

## Michelangelo's David



Marble, 1501-04, Height 5.16 m, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence (This photo from the Cast Courts at the Victoria and Albert Museum)

I was not able to study the original statue in Florence but I visited the Cast Courts at the Victoria and Albert Museum to see the copy that is held there.

The first thing that strikes you about this statue is its sheer scale, it must be nearly 3 times life size. It is very imposing as you approach it.

The detail on the statue is extremely well carved, the veins on the right arm, the tendons on the hands and the musculature are all rendered in fine detail, as can be seen in the photo on the right

The statue depicts a naked young man holding one end of a sling in his left hand while the right hand holds the other end of the sling containing the stone. The left arm is bent at the elbow whereas the right arm is held straight down the side of the body. The body is in the typical contrapposto pose with the left leg lifting slightly, the torso twisting slightly and the head looking to one side.



The face is a study of intense concentration with a furrowed brow conveying a sense of apprehension or anxiety. The body is portrayed as poised for action, you could imagine David being ready to move at any moment.

The facial features are portrayed in fine detail with a narrow mouth flared nostrils adding to the sense of anticipation. The eyes are well detailed with carved pupils. It does seem as though the eyes may be looking in slightly different directions. The delicate features of the face emphasise the youthful nature of the subject. The anatomical detail in the sculpture is striking and the overall impression is of a lithe, athletic body.



In most instances when artists have portrayed David, they have done so after he has defeated Goliath and they show him in a victorious pose. Michelangelo chose to portray David before the battle and his portrayal of concentration, apprehension and athletic stance is quite remarkable. Add to this the sheer scale of the sculpture and it is hugely imposing.

Hughes and Elam in Oxford Art Online describe the "heroic male nude in which the entire emotional charge is carried by the articulation and twist of the body and limbs against the head". Coughlan (1966 p91) describes the statue as "With the head of a beautiful Apollo and the body of a young Hercules, he is an apotheosis of all the most heroic qualities in all young heroes, a figure human in form but superhuman in his perfection of mind, body and soul".

The Art Encyclopaedia comments on the composition as being political "by dispensing with the usual bloody sword and gruesome severed head, Michelangelo is emphasizing the mental rather than physical nature of David's victory".

The Accademia website adds "The slingshot he carries over his shoulder is almost invisible, emphasizing that David's victory was one of cleverness, not sheer force".

On the Khan Academy website Zucker and Harris write that "the biblical figure of David was special to the citizens of Florence—he symbolized the liberty and freedom of their republican ideals, which were threatened at various points in the fifteenth century by the Medici family and others"

Lavin (1993 p58) considers that "the sculpture played a role in Florentine, indeed in European, political history no less significant than its role in the history of art – the first colossal freestanding nude figure carved in marble since antiquity was also the first colossal freestanding public monument conceived in the name of liberty".

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ZUCKER and HARRIS

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