INTRODUCTION

Michelangelo's *David* (see frontispiece) is so well known both as a work of art and as an object of popular culture that it provides a particular challenge for anyone attempting to see through the accretions of its long history – both critical and popular – to the power that this statue must have exerted on its viewers when it was placed at the entrance to the Palazzo della Signoria, the city hall of Florence, in May 1504. The astonishing visual impact of the statue – a combination of its size, its unabashed and sensually charged presentation of the naked male body, its heroic idealization of that body, and its canonic role in our modern history of art – has, however, obscured its complex narrative by absorbing the attention of historians and tourists alike, as if it were the only notable work of public sculpture created in Florence at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Indeed, even today the *David*, in the form of Luigi Arrighetti's copy that replaced it in the Piazza della Signoria in 1910 after the removal of the original in 1873 to the Accademia for reasons of preservation,[1] still remains the preeminent image of the city – with the possible exception of Brunelleschi's dome for the Cathedral. Even though modern fascination with the original *David* is considerable, for long periods of the statue's existence it was barely mentioned in guides to Florence and certainly did not have the visibility in the history of Florentine art that it has today. The beginnings of our modern fascination with the *David* began in the late 1860s when Florence hoped that it would become the permanent capital of a united republic of Italy; the statue's genesis as a symbol for republican Florentines at the beginning of the sixteenth century

made it an appropriate historical symbol for the emerging new country. The 400th anniversary of Michelangelo's birth in 1875 brought further attention to the statue, although another 35 years elapsed before Arrighetti's copy replaced Michelangelo's original before the Palazzo della Signoria. After World War II and the defeat of Fascism and Nazism in Europe, a new generation of historians trained in the crucible of the war years saw Renaissance Florence with its constitution and putative republican government as a paradigm for American and European opposition to totalitarian regimes.[2] The recent evolution of gender studies, especially queer studies, has also opened new avenues for exploration of the meaning of the statue, some that had earlier been implicit in writings by English critics of the nineteenth century but that had never been openly discussed. And, of course, with the explosion of tourism in Florence after World War II and the increasing ease of and demand for photographic and three-dimensional images, the *David* became the most frequently reproduced and well-known of the city's many artistic accomplishments, probably in large part because of the statue's fluid boundaries between a highly charged eroticism and a chilly case study for an historical period that few knew but virtually all considered – rightly or wrongly – a high point in the history of western civilization: the Renaissance. In September 2004, with the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the dedication of the statue and with the controversies surrounding its cleaning as part of that commemorative event, the *David* again reasserted its role as a cultural symbol for the city of Florence, especially given its association with the governing center of the commune, the Palazzo della Signoria. Yet it still remains curiously disembodied from the social, political, and artistic matrix that helped to shape it, even though it was created at one of the most critical periods in Florence's extraordinarily rich history.

The remarkable sculptural achievements embodied in the *David* have also served to create a caesura in the history of Renaissance sculpture, declaring the arrival of a new genius whose shadow stretched so profoundly over the arts of the sixteenth century that it essentially erased the historical events from which the statue evolved, thereby significantly clouding our understanding of its meaning. Michelangelo himself helped to foster such a reading when, in the early 1550s, he provided his biographer, Ascanio Condivi, with carefully constructed information that elided his sculptural training and presented him as a self-taught genius with virtually no connection or debt to sculptors prominent in Florence during his youth and years of training. Ever since, historians have been trying to disentangle fact from fiction and to suggest how even certain of the fictions themselves unintentionally reveal the unrecorded details of Michelangelo's life and work.[3]

Michelangelo Buonarroti was born in 1475 in Caprese, a village outside of Florence where his father, Ludovico, was serving in the political post of Podestà, or governor, overseeing the town for the Florentine state. The infant

Michelangelo was sent to nearby Settignano to a wet nurse and may not have returned to his father's house until he was a young boy. Although information about Michelangelo's early years is nonexistent, his father apparently intended that the boy would train for a professional career in Florence; Ludovico thus sent him to school to learn reading and writing when he was about ten. Michelangelo had other ideas, however. If we are to believe Condivi's 1553 biography, Ludovico responded with anger and beatings to his son's desire to become an artist, although he finally relented and by 1487 had apprenticed Michelangelo to the prominent Florentine painter Domenico Ghirlandaio.[4] At that time Michelangelo, then twelve years old, was recorded as a runner for the master painter, a not unusual, if menial, task for a new trainee in an artistic workshop. It is not surprising that Lodovico, a somewhat impoverished member of an established and respected Florentine family, found such work and the manual labor of an artistic shop demeaning. He probably hoped that Michelangelo would either come to his senses or fail in his training and thus return to the career that his father had chosen for him.

