

Donatello and Ghiberti: The Choice Between Compositional Unity and Narrative Force

Jason Rosensweig

This essay examines two artists at the vanguard of the artistic revolution of Quattrocento Florence, revered both by their contemporary artists and by our retrospective gaze: Lorenzo Ghiberti and Donatello. Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise and Donatello's San Lorenzo pulpits are two sets of sculptural reliefs created at the end of the artists' careers. They exemplify the active struggle and innovation of early Renaissance artists in their rendering of narratives and pictorial spaces. A comparison between these two capolavori can improve our understanding of how sculptural relief and Quattrocento art in general balanced these elements of representation. Ghiberti's compositions, on the one hand, represent formal harmony and aesthetic unity, while Donatello's represent narrative and expressive strength. Ghiberti subjugates narrative to aesthetic effect while Donatello subjugates compositional harmony to expressive effect.

In the spiritual epicenter of Quattrocento¹ Florence April 2, 1452 marked the completion of the Baptistery of San Giovanni's² third set of bronze doors. The soon-thereafter-dubbed "Gates of Paradise" are essentially Lorenzo Ghiberti's final work³. Together with the North Doors of the same Baptistery completed several decades earlier, these East Doors comprise most of Ghiberti's life work. Fourteen years later, in 1466, Donatello died, leaving as his final work his own set of bronze reliefs. These reliefs were not a gilded announcement of Florentine civic accomplishment, visible 24 hours a day by all passersby. They were not over twenty years in the making, nor did they inspire lasting superlatives from Michelangelo⁴. But, like Ghiberti's doors⁵, the San Lorenzo pulpits challenge the representative and expressive potential not only of sculptural relief but of pictorial representation.

In a time in which the modern conception of the artist was only germinating, craftsmen, architects, painters, and sculptures lacked the clear separations between media of contemporary associations. Artists were simultaneously architects and builders; Ghiberti began as a goldsmith. In this fluidity of media⁶ sculptural relief lay at an interesting—and prestigious—intersection between the three-dimensionality of sculpture and the two-dimensionality of painting.

From the 1420s through the greater part of the Quattrocento, Florentine artists proudly and relentlessly pressed the potential of their glorious invention, their revolution in pictorial representation: linear perspective⁷. Almost en masse, these artists trampled the barriers that had limited the realism of their creations. As realism in rendering increased, so did the narrative force of scenes now represented in real spaces. Artists from Massaccio to Fra Filippo Lippi to Donatello worked to balance

synthetic spaces and narrative to create the perfect composition.

In this essay, we will examine two artists at the vanguard of this artistic revolution, revered both by their contemporary artists and by our retrospective gaze: Lorenzo Ghiberti and Donatello. Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* and Donatello's San Lorenzo⁸ pulpits are two sets of sculptural reliefs created at the end of the artists' careers. They exemplify the active struggle and innovation of early Renaissance artists in their rendering of narratives and pictorial spaces. A comparison between these two capolavori⁹ can improve our understanding of how sculptural relief and Quattrocento art in general balanced these elements of representation¹⁰. Ghiberti's compositions, on the one hand, represent formal harmony and aesthetic unity, while Donatello's represent narrative and expressive strength. Ghiberti subjugates narrative to aesthetic effect while Donatello subjugates

compositional harmony to expressive effect.

