

***“As a woman, Judith was a more suitable figure to be a physical portrayal of virtues, particularly those of chastity and humility.”***



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## **Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes*: a Symbol of Tyranny and Virtue in Renaissance Florence**

Throughout the fifteenth century, the Republic of Florence was a place which relied heavily on perception. In a society that was divided primarily by class, and where most families knew each other through either marriage or political ties, how one was seen by one's peers was of critical importance. During the fifteenth century this was exceptionally important to the Medici family, who, led primarily by Cosimo de' Medici, functioned as the *de facto* rulers of Florence, from approximately 1434 until 1494- when the family was expelled from the city.<sup>1</sup> The Medici family had few ties with the old oligarchical form of government, but by forming diplomatic ties across Italy, creating alliances with new friends and, most importantly, establishing an air of legitimacy, they were able to grasp and maintain a hold on power.

The visual arts played a prominent role in the establishment of a legitimized public persona. Sight was the most important sense to Renaissance Florentines, who visualized the Republic as a physical (female) body.<sup>2</sup> All of these social conventions created an environment in which a symbol could have incredible potency, and art could be used effectively to craft an identity, which the Medici family did with the collection of art objects throughout their palace.

The Medici family was famous for its patronage to artists throughout the Renaissance, which helped them create new friends and allies.<sup>3</sup> Expensive art objects, like the multitude found throughout their palace, displayed their incredible wealth. The family was particularly close with

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*(Opposite) Fig. 1. Donatello, Judith and Holofernes, bronze, Museum of the Palazzo Vecchio, Photo courtesy of the Polo Museale Fiorentino.*

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the artist Donatello,<sup>4</sup> from whom they commissioned several sculptures, including two bronze figures which were placed in the semi-public garden of the Medici Palace: Donatello's *David* (fig. 1) and, what will be the focus of this paper, his *Judith and Holofernes* (fig. 2). Donatello not only interacted with the family on a personal, friendly level, but would have been motivated to accommodate any requests from the powerful family who kept him almost constantly employed. Thus the family's close relationship with one of the most prolific sculptors in Florence ensured the creation of works of art which were both technically and aesthetically astounding, as well as reflective of values and ideas the Medici family wished to project onto the public about themselves.

Though both of these sculptures played off one another due to their similar themes and their placement in the garden, it was *Judith and Holofernes* which eventually became the Republic's symbol of their triumph over the Medici family; this sculpture was then moved and installed in front of the Palazzo Vecchio.<sup>5</sup> I will attempt to explain how this image fit into the political and visual context of fifteenth century Florence, and how the sculpture was used in an attempt to craft a civic identity, first by the Medici and later by the Republic. To properly understand the impact *Judith and Holofernes* was meant to have, it is important to examine the social and political landscape of early fifteenth-century Florence, as the Medici's hold on power came to its climax.

The Medici's rise to power as *de facto* rulers of Florence was almost accidental, as Cosimo de' Medici did not seem to develop any intent to position his family as the effective rulers of Florence until a sudden dramatic shift in Florentine politics took place. The city was run by an oligarchy: a small group of men of prestigious patrician families with established names and histories within the city. The opposing class was composed of "new men," coming from newly wealthy families who had virtually no previous political establishment.<sup>6</sup> It must be emphasized that what was most important in this class structure was not only wealth, but also prestige, or "charisma", which established the importance of identity and legitimacy in order to hold power.<sup>7</sup>

The Medici grew to be incredibly wealthy after the Alberti family (until that point the major banking family in Florence) was exiled in 1393.<sup>8</sup> Their consequent rise to power came from the unusual situation of a new rising class, and the failing oligarchic system, of which many families were no longer wealthy and relied on each other for financial support.<sup>9</sup> The Medici allied itself with old patricians as well as "new money" families through a complex marriage network which spanned several Italian states.<sup>10</sup>

The establishing event of Medici rule in Florence came when Rinaldo Albizzi, patriarch of one of the elite oligarchical families, organized a coup and had Cosimo de' Medici briefly incarcerated for treason. What rescued him was his network of friends, who came to Florence and argued for his release.<sup>11</sup> Rather than being executed, Cosimo was exiled; he eventually amassed enough support to return to Florence one year later in 1434 to exile Albizzi and his co-conspirators.<sup>12</sup>

