

## 2016 Higher Level Question 9

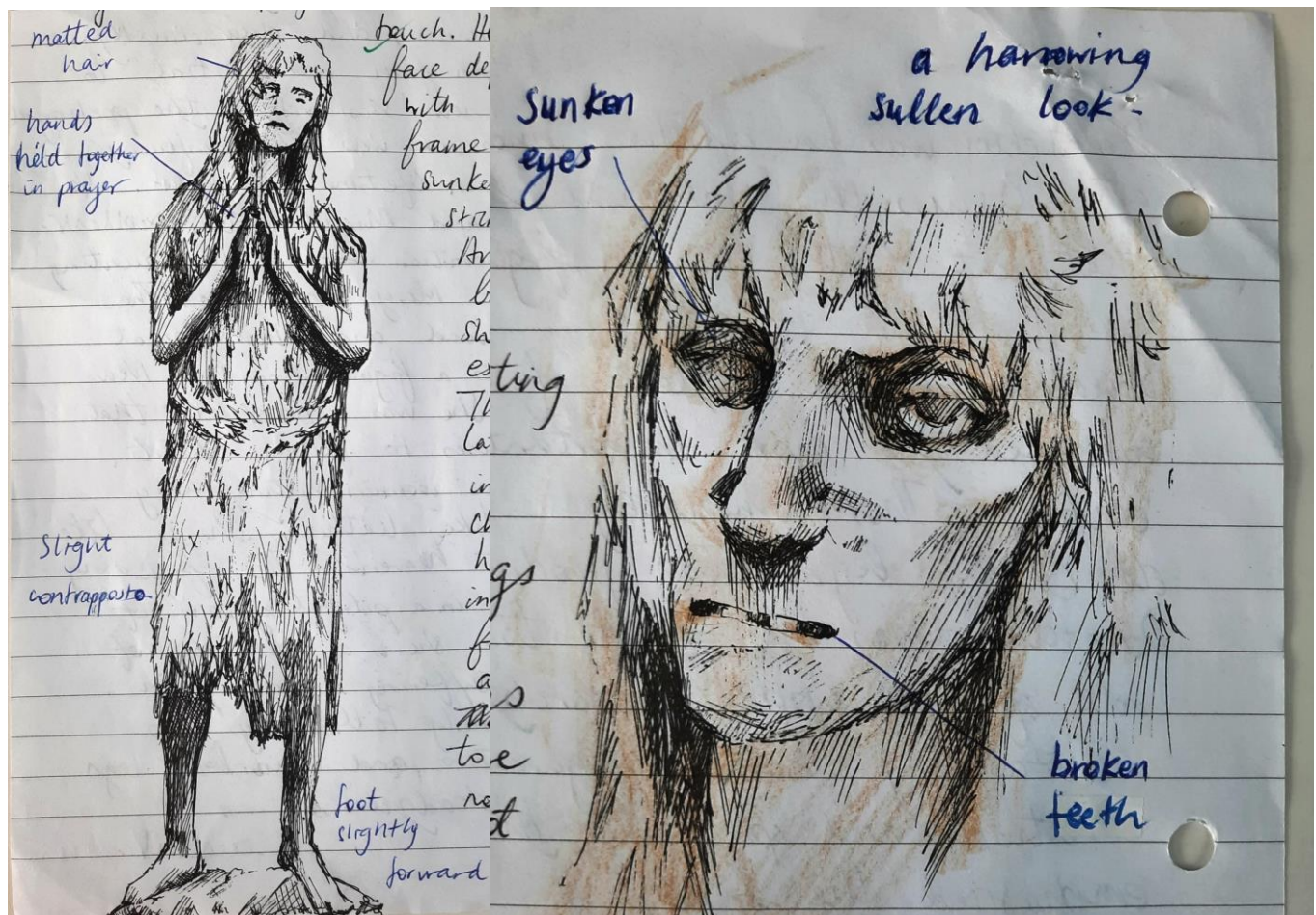
***Donatello (1386 - 1466) was an artistic innovator who created dramatic works of art. Discuss this statement with reference to “Mary Magdalene”, illustrated on the accompanying sheet. In your answer refer to the subject matter, composition, treatment of the human figure and the period in which his work was produced. AND Name and briefly describe one other work by Donatello. Illustrate your answer.***

Donatello was a student of Ghiberti, who at the time was considered to be the most important sculptor of the early 15th century. This completely changed when the young Donato di Bardi began to produce his own extraordinary work. Donatello was the first to break from the traditional role of sculpture as architectural decoration. He introduced freestanding human figures and expressed man's individuality, emotions and spirituality through his sculptures. Donatello emphasised the beauty of humanism and drew inspiration directly from life. The study of the human form was a central focus of his works. Through his innovative ideas, a new sensitivity was introduced to the portrayal of the human figure. His work became a huge influence on many artists, both in his lifetime and later on. Artists such as his mentor Ghiberti, Masaccio and even Michelangelo took inspiration from his dramatic works of art.

