nested against a cartouche.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to the gentle Gothic air of the *Profetino*, this figure is racked with suffering: his neck slack, Christ's head succumbs to the force of gravity, his facial features tinged with pathos. The musculature of the figure, the veins in his forearms, and every bit of his luminescent flesh are rendered with startling naturalism (cat. 3). These details suggest a sculptor attuned to the classicizing rhetoric on view elsewhere on the door—Christ's



Cat. 3, detail



torso, for example, resembles that of the diminutive *Hercules* almost to the letter. The relief is distinguished from its *all'antica* neighbor, however, in its emotional urgency—a quality that better suited its subject.

Although the attribution has spawned considerable debate among scholars, few have doubted that the relief was created during the years that Donatello was actively involved with the Porta's decoration. Whether or not Donatello authored the piece himself, its example appears to have lingered in his mind long enough to inspire his subsequent work. One notes, in particular, the relief's strong affinity with the sculptor's wooden crucifix for the nearby church of Santa Croce (ca. 1408–12), which exhibits a similarly anguished mien, and the same anatomical precision, and heightened sensitivity to modeled flesh.

That Donatello may have simultaneously crafted two works (the *Profetino* and *Man of Sorrows*) so apparently divergent in style—or, at least, witnessed their realization—attests to the variety of influences that engaged him early in his career, each mobilized by the sculptor, to varying degrees, in the years to come.

Fig. 19  
Nanni di Banco  
*The Prophet Isaiah*, 1408  
Marble,  
height 193 cm (76 in)  
Cathedral of Santa Maria  
del Fiore, Florence



## Scale

Whatever his activities were, Donatello clearly impressed the operai with his performance at the cathedral's northeast portal, for in February 1408 they awarded the sculptor his most impressive commission yet: a marble statue of David, freestanding and slightly over life-size, to be placed just above the Porta della Mandorla on the church's north tribune.<sup>20</sup> With the assignment, Donatello joined a program that was already underway. One month earlier, the Opera had tasked Nanni di Banco with carving a figure of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, it, too, scaled to life and destined for the cathedral's roofline (fig. 19). The pair was the first in a planned series of twelve Hebrew prophets that would crown the buttresses surrounding the exteriors of the three tribunes of the building, where together they would act as a stone militia keeping watch over the city's most sacred precinct.<sup>21</sup>

Although the *David* is Donatello's first securely documented commission, in certain respects the ground here is no more stable than before. While Donatello's contract stipulates his salary, as well as the statue's subject and dimensions, it cannot be linked conclusively to any of his extant works. Indeed, the quest to identify the *David* remains an active one on art-historical turf, with several candidates emerging in recent decades.<sup>22</sup> The most commonly cited among these is currently housed in Florence's Bargello museum (fig. 20). Some have noted the artifact's kinship with the *Profetino* discussed earlier: a shared heritage is suggested by the figures' almond-like eyes, delicate nose and mouth, and in the grammar of their gently turning bodies.

And yet none of this quite prepares us for the sheer corporeality and psychic presence of Donatello's ephebe. In this his first full-sized figural



undertaking, Donatello has delivered his referent with astonishing fidelity, conjuring an image of the biblical hero that is convincing in both spirit and letter. Witness the care with which the sculptor has rendered the shepherd boy's flesh, his taut leather armor, and suffused his young warrior with swagger—arms akimbo, cape tossed over his right shoulder, David gazes outward, seemingly conscious of being seen.<sup>23</sup>

If the *David* was Donatello's most accomplished work to date—a marvel of mimesis—it was also arguably his greatest disappointment. In early 1409, just as Donatello was bringing his statue to completion, the Opera took measures to put its counterpart—Nanni's *Isaiah*—in place on the church's buttress. The endeavor proved inauspicious. For in setting the statue's scale, artist and patron alike had not accounted fully for the vast distance between the work's intended site and its audience far below. To be sure, Nanni's prophet cut a formidable figure when viewed head on. Exhibited atop the cathedral's soaring architecture, however, it would have resembled nothing more than a fleck to passersby, a shortcoming duly noted by the operai, who ordered that the *Isaiah* be removed from its perch and returned to the ground ("elevetur et ponatur in terram").<sup>24</sup> Since the height of the *David* was identical to its ill-fated companion, the operai must have concluded that it, too, would be unsuitably small for its lofty setting. In fact, the sculpture never saw the light of day; it was left to languish in the cathedral workshop for nearly a decade, until 1416, when the Florentine government acquired the statue for its town hall (later called the Palazzo Vecchio). There, presented to the intimate address of city councilmen, its scale would have been less controversial.<sup>25</sup>

Although shadowed by frustration, the *David* did not shake the Opera's confidence in Donatello. Hardly had the marble dust settled than the Opera was making arrangements for Donatello to create its successor, identified in documents as the prophet Joshua, and, elsewhere, simply as the "large white man" ("homo magnus et albus"). Clearly both parties had taken to heart their past missteps, for at nearly eighteen feet tall (almost three times the size of its earlier predecessors) the giant statue, wrought from whitewashed brick and plaster, would have been impossible for spectators to ignore.<sup>26</sup> The *Joshua* disintegrated sometime in the eighteenth century, but several illustrations predating its disappearance bear testimony to how commanding its profile once was against the Florentine skyline. In one such image (fig. 21) the prophet appears to grow from the very fabric of the church like a miniature spire, arms cantilevered away from its body, and hands directed skyward in prayer.



Fig. 20  
Donatello  
*David*, 1408–9  
Marble,  
height 191 cm  
(75¼ in.)  
Museo Nazionale  
del Bargello, Florence





Fig. 21  
Ferdinando del Migliore  
"View of Piazza del  
Duomo with Joshua at  
left", in *Firenze città  
nobilissima*  
Etching, 1684,  
Ital 3365.1  
Houghton Library,  
Harvard University

If the *Joshua* gripped Florence's collective imagination, as eyewitness accounts suggest, it was at least in part because of Donatello's technique. The increase in scale demanded resourcefulness. No stone colossus had been attempted in living Florentine memory, and the feat must have raised concerns about whether, in practical terms, a figure so large could be carved, and, if so, whether it would fall (how would the Opera hoist something so ponderous onto the cathedral in the first place?). Faced with such uncertainties, Donatello turned to terracotta (baked clay), which was more easily modeled, comparatively lighter, and cheaper (should the commission fail). In all probability, he built up the "bricks"—eventually coating its entire exterior with stucco and white lead paint (*biaccha*). Payment records suggest that Donatello even applied a final oil-based varnish, which would have served not only to protect the fragile statue, but to give its surface the appearance of polished stone, an effect similar, one imagines, to what Luca della Robbia would later achieve with his glazed earthenware.<sup>27</sup> No wonder that Donatello's final payment specifies *isterium* (roughly "superior craftsmanship"), a recognition of the ingenuity with which he had tackled the problem of site, scale, and medium.



## Optical Corrections

The *Joshua* foregrounds a key issue that would guide each subsequent commission that Donatello undertook at the cathedral. It registers his growing consciousness that, in order to be effective, sculpture had to take into account the *subjective* experience of the beholder. In the example above, Donatello recognized that, when seen at a distance, the factual reality of the *Joshua*'s materials crumbled away. What mattered to him, in this case, was not the cost or prestige of the stuffs he used, but their ability to simulate the optical properties of marble (its luster and texture), and to do so on a previously unimaginable scale.

