

Greek Sculpture and the 'Michelangelo' Myth of Direct Carving

The legend of Michelangelo permeates all scholarly engagement with stonecarving, including art-historical accounts of Greek sculpture. This paper challenges the false, romanticized notion that Michelangelo used direct carving, whereby a solitary artist "frees" the figure dwelling within a stone block. Vestiges of this notion abound in Greek art history, eliding the use of preliminary models in wax or clay, and the support of assistants. A few basic clarifications of Michelangelo's methods can allow scholars to consider Greek sculptors' probable reliance on models and assistants, and begin to challenge some long-held assumptions in art history.

Michelangelo worked from models of wax and clay, then transferred their dimensions to stone (Goldscheider 1962, Ragionieri 2000). His apprentices most likely carried out the transference, as well as the initial shaping of the stone figure. Michelangelo himself helped to elide this process by destroying many of the models shortly before his death.

Michelangelo's 'Non Finito' sculptures are most responsible for the myth of direct carving, in spite of the fact that a wax model survives for at least two of these. The Accademia, which houses several of these works (along with the David), purports to describe their carving:

Unlike most sculptors, who prepared a plaster cast model and then marked up their block of marble to know where to chip, Michelangelo worked mostly free hand, starting from the front and working back. These figures emerged from the marble "as though surfacing from a pool of water," as described in Vasari ... The method was to take a figure of wax, lay it in a vessel of water and gradually emerge it ... Just so, the highest parts were extracted first from the marble.

This confused but typical description first denies that Michelangelo used (plaster) models, then immediately suggests that he used (wax) models, while simultaneously asserting that he "worked mostly free hand." Cellini tells us that sculptors always used small models, and sometimes full-size models in addition:

the wondrous Michelangelo ... worked both ways. But it is well-known that when his fine genius felt the insufficiency of small models, he set to work with the greatest humility to make models of the size of his marble. And such models I have seen with my own eyes in the sacristy of San Lorenzo. [Goldscheider (1962) 8]

The testimonia and physical evidence for Michelangelo's methods can help us fill in the gaps for Greek art history, where the process of marble sculpture is often elided, apart from allowing that the Greeks adapted the Egyptian 'grid' system for carving Archaic *kouroi*. Even accounts which acknowledge the use of models in at least some periods (Stewart 1990 and Palagia 2006), contain some elisions and errors about the process. These in turn can lead to deeper misconceptions, such as Stewart's on the application and impact of Polykleitos' Canon (35).

Palagia (2006) 243 offers the following cautious assessment: "It may be possible to interpret the great versatility of Greek masters by the fact that they could relegate part of their work to assistants and to explain the superb quality of sculptures like the pediments of the Parthenon by suggesting that they were not created free-hand by direct carving on the stone because their material does not yield to such treatment." If we accept that Greek sculptors of all eras very likely used models, some intriguing possibilities and questions are raised. For example, the categorical division between bronze and stone sculpture, dating back at least to

Pliny's *Natural Histories*, would be seriously challenged. If 'Phidias' produced a small wax or clay model and handed it over to a workshop, does that make 'Phidias' a bronze or a marble sculptor? And, to pose a question usually reserved for contemporary art: if 'Phidias' barely touched the finished work, how and why is he the artist who created it?

Bibliography

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