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Democratization of Art

Francesco Battaini, Felicia Liang

I THE ORIGIN

In 1867, a convention was held at the initiative of Henry Cole and his wish for a broad access to art, called the «Convention for Promoting Universally Reproductions of Works of Art for the Benefits of Museums of All Countries». ⁽¹⁾ As the director of the Victoria and Albert Museum at the time, Cole harboured the ambitious scheme to promote an international exchange of the finest works of art countries possessed, to ultimately democratize the Grand Tour and bring the wonders of the world to the ordinary citizen. «He [Cole] wanted to get his hands on as many works of art as possible in order to copy them for working people to be able to see them for themselves.» ⁽²⁾

II THE ORIGINAL

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1501–1503), Marble sculpture. 517 cm x 199 cm x 5170 cm. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, Italy.

In 1501, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) was commissioned the monumental challenge to carve the biblical hero David out of an enormous block of marble. David is described as a young shepherd who in single combat, settled the war between the Israelites and the Philistines by defeating Goliath, the giant, in one move, equipped solely with a slingshot. ⁽³⁾ The victory would forever symbolize heroic resistance against all odds. Evidently, David became a subject of great interest for patrons and artists, with earlier representations by Donatello and Verrocchio.

Michelangelo's David was originally intended to sit atop the grand Florence Cathedral roofline among eleven other Old Testament heroes. Those were to be contemplated from the ground as figures of powerful religious significance awaiting us in heaven. But by the time Michelangelo had finished his work in 1504, the plans for the cathedral had fallen through and David was left without a purpose. However, a council of politicians and artists finally decided to place the statue on the Piazza della Signoria. Michelangelo's David was prominently displayed at the entrance of the townhall of the new republican government, freed from the influence of the Medici family, who had come to control the economic, social and political life of the Florentine Republic. In the course of time, David was installed at a prominent place in front of the city hall, where the

sculpture quickly assumed a significant symbolic role of a new phase in the political history of Florence. ⁽⁴⁾

III THE CAST

The statue also rose to prominence by becoming a symbol of the highest form of art in the Renaissance, according to Giorgio Vasari surpassing all ancient and modern statues that existed. ⁽⁵⁾ By the mid-19th century, however, the physical condition of the marble statue began to raise concerns among officials in the city and a decision was made to again relocate it to a covered site as a way to avoid its collapse and further damage.

At about the same time, cast maker Clemente Papi was commissioned by the Grand Duke of Tuscany to make a full-scale copy of the statue. To cast the figure, Papi had to create a mould; more than 1500 separate segments were needed for the cast, some weighing as much as 680 kg. ⁽⁶⁾

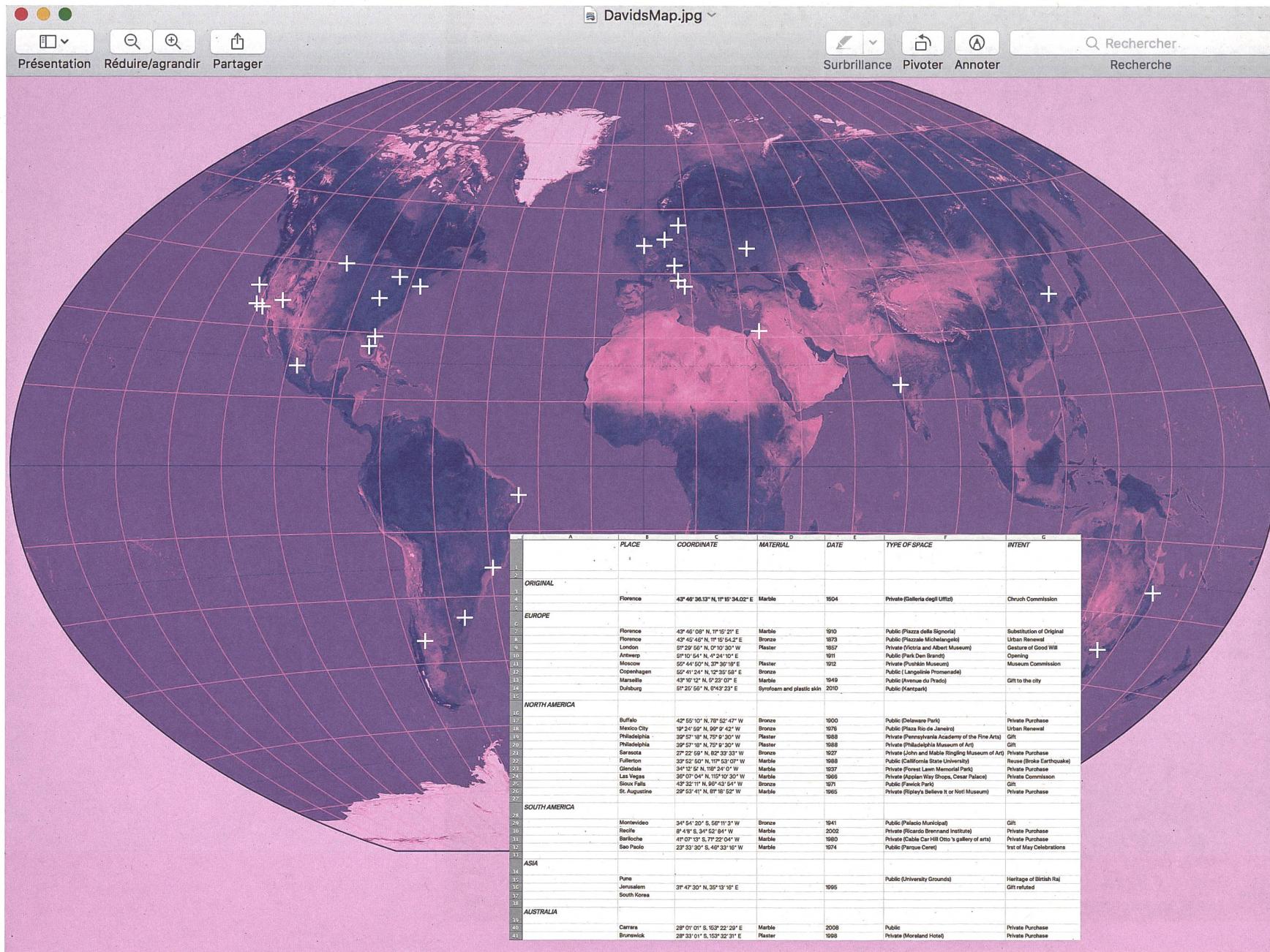
Over the course of his career, Papi made three reproductions of the statue as a whole, one of the commissions was to be donated to Queen Victoria of England and eventually as a royal gift to the South Kensington Museum (now Victoria and Albert Museum). Prior to this gift, the museum had already built up a collection of casts from different periods and countries. But upon receiving David, a more systematic approach was applied in order to get a more desirable and international scope of casts. Henry Cole, who was instrumental in acquiring copies for the museum, witnessed the assembly of the David cast on 21st February 1857 and noted in his diary that «...Mr Cowper remained till 4.30 and saw the legs of David erected, not without jeopardy...» ⁽⁷⁾