Ghiberti: composition and narrative

One way of approaching how Ghiberti deals with narrative and space is to examine one of the questions that strikes any art historian looking at the Gates of Paradise: what is the logic Ghiberti used in arranging and distributing the multiple *effetti*¹¹ in each of the ten¹² panels? At first glance, it is difficult to see any system behind the arrangement of the *effetti*. Each scene is not immediately or easily identifiable to one not extremely familiar with the Old Testament stories, nor do Ghiberti's panels offer any sense of the chronology or succession of events. Ghiberti relied on his Quattrocento Florentines to have a full and ready knowledge of the stories; his purpose, unlike that of the late-medieval mosaics lying just within his doors, was not didactic. Regardless, there should be a logic to the compositions—which scenes are foregrounded, which are larger, and which are in higher relief.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find this desired narrative logic in the panels. One immediate example of this would be in the *Isaac* panel, where three superfluous women stand chatting, in almost full relief, in the front-center-left position. They are prominently sized and defined and occupy the privileged left-hand starting point for Western left-to-right readers. Another example of an explicably prioritized scene is in the *Joseph* (Figure 1). Joseph's sale to the Ishmaelites, perhaps the most dramatic moment in the story, is barely even in the panel; it hides in *schacciato rilievo*¹³, in the far upper-right corner and outside the panel's primary (and monolithic) narrative space below.

John Pope-Hennessy, in an essay on the sixth centenary of Ghiberti's doors, addresses our problematic directly: "The purpose of the [Albertian perspective] scheme [for Ghiberti] is not the creation of a space illusion for the sake of space; it is the creation of a space illusion for the purposes of narrative lucidity" (Pope-Hennessy 52). Pope-Hennessy goes on to claim that Ghiberti uses a logical system of perspective to determine the degree of

relief and the degree of diminution for each figural grouping. Yet when applied to some of the unexplained aspects to Ghiberti's arrangements, Pope-Hennessy's explanation is not satisfactory. In the *Joseph* panel, one could argue that Ghiberti deliberately dampens the prominence of the *effetto* of Joseph's sale so that its potential for narrative energy does not interfere with the prominence of the *effetto* he wants to emphasize—the discovery of the golden cup. But can we use this reasoning to explain the aforementioned chatting women? Their high-relief prominence can only compete with the *effetto* directly beside it—Isaac giving instructions to Esau, which is clearly of greater narrative importance.

Richard Krautheimer's basic thesis is that Ghiberti sacrifices a logical hierarchy among the *effetti* for an overall aesthetic unity: "The demands of the composition prevail over the narrative" (195). This would explain the powerful architectural settings, like in the *Isaac*, the *Joseph*, and the *Solomon* (Figure 2) panels. The composition and the overall aesthetic dominate the panels, subjugating the content to lower hierarchical rungs. Even in a panel like the *Moses*, which lacks an overt architectural, perspective-driven construction of space, Krautheimer's thesis holds. The rocky hill, replacing an architectural frame, structures the panel and anchors the two figural groupings above and below. Here, the specificity of the narrative content drowns in the swarm of figures and *effetti* in the foreground. The one *effetto* that is easily identifiable and imbued with significant narrative force, the reception of the tablets, is pushed to the far top right; it is mere background information. Yet the force of the hill, the composition's fixed structure, is constant.

Krautheimer's claim is strengthened by his assertion that in the later pan-



Figure 1. Ghiberti, *Joseph*, San Giovanni.

els¹⁴ Ghiberti strives "to eliminate the cleavage between narrative and composition" (197). The culminating exemplar of this would be the *Solomon* panel, which ceases to represent multiple *effetti* in one panel. Ghiberti tells only one story, that of the grand marriage between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Finally, "a unity of narrative and design, of time and space...has been established" (Ibid.). Implicit in Krautheimer's argument is the assertion that Ghiberti was conscious of the imperfect "unity" of the earlier panels. Krautheimer would thus have Ghiberti be aware that in order to achieve his desired aesthetic harmony, it was necessary to disrupt the narrative unity by combining *effetti* in illogical ways. Under this thesis, Ghiberti eventually solved this conflict in his final panel, where he discards the whole question of the distribution of multiple *effetti* in one panel. With only one story to relate, he



Figure 2. Ghiberti, *Solomon*, San Giovanni.

can bring compositional and narrative unity together.