As *de facto* ruler of Florence, Cosimo was noted by contemporaries as being fairly passive in business and political affairs, though Machiavelli notes that he “conducted himself with more zeal and boldness,” more so than his father, Giovanni, had.<sup>13</sup> The oligarchic rule of Florence had essentially been overturned due to public opinion in favour of the Medici, and now the family, with no precedent experience as rulers of Florence, no court of their own, and no legitimate claim to power had to continue to maintain their position through the manipulation of public opinion<sup>14</sup>

In this society, where vision and perception were so important, public art and art patronage was an important tool for crafting identity; patrons like the Medici were able to use established iconography to create visual programs that communicated something meaningful about the patron, yet did not reveal their intentions too blatantly.<sup>15</sup> For example, after Cosimo had established the Medici family's power upon his return to Florence, he had paintings commissioned depicting Rinaldo Albizzi and his co-conspirators hanging upside down in front of the Palace of the Podestà.<sup>16</sup> These images effectively functioned as a punishment for the convicted, even though the real people they represented were no longer present in the city due to their exile. This speaks to the power of images during this period, as these images were meant to function as a *real* punishment, as if it were their actual, physical bodies being hung upside down publicly. Works such as these, which would typically have been commissioned by the Medici or their supporters, also reinforced the power structure in Florence at this time, serving as a reminder of possible consequences for attempting to overthrow the family. Thus, the Medici's need for crafting an ideal public persona — one which promoted the values of the Republic of which they were now in charge — is clear,

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Fig. 2. Donatello, *David*, bronze, National Museum of the Bargello, Photo courtesy of the Polo Museale Fiorentino.



as is the important use of imagery in creating such an identity. However, it is important to ask how the iconography of Judith, and Donatello's very particular vision of the heroine, functioned in a positive way for the family, and why they would choose to associate themselves with the heroine Judith in particular.

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*Judith and Holofernes*, placed in the Medici garden by at least 1469,<sup>17</sup> is a large bronze sculpture of the Jewish heroine Judith, about to triumph over Holofernes, an Assyrian general leading an army who would conquer her town of Bethulia. In the Biblical story, Judith is a widow living a chaste life when the Assyrian army lays siege to her town. As the leaders wait for God to intervene, Judith decides to take action by asking God to grant her the power to deceive and kill Holofernes. She dresses herself to make her appearance desirable to the general and then plies him with wine until he is drunk, at which point she decapitates him with two blows from his own sword;

*Then she came to the pillar of the bed, which was at Holofernes' head, and took down his fauchion from thence, And approached to his bed, and took hold of the hair of his head, and said, Strengthen me, O Lord God of Israel, this day. And she smote twice upon his neck with all her might, and she took away his head from him.*<sup>18</sup>

Due to the awkward angle of Holofernes' head in the sculpture, it has been assumed by most scholars that in the moment Donatello has captured Judith as already have stricken Holofernes once, and is about to strike him the second time, which will sever his neck from his body.<sup>19</sup> The sculpture therefore demonstrates Judith in the middle of a violent action. It should be noted that most depictions of Judith up until this point showed her only after she had taken Holofernes' head, thus eliminating the need to directly show Judith, a woman, being violent and aggressive towards a man.

The heroine was already featured in a very public work of art (Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise*) and Donatello's statue in the Palace garden was commended for its technical accomplishments by contemporaries.<sup>20</sup> The sculpture was prominently placed within a semi-public area controlled by the Medici family, demonstrating their desire to project something about themselves to visitors and passerby. Because documentation surrounding the commission of the sculpture is lost,<sup>21</sup> the exact purpose of the work is still debateable (though it is generally dated to the mid-1460s). However, by examining the sculpture within the context of the politics and visual imagery of the period, we can establish that the Medici wanted to project an image of themselves as humble, just, and all-around virtuous defenders of Florentine liberty.

