

News Release



**V&A opens first major UK exhibition to explore the work of the Renaissance master Donatello, including over 50 artworks never seen before in the UK**

***Donatello: Sculpting the Renaissance***

**Sainsbury Gallery**

**11 February – 11 June 2023**

**Supported by Rocco Forte Hotels**

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Opening this Saturday, *Donatello: Sculpting the Renaissance* is the first major UK exhibition to explore the exceptional talents of the Renaissance master, Donatello. It offers a fresh vision of the artist and his impact on both the cultural and artistic development of this crucial time in the history of art. Featuring many works that have never been on display in the UK, the exhibition explores Donatello's innovations, collaborations and inspirations within the vibrant artistic and cultural context of fifteenth-century Italy, and his influence on subsequent generations of artists.

Arguably the greatest sculptor of all time, Donatello (c.1386-1466) was in the vanguard of a revolution in sculptural practice in the early Renaissance. Working in the full range of sculptural materials and techniques, including marble, bronze, wood, terracotta and stucco, he contributed to major commissions of church and state; was an intimate of the Medici family and their circle in Florence, and was highly sought after in other Italian centres.

The exhibition showcases works never seen before in the UK including Donatello's early marble *David* and bronze *Attis-Amorino* from the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, as well as the spectacular reliquary bust of San Rossore from the Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa, and bronzes from the High Altar of the Basilica of St Anthony in Padua. For the first time, the V&A's exquisitely carved shallow relief of the *Ascension with Christ giving the keys to St Peter* is displayed alongside the *Madonna of the Clouds* from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Desiderio da Settignano's *Panciatichi Madonna* from the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, providing an exclusive opportunity to see these works together. Through these and other exceptional loans, the exhibition offers visitors a unique vision of Donatello's genius and central role at this critical time in European culture. Focusing primarily on Donatello's lifetime

and immediate followers, the exhibition combines a thematic approach with chronology, encompassing the inter-relationship between sculpture, paintings, drawings and goldsmiths' work. Donatello's innovative technique and his ability to combine ideas from both classical and medieval sculpture to create works that were novel, yet with an element of the traditional, are expressed throughout the exhibition.

Key works by the master himself are complemented by carefully selected works by Donatello's contemporaries and followers that explore and expand on the sculptor's major place within the development of Renaissance art and its context, as well as inter-relationships across materials. Comprising around 130 objects, the exhibition also incorporates a significant number of objects from the V&A's own collections – including the most extensive holdings of Italian Renaissance sculpture outside Italy – notably from the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries. These are complemented by copies of Italian Renaissance sculptures, including several by Donatello, in The Weston Cast Court.

*Donatello: Sculpting the Renaissance* is the last in a series of exhibitions made possible through collaboration with Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi and the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence, and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Each institution has drawn on its own collections and curatorial expertise to stage three distinct but complementary exhibitions, offering a celebration of Donatello's life and work in three parts, the first to be devoted to the artist for nearly forty years.

**Peta Motture, Exhibition Lead Curator of Donatello: Sculpting the Renaissance said:**

*“Donatello was a driving force behind the Italian Renaissance and an inspiration to artists across the centuries. The exceptional opportunity to collaborate with our partners in Florence and Berlin, together with the generosity of all lenders, has made it possible for the V&A to present a remarkable insight into the artist's training, relationships and legacy. Bringing together objects and narratives never seen before in the UK, the exhibition provides a unique moment to experience, enjoy and – for those less familiar with his work – discover Donatello's astonishing talents and his wide-ranging impact on Renaissance and later art.”*

**About the Exhibition:**

The scene is set with the first section on **Donatello's Florentine Foundations**, amidst the burgeoning of the city's Renaissance sculpture. He produced his first sculptures in marble for the Opera del Duomo, such as the *David* and gained experience of working in wax, clay and bronze in Lorenzo Ghiberti's workshop. The friendships, rivalries and collaborations are drawn out through these early experiences, including the inter-relationship with painters such as Masaccio. Donatello's extraordinary creativity and practical skills are explored through the lens of drawings and models, and of the comparatively common but often underplayed role of the sculptor's training as a goldsmith. Although no goldsmiths' work by Donatello survives, a sense of its importance in his sculptural practice is provided by fundamental works from the

medieval and Renaissance period, such as the head of *God the Father* by Beltramino de Zuttis. The impact of his early experience manifests in Donatello's partnership with Michelozzo from c.1425-34, explored here through their Catasto declarations for tax assessment, as well as sculpture created in their joint workshops, including marble and mosaic panels and a bronze capital showing dancing *spiritelli* from the exterior pulpit of Prato Cathedral (from the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Prato).

The second section, **Tradition and Innovation**, explores in more depth Donatello's ability to marry inspiration from antiquity with that from the more recent past to create a new vision, including his contribution to the revival of the portrait bust and to the expressive intimacy of the mother and son relationship in his sculptures of the Virgin and Child. These are placed in context with precedents from which he took inspiration, and with works by those who followed. These original and replicated images – such as the V&A's stunning *Chellini Madonna*, the Louvre's *Piot Madonna* and the *Madonna of Humility* from the Kunshistorisches Museum in Vienna - could carry multiple meanings according to their context or role in devotional practice. Donatello's extraordinary innovation in shallow relief carving and his approach to perspective is seen in select examples to be displayed around the V&A's iconic *Ascension* relief.