The silence shrouding Michelangelo's early training as a sculptor may be due to his own later awareness of the socially inferior role of the artist as craftsman. We know that throughout his life Michelangelo arranged very advantageous contracts with his patrons (including the one for the *David*), that he underscored his family's ties to the Counts of Canosa, that he was proud of having what was at the time a socially demarcating and patrician surname, that he had a keen sense of money as a measure of social position, and that he died an extraordinarily rich man.[5] Condivi makes no comment at all about the practical aspects of Michelangelo's sculptural training, although he does briefly mention the artist's time in Ghirlandaio's workshop.[6] Instead of naming a master sculptor's shop as the locus of Michelangelo's training in stone carving (the most obvious being those of Benedetto da Maiano and Andrea Ferrucci), Condivi describes a situation in which Michelangelo was discovered by Lorenzo the Magnificent and set to work in what has come to be known as the Medici Garden, an artistic studio of sorts and the apparent source of decorative materials for the Medici Palace. This workshop was housed in a walled garden and loggia bordering the west side of the Piazza San Marco, a space still existing in Florence's urban landscape. The sculptor Bertoldo di Giovanni, known particularly for his work in bronze, oversaw the work carried out there by both sculptors and painters, although what exactly his role was is still uncertain.[7]

A number of other artists whose work has come to define the Florentine Renaissance at one time or another worked in the Medici Garden as well, including Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci. In his life of the sculptor Pietro Torrigiano, Vasari lists Giovan Francesco Rustici, Pietro Torrigiano, Francesco Granacci, Niccolò Soggi, Lorenzo di Credi, Giuliano Bugiardini, Baccio da Montelupo, and Andrea Sansovino as artists who had spent time there.[8] The

1. Michelangelo, *Battle of the Centaurs and Lapiths*, c. 1492, marble, 84.5 × 90.5 cm, Florence, Casa Buonarroti, Inv. 194 (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)

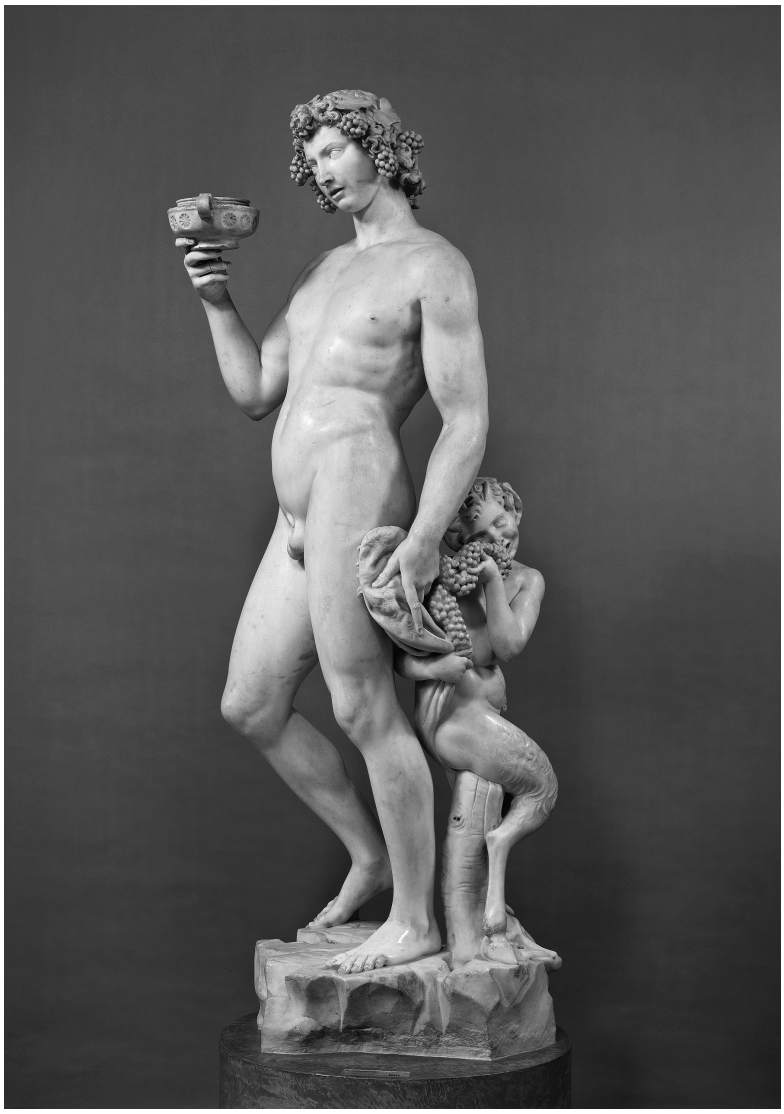
real master of the shop was, according to Condivi, Lorenzo the Magnificent, the head of the Medici family, under whose patronage the garden workshop flourished. Lorenzo's appreciative comment about Michelangelo's first essay in marble sculpture – undertaken, if we are to believe Condivi, in the garden school – apparently set the sculptor on his career. Lorenzo jokingly told Michelangelo, then about fifteen years old, that his copy of an antique faun's mask was very good, but that, contrary to the way in which Michelangelo had represented the gnarled faun, old men did not have all their teeth. As soon as Lorenzo left the garden, the teenaged sculptor reportedly knocked out some of the faun's teeth and eagerly awaited the "master's" return – a subsequent moment in the history of Michelangelo's training that Condivi fails to record, leading one to wonder if the whole story is a fabrication, although one that Michelangelo cherished.[9]