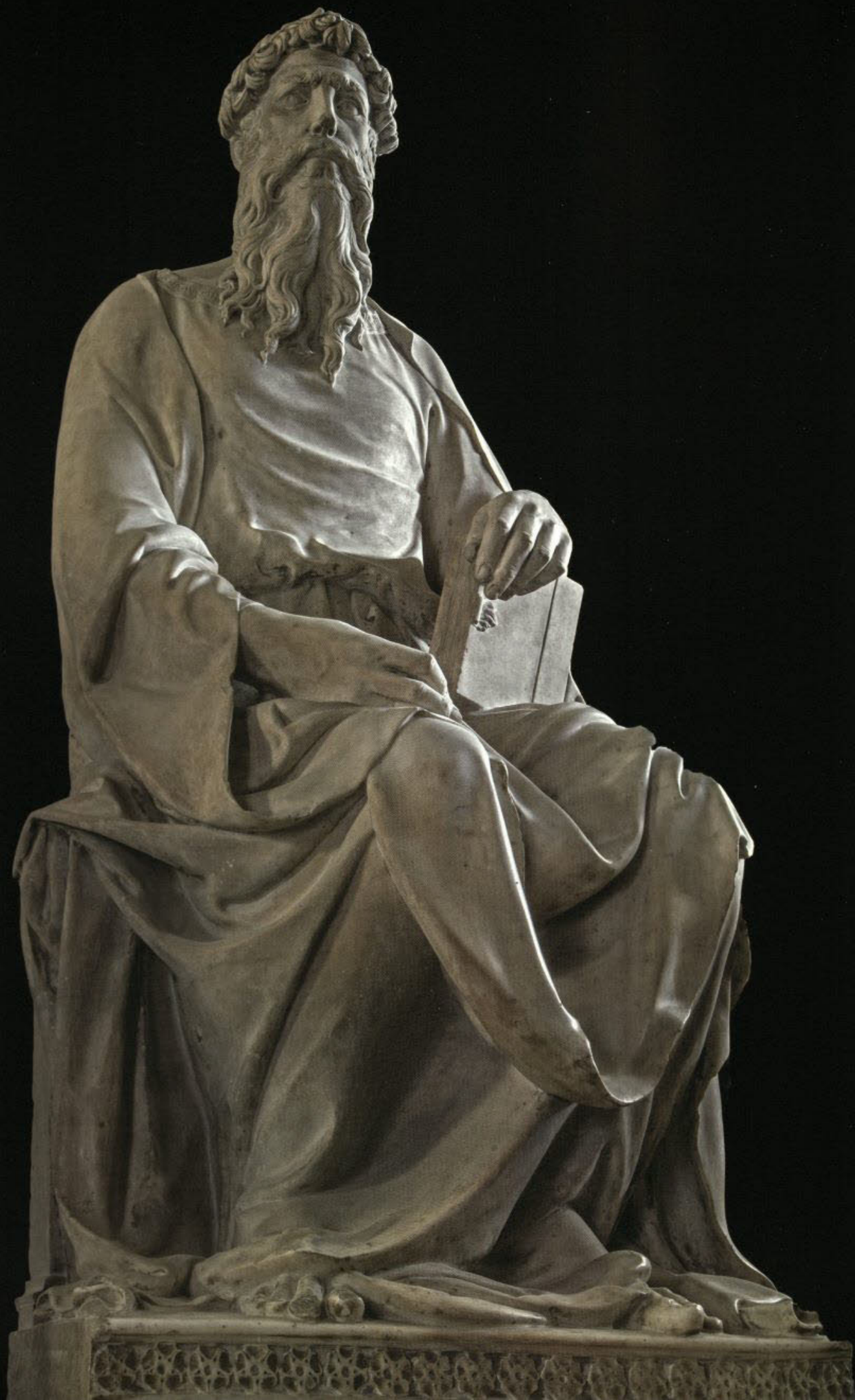
Donatello's monumental likeness of *St. John the Evangelist* (cat. 10), an assignment that he tackled contemporaneously with the *Joshua*, introduced an altogether different set of concerns. The artist's solutions, while different, exhibit a similar sensitivity to the sculpture's conditions of viewing, and a similarly empirical approach toward facture. The *John* was planned as early as 1405, when the Opera began making provisions to frame the cathedral's central west portal with marble effigies of the authors of the New Testament (called the Four Evangelists).<sup>28</sup> These sculptures would inhabit preexisting niches that flanked the portal in pairs, each set roughly ten feet above the ground. By 1408, the Opera had entrusted the first three *Evangelists* to artists who had already proved themselves at the Porta della Mandorla—Niccolò Lamberti (ca. 1370–1451), Nanni di Banco, and Donatello—with the added incentive that whoever was to carve the better sculpture would receive the final commission (the cathedral board later changed its mind, entrusting the fourth to Bernardo Ciuffagni).

Once in place, Donatello's *John* and its companions would become central nodes of attention on the vast façade. Not only would they mark the threshold between the secular world and the cathedral's sacred interior, but they would serve as backdrop and stimulus for the many ritual events that took place in the piazza (see fig. 13). It follows that the sculptures demanded a monumentality to match these lofty imperatives. That the Opera had such considerations in mind may be inferred from their choice to represent the Evangelists *seated*, which implied that the figures' actual height far surpassed that of their architectural containers (a standing figure, cut from the same block, was much less monumental). The sculptures were installed within their respective niches by 1415, where they remained until the 1580s, when the Opera transferred the group indoors following the destruction of the church's façade.

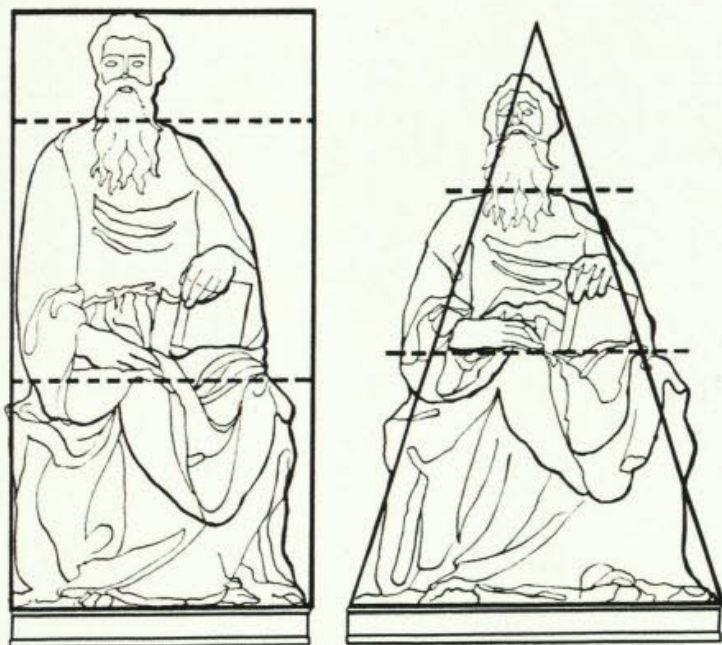
In the years separating Donatello's era and our own, authorities would relocate nearly every one of his sculptures for the cathedral, often more than once, owing to changing political sympathies at times, or to shifts in artistic taste, or simply out of practical need. For this reason, the works under consideration rarely appear in the settings for which Donatello originally intended them. As we have seen already, and as many of his contemporaries recognized, a fundamental strength of Donatello's work was its site-specificity: its delicately engineered relationship to a *specific* setting and audience. It is this same site-specificity, however, that can make his sculptures look altogether unusual when displayed in different contexts.

*St. John the Evangelist* is no exception. When seen only slightly above ground level, as is typically the case in modern museum installations or photographs, *John* often strikes viewers as eccentric in its treatment of the human form. The figure's torso and right arm









are attenuated, its head thrust forward awkwardly, drapery cumbersome, the whole pose languid: hardly what we would expect for someone of John's spiritual pedigree.

How different these same traits appear when seen from below. When Donatello undertook to carve the statue, he recognized that its base would be set roughly four feet above human height, and made formal adjustments to accommodate this low vantage point (cat. 10).<sup>29</sup> Not only are John's proportions far closer to nature when observed from this angle, but his presence is much more formidable: the fabric of his raiment hangs heavily from the frame of his body, and the whole composition organizes itself into a stable pyramid (fig. 22). Gone is every trace of passivity. John is in the act of physically turning to his right, his expression smoldering with intensity, gaze lost somewhere in the distant space of thought (the two nicks indicating pupils may have been later interventions).<sup>30</sup> If a writing instrument once lay between the fingers of John's right hand, as some have suggested, one might understand this to be a representation of the author in the process of writing down his visions, the book he holds—perhaps his Gospel or Revelation—unfinished. In the *St. Luke* for the niche flanking the portal's other side, Nanni likewise used optical corrections, but to entirely different effect. Taken together, his adjustments would have supported the impression that Luke glances downward imperiously, as though reflecting upon—or addressing—the crowd beneath (see cat. 9). Of the three sculptors to join the project originally, only Lamberti did not compensate for a lower viewpoint.

In important respects, Donatello was working with tools that others in his profession had honed before him. Already in the 1280s, the sculptor Giovanni Pisano (ca. 1250–ca. 1315) had applied a similar logic of distortion to his prophets for the upper stories of the cathedral façade in nearby Siena. Realizing that his figures would be seen from a great distance, Giovanni enlarged their eyes, for instance, and elongated their necks to ensure

OPPOSITE  
Cat. 10

ABOVE  
Fig. 22  
Donatello  
*St. John the Evangelist*,  
1408–15  
Diagram of composition  
depending on viewer's  
point of view (from  
Charles Seymour,  
*Sculpture in Italy*  
1400–1500,  
Harmondsworth and  
Baltimore, 1966, 57)



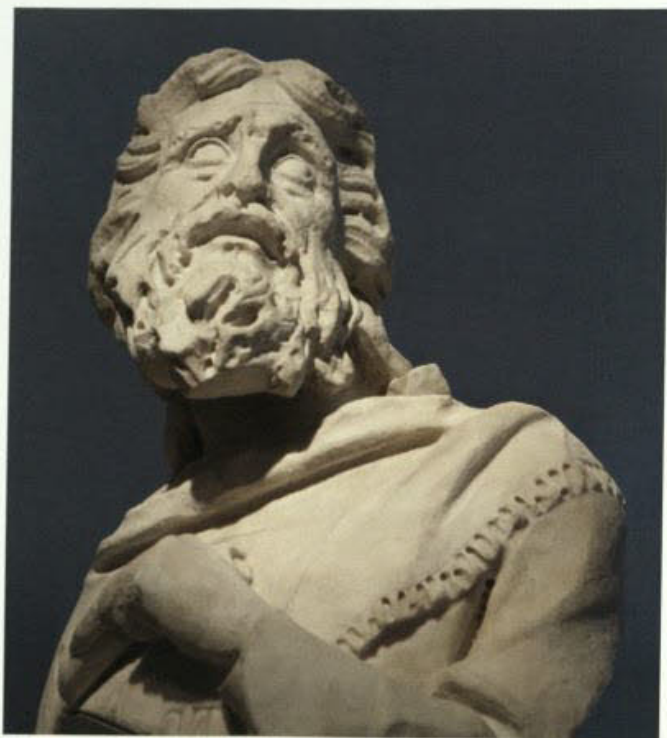


Fig. 23  
Giovanni Pisano  
*The Prophet Haggai*,  
ca. 1285–97  
Marble,  
64 × 48 × 36 cm  
(25½ × 19 × 14¼ in.)  
Victoria and Albert  
Museum, London

