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Autor: Lin, Claire

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CONFLICT AND CREATION

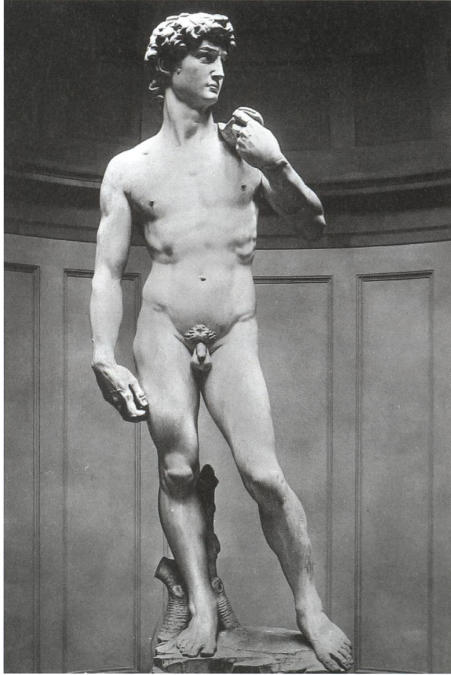


fig. a
Michelangelo Buonarroti, *David*, 1501–1504.
Image: ETH-Library Zurich, Image Archive.

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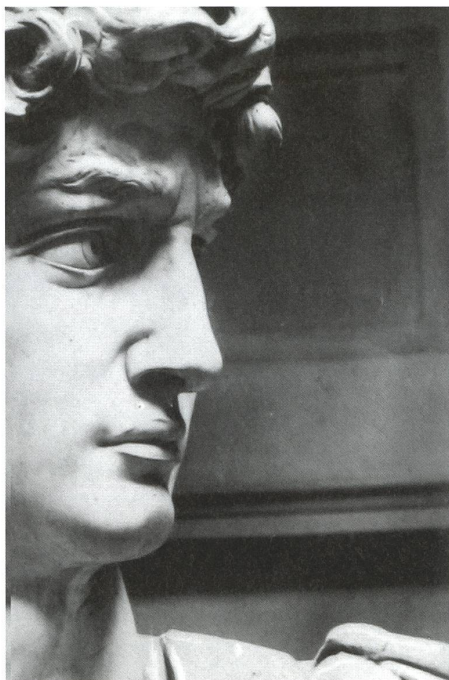


fig. b
Michelangelo Buonarroti, (detail) David, 1501–1504.
Image: ETH-Library Zurich, Image Archive.

He firmly plants himself at the end of the corridor. Four others retreat while you are drawing closer and closer to him. Gradually he looms over you, a figure from the remote past. Awe pierces the ominous silence. He squeezes stone. Goliath sneers. Michelangelo petrifies the moment and David is immortalised. David's upper body is slightly rotated—contrapposto—to indicate an impetus for movement. Force emanates from the sculpture's twisted torso to its limbs. David's knitted eyebrows and furious stare augment his irresistible impulse to act (fig. b). David, one of Michelangelo's most substantial creations, embodies the artist's ideals to the fullest: His worship of antiquity, proportion, contrapposto, anatomic detail and most extraordinarily, life.

Throughout his life, Michelangelo devotes himself to invigorating his figures. He shapes them in optimised proportion and imbues them with rampant emotion. Passion and proportion produce the perfect human body—the essence of his art, a testament to his own complexity. Like all Renaissance men, he celebrates reason; but like all poets, he is a hopeless romantic and constantly immersed in emotion. He conceals his obsession with the male body in the disguise of Neo-Platonic love. As this passion intensifies, it exasperates his Christian mind. In the context of Renaissance Florence, Michelangelo's struggle is crucial since it is a historical conflict on a personal level. When seen in perspective, his obsession with the body is part of a continuous conceptualisation of the self—from Petrarch to modernism: The recognition of human perception, or, in other words, the return to instinct.

The Renaissance is more than just a rebirth. During this time, Florence witnessed the liberation of sensation and the dissociation from religion in subject matter. Although subtle in reality, these trends are revolutionary, as they grant artists more freedom. Michelangelo's sculpture, in particular, exhibits an undeniable degree of corporeality. This, however, is not his invention.