During his time under Lorenzo's care, Michelangelo produced a number of small marble sculptures, only one of which is extant and certainly attributable to him. The *Battle of the Centaurs* (Figure 1) is a modestly scaled work in marble, the subject of which – according to Condivi – was suggested by Angelo Poliziano, a philosopher-teacher in the employ of the Medici. Like the mythic

faun's mask, the *Battle* is a knock-off of the antique. Although it would not now be mistaken as a work from antiquity, in c. 1492 it was certainly meant to pass for an actual work of Roman sculpture, like Michelangelo's deliberately counterfeited and now-lost *Sleeping Cupid* or the faun's mask.[10] It is good to keep in mind that Michelangelo's training in what we might today think of as forgery defined his carving, if not his thinking, in very particular ways for the remainder of his life. Michelangelo was apparently quite proud of his ability to reproduce the antique, since he carefully inserted his technical accomplishments in reproduction into Condivi's narrative of his early work.

With Lorenzo the Magnificent's death in 1492, Michelangelo's career seems to have stalled. Lorenzo's son Piero kept him on as a family retainer, although he never commissioned anything more than a snowman from the artist – this in 1494 during one of the infrequent and therefore notable snowfalls in Florence. Piero as patron has melted out of art historical remembrance almost as completely as Michelangelo's snowman, an analogy perhaps intended by Condivi and Michelangelo, since Piero was exiled from Florence in the year of the snowstorm. Michelangelo, however, continued to live and work under the Medici employ until just before Piero's ouster, so he must have been working at something. There is a curious passage in Condivi's *Life* where the biographer describes the artist as so overwrought by Lorenzo the Magnificent's death that he bought for himself a block of marble out of which he carved a Hercules.[11] Despite the unlikelihood of a seventeen-year-old boy being able to afford a block of marble large enough for a life-size figure,[12] we know that Michelangelo made legal claim to the *Hercules* in 1495, so he must have had credible property rights to the statue. What is important here is that Michelangelo apparently continued to work for Piero, that the *Hercules* was carved within the Medici environs, and that it was part of the Medici estate under control of the Florentine government after the Medici were expelled in 1494. Similar to Michelangelo's earlier work, the *Hercules* must have looked deceptively like a work of ancient sculpture.[13] As we shall see, however, the *Hercules* was far from a simple reference to the antique but was deeply implicated in the symbolic visual propaganda used both by the Medici and by the Republic. It was, therefore, an early example of Michelangelo's involvement with highly charged and contested political imagery.

