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Book Review of A. Victor Coonin, *From Marble to Flesh: The Biography of Michelangelo's David*

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Lippi's *Adoration* and its function within the decorative scheme of the Medici Chapel presents compelling, thoughtful arguments that offer a fresh interpretation of this altarpiece and its patronage. She proposes an innovative interpretative lens through which to examine female patronage and by which to challenge and balance art historical trends in scholarship.



A. Victor Coonin, *From Marble to Flesh: The Biography of Michelangelo's David* (Florence: The Florentine Press, 2014). 272 pp.; 97 color ill., 24 b/w ill.; €25.00

Reviewed by Sandra Cheng

"What makes an icon?" is the underlying question of A. Victor Coonin's book dedicated to Michelangelo's statue of *David*. The larger-than-life-size *David* (Fig. 1) has a status akin to Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. Its image, whether whole or fragmented, is instantaneously recognizable, making it difficult to look at it afresh, but Coonin manages to reflect on well-trodden ground in a captivating manner. This study demonstrates how the *David* is more than an embodiment of masculinity but a statue imbued with multi-faceted symbolism that continues to resonate with viewers today.

To better understand the iconic status of the *David*, Coonin strips away the myths surrounding the artist, some of which originated with the sculptor himself. By tracing the statue from the original commission to its current home in Florence's Galleria dell' Accademia, the author contextualizes the perpetual mythmaking around the *David* that continues in our own time. The early chapters of the book read like a mystery as Coonin draws the reader through the labyrinthine networks of Renaissance Florence, introducing political aspirations and artistic rivalries with each new turn. Coonin's expertise is evident as he skillfully weaves archival sources with early biographies and anecdotal stories. The author has produced a refreshingly entertaining synthesis of Michelangelo

scholarship pertaining to the *David*, presenting an engaging portrait of the statue that would be enjoyed by general readers and academics alike. The book would make an excellent reading assignment for an undergraduate course in art history.

Coonin begins his biography in the first decades of the fifteenth century, long before Michelangelo began working on the *David*, when church administrators first envisioned a decorative program for Florence's Duomo. To give a sense of the extraordinary scale of *Il Gigante*, Coonin transports the reader to the quarries around Carrara and recounts the treacherous excavation of an enormous block of stone not attempted since antiquity. The extraction of marble from the famed Fantiscritti quarry and the transportation of the six-ton block via water and over land offer insights into the economics of Early Modern artistic production. The flawed stone and the failed efforts of an earlier sculptor provide a greater understanding of the challenges Michelangelo faced and deepens one's appreciation of his final achievement.

Fig. 1. Michelangelo, *David*, 1501-1504, Florence, Galleria dell' Accademia (Photo. Public Domain).



The choice of Michelangelo as the sculptor for the commission is the subject of the second chapter. Originally intended for a lofty position upon a spur of the cathedral buttress, the David was finally placed outside the Palazzo della Signoria, the civic heart of Florence. The dispute over its final location reveals the fluctuating symbolism of the David as well as the period's technological accomplishments (and limitations) in moving a colossal statue from the workshop of the Opera del Duomo to the Florentine Senate—a feat that involved forty men and over four days to move the statue the distance of a ten-minute walk. By comparing it to other sculptural works, Coonin demonstrates how the *David*, initially intended as a spiritual symbol for the church, ultimately became recognized as a defender of Florentine independence and ideals.

In chapter three, Coonin demonstrates how Michelangelo's unique iconography of David's battle with Goliath reveals the innovative design of a young sculptor keen to engage in a visual dialogue with the art of his contemporaries as well as antiquity. Coonin examines the afterlife of the *David* in Florence's central public space and notes its controversial presence. Soon after its relocation to the Piazza della Signoria, it was adorned with a garland of gilt leaves in an attempt to ameliorate its brazen nudity. Standing in the public square for over three and a half centuries, the *David* suffered damage not only from exposure, but also from an errant bench tossed from the palazzo during a conflict between republicans and Medici supporters, which resulted in a broken arm. Here and elsewhere, Coonin presents a detailed account of the statue's condition by combining historical chronicle with modern conservation reports.

The last two chapters follow the *David* from the nineteenth-century to the present day. The fourth chapter examines the long process of advocacy to move the *David* indoors, and is perhaps the weakest part of this otherwise absorbing book. At times, Coonin digresses with lengthy biographical accounts of the members of multiple commissions that were formed to study the *David*, though these digressions serve to illustrate how nineteenth-century administrative networks were quite similar in dynamic to the patronage systems of Renaissance Florence. The important point of the transformation of the *David* into a national symbol for a fledgling Italian state is too often obscured. The last chapter examines the numerous copies and appropriations after the *David* and briefly illustrates how the statue has been co-opted by different artistic and social movements, from Banksy's *Bullet Proof David* to the fight against AIDS. Though a brief survey, this final section

functions as a reminder that Michelangelo's *David* remains a relevant cultural symbol and continues to have effect on political and social hierarchies.