OPPOSITE  
Cat. 10, profile view of block

their heads would be legible to the distant spectator (fig. 23). The overall effect must have been remarkably theatrical, with the figures peeling themselves from the fabric of the façade to engage in a choreographed exchange of glances and gestures. More immediately, Donatello may have drawn inspiration from Ghiberti, whose panels for the north portal of the baptistery betray a profound sensitivity to the beholder's angle of vision. Take, for example, the relief depicting the *Resurrection* (see fig. 37).<sup>31</sup> Here, the decisions to elongate Christ's torso, to model his head in high relief, and inclined downward, were clearly made in view of the panel's eventual location, around thirteen feet above the ground (one finds, by contrast, no such compensations in those reliefs exhibited at human height, e.g. see fig. 18). The clay and wax that Ghiberti used to make preliminary sketches and then models (to be cast in bronze) well suited such corrective efforts. These soft, tactile media could be heated and reworked, allowing the goldsmith to adjust his composition continuously, the better to gauge how his finished sculpture would appear on site. Ghiberti's example was not lost on Donatello, who used clay and wax models (*modelli*) frequently in the design process, possibly even while preparing *St. John the Evangelist*.<sup>32</sup> The sculptor apparently even "scaled up" to full-size models on occasion, which

could be tested in their intended setting—later sources recommend covering a wooden armature with cloth "skins" dipped in thick clay slip.<sup>33</sup>

In other respects, the *John* posed problems—and invited solutions—of a different sort. When Donatello and his fellow sculptors planned their figures, they had to reckon with niches whose shape and size were predetermined by the earlier design of the façade. As circumstance would have it, the depth of these alcoves—and thus of the statues they could accommodate—was remarkably shallow, a fact that threatened to undermine the Opera's monumental intentions. How, then, to maximize the figures' appeal—to worshippers entering the church or passersby—within these inherited constraints? A photograph of the *John* in profile helps us to appreciate just how remarkable was Donatello's solution to the dilemma (cat. 10, profile view of block). In fact, what reads as a statue in the round is nothing more than a thin marble block carved in exceptionally high relief, even if viewers below the niche would not perceive this. Working from a slab that was no more than twenty-two inches thick, Donatello excavated the stone at substantially varied depths, leaving the base virtually unaltered, but reducing the piece to less than nine inches at the saint's abdomen.

If Donatello took utmost advantage of the slender block, his colleagues, and particularly Lamberti, proved less intrepid. The older sculptor made his bid for viewers' attention by way of a dazzling use of the International Gothic style, describing in careful strokes the roiling curls of Mark's beard, lyrical folds in his robe, and straps on his codex (fig. 24). The figure is, in spite of its exquisite workmanship, remarkably flat, and almost mannequin-like in its immobility.









Fig. 24  
Niccolò Lamberti  
*St. Mark the Evangelist*,  
1408–15  
Marble,  
210 x 88 cm  
(82½ x 34½ in.)  
Museo dell'Opera del  
Duomo, Florence

OPPOSITE  
Cat. 10, detail

While Lamberti trained his chisel on minutiae to the detriment of figural depth, Donatello reversed these priorities. Eschewing nearly all decorative niceties, Donatello focused his carving on those areas that would most animate his figure, in both a physical and psychic sense. If one looks closely at the *John*, as we may do in this exhibition, there is clearly an emphasis given to those parts that determine the saint's character and action. Note the undercuts below the tendrils of the saint's beard, or beneath his stormy brows, which intensify the play of light and shadow around his face (cat. 10, detail). Or the deeply gouged—almost cavernous—hollows in his drapery, which invest the figure's lower half with apparent volume. Such tactics support the illusion of a three-dimensional body straining from its chair; they unleash the saint from his architectural straitjacket the more directly to interact with the city space before him.

When the adjudicating committee evaluated the finished sculptures they awarded Donatello, the youngest participant, the highest compensation for his work (160 florins). On the other end of the pay scale fell Lamberti, the oldest in the group, who received 130 florins (Nanni and Ciuffagni collected 137 and 150 florins, respectively). This disparity may not necessarily reflect an aesthetic verdict on the part of the Opera, which often determined payment on the basis of practical factors such as number of hours worked and cost of materials. It can be no coincidence, however, that Lamberti left Florence mere months after the Evangelists were put in place. Perhaps sensing a sea change underway, the elder sculptor set out to remake his career in Venice, where the decorative surface patterning characteristic of his *Mark* would be warmly welcomed, and not soon outpaced.

*St. John the Evangelist* was no isolated experiment. In these same years, Donatello accepted a commission for an over-life-size figure of *St. Mark* (1411–13) to adorn the southern exterior of Orsanmichele, Florence's guild church and other major arena for sculpture height, and not surprisingly, Donatello availed himself of similar techniques. As in the *John*, the very qualities that appear ungainly when seen straight on—exaggerated features, deep undercutting, and so forth—become elements that reinforce the statue's physical, as well as moral, weight. The *Mark* also appears severe and lost in contemplation, and it, too, reads as a statue fully in the round. The saint turns, his left foot raised, suggesting that were he to rotate more still, we would see what remains of his body—an illusion, to be sure, since, like the *John*, the figure is no more than a deep relief, its back flat and unfinished. To bolster this illusion further, Donatello stands Mark on a cushion, whose contours fictively bulge as











though compressed under the saint's weight—a conceit that can make one forget that the whole ensemble is, in reality, hewn from a single heavy stone. Indeed, upon seeing the statue in its enclosure, “so gracefully arranged and situated,” no less an authority on sculpture than Michelangelo was reported to have said that, “if Saint Mark really resembled [Donatello's figure] then every word that he spoke would inspire belief.”<sup>34</sup>

Optical feats like those on offer in the examples above became a mainstay in later appreciations of Donatello. In 1481, for instance, the writer and philosopher Cristoforo Landino lauded the sculptor for attaining “great vivacity through both the arrangement and positioning of his figures, all of which appear to move.”<sup>35</sup> Some even attached Donatello's play with optics to a playful personality. This is true of an anecdote from the sixteenth century about Donatello's *Mark*, recounted by Vasari, but possibly known earlier.<sup>36</sup> According to the writer, Donatello's patrons—the consuls of the linen guild—deemed the figure unacceptable when they first examined it at ground level. Recognizing that he could change their minds with a different perspective, as it were, Donatello persuaded his clients to let him set the sculpture in its niche, where he promised to rework it to their satisfaction. In an irreverent sleight of hand, Donatello then hid the piece from view, waiting fifteen days before unveiling it, untouched, to the universal admiration of his critics. The story is almost certainly fictional, an amusing yarn that Vasari, or one of his contemporaries, spun as proof of Donatello's precocious genius, which emerges here in contrast to the ignorance of his patrons. Fiction though it may be, the anecdote does raise an important point: it registers an awareness, nearly a century after Donatello's death, that the belief his sculptures awakened, both aesthetic and religious, extended from his site-specific approach to design.

## OPPOSITE

Fig. 25  
Donatello  
*St. Mark*, 1411–13  
Marble,  
height 236 cm (including  
cushion and plinth);  
width 74 cm (at the base)  
[93 x 29½ in.]  
Orsanmichele, Florence

## Narrative

Donatello's successes at the cathedral and Orsanmichele did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries. That the sculptor had gained the esteem of his patrons is apparent from the next assignment the Opera gave him: he was called on to help complete the program of Old Testament figures on the cathedral's bell tower. The plan was one of long standing. The Opera had initiated the project in the 1330s, when sixteen niches were constructed on the campanile's third story (four on each side), eight of these filled with statues by Andrea Pisano (ca. 1270/90–ca. 1348/49). In 1415, Donatello was commissioned to carve two of the eight statues that remained to be completed (he finished these by 1420).

The sculptor's third contribution to the program was an *Abraham and Isaac*, begun in March 1421 and finished just eight months later (cat. 11).<sup>37</sup> The statue differed from its predecessors in important respects. In the first place, the commission was not Donatello's alone, but awarded jointly to his younger colleague at the cathedral workshop, Nanni di Bartolo (known as Rosso, or “Redhead”, active 1419–51). Timing might help to explain the Opera's insistence on collaboration. Donatello had been dilatory in delivering his first two campanile statues, and by 1421 the Opera would have had good reason to make provisions for the timely completion of his assignments. The year before—in 1420—Brunelleschi's dome had begun to rise over the cathedral site, and, with its completion on the horizon,





Cat. 11

OPPOSITE  
Cat. 11, detail

the Opera may have felt an added urgency to finish outstanding decorative projects. Another possibility is that the sculpture's complexity demanded an additional hand. For unlike its siblings—figures who preach, instruct, or ruminate—this block would represent *two* figures, and it would relate a narrative: the Old Testament story of Abraham nearly sacrificing his son Isaac (Genesis 22:1–13).