*Judith and Holofernes* has primarily been discussed within the political context of late fifteenth century Florence, when the city was almost constantly at war and consistently resisted being conquered.<sup>22</sup> Scholars like Sarah Blake McHam have discussed *Judith and Holofernes* and the other bronze statue, *David*, as tyrannicides: an ancient Roman type of sculpture meant to evoke themes of resisting and conquering tyranny.<sup>23</sup> These themes seem somewhat obvious when we look at the sculptures, both of which depict a biblical figure, who conquer a formidable evil force. Thus it has also been suggested by many that this reading is too simple, and is not sufficient to explain why the Medici would associate themselves with the troubling iconography of Judith, instead of solely representing David.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore the *Judith and Holofernes* sculpture has been placed by many scholars within the Medici's plan for a broader, more unified image for their family to maintain an air of legitimacy and to create pleasant associations with a family that was becoming increasingly tyrannical themselves. The Medici family was suffering from factionalism in the mid-fifteenth century; a threat which could have potentially removed the family from their position of immense power, and which already had already been the primary cause behind the failure of the Albizzi coup.<sup>25</sup> Judith and David as tyrant slayers created an image of the family as protectors of freedom and the Republic, and their actions created virtuous associations with the family.<sup>26</sup>

However, Judith's gender separates the narrative of her story and her iconography from David's in important ways, which adds deeper meaning to the Medici family's self-crafted image. As a woman, Judith was a more suitable figure to be a physical portrayal of virtues, particularly those of chastity and humility. Her humility is stressed through the first inscription on the base: "Kingdoms fall through luxury, cities rise through virtue; behold the neck of pride severed by humility."<sup>27</sup> This wildly luxurious sculpture was used here (somewhat ironically) by the Medici to claim their humility, and thus their moral superiority over their enemies, who, represented by Holofernes, would be seen as prideful and even evil. Judith's chastity is also highlighted in this sculpture, particularly by the physical proximity of the figures. Judith steps viciously on Holofernes' hand and grabs a handful of his abundant hair, which was seen as a sign of sexual virility at the time. She is heavily covered by swaths of fabric, which add movement to the composition but do not draw attention to the contours of her body. While she is visibly female, she is not explicitly gendered in a sexual manner. Judith's chastity is highlighted not only in her coverings, but is emphasized when viewed in contrast to Donatello's *David*. David's nudity and sensual appearance

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Fig. 3. Follower of Fra Angelico, Justice, pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash, ca. 1440, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo courtesy of Open Access for Scholarly Content.

starkly contrast against Judith's portrayal; narratively speaking, after their victorious moments, David becomes a king, while Judith famously returns home to Bethulia, highlighting gender expectations of this time.<sup>28</sup> Thus the Medici aimed to represent themselves as the humble, pious protectors of Florence, using charged, violent imagery, while simultaneously accusing enemies of conveying lewd behaviour and poor moral standards.<sup>29</sup> While this imagery makes the sculpture exciting and effective, it is also troubling in that it features a woman physically victorious over a man, which was highly unusual for the time.<sup>30</sup>

This was especially troublesome for the city of Florence whose patron saint, John the Baptist, was famously beheaded by another Biblical woman: Salome. This of course makes the consequent success of Judith as an icon of the city all the more puzzling. Both Judith and Salome are typically defined by these beheadings. However, the way the women are usually depicted separates their narratives and how they are read. For example, Salome is typically seen dancing, presenting the head of John the Baptist to her father

Herod, or simply holding the platter with his head, and is defined by her sexuality and her luxurious lifestyle. Conversely, Judith is typically shown holding the head of Holofernes and is always holding a sword.

A woman holding a sword would have been a familiar image to Florentines in the form of “Lady Justice,” a female embodiment of the virtue of Justice who is frequently shown holding a sword (fig. 3).<sup>31</sup> Thus, Judith’s actions have an immediate visual link to the virtue of justice and suggest that her actions are in fact justified. This correlation was especially effective during this time when the Republic of Florence was envisioned physically as a woman, and this enabled Judith to be viewed as a Florence-type,<sup>32</sup> becoming a physical embodiment of the Republic, which made her a more potent symbol after the exile of the Medici family.

In spite of these associations to themes of justice, it seems risky for the family to attempt to associate themselves so closely with the idea of decapitation. However, it has been suggested that Judith was such a potent figure specifically *because* her meaning could be destabilized and interpreted in a variety of ways. Indeed it seems scholars have never interpreted her in the same way twice.<sup>33</sup> The Medici family changed the city’s unpleasant association with beheading — that of John the Baptist — into one of justified violence, by linking Judith and David’s heroism and by highlighting Judith’s various virtues which contribute to her moral character. Judith’s violent actions are justified, just as the Medici wished to justify their aggressive actions to the citizens of Florence.