This conception of Ghiberti's artistic design, that of placing compositional harmony and unity above content, is supported, albeit indirectly, by Charles Seymour Jr. In his book on Quattrocento sculpture, he produces diagrams of how Ghiberti arranges curvilinear shapes within the quatrefoil frames of the North Doors. He outlines symmetries, asymmetries, polygons, and opposing curves. Seymour uses these diagrams to develop his ideas on how Ghiberti leads the eye around the scenes, but his use of the diagrams relies on the assumption that Ghiberti first conceived of his panels formalistically. Thus Ghiberti's compositions were abstract forms *before* they became specific narrative designs. Consequently we can align Seymour with Krautheimer in seeing Ghiberti as prizing composition over content.

Donatello: Freedom, dramatic energy, and space

That Donatello constructs his compositional spaces to focus the drama and psychological energy of his scenes is undisputed. Yet most art historians who make reference to this have other scholarly goals and preoccupations.¹⁵ They take for granted the energy in Donatello's compositions while they pursue other areas of discourse. Given this, I hope that, with Ghiberti's panels as a foil, a discussion of several critical perspectives on Donatello, coupled with a few suggestions of my own, will prove illuminating. Just as I focused on Ghiberti's *Isaac*, *Joseph*, and *Solomon*, so will I focus on the following Donatello panels from San Lorenzo: *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* (Figure 3) and *Christ before Pilate and Caiaphas* (Figure 4).

One fundamental problem¹⁶ in dealing with the San Lorenzo pulpits, and perhaps part of the reason they have received somewhat limited scholarly attention, is that they were unfinished at Donatello's death in 1466. Giorgio Vasari, the great 16th century artist and "historian," is explicit about this, and indeed the chasing in many parts is markedly more crude than in others. In his monograph, *Donatello*, Pope-Hennessy devotes significant space to sorting out which panels are by



Figure 3. Donatello, *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, San Lorenzo.

Donatello, which by his assistant Bertoldo, which his other assistant Bellano, which were modeled by Donatello but cast by assistants, and which may have been cast by Donatello but chased by assistants. Bennett and Wilkins seem to operate under the assumption that Donatello is responsible for all of the reliefs, although, puzzlingly, they do explicitly note Vasari's reference to their incompleteness at the time of his death. Where Pope-Hennessy explains the "crudeness" of certain figures by refusing to attribute them to the master, Bennett and Wilkins assume the reliefs' authenticity in this respect. Bennett and Wilkins assume that Donatello intended the "crudeness," contrasting his style to "the consummate and careful craftsmanship so important to most fifteenth-century Florentine artists and patrons...[in which]; the forms are finely finished and the effect is of elegance and refinement..." To them, Donatello's harshness (rather than a function of his assistants' ineptitude) is a reaction to the "decorative, emotionally restrained work created by most of his contemporaries" (17)¹⁷. Even highly regular objects such as spears (recall Uccello's *Battle of San Romano*), in the *St. Lawrence* relief become course, irregular, and curvy. The world of a Donatello scene such as this is not ordered, harmonious, or constructed with exactitude and precision. Even the architectural elements are not composed of perfectly congruous shapes and lines. The individual lines, circles, and elements of the walls and ceiling are uneven, as if they

were sketched or as if the whole space was imbued with a kind of holistic vibration. The architecture, as we will see, is subordinate to the narrative, so as the dramatic energy of the scene resonates it disrupts the spatial structure and the visual fabric themselves.

Bennett and Wilkins see Donatello much the way I do, as someone for whom space compositions are not independent abstractions, but instruments for expressive strength. Their comparison of Donatello's *Miracle of the Repentant Son* in Padua with Ghiberti's *Miracle of the Strozzi Boy* for the tomb of St. Zenobius exemplifies their attitude: "Ghiberti's approach was to simplify and clarify; his search was for symmetries and harmonies. Donatello moved in the opposite direction, toward complication, contrast, and variety. Ghiberti chose to understand Zenobius's act as a dignified, solemn, and timeless occasion. For Donatello, Anthony's miracle was a dramatic, emotional event taking place in an atmosphere of charged excitement" (167).