The Opera's choice of subject would have aroused immediate associations with the competition for the baptistery's doors from roughly two decades earlier, in which contestants had been asked to produce trial reliefs representing the same episode. Donatello and Rosso's group departs from these reliefs—the two that survive, at least—in its choice of moment (see figs. 31 and 32). Where Ghiberti had shown Abraham readying himself for the deadly blow, and Brunelleschi the instant of angelic rescue, Donatello and Rosso fixed on a later point in the biblical psychodrama. This is the second after Abraham hears the angel's voice, and understands that his son will live. Certain details hint at the mayhem that has just transpired: the father's left hand still grips the boy's disorderly coils of hair, the right sleeve of his robe is still raised in preparation for death-dealing, and his right foot is still perched atop the kindle for the sacrificial altar. But Abraham's right arm grows slack, and the edge of the blade he holds slides away from the boy's throat, his gaze directed skyward in wonder (cat. 11, detail).

It may have been that the sculptor's decision to focus on the episode's dénouement was motivated by practical necessities. The niche that the sculptors inherited was both shallow and narrow, a fact that allowed neither frenzied movement in his composition (cf. Brunelleschi's relief), nor additional characters. By homing in on a moment of relative calm—the father pauses, his gaze apparently lingering on the elevated site of his epiphany—they could accommodate the formal constraints of the assignment while still honoring the story's psychological demands.

## Surface

The Opera's account books do not specify how labor was divided between Donatello and Rosso. In the absence of concrete evidence, scholars generally endorse the idea that Donatello was responsible for the group's design and most of its carving, while Rosso—the less established sculptor—confined himself to surface work. This type of arrangement was hardly unusual. The later stages in a marble sculpture's production could be enormously time-consuming: its surface was often filed to erase chisel marks, meticulously polished with pumice and straw, and occasionally colored with pigment. In Donatello's time, it was not uncommon for sculptors to delegate some of these activities to others, owing to lack of time or expertise. Indeed, what evidence exists of Donatello's early workshops suggests that he often, if not always, followed this approach, especially when working on a larger scale. It does not follow, however, that the handling of surface was low in Donatello's hierarchy











of priorities, mere technical drudgery that he passed on to assistants or younger collaborators like Rosso. On the contrary, it appears to have been an organizing concern for the sculptor, even if some of the more repetitive work fell to different hands. Not only was surface treatment instrumental in how his works *looked*, but it could, as we shall see later, factor into their narrative meaning.

What sorts of considerations guided Donatello's management of surface? Later commentators hinted that the distance at which a work was displayed bulked heavily in the sculptor's mind. Writing in 1677, Giovanni Cinelli noted that Donatello refrained from giving certain works too high a finish to enhance "their effectiveness [from afar], even though they became somewhat less striking when viewed at close range."<sup>38</sup> Cinelli's remark and others like it orient us toward an important—and by now familiar—idea: that Donatello adjusted his technique according to the circumstances of viewing.

The works themselves would seem to confirm Cinelli's intuition. On the one hand, there is *St. John the Evangelist*, which, in comparison to other sculptures we have encountered, was exhibited relatively close to the beholder. What is apparent, even if the surface has lost some of its original finish, is just how much care Donatello took to differentiate the marble's textures. He indicated the figure's eyebrows with short, irregular strokes, the strands of its beard with wending, almost draftsman-like incisions, the fringe on its garment with repetitive, vertical gashes: all this in contrast to the vast expanses of robe where traces of the chisel are nowhere to be found. Donatello added further tactile variety by giving more or less polish to areas of the stone: note how markedly the smooth sheen and deep tone of John's hands, finished with abrasives, differs from those sections that are treated more coarsely, such as the beard, which appear much brighter (cat. 10, detail). Not only were these variations perceptible to the viewer, but they contributed directly to the illusion that the sculpture was not marble, but flesh, hair, and cloth. We do not know whether, or to what extent, Donatello added polychromy to the figure, or if and how selectively it was gilded. Such practices were indeed quite common, and both have been shown to pertain to near-contemporary marble works by the sculptor.<sup>39</sup> Should Donatello have heightened the *John* with colors and gold, the figure's diversity of texture and hue would have been still more pronounced.

In the series of bell tower prophets, on the other hand, such surface subtleties were of little account. More than ten times distant from the beholder's eye than the *John*, these statues' placement necessitated a different approach entirely. To illustrate this point, we would do well to look at one of Donatello's final contributions to the program, the *Zuccone*, originally placed in a niche on the north side of the campanile (cat. 12). Scholars remain divided over the specific identity of the prophet, in part because the Opera's payment records and deliber-



OPPOSITE  
Cat. 10, detail

ABOVE  
Cat. 12, detail









ations rarely name figures explicitly.<sup>40</sup> As Timothy Verdon suggests in his essay, it may be that the Opera's interest—and Donatello's—centered not on *who* the prophet was, but on *how* he, and his marble counterparts, evoked the Old Testament ethic that they preached.

Here, as elsewhere, legibility was of utmost importance. Recent conservation efforts have helped the marble regain some of its original appearance, enough to establish that Donatello did not give the figure a high polish, leaving unrefined, for instance, the file marks that limn its arms, nape, and lone exposed shoulder (cat. 12, detail).<sup>41</sup> The emphatically scratched lines of the beard, and the deeply cut eye sockets—which create pooling shadows beneath the figure's craggy brows—together relay a sense of inner turmoil (cat. 12, above, and cat. 12, detail, page 65). Donatello's emphatic surface marks thus contribute to the statue's expressiveness and render it clearly visible from a distance.

As with other prophets, like the *Jeremiah* (fig. 26), Donatello pared the *Zuccone* down to its emotional nucleus. No decorative adornments or iconographic prompts: even the scroll was done away with to enhance the figure's psychological immediacy. His neck thrust forward in speech, the *Zuccone* glowers downward to address the populace. But where the *Jeremiah* is athletic, this figure is physically frail. The crenellation of his teeth is irregular, for instance, and his flesh seemingly worn out from severe asceticism.<sup>42</sup> In his gritty appearance, the figure embodies the very message of selfless devotion to God that Old Testament prophets advocate. This renders the urgency of his message all the more poignant. For in spite of its wilted state, the *Zuccone*'s body pulsates with energy, the tendons of his neck tensed as though his voice strains.

As we have seen, praise for the *Zuccone* and its affecting realism echoed loudly in later estimations of the sculptor. Some even attributed its success directly to Donatello's technique. Writing in 1596, the scholar Bernardo Davanzati noted that the eyes of the figure as one sees them "on high look as though they were dug out with a spade; had [Donatello] worked them for a near view, the figure would now appear blind, for distance

OPPOSITE  
Cat. 12, detail

LEFT  
Fig. 26  
Donatello  
*The Prophet Jeremiah*,  
1423–25 (?)  
Marble,  
194 x 45 x 45 cm  
(76 3/4 x 17 3/4 x 17 3/4 in.)  
Museo dell'Opera del  
Duomo, Florence

