Donatello (1386?-1466)

The Tomb of Cardinal Cossa was an innovative memorial in the early quattrocentro. The tomb is located in the Baptistery and combines architecture and sculpture in a harmony remarkable for its time. Michelozzi, whose focus was architecture, designed the vault and Donatello the statue. The focal point of the group is Cardinal Cossa's effigy. Donated in his official vestments and sleeping on a bed supported by two lions, it is highly realistic in appearance, especially when compared to other contemporary funeral monuments. It had been a Tucson tradition for artisans to make plaster death masks on the deceased which produced mediocre results, especially when the plaster often collapsed. Donatello rejected that method and used innovative bronze sculptural techniques creating a more realistic effigy. Donatello not only recreated the physical appearance of the good Cardinal, but also captured Cossa's "adventurous" personality. Highly realistic and psychological, the effigy seems to be "still twitching with animal energy and animal appetites." 36

The tomb of Pope John XXIII was one of several important innovations that Donato di Niccolo Betto Bardi, nicknamed Donatello, created. For example, his David was the first life size bronze male nude cast since the heyday of the Roman Empire. Similarly, the memorial to the condottieri Gattamelata was the first large bronze equestrian statue cast in over a thousand years. Donatello was influenced by classical statues that connoisseurs, such as Cosimo, were collecting. Donatello, however, did not simply make copies of these pieces. As seen in the Cossa group, Donatello discovered techniques that gave his work a strong human psychological element. Perhaps for the first time ever in the history of western art, with the exception, perhaps, of the Athenian Scopas.

Donatello's impact on the generation that produced the Florentine Renaissance was great.
For example, his use of line in carving relieves was fundamental to Sandro Botticelli’s education and can be seen in pieces, such as the Birth of Venus and La Primavera. Donatello’s composition of reliefs influenced Ghiberti’s second pair of bronze doors for the Florentine baptistery. A generation later, Michelangelo would declare these doors to be fitting for the gates of heaven itself and would then go on to paint his interpretation of these techniques on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. A more direct link between Michelangelo and Donatello was Bertoldo. Bertoldo was Donatello’s student and companion, the same Bertoldo who taught Michelangelo how to sculpt. Moreover, Bertoldo probably used Donatello’s third David in Michelangelo’s training (which will be investigated further later). Overall, Donatello had a great impact on his generation and the Renaissance.

**Artist’s Writings**

Donatello’s nickname appears on pieces he was proud of, such as the David. Apart from this signature, there are none of his writings available, he was probable virtually illiterate. He regularly asked friends and companions to write for him. For example, while working on the Cossa Tomb, Michelozzi filed Donatello’s catastro (tax report). On subsequent catastros, others associates filed for him. His age on the catastro are erratic which results in confusion over many dates in his lifetime. In one year, he claimed to be thirty years old, and twenty-eight on the following year’s catastro. Perhaps he was uncomfortable with his age and exaggerated (as many homosexuals still do today).

His nickname, “Donatello”, is in itself significant. Donatello was not the customary nickname for the given name, Donato. Instead, it was a masculine version of the female name Donatella, “which is rarely used, if at all, by men.” The vast majority of men named Donato in
Renaissance Florence had other masculine nicknames. Bonnie Bennett and David Wilkins, only found one other significant male nicknamed Donatello in 15th and 16th Centuries!

**Lifestyle**

Donatello resided in Florence with males for the majority of his life, excepting his mother in his youth. At age thirty, the age when most men gave up male companions and took a wife, he did not marry; he never married. There are no references to his ever having female lovers, illegitimate children, or in fact any sexual interest at all in women. He preferred the companionship of males and had working relationships with three famous artists along with dozens of apprentices and students.