Petrarch's literary experiment in the *Canzoniere* illuminates the temporal self. Many generations of poets attempt to imitate Petrarch's erotic form of expression. Although criticised for their superficiality, the candid utterance of desire in their work readdresses human perception as an active factor after the collapse of Greco-Roman culture. From a historical point of view, the Renaissance



fig. c
 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Tomb of Giuliano Duke of Nemours*,
 San Lorenzo, New Sacristy, 1526–1534.
 Image: ETH-Library Zurich, Image Archive.

inherits «the self» from the Middle Ages and borrows «the body» from antiquity. Through extensive artistic practice, the era creates a unique form of art which excels antiquity.

Praised as the climax of the Renaissance, the Florentine style advertises the connection between literature and art. The Florentine tradition encourages artist to embrace *difficùtà* (difficulty) and *virtù* (virtue) like their literary counterparts. Manipulating a slab of marble brings with it its difficulties; casting the illusion of movement makes the task even more formidable. Even so, Florentine artists employ the serpentine figure adopted from Greco-Roman aesthetics to generate a hint of vitality. Leonardo da Vinci first introduces this concept in painting. He suggests that «the contours of any object should be considered with the most careful attention, observing how they twist like a serpent»¹. Here the representation of a snake refers to *contrapposto*, a compositional device often observed in ancient sculpture. While relating movement to contours, Leonardo's concern remains superficial as painting is a two-dimensional art. Michelangelo subsequently modifies the idea: He transforms the contours of movement to the force of movement.

An early effort in sinuous movement is evident in Donatello's sculpture. In particular, the bronze David (fig. f) dedicated to Cosimo de' Medici takes on a *contrapposto*. Together with the firm grip of the sword, the S figure exudes a chivalric yet poetic ambience. Summers suggests that the tradition reaches Michelangelo through Bertoldo di Giovanni, who is a pupil of Donatello and in charge of the art school founded by Lorenzo de' Medici at the time. One may argue that the buoyant mood of Donatello's David is inapt for the dramatic episode of David and Goliath; unlike Michelangelo's response, a grandiose David wearing an expression of fierce concentration.

Michelangelo believes that true art mirrors God's work. He advances this idea and draws a comparison between artistic activity and Creation, a metaphor that bestows intellectual value upon his practice. The real artist can grant artefacts spirit and movement, and therefore, life. This leads to Michelangelo's conclusion that transcendence can be achieved through the pursuit of beauty. It involves the experience with and the imitation of the animate world, especially the human body – the

¹ David Summers, «Michelangelo and the Language of Art». Princeton: Princeton UP 1981, p. 71, 72, 81–87.

supreme form above all. This is the fundamental compromise he makes to reconcile his Christian mind with his desire. He thinks of the corporeal form as «a repetition of the celestial ones», albeit imperfect compared to their divine counterpart, having «their own earthly and human perfection».² This makes the body worth celebrating.

Michelangelo's development of movement is both stylistic and symbolic. The creation of the two sets of allegorical figures – Day and Night, Dawn and Dusk – in the New Sacristy epitomises the application of contrapposto. Day and Night are situated underneath the statue of Giuliano, whereas Dawn and Dusk accompany the sculpture of Lorenzo (fig. c, d). The first pair is arranged in a disrotary manner, with Day rotating inward and Night rotating outward. The movement indicates the rotation of day and night and thus the fleeing of time: Movement here is not simply physical but allegorical. Similarly, Dawn and Dusk's movement also communicate a deeper meaning. Dawn is reclining whereas Dusk is rising. This translational motion can be interpreted as the rise and fall of dawn and dusk. The horizontal movement of Day and Night resonates with the vertical movement of Dawn and Dusk. The degree of vibrancy echoes with emotion, lamenting the untimely death of the two Medici members.

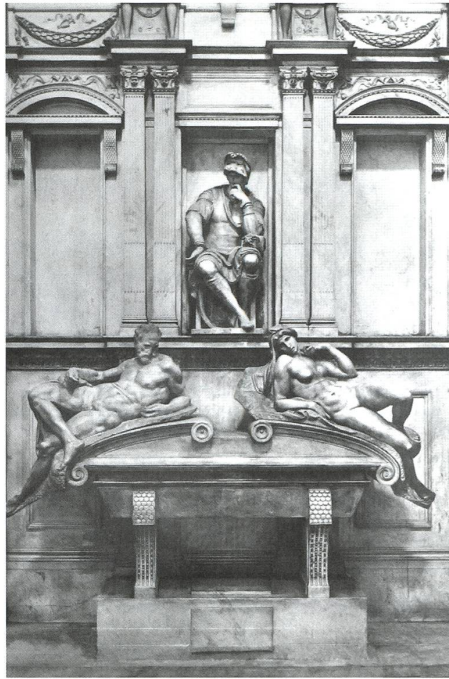


fig. d
Michelangelo Buonarroti, Tomb of Lorenzo Duke of Urbino,
San Lorenzo, New Sacristy, 1525-2531.
Image: ETH-Library Zurich, Image Archive.

