



Coonin, A. Victor. Donatello and the Dawn of Renaissance Art

Jennifer Strtak

Volume 43, Number 1, Winter 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070195ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34112>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Strtak, J. (2020). Review of [Coonin, A. Victor. Donatello and the Dawn of Renaissance Art]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(1), 229–231. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34112>

Coonin, A. Victor.

Donatello and the Dawn of Renaissance Art.

London: Reaktion Books, 2019. Pp. 288 + 76 ill. ISBN 978-1-78914-130-6 (hardcover) US\$22.50.

In his latest book, A. Victor Coonin explores the ways in which Donatello contributed to the cultivation of the Renaissance and the development of modern art. Balancing studies of Donatello's life and most significant artistic accomplishments, Coonin highlights the artist's creativity in both personality and work. Employing visual and written sources, this biography posits that it was the artist's collaborative sense, technical innovation, and working versatility that engendered the humanism, naturalism, and realism that came to define Renaissance culture.

The first chapter provides readers with an overview of Donatello's artistic formation. The argument underpinning the narrative is that Donatello developed technical and innovative skills by nurturing personal relationships in a network of influential artists. Training under Lorenzo Ghiberti, trips to Rome with Filippo Brunelleschi to study classical objects, and mentorship from Nanni di Banco enabled Donatello to collect different methods of work and tools and, subsequently, produce new types of sculptural reliefs, funerary tombs, and public monuments. By integrating wood stucco with clay, bronze, and marble, or glass, terracotta, and wax—as in his *Madonna Piot*—Donatello created art that confronted contemporary notions of sculpture making. For Coonin, Donatello's deeply emotive works of interacting mediums are thus the catalysts that ushered in the transformation from medieval abstraction and artificiality to Renaissance sensuality and naturalism.

In chapter 2, Coonin builds upon points raised in the previous chapter, arguing that Donatello's talent was not wholly innate but acquired through interactions with people of tremendous intellect and remarkable creativity. Highlighting how collaboration and competition engaged contemporary artists, Coonin presents a close-focus study on the relationship between Donatello and Michelozzo di Bartolomeo Michelozzi. Working together over the course of nine years, the artists benefited from the financial stability, professional development, and creative activities that emerged during the tenure of their partnership. The pair was tasked with executing architectural elaborations central to the Renaissance, such as the Prato Cathedral pulpit. However,

Donatello's inability to fully invest in the execution of projects hindered his partnership with Michelozzo, which eventually ended in amicable separation. While Coonin rightfully acknowledges Donatello's style of wandering as a weakness, he does view it as a defining characteristic of the artist—a stimulus that enabled him to forge relationships in a broad patronage circle that included the Martelli and Medici families.

Coonin delves into Donatello's time in Florence, which spanned roughly 1434 to 1444, in chapter 3. He cites these years as the artist's most fruitful, and offers readers exciting analyses of some of Donatello's most celebrated works. Coonin delicately balances a discussion of the sexual expression of Donatello's *David* with an investigation of the sculpture's ambiguity and interpretive flexibility—an intentional feature of the work according to Coonin. The art historian Kenneth Clark has suggested that Leonardo da Vinci possessed a unique ability to evoke and present mystery and variability in his art. Coonin challenges Clark's argument, raising the well-founded point that Donatello preceded Leonardo in this creative and technical ability by approximately a generation. In creating sculptures that left viewers questioning the presentation of physical form and emotion, Donatello produced inspirational art that explored and encouraged interpretive openness.

Chapter 4 sees Donatello travelling to Padua and offers readers a wonderful example of the reaches of Renaissance collaboration. It was in the city that Donatello reunited with Paolo Uccello, a friend and colleague, while working on an equestrian monument to the *condottiere* Erasmo da Narni. Coonin writes that beyond representing the revival of the equestrian monument, Donatello's *Gattamelata* exemplifies the realization of Renaissance culture. Coonin illustrates for readers the ongoing consulting and engagement that occurred between the two artists, tracing their working relationship from Uccello's *Funerary Monument to Sir John Hawkwood* to Donatello's equestrian monument. What is more, Coonin demonstrates how Donatello's monument engaged with contemporary literary works on horsemanship. Drawing evidence from Leon Battista Alberti's work *Il cavallo vivo*, Coonin explains how Donatello's monument brought notions of equine behaviour and physiology to life.

The book's final chapter examines Donatello's mature years, covering his movements between Florence and Sienna. This chapter indicates that Donatello possessed the ability to adapt to evolving circumstances as he moved from city

to city, and that his art continually incorporated new and different experimental mediums and techniques. Coonin connects Donatello's versatility to his maturity, writing that as the artist's physical capabilities changed with age so too did his methods of making art.

Coonin's book, which marks the first biographical publication on Donatello in twenty-five years, is an enjoyable and engaging read. The text is lucid, well-documented, and an informative source for those looking to explore the creativity and personality of one of the Renaissance's most acclaimed artists.

JENNIFER STRTAK

Yale University

D'Amico, Silvia et Susanna Gambino Longo, éd.

Le savoir italien sous les presses lyonnaises à la Renaissance.

Cahiers d'Humanisme et Renaissance 142. Genève : Droz, 2017. 635 p. ISBN 978-2-600-01954-5 (broché) 82 CFH.

À l'intersection des grands axes technologiques et commerciaux du continent, l'agglomération largement bilingue de Lyon sert de point de contact entre Paris, Genève, Bâle, Florence, Trino et Turin pendant la période renaissante. La traduction d'ouvrages pratiques, de même que la publication de manuels de langue à l'intention des voyageurs, y sont des activités florissantes. Profitant du déclin de Genève à la fin du XV^e siècle, la ville est ouverte à la libre circulation des idées et du capital, directement soutenue par une multitude d'ateliers d'imprimeurs-libraires. Une importante communauté italienne originaire de Toscane et du Piémont, marquée par une grande mobilité géographique, contribue pleinement depuis le début du siècle à l'expansion de l'industrie lyonnaise du livre et de ses technologies de pointe. C'est cette effervescence exceptionnelle que cherche à saisir le recueil d'articles réunis par Silvia D'Amico et Susanna Gambino Longo à la suite du colloque multidisciplinaire tenu à l'Université Jean Moulin de Lyon en 2014. Rédigés en français et en italien, la vingtaine d'articles rassemblés ici s'appuient sur les travaux fondamentaux d'Enea Balmas, Nicole Bingen et Jean Balsamo, sans lesquels il n'eût pas été possible d'envisager des plans d'ensemble aussi riches sur le monde de l'édition et du commerce du livre à Lyon durant cette période extrêmement féconde.