The partnership with Michelozzi was just one of many relationships that Donatello had with other unmarried male masters. For example, the pair had spent a year in Rome with the architect Filippo Brunelleschi. In Rome, Donatello and Brunelleschi studied firsthand ancient Roman architecture and sculpture that influenced both masters work. Donatello's primarily interested was sculpture, but "together they made rough drawings of almost all the buildings in Rome." The trip was a carefree artistic adventure for the men, according to Manetti, "Neither of them had family problems, since they had neither wife nor children, there or elsewhere. Neither of them paid much attention to what they ate and drank or how they were dressed or where they lived, as long as they were able to satisfy themselves by seeing and measuring." ⁴⁰

When they returned to Florence (c1433), Brunelleschi seems to have soured towards both Donatello and Michelozzi. First, Michelozzi would become somewhat of a rival architect to Brunelleschi. For example, when Cosimo built the new Medici Palace he invited many architects to submit proposals. He tactfully rejected Brunelleschi's ornate model in favor of 19
Michelozzi’s simpler design. In a characteristic fit of indignation Brunelleschi smashed his own model “into a thousand pieces”.\footnote{41} Similarly, Brunelleschi and Donatello’s friendship fell victim to “artistic disagreements”.

According to Manetti, an argument resulted that Donatello “detracted as much as he could from Filippo’s (Brunelleschi’s) achievement and fame at the instigation of some inconsequential person.”\footnote{42} It is, however, improbable that the argument was over art. Donatello and Brunelleschi were friendly competitors and seem to have respected each other’s craft. Vasari recorded that Brunelleschi severely criticized a crucifix of Donatello's when pressed for his opinion. Donatello, upset, challenged Brunelleschi to make a better crucifix. In secret Brunelleschi carved a superior crucifix that he placed in his dining area and invited Donatello for dinner. Walking through the Old Market Place together, Brunelleschi bought some grocers and "gave them to Donatello, saying "Take these home and wait for me. I shall be along in a moment."\footnote{43} Although Brunelleschi criticized Donatello severely, the two seem to be on most amicable terms. Perhaps even intimate, the two had no problem with Donatello going into Brunelleschi's living quarters alone. Donatello was stunned by the beauty of Brunelleschi’s crucifix and dropped "the eggs, cheeses, and the rest of the shopping...". Brunelleschi came in laughing and asked "...what are we going to eat now that you've broken everything? Myself, Donatello answered, I've had my share for this morning. If you want take yours, you take it. But no more please, Your job is making Christs and mine is making peasants." So according to Vasari, art does not explain their fall out.

Years later, when Donatello began to "detract as much as he could", Brunelleschi "laughed at this talk and attached little importance to it".\footnote{44} However, the rivalry continued for some time. "... After a great deal of such talk caused by Donatello’s persistence in his
presumptuousness, Brunelleschi compose[d] some sonnets in his own defense”. So the argument continued with Brunelleschi writing sonnets, a venue of discourse not open to Donatello. All of Florence was gossiping about these two famous companions and unexplained fall out.

During Donatello’s golden years, the artist Bertoldo di Giovanni was his companion. Bertoldo was a master of bronze and marble relief, previously Donatello’s apprentice.45 They lived together and had a close relationship. Bertoldo’s hand was active in producing some of the late masterpieces of the botteghe, the most famous being the Pulpits of San Lorenzo.46

Along with the companionship of these three masters, Donatello’s workshops or botteghes were filled with many youthful apprentices. Women, not surprising, were excluded from artistic careers and could not work in these shops. Often times, however, women would be associated with a botteghe. Often, botteghes served the double role of home as well as workshop, therefore, they often included women, such as a master artisans’ wife, daughters or current female interests, associated with them. Again, for Donatello, this was not the case, the botteghe was apparently filled only with males. Overall, Donatello’s lifestyle does not preclude a sodomite disposition, he actually seems to have preferred the company of men.

Demographic Evidence

Rocke has shown that sodomy could occur almost anywhere in Florence (and seems to have) which would imply that Donatello certainly could have engaged in sodomite relationships. Of course sodomy was an option open to and perhaps the norm, for most Florentine men. More substantial is the historic foundation of sodomite activity in the particular neighborhoods in which his botteghes were located.