Although criticised for their monotonous appearance, Michelangelo's sculptures exemplify his definition of ideal beauty – the living male nude. Both figures, Night and Dawn, though female in representation, exhibit masculine structures and strength. Considered to be the zenith of creation in both Neo-Platonic teaching and Christian doctrine, masculinity is Michelangelo's maxim. Symmetry and proportion of the body contribute to its divinity. These two concepts date back to Vitruvius' writing on architecture, which associates the ideal human proportion with geometry.

As opposed to the Vitruvian concept, the Florentine tradition is to view a building as a harmonic entity. Disregarding mathematical reasoning, this idea is defined as the «artificiality of symmetry»³. The concept originates from classical rhetoric theories. Summers provides an example of Cicero devising words based on the harmony of language at his time; harmony is what Cicero considers as the structure of sense.³ Briefly, «artificiality of symmetry» designates a set of literary precepts – called into existence in accordance

2 Luca Marcozzi, 'The Metaphor of the Corpus Carcer', in: Julia L. Hairston and Walter Stephens (Ed.), 'The Body in Early Modern Italy'. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP 2010, p.41.
3 David Summers, 'Michelangelo and the Language of Art'. Princeton: Princeton UP 1981, p. 439



fig. e
 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, (detail) Mary,
 1498–1499, St. Peter's Basilica.
 Image: ETH-Library Zurich, Image Archive.

to the vogue of the time – to cultivate the mind. Without the interference of mathematics, it smoothly relates symmetry to subjectivity – as the term ‘artificiality’ implies. In terms of art practice, ‘artificiality of symmetry’ refers to a process whereby the mind accustoms itself to a set of existing symmetric aesthetics, bridging perception and art.

Just like the dialectical example of numerical symmetry versus artificial symmetry, quantitative proportion has its antithesis – qualitative proportion. Again, without the involvement of mathematics, qualitative proportion refers to the relation between an object and its purpose; It alludes to the object’s intention of existence. A perfect sculpture should follow a set of qualitative standards, «having to do with the essence of life, movement and orderly change»⁴. One example is Michelangelo’s conceptual depiction of Mary in *Pietà* (fig. e). He defends the Virgin’s youth as the culmination of purity.⁵ Here, the marble figure appropriately serves its intention – to represent the virtue of Mary.

«sì presso a morte e sì lontan da Dio».⁵
 ([...] so near to death and so far from God.)

Different to the optimistic tone in other poems to Tommaso de’ Cavalieri, it introduces the theme dominant in his later writings and preludes the sentiment of the Last Judgement. At the last stage of his life, he constantly contemplates death and decadence. He worries about his appearance in front of God. He denies his love for Tommaso; moreover, he denies his art: He destroys his sculptures as his own death draws closer and closer. Eventually he reduces himself to a piece of skin in the Last Judgement, doomed to be condemned. As beautiful as any tragedy, Michelangelo becomes his final production, which he is so desperate to destroy. David, like all Michelangelo’s projects, bears his signature of difficulty and paradox. It is in this concoction of difficulty and paradox that Michelangelo’s highly complex Christian mind drifts. We resort to his sculptures and aesthetics and try to reveal part of the myth. James Joyce says in ‘Ulysses’, «Think you’re escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way home.» Ever since the early twentieth century, fragmentation of the self prevails in literature. On the other hand, perception and sensation continuously inspires modern art. The self, therefore, is an interesting concept to look at and to reflect upon, for it is the source and the means of endless conflict and creation.

4 David Summers, ‘Michelangelo and the Language of Art.’ Princeton: Princeton UP 1981, p.10, 336, 338.

5 Michelangelo Buonarroti. Translated by Creighton Gilbert. ‘Complete Poems and Selected Letters of Michelangelo.’ Princeton: Princeton UP 1980, p. 162, G66, vv. 14.



fig. f
Donatello di Niccolò di Betto Bardi, *Bronze David*, 1430-1433.
Image: Museo Nazionale del Bargello.

Claire Lin, born 1986, majored in chemistry and material culture studies in the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is currently a chemistry graduate student at the ETH Zurich.