Michelangelo's David-Apollo

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
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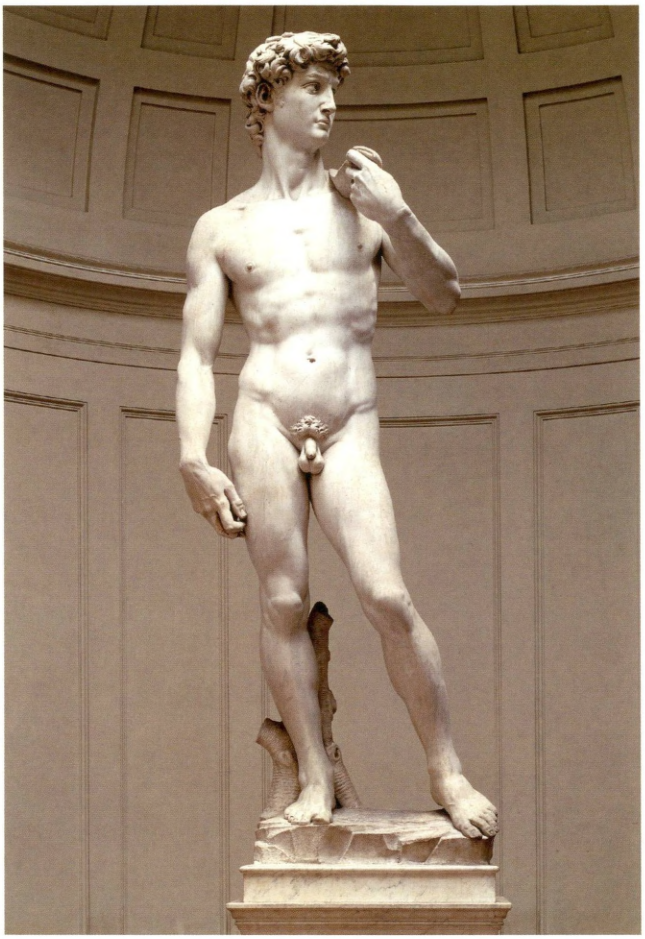
1 Giorgio Vasari, *Michelangelo Buonarroti*, woodcut, from *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori* (Florence, 1568). National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, Gift of E. J. Rousuck



2 Michelangelo, *David*, 1501–1504, marble, h. 516 cm (including base). Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence

The loan of Michelangelo's *David-Apollo* (COVER) from the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, to the National Gallery of Art opens the Year of Italian Culture, 2013. This rare marble statue visited the Gallery once before, more than sixty years ago, to reaffirm the friendship and cultural ties that link the peoples of Italy and the United States. Its installation here in 1949 coincided with Harry Truman's inaugural reception.

The ideal of the multitalented Renaissance man came to life in Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), whose achievements in sculpture, painting, architecture, and poetry are legendary (FIG. 1). The subject of this statue, like its form, is unresolved. In 1550 Michelangelo's biographer Giorgio Vasari described the figure as "an Apollo who draws an arrow from his quiver," but a 1553 inventory of the collection of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici calls it "an incomplete David by Buonarroti." By then it had entered the Palazzo Vecchio (the seat of government in Florence), joining several earlier sculptures of the biblical giant-killer David, a favorite Florentine symbol of resistance to tyranny. Michelangelo's colossal marble *David*, executed from 1501 to 1504 when he was still in his twenties (FIG. 2), stood as a guardian at the entrance, holding a sling over his shoulder. The National Gallery of Art owns a fifteenth-century marble David, with the head of Goliath at his feet, made for the Martelli family of Florence (FIG. 3).

In the *David-Apollo*, the undefined form below the right foot plays a key role in the composition. It raises the foot, so that the knee bends and the hips and shoulders shift into a twisting movement, with the left arm reaching across the chest and the face turning in the opposite direction. This graceful spiraling pose, called *serpentinata* (serpentine), invites viewers to move around the figure and admire it from every angle. Such poses grew increasingly artificial in the work of later sixteenth-century artists who emulated Michelangelo by striving for a figure style that surpassed nature in power or elegance. An example at the Gallery is the Venus wringing out her wet hair in a fountain (FIG. 4). That bronze statue comes from the circle of Giovanni Bologna (1529–1608), the most celebrated sixteenth-century Florentine sculptor after Michelangelo.

Michelangelo carved the *David-Apollo* for Baccio Valori, who was appointed governor of Florence in 1530 after the Medici and their imperial allies had crushed a