Seeing political storm clouds gathering in Florence, Michelangelo left the city in 1494, first going – according to legend – briefly to Venice and then settling in Bologna, where he was supported by Gianfrancesco Aldovrandi, a member of the governing Council of Sixteen in that city. There Michelangelo added finishing figural elements to the tomb of St. Dominic that had recently been enlarged by Niccolò dell'Arca but had been left incomplete at Niccolò's death in 1494, shortly before Michelangelo arrived in the city. From Bologna Michelangelo went to Rome, where he is recorded in 1496 and where he was



2. Michelangelo, *Bacchus*, 1496–1497, marble, 195 cm h. (209 cm with the base), Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Inv. S.10 (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)

associated with members of a well-established Florentine community there, as well as with prominent members of the papal Curia. When he returned to Florence in 1501 to seek the commission for the *David*, he was 26 years old, a mature age for a sculptor during this period. His extended stay in Rome had supported and amplified his early training in classical antiquities, and his successes in the papal city must have encouraged him to demonstrate his abilities in his hometown, notorious for its critical artistic environment. Michelangelo's proven Roman accomplishments – the *Bacchus* (1496–1497; Figure 2) with its reeling torqued pose, its barely muscled soft, fluid surfaces implying a sexual

heat brought about by the wine that the god drinks, and the Roman *Pietà* (1498–1499; Figure 46) with its complex (and gratuitous) bunching of drapery, endlessly curvilinear hem, and extraordinary polish – would have led his fellow Florentines to look favorably on his work, even though, as he would have us believe, he had not had a conventional sculptural training in his native city. The *David*, an impressive project for a public space, proved to be the perfect vehicle to announce his presence in a definitive manner to the Florentine artistic and patronage communities after his long absence from the city.

Michelangelo's palpable success in bringing a heroic political symbol out of the block of stone he was awarded in 1501 has significantly influenced the way the colossal statue is now understood. The *David* has largely appeared as a singular work unmediated by any possible relationships with other sculpture of the period – including Michelangelo's own. Although often referenced to the renewal of the Florentine Republic after the expulsion of the Medici in 1494, and to the Republic's need for powerful political imagery, discussions of the statue have not adequately considered how the locations for which it was commissioned and in which it was ultimately placed might have been integral to the meaning of the *David* for contemporary viewers. With the 500th anniversary of the completion of the *David* recently celebrated, it seems appropriate also to review – based on the documents, contemporary sources, and the statue's artistic, social, and political contexts – what we know of the history of the statue since Michelangelo was given the commission in 1501 and of the records of its restoration in the nineteenth century.

Although it is useful to see the *David* as part of Michelangelo's own sculptural career and as part of the evolution of his style, the lens onto his creative activity can be opened a bit wider to discern certain of his strategies for conveying meaning, perhaps even for a deliberately elusive and polyvalent structuring of meaning. The *David* seems so forthright in its nakedness that it is easy to overlook what the figure might be hiding. Yet it is precisely in Michelangelo's presentation of the physical characteristics of the figure that meaning for the statue may be discerned. In fact, a close reading of the physical forms of the completed figure suggests that understanding the statue simply as a representation of David is too limited. Paradoxically, the blatancy and apparent straightforwardness of the naked form reveals subtle complexities in Michelangelo's thinking and in the iconography of visual propaganda of his time. Thus, Chapter 2 presents possible identifications for the statue in addition to David, as well as the need to see the slippages in the figure's iconography as a deliberate strategy to enhance its power as a political symbol.

I suggest in Chapters 3 and 4 that, despite its dominating role in the history of western visual culture, the *David* was really just a part – albeit a colossal one, as the documentary terminology for the sculpture itself would have it – of a much larger program of sculptural decoration at the Cathedral of Florence

and at the Palazzo della Signoria that extended not just back in time (as others have noted) but also forward in time as well. Underlying this approach is my belief that the *David* was not just a discrete commission that reveals its meaning simply by close scrutiny of its form and documentary history. Rather, I see it as part of a network of artistic commissions for the two buildings with which it was most intimately associated. Ordered for the Cathedral and subsequently placed at the main portal to Florence's seat of government, the statue initiated an impressive number of sculptural commissions for the Cathedral, the Baptistry, and the Piazza della Signoria at the beginning of the sixteenth century that were extraordinary in number and importance, raising questions about why such an astonishing concentration of sculptural projects occurred at that time and why the *David* has eclipsed for modern viewers any perception of the quality of the statue's numerous and quite stunning companions. It is insufficient, therefore, to limit discussion to the *David* itself, regardless of how informative such a specific focus might be.