After the death of his father Cosimo, Piero de’Medici had a second inscription added to the sculpture, reading: “Piero, son of Cosimo, has dedicated the statue of this woman to that liberty and fortitude bestowed on the republic by the invincible and constant spirit of the citizens.<sup>34</sup>” This makes the political intent of the sculpture clear and emphasizes the Medici’s desire to appeal to the citizens of Florence (whom Machiavelli describes as civic-minded “conquerors<sup>35</sup>), at a time when Medici power was waning.

Ultimately, the sculpture failed to identify the Medici as humble protectors of freedom and instead came to be associated with the family as a symbol of their hypocrisy and luxurious taste. By 1494, the Medici, claiming to protect the Republic from tyrants, were now seen to be tyrannical themselves.<sup>36</sup> They were exiled and the newly established government claimed many of their luxurious possessions. *Judith and Holofernes* was seized; inscriptions were effaced and the sculpture was installed in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, the seat of the new government and an extremely public location within the city. A new inscription was set onto the sculpture,

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reading: “An exemplar of the public good. The citizens installed it here in 1495.<sup>37</sup>” In this case, Judith became a symbol of the city’s triumph over the Medici; the new inscription placed emphasis on Judith’s civic duty<sup>38</sup> and it also proclaimed a Republic in which all citizens participated in public decisions.

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This treatment of the sculpture demonstrates how closely it had been linked to the Medici in the eyes of the people, as it now came to function as a sort of trophy for their defeat. The installation in a new environment and the removal of the inscriptions call to mind the practice of *damnatio memoriae* in ancient Rome, in which a ruler would command all public works associated with the previous ruler to be physically destroyed, “damning” the subject from memory.<sup>39</sup> The Florentine Republic had reclaimed *Judith* and *Holofernes* and destroyed the ideological image the Medici family had so carefully attempted to craft for themselves, which emphasized Judith’s narrative actions as a civic heroine, rather than a symbol of the “humility” of the Medici family.

Now Judith had come to truly symbolize the Republic’s freedom over tyranny, her charged imagery and her gender making her a more potent symbol for the Republic than her counterpart David, who was moved inside the Palazzo. However, her gender became an issue again in the latter half of the sixteenth century, when some officials began to worry about an increasing number of women being present within the Palazzo della Signoria<sup>40</sup> and believed the violent sculpture may have been partly to blame. The sculpture was moved to a niche on the side of the palazzo, replaced by *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. It was later again moved to the inside of the Palazzo where it is still displayed, after Michelangelo’s *David*, a symbol of masculinity, supplanted the original placement.<sup>41</sup>

In attempting to craft a visual program identifying their supposed role as the humble protectors of freedom in Florence, the Medici family created a symbol of their own hypocrisy and tyranny. The acquisition of Donatello’s *Judith and Holofernes* by the Republic after the exile of the Medici family demonstrates the power of an image and its ability to identify and create identity within the context of fifteenth century Florence. While the Medici family seemingly failed in this instance to create a convincing identity of humble servitude to their state, their legacy of art patronage spanning generations has caused history to remember them fondly in terms of their contributions to culture. Upon his death in 1464, Cosimo de’ Medici was given the title of *Pater Patriae*, or “father of his country.”<sup>42</sup> This speaks to a difficult and complex relationship between the Medici family and Florence,

and ultimately suggests that perhaps the identity the family sought to create for themselves was not entirely unsuccessful.