RIGHT  
Cat. 12



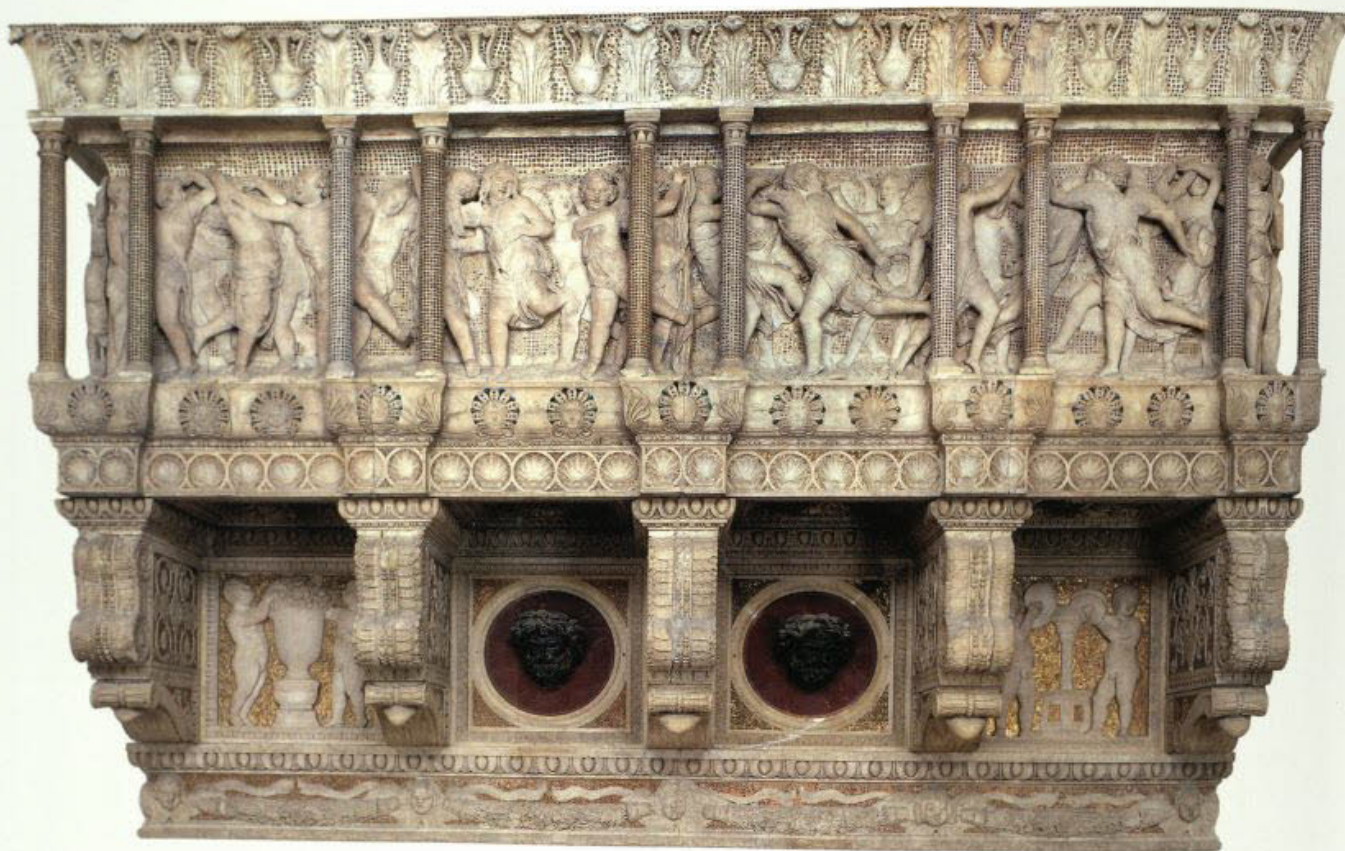


Fig. 27  
Donatello  
Cantoria, 1433–39  
Marble with gold and  
colored mosaic inlay,  
bronze heads,  
348 × 570 cm  
(137 × 224½ in.)  
Museo dell'Opera del  
Duomo, Florence

devours all refinements.”<sup>43</sup> Davanzati’s observation—that “everything depends on context,” as he put it—registers an awareness of the practicalities that underpinned Donatello’s approach to surface.

Likewise sculpted for a location far over head, but utterly different in appearance, tone, and subject, is Donatello’s organ loft, or “cantoria,” which he made to adorn the cathedral’s formidable southeast pier (fig. 27).<sup>44</sup> In the early 1430s, with Brunelleschi’s massive dome above the altar area nearing completion, the Opera turned its attention to furnishing the newly renovated space beneath. Among their priorities was a larger organ to enrich the acoustic life of the church, planned as early as 1426.<sup>45</sup> This new instrument, and its smaller predecessor, would be mounted in architectural galleries set well above the cathedral’s north and south sacristies (immediately to the left and right of the main altar, respectively). Given the organs’ indispensable role in church ceremony and their high visibility, these structures were destined to become central nodes of attention in the cathedral. Responsibility for the first gallery, that which would house the main organ, fell to Luca della Robbia, his contract likely drawn up in 1431. Donatello was then in Rome (he had based himself there from 1430), but when he returned to Florence in 1433 the Opera awarded him the second commission forthwith, later adding that he would receive up to ten more florins than Luca for each panel that surpassed his in quality.<sup>46</sup>

How did each artist approach the assignment? Luca set ten figural reliefs within an architectural framework, each panel closely portraying one verse of Psalm 150, which enjoins the faithful to “praise the lord” through music, song, and dance. These reliefs throb with details of an almost ethnographic sort: adolescent boys jockey for space around a book of hymns; a child loses his place in the text; and instruments, sandals, even hairstyle all appear with studied authenticity (fig. 28). Although classicizing in style, this content would have struck churchgoers as familiar, for in age and action the youth resemble the confraternity of boys that daily sang the church’s canonical hours.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, classicism pervades the whole





ensemble, evident in the Roman lettering of the inscriptions, or in the paired Corinthian pilasters that punctuate the gallery's face. Although similar in size and format, Donatello's cantoria departs from its counterpart in almost every other respect. Abandoned are the anecdotal particulars of everyday life, replaced by winged infants that know no real-world referent. And where Luca exhibited each relief discretely, Donatello arrayed his cavorting creatures along a continuous horizontal band, the sum total conjuring an ongoing sense of movement *around* the gallery (in reality, the frieze comprises four slabs—two spanning the front, and one on either side—evidence that a desire to out-earn Luca was not foremost among Donatello's motives). Donatello drew from ancient sources, as well, but his approach was emphatically *sui generis*: while he borrowed motifs from classical sarcophagi, for example, the variegated mosaic that sheaths the construction recalls, instead, early Christian or medieval inlay work (called *opus sectile*), familiar to the sculptor from his Roman sojourn.

In their finish and facture, too, the ensembles could not be less alike. Predictably, Donatello tailored his treatment of materials to the work's eventual location. In the first place, and along lines similar to his prophets, he refrained from polishing the marble (fig. 27, detail, page 71). Strong modeling and exaggerated—almost unthinkable—poses are likewise deployed with respect to the viewer below.<sup>48</sup> Luca, by contrast, fashioned his compositions delicately, meticulously finishing every square inch of his panels, especially those completed in the initial stages of the assignment (fig. 29). Documents indicate that the sculptor came to recognize early on the perils of his approach, for when Luca renegotiated his contract in 1434, roughly midway through work on his cantoria, he pledged to produce reliefs that were “better and more beautiful.”<sup>49</sup> There is a notable difference, in fact, between these two phases: Luca modeled his later panels more robustly, in higher relief, and with less finish, no doubt in an effort to enhance their legibility to the viewer on the pavement below (fig. 30). Could it be that seeing Donatello's reliefs in progress had led Luca to revise his approach?

Fig. 28  
Luca della Robbia  
Cantoria, 1432–38  
Marble,  
328 × 560 cm  
(129½ × 220½ in.)  
Museo dell'Opera del  
Duomo, Florence





LEFT  
Fig. 29  
Luca della Robbia,  
*Group of Tambourine-  
Playing Children*  
(detail of cantoria),  
1432–35 (?)  
Marble,  
98½ × 94 cm  
(38¾ × 37 in.)  
Museo dell'Opera del  
Duomo, Florence

RIGHT  
Fig. 30  
Luca della Robbia,  
*Children Singing* (detail of  
cantoria), 1435–38 (?)  
Marble,  
103 × 64 cm  
(40½ × 25½ in.)  
Museo dell'Opera del  
Duomo, Florence

But there is more at play in Donatello's cantoria. As Timothy Verdon notes in his essay, the sculptor's design took carefully into account his cantoria's principal light source: mere feet below the work was a group of torches and candles elaborately ordered atop an architrave, their purpose to illuminate the space surrounding the church's main altar. In this respect, Donatello's use of materials cannot have been arbitrary. Consider the glass *tesserae* that so densely populate the cantoria, or the variegated pigments that Donatello applied selectively to accentuate decorative motifs. Both media are highly reflective, and would have endowed the monument with a shimmering quality, enhancing its visual impact in the otherwise subdued light of the church interior. Crucially, Donatello extended this effect to the stone itself. Left unfinished, marble exudes an inner luminosity, and appears extraordinarily bright, qualities that are greatly reduced once the substance is polished. In leaving his surfaces only roughly chiseled, then, the sculptor unleashed the brilliant qualities inherent in the stone (Luca's turbulent children not only more conspicuous, but more *animated*. Light from nearby candles would have flickered across the raw, grainy surface, picking out individual crystals in the rock, and enhancing the children's uncanny illusion of continuous motion. In the cantoria, finish—or lack thereof—became a vehicle for expressive meaning.

It bears mentioning that Donatello's treatment of surface was not only a bravura show of artistry, but directed to the function of the cantoria. To those who gazed upon his gallery during the Mass, and especially when music was sung or played, these children would have been understood as responding to a concert celebrating God. To viewers aware