Like the Palazzo della Signoria, the Cathedral was a civic space and thus often at the center of a long and contested history of rival factions attempting to control Florentine political life. When seen as an aggregate rather than as individual works, the sculpture projected and carved for the Cathedral at the beginning of the sixteenth century carries with it the same powerful propaganda value as works for the Palazzo della Signoria. This should come as no surprise since the same men – or families – who held public office at the Palazzo della Signoria also served on building committees at the Cathedral and the Baptistry, and since competition between guilds responsible for building programs at the sites had been a central aspect of their patronage of religious architecture and its decoration in Florence for well over two centuries before the *David* was commissioned. Since 1331 the Consuls of the Wool Guild (the Arte della Lana) had had supervisory responsibility for structural and decorative projects at the Cathedral. Although the Wool Guild acted administratively as overseer of projects and funding, with the Opera (the Cathedral workshop administration) as its practical arm, the actual monies for work at the Cathedral were substantially provided by the Florentine state from taxes. Thus, commissions at the Cathedral must be seen not simply within a narrowly conceived religious context but also as works that were driven as much by the propagandistic needs of the state as by those of the religion that they served. Resituating the *David* into this Cathedral context – including the remembered history of related earlier commissions there – again opens the possibility for greater understanding of how the statue might have been perceived in its own day.

At the Palazzo della Signoria where it was placed in 1504, the *David* must have been seen as part of a continually evolving yet carefully focused Florentine civic iconography. The original position of the statue high on a base at the south end of the *ringhiera* – the platform extending the length of the façade of

the Palazzo – gave it a distinct physical space and a role as a "portal guardian," a function that had widespread significance, as we shall see in Chapter 4.[14] Indeed, the *David* guarded the liminal space of entrance into the halls of the Florentine government, thus suggesting that it assumed a protective role for governors of the renewed Republic. For the Priors and the *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* (literally "Standard Bearer of Justice" or chief magistrate of the Signoria) and for the Consuls within the building, as well as for the population at large who saw it from without, the statue would have been an image of protection and of state security. As a contributing element of the rich iconographical program being elaborated at this time at the Cathedral and the town hall, the *David* can only be understood within the larger contexts of the sites for which it was originally intended and in which it was subsequently placed. Extending out from the official nature of these two civic locations to the lived experience of the people in the street, the gigantic image of the *David* can also be seen in relation to colossal festival imagery, itself part of the civic experience of Florentines of this period. Indeed the very porousness of the boundaries between official and popular imagery during this time supports an interpretive integration of political principle with daily practice.

One of the ironies of the history of the *David* is that it lost its original position in front of the town hall shortly after Florence lost the position it had held very briefly from 1865–1870 as the capital of a nascent national state of Italy. With the emergence of the nation in 1871, Rome became the capital of the country. A cartoon that appeared in 1872 just prior to the removal of the *David* to the Accademia (Figure 3) shows an imprisoned David, punished for having failed his city, anxious to break the confinement of his moving crate. In this cartoon the Florentines seem to be doing what they had done for centuries: removing, humiliating, or damaging miracle-working images that had not produced the desired results on cue. Despite the disappearance of the *David* from its very public place at the entrance to the Palazzo della Signoria, the image was not completely removed from public view, although its original political significance was virtually unnoticeable. A bronze copy by Clemente Papi, made in 1866 at the first flush of Florentine pride in being the capital of the new nation, was, on the fourth centennial of Michelangelo's birth in 1875, placed on the Piazzale Michelangelo. There it still stands, exiled from the political center of the city to its fashionable though isolated periphery, where it functions as a monument to the artist's renown and the city's artistic patrimony rather than as any referent to a republican ideal, either of the early sixteenth or the latter part of the nineteenth centuries.[15]

After the *David* was placed in the Accademia in 1873, the desiccated classicism and artificial isolation of its new architectural setting served further to undermine the statue's original meaning. Placed in an apsidal space at the intersection of a long nave-like approach and a transept-like cross axis, the

3. Cartoon from 1872 showing the *David* in a protective box (image in the public domain)

statue is now framed, or indeed sanctified, as divine art – specifically art within the classical tradition that has, until recently, so defined Renaissance art. In its new location the *David* is removed definitively from the lived, civic role for which it was intended. At its completion in 1504 the *David* had given Florence an image that claimed metaphorically that the renewed Republic – then only ten years old – was unmatched in its power and magnificence. With the nudity alone, a sure reference in contemporary terms to classical antiquity, the *David* declared Florence to be a republic comparable to that of ancient Rome, where such heroic sculptural imagery had decorated urban spaces. Late medieval writers and political theorists had repeatedly made this comparison and had even claimed that Florence had been founded by Roman troops during the period of the Roman Republic, a history that was elaborated upon at