**Bronzes: Sacred and Secular** focuses on a carefully selected group of works in bronze, demonstrating how Donatello responded to the needs of patrons and different contexts – public and private, sacred and secular – in this expensive material. These sculptures embrace political and religious messages, both in their iconography and in the choice of material. Small bronzes, such as the '*spiritelli*', inspired by antiquity, were created for both religious and domestic settings. Among these are those made for the Siena Baptistery and the Duomo in Florence which, divorced from their setting, take the form of bronze statuettes, another fifteenth-century revival. Other highlights include two fountain figures associated with the Medici, and the inventive *Attis-Amorino*, created for a family in the Medici circle.

The section **Padua and Northern Italy** explores Donatello's ten-year sojourn in Padua (1443-54) and how this was significant to artistic developments in the city, as well as nearby centres such as Ferrara and Venice. This section highlights Donatello's inter-relationship with and impact on both sculptors (Giovanni da Pisa) and painters (Mantegna, Bellini, Schiavone, Zoppo). In Padua he created the equestrian monument to Gattamelata, and the exceptional sculpture for the High Altar of the Basilica of St Anthony. Three sculptures now on the High Altar speak both to their religious context and to Donatello's remarkable creative skills, collaborating with talented assistants and the founder Andrea Conti. The *Miracle of the Mule* in particular reveals his innovative approach to creating space and colouristic effects. The exhibition will juxtapose Donatello's *Crucifix* from the Santo with sculptures from the Crucifix Altar in Ferrara, highlighting a little-studied but important relationship between Donatello and Niccolò Baroncelli and his heirs.

**Devotion and Emotion** focuses on Donatello's exceptional ability to portray emotions through both design and exploitation of materials, usually intended to inspire religious devotional practice. The imagery of the Passion was often inspired by religious dramas performed in Florence at the time, with which Donatello would have been familiar. The Museum's *Lamentation* relief and the Bargello's *Crucifixion*, provide a focus in comparison to works by contemporaries and close followers.

The final exhibition section, **Homage to Donatello**, highlights his legacy; reviewing how his sculpture inspired generations in the later Renaissance, as well as in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which Renaissance sculpture was both emulated and imitated. The narrative opens with the marble *David* from the Martelli family, probably designed by the elderly Donatello, but executed by one or more of his followers, and closes with Alceo Dossena's remarkable marble *Virgin and Child* relief from the Detroit Institute of Arts, an exemplification of Donatello's enduring legacy in the twentieth century. This section offers the opportunity to review the changing attribution of works acquired as Donatello in the V&A's collection and to examine the production and status of the imitations produced in the later period. The theme of this section is unique to the London exhibition presenting new research into the V&A's collection.

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**For further PRESS information about Donatello: Sculpting the Renaissance please contact Callum Walker on [c.walker@vam.ac.uk](mailto:c.walker@vam.ac.uk) / 020 7942 2502 (not for publication). A selection of press images is available to download free of charge from [pressimages.vam.ac.uk](http://pressimages.vam.ac.uk).**

#### **Notes to Editors**

- The exhibition *Donatello: Sculpting the Renaissance* runs from 11 February – 11 June 2023.
- Adult tickets £20. Tickets are on sale now at [vam.ac.uk/Donatello](http://vam.ac.uk/Donatello)
- The exhibition has been curated for the V&A by Peta Motture, with Whitney Kerr-Lewis.
- The exhibition will be accompanied by a new V&A publication, edited by Peta Motture. RRP £40.
- *Donatello: Sculpting the Renaissance* has been developed in collaboration with Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi and the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence, and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
- The V&A's Italian Renaissance sculpture collection, the most extensive outside Italy, forms part of the Museum's diverse world-class holdings of decorative art and design. Together with the spectacular Cast Courts which display our renowned nineteenth-century plaster cast collection, these collections provide an unrivalled resource in the UK for the study of medieval and Renaissance sculpture.

## **Social Media**

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**Support for the V&A is more vital than ever. Please help us by acknowledging the exhibition supporters Rocco Forte Hotels, with further support from Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne, Daniel Katz Ltd, Kathryn Uhde, the *Donatello: Sculpting the Renaissance* Exhibition Supporters' Circle, Tavolozza Foundation and Henry Moore Foundation.**

## **About Rocco Forte Hotels**

Established by Sir Rocco Forte and his sister, Olga Polizzi in 1996, Rocco Forte Hotels is a collection of 14 individual hotels and resorts led by an Italian-Anglo family who have been in hospitality for four generations. From London to Berlin, Rome to Sicily, or Florence, all properties are architecturally-inspired landmarks, occupying magnificent buildings in exceptional cultural locations.

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