

# Arts & Faith

Art and Commentary for Pentecost +10, Proper 15C by [Hovak Najarian](#)

## Introduction

Greetings to everyone associated with St. Margaret's Sunday Morning Forum,

You may have heard the story about a child in kindergarten who was very serious about what she was drawing. When the teacher asked her about it, the child said it was a picture of God. The teacher said "But nobody knows what God looks like." The child said " Well, they will now!"

It took many centuries before artists settled on the image of Jesus as we know it today. Even more time passed before an image of God was attempted. In early paintings or illustrations, God would be represented by only a hand jutting out from a cloud or extending down from the top of a painting. When artists finally did represent God, they portrayed him as an old man. The origin of this might be that God was described as being "ancient of days" in the Book of Daniel (7:9).

In paintings, when a prophet or apostle was depicted, often an object or symbol associated with something they did or experienced would be included as a means of identifying who was being represented. When a figure is not painted directly from life and an identifying symbol is not included, we have only a title to tell us who the artist was attempting to portray.

Nine years ago, I was asked to comment on a sculpture of Jeremiah. Of course, neither the sculptor, Donatello, nor any of his contemporaries knew Jeremiah's physical appearance...but now we do! Or at least we know Donatello's interpretation. Attached is Donatello/s Jerimiah with my comments.

When Michelangelo painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Jeremiah was included. Unlike Donatello's interpretation, Michelangelo's Jeremiah is a bearded old man. I have attached Michelangelo's Jeremiah (without comment) to this message.

~Hovak Najarian

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*Prophet Jeremiah*, marble, 1423-26, Donatello, c.1386-1466

Commentary by Hovak Najarian



In the fifteenth century great changes were underway in Italy and Donatello (Donato di Niccolo di Betto Bardi) played a major role in developments that took place in sculpture. Throughout the Romanesque and Gothic periods, sculpture tended to be an adjunct to architecture; it was stylized and sometimes column-like. Often it was in the form of important saints and notable church figures lined in rows at the entrances of cathedrals or placed in niches built into interior or exterior walls. Much of it was in relief and seemed incapable of escaping from a wall or column. Even when it was free-standing (not in relief) it was placed usually in a space that was surrounded closely and it was seldom created to be seen “in the round.” While liberating sculpture from its subordinate role in architecture, Donatello became the most celebrated sculptor of the Early Renaissance and an influence on almost all sculpture that followed.

At age seventeen Donatello worked with Lorenzo Ghiberti during the time the first set of doors for the Baptistery of Florence Cathedral was being conceived. After a short time in the studio of Ghiberti, he went to Rome with Filippo Brunelleschi to “treasure hunt.” Their treasure was the information they gleaned from the pieces of sculpture and architecture found among the ruins of Roman buildings. This visit to Rome affected the future work of both men. Donatello departed from his early training in stylized late Gothic sculpture and Brunelleschi went on to discover linear perspective and to build the magnificent dome of Florence Cathedral (known as Il Duomo).

In Greek sculpture the gods and goddesses were given idealized proportions; their bodies and faces were not those of real people. The Romans also made sculpture that depicted their gods but they carved portraits of their leaders as well. These portraits depicted the sitter’s individual characteristics and

expressions. When Donatello left Gothic stylistic elements, he did not follow the Greek model of ideal proportions. Instead, like Roman portraits, he brought a sense of realism and naturalism into his work. This naturalism is evidenced in two marble figures in adjacent niches carved for the Bell Tower (designed by Giotto) of Florence Cathedral.



Donatello, Jeremiah (detail)



Donatello, Habakkuk(?)



Florence Cathedral and Bell Tower



Giotto's Bell Tower (detail with niches)



The two prophets, Jeremiah and a bald figure dubbed “Zuccone” (pumpkin head) and believed to depict Habakkuk, each stand with loose informal toga-like wraps hanging from their shoulders. Both are beardless and, in their characteristics they are like Roman orators; not like Greek gods. The Zuccone is in a relaxed stance but rather undignified with parted lips and an almost quizzical expression. Jeremiah is in a similar stance but has a full head of hair and a face that carries a sense of strength. His firm jaw and tight lips convey seriousness and inner thoughts. Yet his large eyes seem to express sympathy, gentleness, and perhaps even sorrow. Donatello portrays Jeremiah as a real person; a human with whom we can identify, not as an impersonal idealized figure or as a bearded old prophet of long ago.

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