We find the same "charged excitement" in San Lorenzo. In the *Deposition*, the "rigid body of Christ forms a stable horizontal and the seated Virgin provides a corresponding vertical" (Bennett and Wilkins, 15). In the *St. Lawrence*, the long, central branding-hook bisects the frame horizontally, in contrast to the vertical bisection created by the ceiling beam and the upright soldier.

In addition to the formal composition and its central bracing cross ele-



Figure 4. Donatello,
Christ before Pilate and Caiaphas, San Lorenzo.

ment, the composition of the *St. Lawrence* sets up oppositions and juxtapositions between stasis and movement. In general, the figures are frozen, not mid-movement as in a candid snapshot, but as if posed. Bennett and Wilkins describe the effect as such that “an artist or his patron wished to stop all action, to put a pronounced emphasis on the emotion of grief” (16). Even the flames of the coals on which the saint will be martyred are powerful evocators of movement, yet the other martyr appears to lie still across the coals, without struggling.

Juxtaposed to these elements of stasis, there is a series of elements tied to movement and action. The angel at the far right, with graceful and billowing robes, contrasts sharply with the forcefully-paralyzed figures of *St. Lawrence* and his fellow martyr immediately adjacent. While the rest of the figures in the composition are frozen into the constructed space, two figures rupture that space: the angel on the right and the figure at the far left carrying away the saints clothes. A statically composed scene would not rupture its frame; only one whose action progresses oblivious to its formal constraints would disregard the formal limits set for it. How dutifully did Ghiberti observe the rules set by the quatrefoil frame in the North Doors¹⁸? Donatello’s juxtapositions of stasis and movements create a powerful, clenched tension. The central action, that of the executioner extending the branding hook, is

frozen at its apex: the hook has been extended in what must have been a powerful, decisive thrust. Then, that vertex of full extension is held in place, like a weightlifter squeezing and holding a repetition at the end of its range.

The *Christ Before Pilate and Caiaphas* panel contains the same narrative energy. In the *St. Lawrence*, there is a firmly constructed room that contains the action. But as we said before, even this belies its highly imperfect human construction. Furthermore, it is a simple, rectangular space. Donatello uses that space so loosely that the precise arrangement of the figures within that space remains somewhat unclear. In the *Pilate*, however, Donatello does employ a strong architectural structure, recalling the loggia¹⁹ of Ghiberti’s *Isaac*. There is a front stage space, two monumental arches—where in the *Descent into Limbo*, *Resurrection*, *Ascension*, and *Pentecost* the arches we two-dimensional, drawn onto the background—plus spaces above on the balcony and further into the distance behind the metal grilles.

The chaos of the crowds of figures almost overpower the narrative. The seated *Pilate* on the left faces the seated *Caiaphas* on the right, both with a passive *Christ* standing before them. The swirling chaos of the composition is reminiscent of Greek vase paintings of the Amazonomachy, or of battle scenes of antique sarcophagi. Soldiers and onlookers literally flow up out of the ground and the sides, even spilling across the temporal barrier that should exist in between the two scenes. If we contrast this form of figural arrangement with those in Ghiberti’s *Solomon* or *Joseph*, we see the difference in his attitude toward architectural elements. In the *Solomon*, Ghiberti takes the architectural structure to an extreme, creating arches within arches in a Russian-doll like repetition, almost ad infinitum. The scene takes places almost entirely in front of the architecture, yet the architectural space continues well behind the action space. These almost superfluous spatial creations,

unrelated to the narrative, exemplify Ghiberti’s priority of composition. In Donatello’s *Pilate*, there are no superfluous spatial areas. Figures occupy each space that he creates, even the seemingly gratuitous balcony. In most of Ghiberti’s panels, *effetti* and figural groupings, even if they inhabit the same plane of space, as in the *Isaac* or *Joseph*, have spatial buffers between them²⁰. The *David* and *Joshua* panels are the only panels in which there is a level of narrative and figural chaos comparable to Donatello’s *Pilate* panel. But even in those panels, the figures are almost all obediently vertical and are crowded *into* the panel, rather than bursting out of or *into* the panel, as in the *Pilate*.