IV THE COPIES

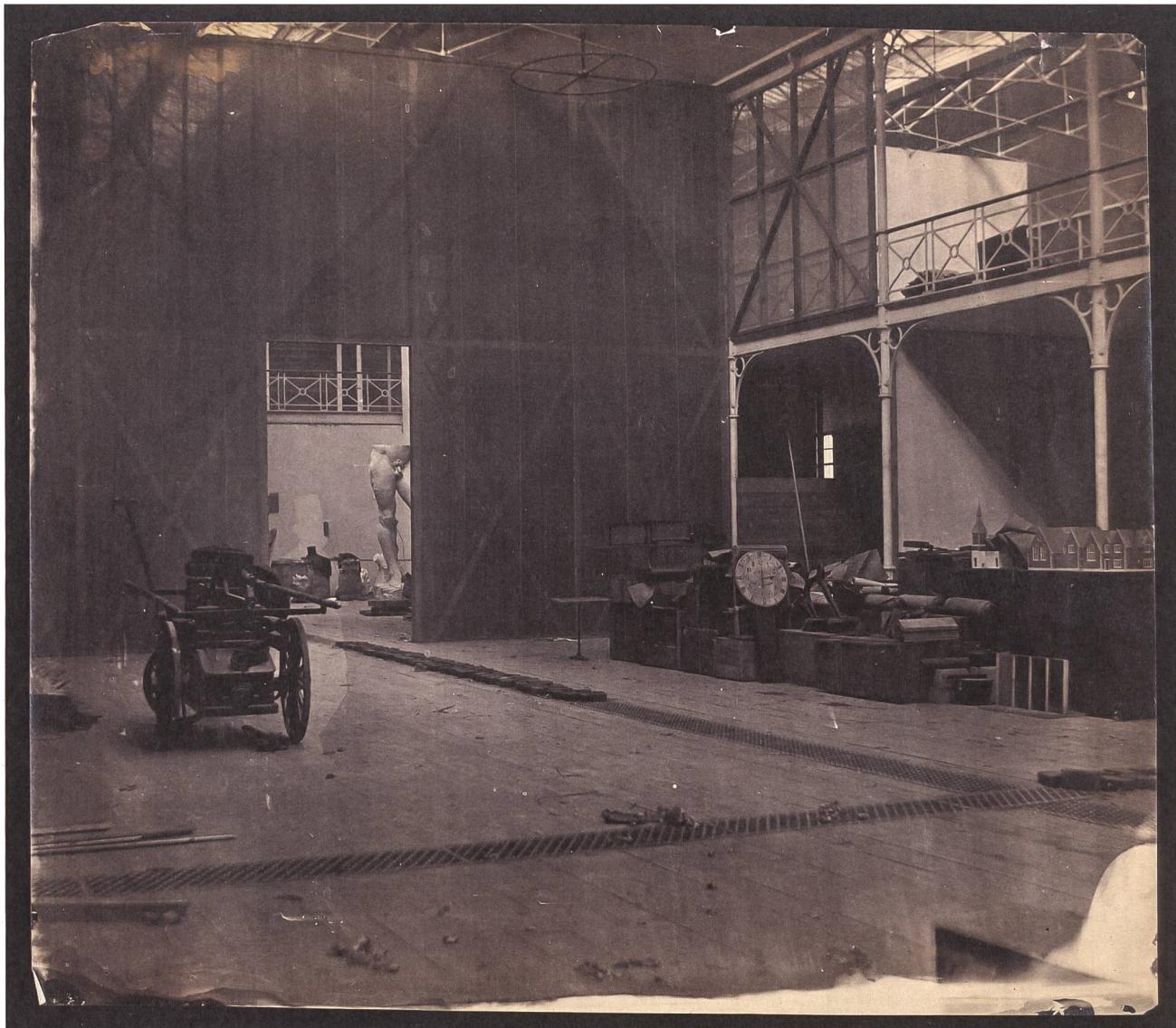
The introduction of the cast to courts in the 1870s generated enormous attraction where people flocked to see the international scope of art wonders reproduced. The element of democracy and the new technologies of plaster casting, electrotyping and photography, triggered artefacts to be reproduced more accurately and efficiently than ever. «People thought it was the real thing and people still think it is the real thing». ⁽⁸⁾