Donatello rented a total of seven botteghes in Florence (usually one at a time). While his
mother was still living, however, he usually kept two sets of living quarters. For example, while working on the Cossa tomb he rented, according to the catastro of 1427, living quarters for his mother and cousin near the Baptistry, as well as a botteghe with Michelozzi. He was also renting living quarters, with a certain Gherador, near the Piazza Frescobaldi.\(^47\) Piazza Frescobaldi is located on the south side of the Arno river across the Ponte S. Trinita. Having up to three rentals during this time, Donatello enjoyed a great deal of "privacy" apart from his family’s attention.

The rentals in the center of the city were all close to infamous homosexual haunts. For example, the Old Market Place was within a two minute leisurely stroll from Donatello’s door. The Old Market Place was a popular cruising spot for sodomites and sodomy frequently occurred there, usually at night.\(^48\) At least 4,760 men were denounced for engaging in sodomy outdoors, many around the Old Market Place.\(^49\) The Street of the Furriers, v.Pellicceria today, another homosexual haunt was also within a six to eight minute walk from all of his residences. The Street of the Furriers is where Jacopo (page 9) was caught. Donatello actually created another homosexual haunt, the *St. George*, which will be addressed under homo-erotic art.

When Donatello broke with Michelozzi the former moved into living quarters near the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova. By 1433, Cosimo de’ Medici was renting a botteghe and living quarters for Donatello. Formerly an inn, Santa Caterina, the botteghe was located between the Palazzo Bischeria and Orsanmichele. Unlike his younger days, these rentals served Donatello as both living and working quarters. Later, around 1440, this botteghe was demolished by Michelozzi to make room for the new Medici Palace while Donatello was working in Padua. (c1440)

By 1454, Donatello was back in Florence and took a botteghe directly behind the Duomo,
which he rented till 1462. Later, Verrocchio would move his workshop into this location. Finally, after 1462, he rented "a shabby little place" where he died impoverished. It was located near the Church of San Lorenzo, in which he worked on his last commission.

All the above botteghe were located within or on the Piazza that bordered San Lorenzo Parish. The furthest location from San Lorenzo was the Santa Caterina location, under a six minute walk from the doors of San Lorenzo itself. Both the Medici rental and the final rental were within a literal stone throw away from the doors of San Lorenzo. All of his botteghe were within four blocks from the church itself.

The San Lorenzo Parish was the center of sodomite activity. San Lorenzo Parish had an overwhelming majority of sodomite activity associated within it. Out of the fifteen parishes where a significant amount of sodomite behavior had occurred, it had the most. San Lorenzo had more denunciations then any other section of Florence or any town within the domains. It also had the most convicted sodomites living in it.

So, demographic evidence shows that Donatello's botteghe were located in a particularly sodomitical neighborhood, with easy access to popular cruising spots. Most of his botteghe were within a two minute walk from infamous cruising areas. As noted earlier, men were known to perform sodomy in the Duomo itself, which his botteghe c 1454 -1462 was directly behind. Sodomy could have occurred in his botteghe, to which contemporary sources allude.

Contemporary Sources

Vasari tells how Donatello was generous to the young men that lived in his botteghe. For example, Donatello used to keep his money in a basket suspended from the ceiling where any of his apprentices and friends were allowed to take whatever they wanted. Vasari also recounts
that Donatello, "left his professional belongings to his pupils." 52

A racy collection of Facetiae published in 1548 implies that Donatello had sodomitical relationships with his pupils. These were popular catch phrases and stories written by Agnolo Poliziano who was living in the Medici household. Six phrases were attributed to Donatello, more than any other artist, three involve his apprentices and assistants.53

First, Donatello had a very beautiful assistant with a brother who needed work. Donatello was initially receptive to the idea, until someone told him that the brother was even more stunning than Donatello’s assistant. Donatello, perhaps getting on in years and not confident with his own appearance exclaimed “The less long he will stay with me!”

The Second refers to Donatello’s concern that other masters might steal his beautiful assistants away. The author recorded that “Donatello used to tint his assistants [or make them unappealing], so others would not take a fancy to them, hinting perhaps at the competition over beautiful youths that existed in Florence.

