

## *Michelangelo's David: Marble or Wool?*

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Many of us are familiar with Michelangelo's *David* - but what many do not know is that this famous sculpture was commissioned by the Florentine Wool Guild. The immense marble sculpture was created in Florence, Italy in the early 16th century. It stands at about 14 feet, and depicts the biblical figure David moments before his fight and eventual victory over Goliath the Giant. David was an important figure for Florence during the Renaissance, as the city strongly identified with the idea of the underdog who eventually overcomes the adversary - a persona that David embodies. The sculpture was originally placed outside of the Town Hall in 1504 as a political symbol, conveying the message that the Florentines were always ready to take on their next enemy, however menacing they may be<sup>1</sup>.



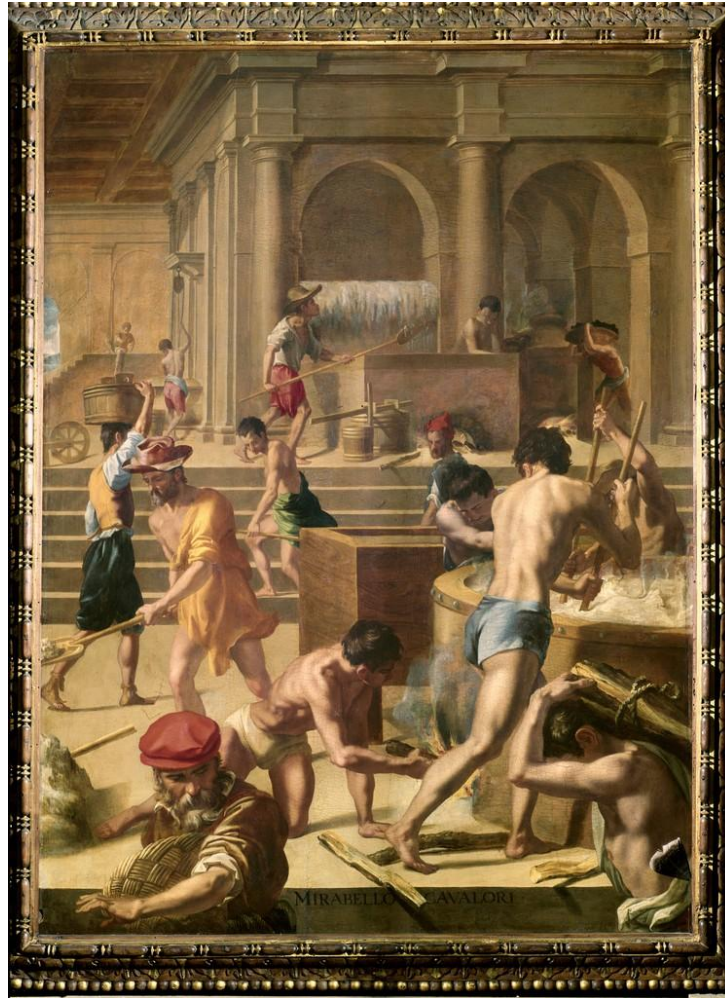
Michelangelo, *David*, 1501-1504 (Figure 1)



Coat of Arms of the Arte della Lana (Figure 2)

The sculpture, which would become one of the most important works of art of all times, was commissioned not by royals, a noble family, or the Pope, but by the Florentine Wool Guild, also known as the *Arte della Lana*<sup>2</sup>. In the Renaissance period, the wool industry grew to be a vital aspect of the Florentine economy. Wool textiles were one of the most important imports and exports in Italy during this time, with the textile industry employing about one-third of the city's population during the 14th century<sup>3</sup>. The wool was typically imported from England because of its superior quality, and after being processed, refined, and dyed in Florence, was traded at a much higher price<sup>4</sup>. In *The Wool Mill* (fig. 3), Mirabello Cavalori paints a scene from within a wool textile mill. The individuals are shown working within the different stages of textile production - washing the wool, sorting and combing, dyeing the wool, and spinning it into yarn. Cavalori depicts all of these processes within one room, however, they actually occurred throughout several different locations - being sent back and forth between the city and countryside<sup>5</sup>. Lastly, though all of the subjects within this painting are men,

women played a very important role in the Florentine wool industry - they were typically the ones spinning and weaving the wool. The textile industry was one of few at the time in which a significant number of both men and women were employed<sup>6</sup>.



Mirabello Cavalori, *The Wool Mill*, 1570-1575 (Figure 3)

The *Arte della Lana* had amassed a great amount of power and wealth during the Renaissance. Together with several other guilds, the *Arte della Lana* formed the *primo popolo*, a governing body that aimed to protect the interests of the people. Towards the 14th century the *popolo* had a strong influence over the politics and economy of Florence. The guild oversaw the activities of the craftsmen, merchants, taxation of guild members, and the quality of the finished textiles<sup>7</sup>. Another organization that the *Arte della Lana* presided over was the *Opera del Duomo*, the Cathedral Board of Works. The *Opera* was responsible for construction, administration, and upkeep of the Florence Cathedral, as well as any related commissions<sup>8</sup>. In 1501 the *Opera* commissioned Michelangelo to create the statue

of *David*, after years of trying to find an artist willing to work on such a large piece of marble. *David* was originally meant to be part of twelve sculptures decorating the buttresses of the Florence Cathedral, but due in part to some political reasons it was decided that the statue would be better positioned in front of the Palazzo della Signoria - the Town Hall. With this change in location and ownership, the *Opera del Duomo* was relieved of their financial obligations towards *David*, handing over their responsibility to the Signoria<sup>9</sup>.

It may be hard to imagine that one humble material had such a strong influence over an entire region's economy, but wool and wool textiles were just that important. The industry generated great wealth for the city, which was often used to commission new cathedrals, paintings, and sculptures.

#### Endnotes

1. Monika Schmitter, "The High Renaissance in Italy: A Balance of Real and Ideal." (lecture, Survey: Ancient to Medieval Art, University of Massachusetts Amherst, December 6, 2021)
2. Gene A. Brucker, "Economy." in *Florence: The Golden Age, 1138-1737* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998) 68–72.
3. Brucker, *Florence: The Golden Age*, 266;  
"Florence in the 14th Century." *Encyclopædia Britannica* online, Last modified April 13, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy/Florence-in-the-14th-century>.
4. Dixon, E. "The Florentine Wool Trades in the Middle Ages: A Bibliographical Note." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 12, 1898, pp. 151–179.
5. Brucker, *Florence: The Golden Age*, 105
6. Richard T. Lindholm, "Time For It All: Women in the Renaissance Florentine Wool Industry" In *Quantitative Studies of the Renaissance Florentine Economy and Society* (2017): 211–34, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1jktqrn.15>.
7. Brucker, *Florence: The Golden Age*, 72.
8. Tacconi, Marica. "After 1310: the Service Books of Santa Maria Del Fiore." In *Cathedral and Civic Ritual in Late Medieval and Renaissance Florence: The Service Books of Santa Maria Del Fiore* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005) 137.
9. Joost Keizer, "Giuliano Salviati, Michelangelo and the 'David'." *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 150, no. 126 (2008):, 664–668.