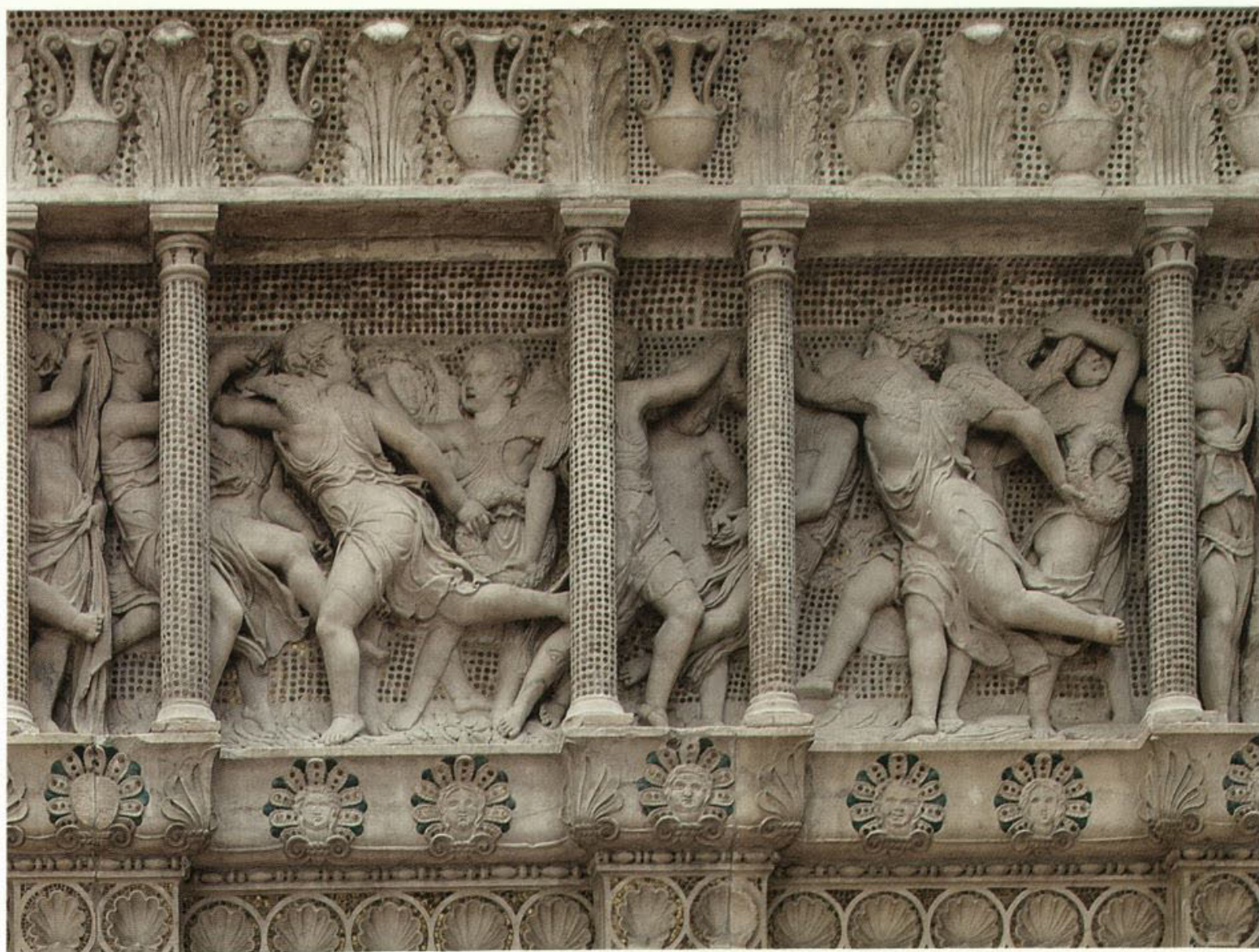
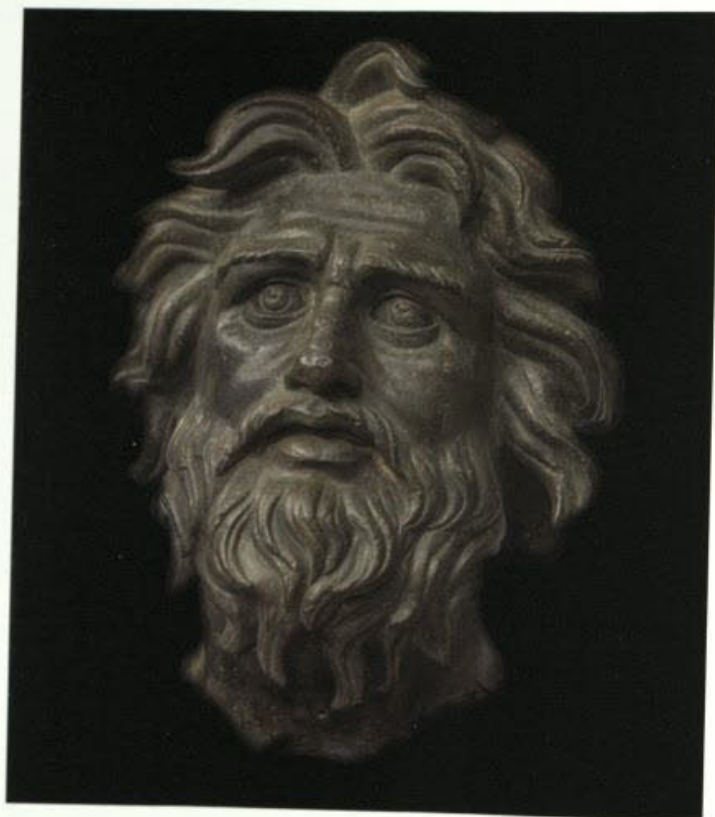


Fig 27, detail





Cat. 14

of philosophical interpretations of how sound traveled, they also perhaps evoked ideas about the ways music stirred the human soul. As Charles Dempsey has shown, Donatello's exuberant infants belong to an iconographic type well known to the sculptor and his contemporaries: the *spiritello*.<sup>50</sup> A venerable tradition with its origins in the Greek philosopher Aristotle and current in fifteenth-century Tuscany held that these "little sprites" occupied the air: immaterial entities whose movements were excited by the melodies and rhythms of music, their activity arousing the emotions of listeners. These personified spirits well suited the purpose of Donatello's cantoria, and during the celebration of the liturgy their role would have been especially pronounced. The *spiritelli* (they are called this explicitly in the documents) would have appeared to react to the playing of the organ, as though its noise produced a sudden surge propelling them into frenzied dance.<sup>51</sup> Here, glinting marble and mosaic were the privileged media with which Donatello brought these ethereal beings to life.

By 1439 work on the cantoria had all but concluded, with one notable exception.<sup>52</sup> The bronze heads in this exhibition were probably the last elements that Donatello added to his ensemble (see cats. 13 and 14). The sculptor set them below the loft's projecting face, in the two central spaces between the consoles, each head nested against a disc of purple porphyry, and each inclined down-

ward toward the pavement below. As a document from October 1439 implies, these iridescent likenesses are, in reality, the same person twice portrayed. Whereas Donatello quarried many sources in the zone above, this pair is *explicitly* classical in form, material, and style. Along these lines, it might be tempting to view these "pseudo-antiques" as an improvisational afterthought, a curiosity that the sculptor added to the cantoria as testimony of his own classical interests, which were at fever pitch after his trip to Rome—a veiled artistic signature, in other words. Given their commanding place in the cantoria's lower register, however, and the sheer cost of bronze and porphyry, it is unlikely that these objects were mere antiquarian whimsy. What role might they have served, then, in the original program for the cantoria?

At the most basic level, the heads acted as foils for the *spiritelli* above them. This occurred, first, materially. As Donatello knew well, bronze offered aesthetic possibilities that the other media in his ensemble did not. The metal's smooth, finished surfaces and dark, earthy tones could powerfully evoke human hair and flesh, here in opposition to the glimmering marble of the *spiritelli*, which implied something almost incorporeal. Emotionally, moreover, the heads' haunted air offers the strongest contrast imaginable to the manic glee of the *spiritelli*. A premium is placed on pathos: disheveled hair, furrowed brows, and parted lips—all boldly modeled for the spectator below—suggest the duo is gripped by internal drama. Were these denizens of antiquity unnerved by the Christian jubilation that surrounded them? Or were they not pagan at all? Do they, too, respond to the music of the organ, modeling its effects to churchgoers, as it were?



Within this sea of interpretative uncertainties, one fact remains undeniable: as the cantoria's largest anthropomorphic features, and angled toward viewers, the two heads delivered the most direct human appeal in the entire structure. Scanning the cantoria during Mass, the spectator may have felt that the heads addressed him or her directly, their enlivened—and very recognizable—gazes meeting the viewer's own, forcing participation with the work at large. Thus, above and beyond their antique visual references, these heads may also have been—perhaps most saliently—human points of entry into the cantoria's more rarefied realms.

What is clear is that the Opera deemed the aesthetic impact of the pair important. This may be inferred from the fact that in 1456, some seventeen years after the heads were installed, the Opera made arrangements to have them gilt with gold leaf (traces of which still remain).<sup>53</sup> In all probability, the Opera, or Donatello himself, found that the dark bronze objects were not sufficiently visible within the shaded recesses below the gallery, and required gilding to make them more eye-catching. Able thus to respond more dynamically to the candles below, the heads would have become full-fledged actors in Donatello's multi-media tour de force. Bronze, porphyry, gold, marble, mosaic, and paint—the surface of each material essaying a different effect—joined together in theatrical accompaniment to the church's ceremony.

## The End of Marble

The cantoria was, in all probability, the last major commission that Donatello completed in marble. By 1443, and perhaps earlier, the sculptor had left Florence for the city of Padua to the north, where he would complete some of the century's most ambitious projects in bronze. Even when Donatello returned to Florence in the mid-1450s, he focused his energies on other materials. It is difficult to say with certainty what motivated Donatello to relinquish marble for the last two decades of his life. Given the sculptor's absolute silence on the matter—indeed on any matter—the question must remain open-ended. It may be that Donatello's taste—or the taste of his patrons—had changed. Or perhaps the expressive possibilities offered by other media—wax/bronze, stucco, limestone—proved more appealing.

When Donatello's great age of marble came to an end, the sculptor had left behind a substantial—and varied—corpus of works in that medium, many of these for Florence's cathedral. As we have seen, each of these sculptures was an individually wrought solution to a specific set of demands—and many drew on the sculptor's experiences in other media. So, as well, would each endure beyond the circumstances and the era in which it was made. As Vasari's anecdote at the beginning of this essay hints, artists in the sixteenth century continued to learn from the lessons these works had to teach. They still marveled at the skill with which Donatello had made his stony figures—how it was that these “visions” seemed to speak, to move, to come to life. Even viewers today might wonder the same.



