

A Tale of Two Davids: Different Views, and Why the Difference Matters

by Bonnie James

In the story of David and Goliath, from the Old Testament Book of Samuel, the army of Israel flees in terror from the giant Philistine warrior Goliath, who stands “six cubits and a span.” When no one else has the courage to confront Goliath, David, the youngest son of Jesse, tells Saul that he will go up against the giant, and slay him:

“And Saul said to David, Thou art not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him: for thou art but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth. . . .”

But when Goliath appeared again, “David hasted, and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine.

“And David put his hand in his bag, and took thence a stone, and slang it, and smote the Philistine in his forehead, that the stone sunk into his forehead; and he fell upon his face to the earth.”

Then, “David ran, and stood upon the Philistine, and took his sword, and drew it out of the sheath thereof, and slew him,

and cut off his head therewith. And when the Philistines saw their champion was dead, they fled.”

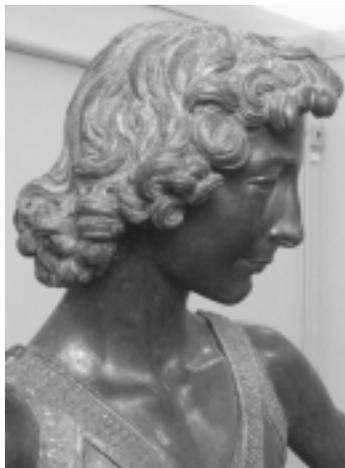
“Little” David’s decisive victory over the huge Goliath has become the universal metaphor for the idea that the power of good, wielded against evil, no matter how great the disparity in size or number, will prevail.

Michelangelo’s David

One of the most well-known and popular works of the Italian Renaissance is the enormous statue of *David* by Michelangelo (1475-1564), and its fame has only grown over the centuries since it was completed in 1504. Much fanfare has accompanied *David’s* 500th birthday; for the great occasion, *David* is being given a makeover. Dozens of articles have appeared in the world’s press recounting the spat which has erupted over the method that



Courtesy National Gallery of Art



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VERROCCHIO'S DAVID, modelled on Classical sculptural principles, is seen at the moment of victory, when the future king looks toward the future. The detail (above) reveals a calm determination.



MICHELANGELO'S DAVID, 18 feet high and weighing nine tons, would have towered above the nine-foot-tall Goliath. Nonetheless, David's expression (above) does not evoke confidence in the moments before their confrontation.



EIRNS/Fletcher James

should be used to clean the statue, but we will leave that aside for now, and try to discover a deeper truth beneath all the hype.

When you see Michelangelo's *David* in the flesh, so to speak, as opposed to one of the millions of reproductions available—the first thing that strikes you is its sheer size. In fact, it is nearly 18 feet tall, and weighs over nine tons. It is as if David has become Goliath! Moreover, your eye-level is just below his feet, and as you look up at this giant, you see a perfectly formed male torso (with all the accoutrements). What you **can't** see is David's face, its expression, what might be going on in his mind.

But, wait a minute: Isn't the idea of the Old Testament story that it is not physical beauty or power that counts in the end, but rather, purity of intent, sustained by the knowledge that evil can and must be defeated, even against overwhelming odds?

Look at the detail of David's head, where you can see his facial expression. Here he is, just before he is to go into battle against Goliath. Where is the tension? His slingshot is casually thrown across his mammoth left shoulder, his body relaxed. But when you see his face, it reveals him to be in the throes of an existentialist crisis! He seems to recoil in fear, his brows knitted. His expression is at odds with the power of his physical presence. Can this be the young David we read of in Samuel? Where is the calm conviction that he will prevail:

"Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. . . ."

Michelangelo has turned the biblical story upside-down: His *David* has physical strength, but no courage!

This "David" of Michelangelo is unrecognizable as the enemy of Goliath. He looks like a bad actor, who is trying to express something he has never experienced. Is it surprising

that among the sponsors of David's restoration are fellow pop icons Mel Gibson and Sting?

Verrocchio's David

Forty years before Michelangelo completed his *David*, in about 1465, Andrea del Verrocchio (1435-88), the leading Italian sculptor of the second half of the 15th century, produced a very different David.¹ Verrocchio's *David* (which measures only about four feet tall) is shown **after** he has slain the giant, whose massive head lies at his feet. Before the restoration of this statue, Goliath's head had been placed between David's feet, rather than as it is seen here, to the right of David's foot, as Verrocchio intended. The restored version immediately brings to life the dynamic, slightly "off-balance" pose of the figure, highlighting its conceptual debt to Classic Greek sculpture, of which Verrocchio had made extensive studies. David's youth is emphasized by his slender form, while his left arm, placed with his hand on his hip, reinforces that youthful insouciance.

Verrocchio creates a powerful irony by contrasting David's pose with his expression: Looking at the detail of David's head, even in profile, we can see that he is somber and contemplative. He has just defeated his enemy, but, as the future king of Israel, he is looking into the future; he knows this is just the beginning.

A leading art historian has argued that the model for *David* was a young student in Verrocchio's workshop—Leonardo da Vinci, who would have been about 13 years old at the time, just about the age of David when he slew Goliath.

1. Verrocchio's *David*, also newly restored, will visit the United States later this year, on its first-ever voyage outside Florence. It will be on exhibit at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Nov. 22, 2003 through Feb. 8, 2004, and at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., Feb. 13-March 21, 2004.