Thirdly is the assistant who got away. The apprentice had an argument with Donatello and left the master. Fleeing an enraged Donatello, the apprentice ran to Ferrara. Upset, Donatello asked Cosimo de’ Medici to obtain permission from the Duke of Ferrara so Donatello could kill the apprentice. Cosimo, "knowing Donatello’s true temperament", obtained the permission. Later, when asked by the Duke of Ferrara about the outcome of Donatello’s hunt, i.e. did Donatello kill the apprentice? Donatello replied “No dammit! He laughed at me and I at him.”

These contemporary sources point to, at least, strong emotional and personal bonds between Donatello and his apprentices. Moreover, some of the art they produced seems to confirm sodomitical bonds.
Homo-erotic Art

Donatello's botteghe produced contemporary homoerotic art. Donatello's St. George and the Dragon group is one example. Donatello's St. George is a young and confident warrior, an important commission for the Armors Guild's niche of Orsanmichele. (The original is in the Bargello Museum today, the one in the niche is a copy.) Donatello inspired by classical sculpture combined with contemporary and fantastic imagery, produced a masterpiece again, rich in psychological presence. This group was at least appealing to some sodomites. Cellini wrote, Donatello's St. George made the men as well as the women of Florence swoon. Cellini was convicted of sodomy twice.

Also, Donatello's botteghe purposefully created homoerotic art. The bronze David, commissioned by Cosimo for his new palazzo, is the prime example of homoerotic art. Donatello's bronze David was the first free standing nude since the days of the Roman empire and so naturalistic that Vasari stated that even "artists find it hardly possible to believe it was not molded on the living form."

The group features a beautiful youth, David, standing over the severed head of the giant Goliath. David holds his sword in one hand and is nude except for two items, a hunting hat and high riding boots. (of contemporary design) Goliath's wears a decorative helmet probably inspired by a Roman artifact and was crowned with naturalistic looking wings flowing towards David's leg.

The group symbolized Florence's victories over Milan, which would become a favorite theme for other Renaissance artists. David represents Florence (population around 40,000), Goliath would be Milan (population around 80,000). Against everyone's expectations Florence had beaten Milan in the field on two recent occasions. Many interpreted theses victories as the
triumph of the new republican government over the traditional feudal order.

The overall impact of the group was erotic. This is achieved not only by the change in the classic pose of David, thrusting out David's right elbow and placing the right hand on David's hip, but by David's partial nudity. The inclusion of the high leather riding boots and a contemporary hunting hat augment the eroticism of David's nudity. The purposeful and realistic feathers that still rise from Goliath's helm, to play on David's thigh, plainly adds to the erotica. These wings could well be a reference to Ganymede. Ganymede was the most beautiful youth, except perhaps Adonis, in classical mythology and the beloved cup bearer to Zeus. Donatello also added Eros' chariot to the visor of Goliath's helm that would support a Ganymede connection.

Donatello, a master sculptor, purposefully changed the proportions of David's anatomy to create an illusion of androgyny. Moreover, androgyny was achieved by Donatello's incorporation of female anatomy in the "male" giant slayer. For example, he broadens David's thighs near the pelvis to the point that they are no longer male legs, they have become quite female. David's pelvis is similarly broadened and would be consistent with a woman's hips, rather than a male warrior. Moreover, Donatello adds so much fatty tissue to David's chest, that it could be classified as breasts. Most telling is the rear view of David, where long curly hair flows to a sloping, wide buttocks. This is the most obvious inclusion of female anatomy in the group, giving David the appearance of a female when viewed from the rear. As H. W. Janson has pointed out these are not mistakes, the difference in male and female anatomy are known to even amateurs.

David was soon the talk of Florence, many more conservative viewers were shocked by the group. "...that he [Donatello] should have portrayed the young male form so lovingly,
realistically and sensual, was so obvious a delight in the flesh, was outrageous". The group was a private commission for Cosimo who placed it in his garden, fitting decor for Ficino’s lectures on neoplatonism.