35. P. Rose, "Bears, Baldness and the Double Spirit: The Identity of Donatello's Zuccone," *The Art Bulletin* 63 (1981): 31-41.
  36. Alberti, *Della pittura/De pictura* (in *Opere volgari*, vol. 3 of 3 vols.), ed. Cecil Grayson, 3 vols. (Rome and Bari, 1960-73), vol. 3 (1973), 7-8. Reproduced here is the English rendering of the phrase in Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. and with an introduction by John R. Spencer (New Haven and London, 1956), 39-40.
  37. See Vasari's biography of Filippo Brunelleschi: *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi, 9 vols. (Florence, 1906), vol. 2, 327-87.
  38. A. Gobbrielli and E. Settesoldi, *La storia della foresta casentinese nelle carte dell'archivio dell'Opera del Duomo di Firenze dal secolo XIV al XIX*, Collana Verde 37 (Rome, 1977).
  39. In his biography of Luca della Robbia. See Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 2, 167-89.
  40. Giancarlo Gentilini, *I Della Robbia: la scultura in vetrata nel Rinascimento*, 2 vols. (Milan, 1992), vol. 1, 90-91.
  41. Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 119-29.
  42. *Ibid.*, 120, where Janson summarizes the document published in Poggi, *Il Duomo di Firenze*, doc. 1312. Janson discusses the two bronze heads at length in *Sculpture of Donatello*, 123-25.
  43. Poggi, *Il Duomo di Firenze*, doc. 1318.
  44. F. Antal and E. Wind, "The Maenad Under the Cross," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (1937-38): 70-73. Cf. also T. Verdon, "Donatello and the Theater: Stage Space and Projected Space in the San Lorenzo Pulpits," *Artibus et Historiae* 14 (1986): 29-55.
- Donatello's Visions:  
The Sculptor at Florence  
Cathedral  
Daniel M. Zolli
- In preparing this essay, I have benefited from the advice and encouragement of many individuals, among them Michael Cole, Alina Payne, Luke Syson, Amy Bloch, Frank Fehrenbach, John Paoletti, and Stephan Wolohojian. I am especially grateful to the latter four individuals for reading a version of the manuscript in its entirety, and for their valuable criticisms and commentary. Jesse Feiman likewise sacrificed time from his work to scrutinize an earlier draft, as did Trevor Stark. Finally, my heartfelt thanks to Richard Townsend, Monsignor Timothy Verdon, and the staffs of their respective institutions: for their kindness, good sense, and for providing every sort of practical support imaginable. Unless otherwise acknowledged, translations are mine.
1. "lavorò di marmo, nella facciata dinanzi del campanile di Santa Maria del Fiore, quattro figure di braccia cinque; delle quali due ritratte dal naturale sono nel mezzo: l'una è Francesco Soderini giovane, e l'altra Giovanni di Barduccio Cherichini, oggi nominato il Zuccone; la quale, per essere tenuta cosa rarissima e bella quanto nessuna che facesse mai, solea Donato, quando voleva giurare, sì che gli credesse, dire: Alla fè ch'io porto al mio Zuccone; e mentre che lo lavorava, guardandolo, tuttavia gli diceva: favella, favella, che ti venga il cacasanguel!" In Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi, 9 vols. (Florence, 1906), vol. 2, 404-5.
  2. On the relative ages at which sculptors and painters began apprenticeships see, for example, Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy* (Cambridge, 1995), esp. 51-56; for statistics see Richard Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore, 2009), 373.
  3. See Lucia Gai, "Per la cronologia di Donatello: un documento inedito del 1401," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 18/3 (1974): 355-57.
  4. James Beck discusses this possibility in "Ghiberti giovane e Donatello giovanissimo," in *Lorenzo Ghiberti nel suo tempo*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1980), vol. 1, 111-34.
  5. See Antonio di Tuccio Manetti, *The Life of Brunelleschi*, ed. Howard Saalman and trans. Catherine Enggass (University Park, PA and London, 1970), 52-55.
  6. The first reference to Donatello at the Porta della Mandorla, from November 1406, refers to him as "carver" [scarpellator], which implies that he had already had some training in marble work. See Giovanni Poggi, ed., *Il Duomo di Firenze* (Berlin, 1909), doc. 362.
  7. On the collaborative nature of Ghiberti's workshop, and its implications, see Adrian Randolph, "Republican Florence, 1400-34," in *Florence*, ed. Francis Ames-Lewis (Cambridge, 2012), 121-24.
  8. The very fact that Donatello was hired into Ghiberti's shop suggests that he had prior training as a goldsmith. On this possibility see Richard Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti* (Princeton, NJ, 1982), 369, doc. 28. On the original documentation concerning Ghiberti's North Doors see page 188, note 5.
  9. See Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, 369-70, doc. 31.
  10. According to Richard Krautheimer, the Nativity belonged to a group of four reliefs on which Donatello probably worked. See Krautheimer, "Ghibertiana," *The Burlington Magazine* 71 (1937), esp. 69, 75. The scholar revised his overall chronology somewhat in his 1982 monograph, but kept the Nativity in the 1403-7 group (see Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, esp. 121-22 n. 15 and 127).
  11. A useful overview of these activities may be found in Francesca G. Bewer, "Bronze Casting: The Art of Translation," in *Bronze*, ed. David Ekserdjian, exh. cat. (London, 2012), 24-31.
  12. For the contract of 1403, of which only a summary survives, see Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, 368-69, doc. 26.
  13. Although bronze works are not the focus of this essay, they comprised a substantial portion of Donatello's oeuvre, especially in the latter half of his career. On Donatello's relationship to bronze casters see, for example, H. W. Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello* (Princeton, NJ, 1963), esp. 45-64; Bruno Bearzi, "La tecnica fusoria di Donatello," in *Donatello e il suo tempo* (Florence, 1968), 97-105; and Andrea Calore, "Andrea Conti 'da le caldiere' e l'opera di Donatello a Padova," *Il Santo* 33 (1993): 247-72.
  14. On the impact of French Gothic art on Ghiberti, see Richard Krautheimer, "Ghiberti and Master Gusmin," *The Art Bulletin* 29/1 (1947): 25-35.
  15. A brief but lucid account of the political and cultural context in which each phase unfolded may be found in Charles Seymour, *Sculpture in Italy 1400-1500* (Harmondsworth and Baltimore, 1966), 31-35.
  16. In May 1408, for example, Niccolò Lamberti was admonished by Giovanni d'Ambrógio, then *capomaestro*, for deviating from the master design, and was fined twenty-five florins unless he corrected his mistakes. See Poggi, *Il Duomo di Firenze*, doc. 367.
  17. For further elaboration on this point see page 79.
  18. The absence of a scroll has led some to speculate that the statue was not born as a prophet, but rather as the Archangel Gabriel. See Wilhelm Reinhold Valentiner, "Donatello and Ghiberti," *The Art Quarterly* 3 (1940), esp. 182-86. It may be that the statue originally belonged to an Annunciation filling the lunette above the door. On this possibility see Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 221-22.
  19. On the iconography of the relief, and its relationship to the Porta della Mandorla, see pages 21-24.
  20. In Poggi, *Il Duomo di Firenze*, doc. 406.
  21. On the talismanic function of these statues, and particularly their role in defending Florence against Milan, see Frederick Hartt, "Art and Freedom in Quattrocento Florence," in *Essays in Memory of Karl Lehmann*, ed. Lucy Freeman Sandler (New York, 1964), 114-31.
  22. Many have drawn the connection between Donatello's Bargello statue and the 1408-9 commission. See, for example, Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 3-7. Another plausible candidate is the so-called Bearded Prophet in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. This attribution is supported by John Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello Sculptor* (New York, 1993), 17-20, among others. A useful summary of the debate may be found in John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, 4th edn. (London, 2011), 208-9.
  23. For a brilliant discussion of Donatello's treatment of the subject, and specifically his later bronze statue, see Adrian W. B. Randolph, *Engaging Symbols: Gender, Politics, and Public Art in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (New Haven, 2002), 139-92 (the Bargello David figures on 153-55).
  24. Poggi, *Il Duomo di Firenze*, doc. 413.
  25. For a different interpretation of these events, see Manfred Wundram, *Donatello und Nanni di Banco* (Berlin, 1969), esp. 7-10, 26-29, 62-69; Volker Herzner, "David Florentinus I. Zum Marmordavid Donatellos im Bargello," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 20 (1978), 43-115; and Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello Sculptor*, 17-20.
  26. Some scholars have suggested that the Joshua may have been a trial piece intended to test the size necessary for the buttress statues. See, for example, Paoletti and Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, 210.
  27. Poggi, *Il Duomo di Firenze*, docs. 415, 421.
  28. In June 1405, the Opera had four pieces of marble, each roughly seven feet tall, harvested from the quarries in nearby Carrara. See *ibid.*, doc. 162. For a translation and analysis of this document see Mary Bergstein, *The Sculpture of Nanni di Banco* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), 188, doc. 49.
  29. Charles Seymour first noted Donatello's optical adjustments in *Sculpture in Italy*, 66-69. Robert Munman later examined