Timothy Verdon breaks down the “spatial novelty” of the San Lorenzo pulpits into three categories: 1) The creation of real spatial depth, most prominent in the *Holy Women at the Sepulchre*, 2) The spillover of figures outside the frame, most prominent in the *Pilate* but also in the *Agony in the Garden* and the *Descent into Limbo*, and 3) The spillover of figures behind and into the frame, most prominent in the *Pilate*, the *Lamentation*, and the *Descent into Limbo*. Verdon attributes the origin of this “spatial novelty” to Donatello’s adaptation of theatrical scenes and special effects. Regardless of where Donatello drew his inspiration, he employs these devices to great effect. However, the theatrical parallel provides an interesting hypothesis for why Donatello would choose to depict such unorthodox moments in the Biblical stories, and with such unorthodox compositions²¹. Verdon offers a compelling lead, in his connecting the



Figure 5. Donatello,
Raising of Drusiana, San Lorenzo.

composition of the *Ascension* scene, in which Christ's feet atypically touch the earthly ground, to the necessity of that moment's inclusion in a theatrical production. That is, in order to depict Christ's rising to heaven on stage, he would have to begin with his feet on the stage.

Similarly, choreographed theatrical scenes could reach the climaxes of harmonic arrangements that we see in panels like Ghiberti's *Solomon*. Yet theatrical scenes would have to include moments in their representation (unlike painting or other sculptural relief) where figures are half on stage and half off, or where the arrangement of the actors on stage is somewhat chaotic or evolving as they move toward their choreographed positions. Seeing such moments on stage could have provided the source for Donatello's chaos-imbued designs.

Conclusion

In more than just his bronze reliefs, Donatello allows his narratives to drive his compositions. In his roundel of the *Ascension of John* in the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo, the architectural forms are distorted, almost warped. They serve only as props to the miracle of the Ascension. The figures, and the architecture in which they stand, represent a disordered but nonetheless focused thrust up and further up, as John, with only his toes still resting on the house, lifts up into the sky. Similarly, in the *Raising of Drusiana* (Figure 5) in the same sacristy, the architectural space is somewhat unclear. The central arches are marked off from the side walls with a lighter sepia color, but it is actually not clear whether they lie in the very back of the architectural space, or

whether they bisect it, coming forward very close to Drusiana in the center. Either way, the architectural constructions and the surrounding figures in white encircle the central Drusiana in a sort of confused ring. Again they become props to the focusing of attention on narrative. In this case the only figure really relevant to the narrative expression is Drusiana, who is set off spatially and coloristically (with her highly contrasting black robes).

Ghiberti would not have tolerated the ambiguity of the architectural space in the *Drusiana*, or the distorted space in the *Ascension of John*. Drusiana, intensely isolated in black in the center of an otherwise markedly light composition, can serve as a fitting symbol of the degree to which Donatello moulds his composition to serve his narrative and expressive goals.