### Endnotes

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| <p>1 Sarah Blake McHam, “Donatello’s Judith as the Emblem of God’s Chosen People,” in <i>The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines</i> [online], ed. Kevin R Brine, Elena Ciletti, and Henrike Lähnemann. (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), 307.</p> <p>2 Adrian W.B. Randolph, <i>Engaging Symbols</i> (London: Yale University Press, 2002), 78.</p> <p>3 Caroline Elam, “Art and Diplomacy in Renaissance Florence,” <i>RSA Journal</i> 5387 (1988): 817.</p> <p>4 Giorgio Vasari, <i>Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects, Volume II</i> (London: Philip Lee Warner Publishers, 1912), 252.</p> <p>5 McHam, “Donatello’s Judith as the Emblem of God’s Chosen People,” 307.</p> <p>6 John F. Padgett and Christopher K. Ansel, “Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici,” <i>American Journal of Sociology</i> 6 (1993): 1269.</p> <p>7 Randolph, <i>Engaging Symbols</i>, 4.</p> | <p>8 This even also established the Medici as the papal banking family in Florence. Padgett and Ansel, “Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici,” 1292.</p> <p>9 Ibid., 1269; 1284.</p> <p>10 Padgett and Ansel thoroughly describe how the Medici family “mobilized” members of elite families into the Medici party through direct connections to Medici family members, which resulted in more cohesiveness than complex, interconnected relations. Ibid., 1279.</p> <p>11 Tim Parks, <i>Medici Money</i> (New York: Atlas Books, 2005), 96</p> <p>12 Roger J. Crum, “Severing the Neck of Pride: Donatello’s <i>Judith and Holofernes</i> and the Recollection of Albizzi Shame in Florence,” <i>Artibus et Historiae</i> 44 (2001): 23.</p> <p>13 Niccoló Machiavelli, <i>History of Florence and the affairs of Italy from the earliest times to the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent</i> [online], ed. W. Walter Dune. (New York: Universal Classics Library, 1901): Book IV, Chapter VI. Accessed on December 17,</p> | <p>CUJAH<br/>VOLUME XI<br/>REBECCA<br/>PROPPE</p> |
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- 14 Elam, "Art and Diplomacy in Renaissance Florence," 814.
- 15 Mark Jurdjevic, "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici," *Renaissance Quarterly* 4 (1999): 999.
- 16 These images were removed in 1494 when the Medici family was exiled. Patricia Lee Rubin, *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 118.
- 17 Allie Terry, "Donatello's decapitations and the rhetoric of beheading in Medicean Florence," *Renaissance Studies* 5 (2009): 609.
- 18 "Judith 13:6-8" The Official King James Bible Online, accessed on November 9, 2014, <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Judith&chapter=13&verse=>.
- 19 Sarah Blake McHam, "Donatello's Bronze *David* and *Judith* as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence," *The Art Bulletin* 83 (2001): 32-47.
- 20 Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects, Volume II*, 245.
- 21 McHam, "Donatello's Bronze *David* and *Judith*," 33-34.
- 22 Laurie Schneider, "Donatello's Bronze *David*." *The Art Bulletin* 55 (1973): 213.
- 23 McHam, "Donatello's Bronze *David* and *Judith*," 36-37.
- 24 David on his own was a very potent political symbol for the family, as Donatello had previously sculpted a marble *David* for the Palazzo della Signoria, further enhancing political connotations. Schneider, "Donatello's Bronze *David*," 213.
- 25 Jurdjevic, "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici," 998.
- 26 Crum, "Severing the Neck of *Pride*," 26.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 28 Roger J. Crum, "Judith between the Private and Public Realms in Renaissance Florence," in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines* [online], ed. Kevin R. Brine, Elena Ciletti, and Henrike Lähnemann (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), 293.
- 29 Jane Davidson Reid, "The True *Judith*," *Art Journal* 4 (1969): 378.
- 30 Randolph, *Engaging Symbols*, 251.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 258.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 33 Jane Davidson Reid nicely summarizes how *Judith* has been interpreted by various

- artists and scholars over the years. Reid, "The True Judith," 376-387.
- 34 John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke. *Art in Renaissance Italy, Fourth Edition* (London: Laurence King Publishin Ltd, 2012), 387.
- 35 Machiavelli, *History of Florence*, Book III Chapter I.
- 36 McHam, "Donatello's Judith as the Emblem of God's Chosen People," 318.
- 37 aoletti and Radke. *Art in Renaissance Italy*, 387.
- 38 Judith's story has traditionally been compared to that of Esther, and interpreted in terms of her actions and civic heroism. Robert Applebaum, "Judith Dines Alone: From the Bible to Du Bartas," *Modern Philology*, 4 (2014) 689.
- 39 Jaś Elsner, "Iconoclasm as Discourse: From Antiquity to Byzantium," *The Art Bulletin* 94.3 (2012): 370.
- 40 Prominent citizen Francesco Filarete stated that "The Judith is a deadly sign and does not befit us whose insignia are the cross and lily, nor is it good to have a woman kill a man [...]". Randolph, *Engaging Symbols*, 280.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 284.
- 42 Parks, *Medici Money*, 107.
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