The faithfully cast David in the V&A is not as famous as the original but it captures the condition of the





C



C Charles Thurston Thompson, South Kensington Museum, nave with engine and part of David, 1856.
Image: Victoria and Albert Museum, London

original of the 19th century. The cast forms that can be found around the world are more than simple reproductions of Michelangelo's original. They might all differ from one another in terms of how they have been copied, but nonetheless they are great examples of technical achievement and craftsmanship. The abundance and spread of Davids has lent a culturally attractive atmosphere to some very unlikely settings.

DAVID IN CALIFORNIA

Arriving in Glendale, California, David first settled in the Forest Lawn Memorial Park to be contemplated amongst other sculptures. However, everything changed in 1971. There was a fall and it was brutal. The earthquake shattered David into eight pieces (the feet on the base, an arm, a hand, the lower torso, the head attached to the upper torso and the legs, which were broken into three pieces), and he has never been the same since then.

Instead of burying him on those very grounds, David found a new life a few kilometers away at the California State University. The shift of David's limbs was placed on the grass with his derrière up, giving students an opportunity to ward off the evil eye for the semester to come by and kindly pat his behind.⁽⁹⁾

DAVID IN SÃO PAULO

Chosen for the Educational, Recreational and Sports Center of the Worker (CERET), David had the dignified task to inspire athletes and sports fans by exposing himself as a symbol for health and athleticism. The statue was inaugurated as a part of the Labor Day celebration on the first of May 1974. Still standing three decades later, David's space would be called into question, but any other arrangement was prevented. The Department of Historical Heritage did not and could not authorize any change as David had established affective ties with the residents. He had become a local figure for them, unanimously nicknamed Peladão (The Naked).⁽¹⁰⁾

DAVID IN JERUSALEM

In 1995, Jerusalem was celebrating a symbolic year, namely the 3000th anniversary of King David's conquest. As a gift from the city of Florence on the occasion and prior to his arrival in the Holy City, David caused a stir. The ultra-Orthodox and Arab community shunned the five-meter-tall bare figure's placement in a public square as a symbol of sexuality. Cornered by the city's disdain, naked David was doomed to be replaced by a clothed version of himself.⁽¹¹⁾

V THE NEW ORIGINALS

A reproduction will never match the original. But can it be detached from the original and create its own meaning as a work of art in its own right?

A copy allows for another kind of connection than the original, if it is recontextualized and corresponds with dynamics that can shape new meanings and interpretations. Each context of a reproduction influences the art work and vice versa: they each become then local and embody what is specific to the place. Whether it is about celebrating a historical happening, creating a symbol for a neighborhood or acting as pure decoration.

A David within an academic framework will be seen through institutional lenses, a David in a private garden might be considered as an extremely excessive act, a David on a public square can be seen as a civic hero and so on. The meanings are countless and differ from one another, creating a further distance from Michelangelo's original, allowing new «owners» to project their own meaning to their own original copy.

The replicas of David showcase an immense potential of how art and heritage can be reproduced and the capacity to preserve the world's cultural legacies. Hence a sense of democracy lies around this issue, where technical advancements, such as 3D scanning and VR, now also allow for more precise copies to reach a wider audience through a new kind of interaction. One might not ever get the opportunity to go to Florence and see Michelangelo's David in real life but encounter a reproduction instead – still pretty close.