**Legal Evidence and Bertoldo**

Vasari wrote that "Cosimo thought so highly of Donatello's talent that he kept him continually occupied; and in return Donatello loved Cosimo so well that he could understand all he wanted, from the slightest sign, and he never disappointed him". Their strong bond would, as seen from contemporary sources, explain the lack of denunciations against Donatello. It is improbable that anyone would charge one of Cosimo’s friends with any crime, especially sodomy. Although charges of sodomy were anonymously made, the accuser had to testify before the magistrate. Often, if the accused confessed or was found guilty, the accuser received a fine. However, Cosimo controlled the selection of the Officers of the Night, as he did most political bodies.

Furthermore, if such a charge ever surfaced, the Signoria might veto the proceedings. Take the case, towards the end of the century, of a youth from a prominent Florentine family having an affair with a foreign ambassador. When a zealous Officer decided to continue with an investigation, the Signoria canceled the hearing, “considering the quality of his person and of his lord, that saving him can be of some utility”. Can it be asserted that Donatello, a friend of Cosimo de Medici, would be treated differently?

By 1464, Cosimo de Medici was weary and gout ridden. To the ambassador of Milan Cosimo said “NICODEMO MIO...I can bear no more. I can feel myself failing and am ready to go”.

62 A few months latter he died at age sixty-five. Many wanted to create a tomb as magnificent as
the Cossa tomb, but Cosimo requested that he be buried "without pomp or demonstration", consistent with his public lifestyle.

His will bequeathed a farm to Donatello, to support the aged artist. Unlike Cosimo, Donatello was a city lover and quickly moved back to Florence where Piero de' Medici (Cosimo's heir) gave Donatello a regular cash stipend. The cash he received was small, his last living quarters and botteghe were described as a rundown "poor little house"V, across from San Lorenzo where Donatello and Bertoldo worked on the Pulpit, their last masterpiece.

As discussed in contemporary sources, when Donatello became suddenly ill, his family visited him, hoping to be included in his testament. Donatello threw them out and when he died, his remaining family received nothing. The farm he left to the peasant who had always worked it, and his contents of his studio he left to his students, much of which went to Bertoldo. Donatello was buried next to Cosimo in December.

Bertoldo di Giovanni (1420-1491) was one of Donatello's most talented apprentices, and remained with the master till the end. Vasari recorded that Bertoldo finished and polished what Donatello had brought near to completion. Bertoldo, like his master, also never married and produced some homosymbolic art. For example, Bertoldo created a fine bronze statue of Orpheus, the famous lute player ripped by three harpies for bringing sodomy to Ancient Greece.

Donatello bequeathed Bertoldo much of the contents of the botteghe. Among these was another statue of David. The homoerotic David, then in the Medici garden, was one of three Davids crafted by Donatello's hand. His first was a marble youth purchased by the Signoria in 1417. Another David, "three braccia tall,"63 never quite finished, Donatello kept in his possession. As Dr. Kennedy shows, the third David was among the personal effects that Donatello bequeathed to Bertoldo. Bertoldo had 3rd David after finishing the pulpits of San
Lorenzo and receiving a job as curator of the Medici collection, brought it with him when he moved into the Medici Palace.

**Summary Donatello**

Donatello sexual preference was for men. He took the masculine version of a female name, and his life style was that of a sodomite or ascetic. Demographic evidence shows that he lived in an area rich in sodomitical activity. Contemporary sources hint that Donatello had that reputation, and show he had an emotional friendship with Brunelleschi. Agnolo Poliziano hints that Donatello was sexually involved with his apprentices. Donatello’s bottege produced purposeful homoerotic art which also indicates a sodomitical disposition. There are no legal denunciations, but Cosimo would have protected his reputation. Some legal evidence exists and shows he was closer to his apprentices, especially Bertoldo, than his relations. People then as now, usually bequeath their possessions to those most closest to them, and I believe Bertoldo was closest to Donatello. Also, I believe were probably romantic partners, such a relationship would be within the parameters of Florentine sexuality Rocke has established.

Bertoldo received his position in the garden by Lorenzo the Magnifico de Medici, who was unexpectedly thrust to the forefront of the House when his father Piero and older brother died.