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The Secondhand Origins of Michelangelo's David

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They say there's nothing new under the sun, that all ideas have been formulated – and reformulated – countless times. In an age when we are bombarded by content, it's telling that we are insatiably drawn to the 'classics' as a purer form of engagement with art. We seek out recognizable paintings, sculptures and buildings of times gone by. But we have a tendency to think of masterpieces sprung fully formed out of their creators' minds. Little do we realize their ideas were subjected to the same cycle of change, development, and refinement. The Renaissance was an era bursting with creation, and that inevitably means *re*-creation.

It may be one of the most famous sculptures in the world, but [Michelangelo's iconic statue of David](#) was far from immune to this process.

Michelangelo's David: From damaged marble to flawless masterpiece

When Michelangelo began work on what would become one of the most iconic statues in the world, the odds were already against him. As far back as 1464 – the idea for a monumental sculpture to guard the [Florence Cathedral](#) was formulated and its creation in the works. The Opera del Duomo, made up of members from The Wool Guild of Florence (who were a *big* deal during the time), selected sculptor Agostino di Duccio to undertake this mammoth task.

But the project was fraught with trouble from the get-go. Though he was gifted with a chisel, Agostino wasn't as skilled when it came to selecting materials. The block of marble he chose – hewn from a mountainside in Carrara – was already damaged before the project began. Not only that but the stone was so large that it took a total of two years and a motley crew of men, oxen and animals to transport it to the city of [Florence](#).

Though the people marvelled at the marble once it got there, the problems plaguing it followed it to the city. Its sculptor was unused to working on such a large scale and eventually abandoned the project, but not before making some unrepairable alterations to the block of marble by starting to carve the feet and legs. Antonio Rossellino was the next sculptor to take up the challenge but he too was forced to admit defeat, citing that the marble's imperfections made it too fragile to work with.

David in his current home in the [Accademia Gallery](#) in Florence

For 25 years the marble lay unused – impressive yet imperfect. It would take a mix of skill, impetuosity and daring to take on a project of this size.

In 1501 when he was just 26 years old, [Michelangelo](#) di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni was already a highly regarded and well-paid sculptor. Two years previously he had finished the Pietà for French Cardinal Jean de Bilhères and earned instant recognition from Florence's elite.

This made him an attractive prospect for the David commission and soon, the Wool Guild offered him the task, with the caveat that he must use the original block of marble which even they admitted had been 'roughly hewn'. Undeterred by the fact that he was dealing with a) marble that was unfit for purpose, and b) a commission two previous artists had abandoned, Michelangelo enthusiastically accepted. Despite damage to the marble thanks to his predecessors, Michelangelo worked continuously for two years and unveiled a work that was immediately recognised as a masterpiece of the time.

Fast Facts:

- Michelangelo's David is currently on display in Florence's [Accademia Gallery](#) and is visited by over a million people per year.
- The statue was commissioned by the Overseers of the Office of Works of the Florence Cathedral (or *Opera del Duomo*) who served Michelangelo the official contract on the 16 August 1501.
- David stands at a staggering 17 feet tall (5.16 meters) – three times the size of the average man.
- Michelangelo's David had many predecessors including Donatello and Bernini's, but there are key differences between the three renditions. Bernini's David is lifesize, in the middle of action and a part of the Italian Baroque period, meanwhile, Donatello's statue is carved in Bronze and depicts the moments *after* David's battle with Goliath