Notes

1. Italian term for the 15th century. [Ed.]
2. The Baptisery lies directly in front of the main doors of Florence's cathedral. [Ed.]
3. At least that which is extant. In the essay discussed below, by John Pope-Hennessy, he not only claims that Ghiberti's artistic production extends far beyond that which is extant, by that he produced many designs for works of art then executed by other artists.
4. It was Michelangelo's purported exclamation upon first seeing Ghiberti's second set of doors that led to their "Gates of Paradise" nomenclature.
5. I will refer to the Ghiberti's Doors with this shorthand. When referring to the North Doors, I will be explicit.
6. All were linked under the umbrella "muse" of *disegno* (design, or drawing) which was the base for all the arts and crafts.
7. Specifically, single-point linear perspective is a composition principle that solves the problem of representing a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface plane. In linear perspectives, all "parallel" lines converge at a single point on the horizon; imagine the way the lines of a square-tiled floor pattern are slanted as they lead to a convergence point. The ceiling of Donatello's *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* (Figure 3) provides a simplified example of this.
8. San Lorenzo is one of Florence's largest churches. It was the family church of the Medici, designed by Brunelleschi, and decorated by Lippi, Donatello, Bronzino, and others.
9. Italian term for "masterpieces." [Ed.]
10. In justification of this choice of comparison, I point the reader to several notes of history:
 - 1) Donatello is listed as working in Ghiberti's workshop around 1407 (Krautheimer 109)
 - 2) As early as the 1410s, Donatello and Ghiberti were sculpting competing monumental statuary for Orsanmichele: Donatello's *Saint Mark* (1411-1414) and *Saint George* (1417) and Ghiberti's *Saint John the Baptist* (1412-1416) and *Saint Matthew* (1419-1422).
 - 3) In the 1420s, when the city of Siena sought Florentine artists to contribute bronze relief panels for the new Baptismal font, it selected Ghiberti and Donatello.
 - 4) Even outside of sculpture, the two artists were competing. Both contributed stained-glass roundels for the Duomo: Ghiberti the *Assumption*, the *Presentation in the Temple*, the *Agony in the Garden*, and the *Resurrection* and Donatello the *Coronation of the Virgin*.
 - 5) They even shared a star pupil, Michelozzo, who passed from Ghiberti's workshop directly to Donatello's in 1424.
11. Italian term literally translated as "effect." In this context, it refers to the individual narrative episodes in Ghiberti's panels. [Ed.]
12. Really, this only applies to nine of the panels, as the *Solomon* contains only one *effetto*.
13. A technique, possibly invented by Donatello and first seen in the relief for the base of his Saint George, in which a sculptural relief is so low as to be almost no more than an etching.
14. Like much of Krautheimer's analyses, this depends on the accuracy of his chronology of the panels.

15. E.G. Pope-Hennessy's focus on the authenticity and authorship of the panels and parts of the panels or Verdon's focus on the influence of contemporary theatre on Donatello's composition style.
16. A second problem is that of the reliefs' origin and intention. Bennett and Wilkins and Pope-Hennessy accept the recent (1972) conclusions of Herzner that there was to be only one pulpit (now the right) and that the panels now on the left pulpit were intended for Cosimo II Vecchio's tomb. As we are dealing with issues of internal composition, and not with the rhetorical relationship between the panels and their function as a pulpit, nor with their rhetorical relationship to their specific location in San Lorenzo, the question of the intended function of the reliefs does not bear heavily on my analysis.
17. Under most hypotheses, the reliefs would have been at least modeled or designed by Donatello. Even if some of the panels were in fact completed by assistants, the composition of the scenes would not change, so I see no interference with my analysis. Furthermore, I am inclined to believe that Donatello, a sculptor able to produce such idiosyncratic sculptures as the wooden *Mary Magdalen* now in the Museo dell'Opera Del Duomo or the *St. Jerome* in Faenza, would be willing to take significant liberties, at the end of his career, in the San Lorenzo reliefs. The coarse modeling of figures like St. Lawrence or those in the *Agony in the Garden* seem well within Donatello's range. Furthermore, Donatello's Padua panels, like the *Miracle of the Repentant Son*, were certainly completed by him and use this rougher, course style.
18. See the *Resurrection*.
19. An open-aired gallery or arcade, usually composed of arches. [Ed.]
20. Recall the spatial buffer around Jesus, of which Goethe was so fond, in Leonardo's *Last Supper*.
21. Bennett and Wilkins note such choices as his emphasis of grief, as opposed to the more traditional joy, in the *Resurrection* (24-25).

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