- the topic exhaustively, and across the sculptor's oeuvre, in *Optical Corrections in the Sculpture of Donatello* (Philadelphia, 1985).
30. On the carving of John's pupils see Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 16; and cat. 10 here.
  31. See note 10 above.
  32. See Bonnie A. Bennett and David G. Wilkins, *Donatello* (Oxford, 1984), 98; Irving Lavin, "Bozzetti and Modelli: Notes on Sculptural Procedure from the Early Renaissance through Bernini," in *Visible Spirit: The Art of Gianlorenzo Bernini*, 2 vols. (London, 2007), vol. 1, esp. 37; Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello Sculptor*, 38–39, 61.
  33. See Giorgio Vasari, *Vasari on Technique*, trans. Louisa Maclellan and ed. Gerard Baldwin Brown (London, 1907), 150–51.
  34. Giovanni Battista Gelli, reprinted as G. Mancini, ed., "Vite d'artisti di Giovanni Battista Gelli," in *Archivio storico italiano*, fifth series, XVII (1896), 59.
  35. Cristoforo Landino, *Comento sopra la Comedia*, ed. P. Proccaccioli, 4 vols. (Rome, 2001), vol. 1, 242.
  36. Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 2, 403.
  37. For relevant documents see cat. 11, note 1. The statue was made for the campanile's eastern side, but the Opera had it moved in 1464 to the western face, the latter facing the piazza and therefore probably more prestigious. On the implications of this relocation, see page 32.
  38. Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 18.
  39. On Donatello's use of gilding see Carlo Sisi, "San Marco," in *Restauro del marmo: opere e problemi*, OPD Restauro, eds. Antonio Paolucci and Anna Maria Giusti (Florence, 1986), 134–50; and Anna Maria Giusti, Carlo Biliotti, and Cristina Samarelli, "Alcuni casi di utilizzo del laser nella pulitura dei marmi," *OPD Restauro* 8 (1996): 120–26. Documents on polychromy in Donatello's marble sculptures, specifically for the *Bargello David* when it was transferred to the town hall, are published in Poggi, *Il Duomo di Firenze*, docs. 426–27.
  40. E.g. Poggi, *Il Duomo di Firenze*, docs. 272, 279.
  41. Restorers at the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo conserved the *Zuccone*, as well as Donatello's four additional bell tower prophets, in 1999. I thank Rita Filardi for sharing their findings with me.
  42. That Donatello drew inspiration from ancient Roman busts for his *Zuccone* and other prophets is noted widely in the literature. See, for example, Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello Sculptor*, 56–70, p. 61. See also page 36.
  43. Bernardo Davanzati, *Opere di Tacito*, vol. 2 (Padua, 1755), 656. Here I use the translation provided by Janson, with some modifications (Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 36).
  44. The term "cantoria," retained here for convenience, refers to the loft's later function as a gallery that housed singers. See Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello Sculptor*, 103–12; Pope-Hennessy, *Luca della Robbia* (Oxford, 1980), esp. 19–29; and Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 119–29.
  45. Poggi, *Il Duomo di Firenze*, doc. 1336.
  46. *Ibid.*, docs. 1286–7.
  47. For an interesting contextual study of Luca's cantoria and the confraternity that sang at Florence Cathedral see Robert L. Made, "Adolescent Confratelli and the Cantoria of Luca della Robbia," *The Art Bulletin* 68/1 (1986): 67–71.
  48. On the compositional strategies that Donatello used to enhance the children's illusion of movement, see E. H. Gombrich, "Moment and Movement in Art," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 27 (1964), esp. 304–5. I thank Frank Fehrenbach for this reference.
  49. Poggi, *Il Duomo di Firenze*, doc. 1262.
  50. See Charles Dempsey, *Inventing the Renaissance Putto* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001), esp. 1–61. Ulrich Pfisterer likewise reads the children as *spiritelli*, in *Donatello und die Entdeckung der Stile: 1430–1445* (Munich, 2002), 201–16.
  51. Poggi, *Il Duomo di Firenze*, doc. 1315. Cited in Dempsey, *Inventing the Renaissance Putto*, 14. For an alternative interpretation of this document see Francesco Caglioti, "Tra dispersione e ricomparsa: gli spiritelli bronzetti di Donatello sul pergamo di Luca della Robbia," in *Santa Maria del Fiore: The Cathedral and its Sculpture*, ed. Margaret Haines (Florence, 2001), 263–78, esp. 267.
  52. A document from February 1439 refers to the cantoria that Donatello "has made." See Poggi, *Il Duomo di Firenze*, doc. 1311.
  53. *Ibid.*, doc. 1318.
- Lorenzo Ghiberti:  
From the Early Workshop  
to the Gates of Paradise**  
Amy R. Bloch
1. Ghiberti, *I commentarii*, ed. Lorenzo Bartoli (Florence, 1998), 92–93.
  2. Antonio di Tuccio Manetti, *The Life of Brunelleschi*, ed. Howard Saalman and trans. Catherine Enggass (University Park, PA and London, 1970), 46–51.
  3. On Ghiberti's early training in his stepfather's goldsmith shop, see Dora Liscia Bemporad, *La bottega orafa di Lorenzo Ghiberti* (Florence, 2013), 9–18.
  4. Certain bronze objects, like bells and mortars, were cast in Florence.
  5. Most of the original documentation for baptistery commissions was lost in an eighteenth-century fire that destroyed the Calimala archive. Fortunately, in the seventeenth century Carlo Strozzi copied, summarized, and excerpted a number of the original records. I cite the versions of Strozzi's records published in appendices of the following two volumes: Anita Fiderer Moskowitz, *The Sculpture of Andrea and Nino Pisano* (Cambridge, 1986); and Richard Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti* (Princeton, NJ, 1982). A document of 1329 suggests that the Calimala at first planned to bring in a Venetian sculptor to carry out the entire project; see Moskowitz, *Sculpture of Andrea and Nino Pisano*, 198, doc. 2. For the record of a payment to the Venetian artisan who, along with two assistants, cast Andrea Pisano's reliefs in bronze, see Moskowitz, *Sculpture of Andrea and Nino Pisano*, 199, doc. 12.
  6. *I commentarii*, 93: "...pictori et scultori, d'oro e d'argento e di marmo."
  7. Massimo Bernabò, ed., with Mario Scalini, "Le tecniche e gli strumenti," in *L'oreficeria nella Firenze del Quattrocento* (Florence, 1977), 203–32, esp. 205–6.
  8. Lorenzo Ghiberti: "materia e ragionamenti," exh. cat. (Florence, 1978), 66; and Francesca G. Bewer, Richard E. Stone, and Shelley G. Sturman, "Reconstructing the Casting Technique of Lorenzo Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise," in *The Gates of Paradise: Lorenzo Ghiberti's Renaissance Masterpiece*, ed. Gary M. Radke (New Haven and London, 2007), 157–182, esp. 175.
  9. The Calimala called in a local Florentine goldsmith, Piero di Donato, to help chase Andrea Pisano's doors; see Moskowitz, *Sculpture of Andrea and Nino Pisano*, 199–200, docs. 13, 15–17, 27, and 29.
  10. For his first set of doors Ghiberti used alloys with a high white-metal content (around 17–26%), making them especially hard and thus difficult to chase; see Salvatore Siano, Piero Bertelli, Ferdinando Marinelli, and Marcello Miccio, "Casting the Panels of the Gates of Paradise," in *The Gates of Paradise: Lorenzo Ghiberti's Renaissance Masterpiece*, 141–55, esp. 147.
  11. Giuseppe Marchini, "Ghiberti ante litteram," *Bollettino d'arte* 50 (1965): 181–93. On the bronze industry in medieval and Renaissance Venice, see Victoria Avery, *Vulcan's Forge in Venice: City: The Story of Bronze in Venice, 1350–1650* (New York, 2011).
  12. For the contract of 1403, of which only a summary survives, see Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, 368–69, doc. 26.
  13. *Ibid.*, 369, doc. 28.
  14. On the chronology of Ghiberti's first doors, and on the progress of work, I follow Richard Krautheimer, "Ghibertiana," *The Burlington Magazine* 71 (1937): 68–70, 75–76, and 79–80, here 69 and 75.
  15. Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, 369, doc. 27.
  16. On the membership of the shop in this period, see *ibid.*, 369–70, doc. 31.
  17. James Beck, "Uccello's Apprenticeship with Ghiberti," *The Burlington Magazine* 122 (1980): 837.
  18. Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, 109 and 370, doc. 34. On Michelozzo's contribution, see also Harriet McNeal Caplow, "Sculptors' Partnerships in Michelozzo's Florence," *Studies in the Renaissance* 21 (1974): 145–75, esp. 159–60.
  19. On this possibility, see Robert Glass, "Filarete at the Papal Court: Sculpture, Ceremony, and the Antique in Early Renaissance Rome," PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2011, 133–40.
  20. Later in his career, Donatello often made the wax models for his bronzes but left their casting to others. On this, see Bruno Bearzi, "La tecnica fusoria di Donatello," in *Donatello e il suo tempo* (Florence, 1968), 97–105; and Andrea Calore, "Andrea Conti 'da le caldiere' e l'opera di Donatello a Padova," *Il Santo* 33 (1993): 247–72.
  21. H. V. Janson mentions the generally Ghibertian mien of the *Profetia in The Sculpture of Donatello* (Princeton, NJ, 1963), 220.
  22. On this point, see pages 53–61, as well as the catalogue entry on Donatello's *St. John the Evangelist* (cat. 10).
  23. On the dating of the *Resurrection* panel, see Krautheimer, "Ghibertiana," 69 and 75. Krautheimer redated the panel to ca. 1414–16 in *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, 121–22, n. 15 and 127.
  24. Mary Bergstein, *The Sculpture of Nanni di Banco* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), 103–4.
  25. On the influence of Ghiberti's first doors, see Aldo Galli, "Nel segno di Ghiberti," in *La bottega dell'artista: tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, ed. Roberto Cassanelli (Milan, 1998), 87–108, esp. 92–94.