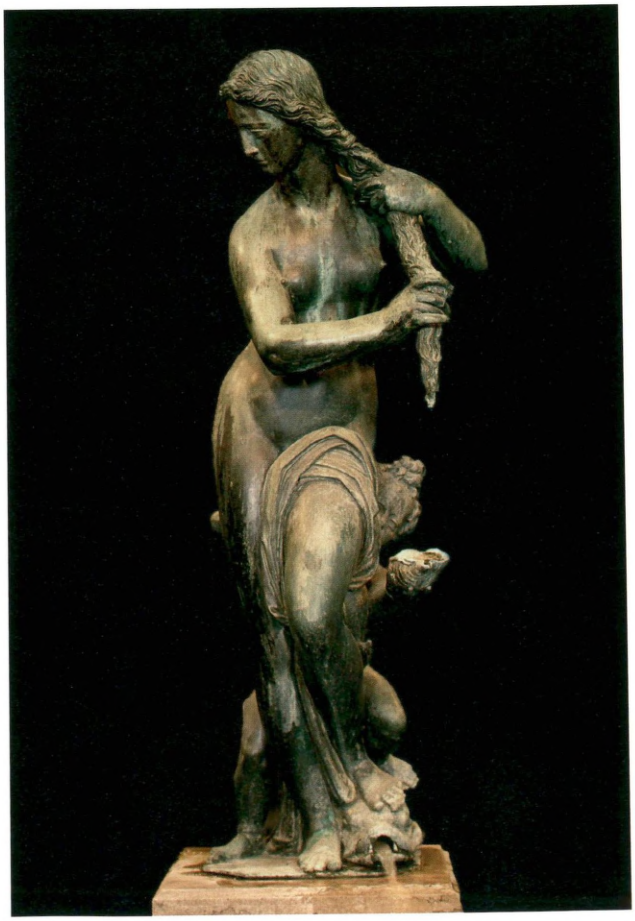
resurgence of the republic. Having fought on the republican side, Michelangelo needed to make peace with the Medici and sought to please their henchman through this work. He brought the figure tantalizingly close to completion before leaving Florence, never to return, after the death of Pope Clement VII, his Medici patron and protector, in 1534. Valori, who later joined a failed rebellion against the Medici, was executed in 1537, and Duke Cosimo I de' Medici took possession of the statue.

The *David-Apollo* and Michelangelo's Unfinished Works

This statue embodies a highly personal aspect of Michelangelo's work—his habit of leaving sculptures unfinished (*non-finito*). The results stimulate the imagination, as figures seem to emerge from the rough marble. The reasons for the practice have been much discussed. Michelangelo regularly took on more work than he could realistically complete, often carving several figures simultaneously. He apparently enjoyed the look of forms taking shape, born from the stone he loved. But the number of unfinished sculptures also suggests that he sensed a finished work would not live up to his idea, exalted and constantly changing. In one poem he referred to "the hand obedient to the mind" that confronts the near-impossible task of liberating the artist's conception from the stone.

Viewers can trace stages of execution through the marks of different tools: a point chisel to rough out forms, as on the back and tree stump (FIG. 5), and claw chisels of various sizes to refine them, up to the comparatively smoother surfaces of the flesh. In less finished works by Michelangelo, such as the captives begun for the tomb of Pope Julius II (FIG. 6), the visible process of bringing forth vital forms from inert material has

3 Bernardo or Antonio Rossellino, *The David of the Casa Martelli*, c. 1461/1479, marble, 164.6 × 50.4 × 42.4 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection (Gallery G-19)



4 Follower of Giovanni Bologna, *Venus and Cupid*, c. 1575/1580, bronze, h. 124.5 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of John and Henrietta Goelet, in memory of Thomas Goelet, and Patrons' Permanent Fund (Gallery G-10)

5 Michelangelo, *David-Apollo* (side view), c. 1530

6 Michelangelo, *Awakening Captive*, c. 1530/1532, marble, h. 267 cm. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence

7 Auguste Rodin, *Woman and Child* (originally *Première Impression d'Amour*), model c. 1885, carved c. 1900–1901, marble, overall 43.2 × 44.4 × 33.1 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mrs. John W. Simpson (Gallery G-3)

evoked for some the work of God as described in the book of Genesis. This expression of the artist's creative struggle also impressed the romantic imagination of the nineteenth century and inspired Auguste Rodin in particular. In his marble works, smoothly finished figures emerge as if in deliberate contrast to their massive, chisel-marked blocks (FIG. 7).

While the *David-Apollo* is nearly completed, the flesh areas remain veiled by a fine network of the claw-chisel marks that defined the shapes of the limbs. The roughed-out eyes with their heavy lids enhance the impression of a figure who moves in his sleep. Least finished are the supporting tree trunk and the elements that would define the subject: the rectangle on his back that could become Apollo's quiver or David's sling, and the form under his right foot that could be a stone or the head of the vanquished Goliath (see FIG. 5). The *David-Apollo* dates to a time when Michelangelo was torn between his loyalty to the republic and his long devotion to the Medici family that had obliterated it. Consciously or not, he may have sought to put off the final choice between a beautiful but authoritarian pagan god and the young biblical tyrant-slayer, a hero of the lost republic.

Under the auspices of the President of the Italian Republic, the presentation of *Michelangelo's David-Apollo* inaugurates *2013—The Year of Italian Culture*, organized by The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Embassy of Italy in Washington, in collaboration with the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali and with the support of the Corporate Ambassadors Intesa Sanpaolo and Eni.

The presentation has been organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Embassy of Italy in Washington, the Soprintendenza Speciale per il Patrimonio Storico, Artistico ed Etnoantropologico e per il Polo Museale della città di Firenze, and the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.

2013 ANNO DELLA CULTURA ITALIANA
YEAR OF ITALIAN CULTURE

COVER Michelangelo, *David-Apollo*, c. 1530, marble, 146 × 46 × 53 cm. Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo Museale Fiorentino

PHOTO CREDITS figs. 2, 6, cover: Scala / Art Resource, NY; fig. 5: The Bridgeman Art Library