### Mary Magdalene

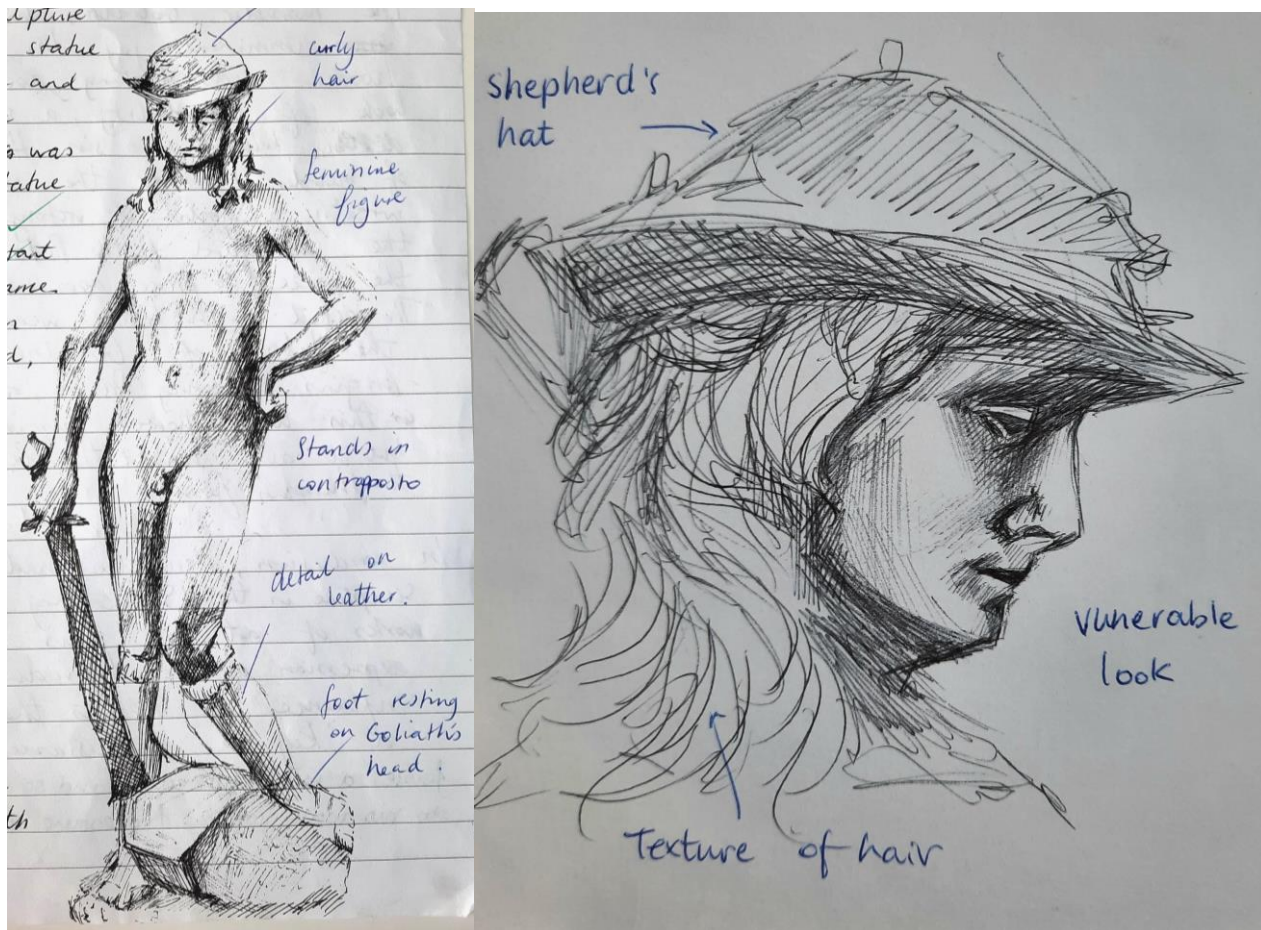
An example of his artistic innovation is seen in the haunting sculpture of Mary Magdalene. The figure is carved from poplar wood and shows great texture. Mary Magdalene is a figure from the New Testament of the Bible. She was a prostitute who decided to repent her sins and follow the teachings of Christ. Donatello depicts her as a withered woman wasting away from severe fasting. The harrowing figure is slightly bent over in a pitiful gesture of grace, like a flickering flame pointing to heaven. Her hands are joined in prayer but do not touch. The slender figure is extremely tall, nearly two meters in height. The long torso and thin bony legs emphasise her suffering and convey an impression of unsteadiness. Mary stands in contrapposto with her feet apart. One of her feet is placed slightly forward suggesting subtle movement. She is dressed in tattered rags or some interpret it as the extensions of her hair which hangs limply from her

skeletal frame. A weathered belt loosely encloses her midsection. Donatello depicts her as a once beautiful woman with high cheekbones and a slender frame but is now filled with hollow sunken eyes and thin frail bones sticking out from her collar. An open mouth reveals broken teeth and a sense that she is crying out for help. Her face shows intense agony and suffering. The statue was once painted and gilded but now only traces of the sad blue eyes stare out from hollow sockets. In a timeless way, she is a reminder of the inevitable tragedy and embodies the physical representation of human suffering and pain.



This is one of Donatello's later works, produced around 1453. It is interesting to note that he chose to place emphasis on the upper half of the body instead of adhering to anatomical correctness. He enlarges her arms in prayer and Mary's wrinkled face in an attempt to convey greater emotion. It makes this piece difficult to look at because we are not used to being shown the "ugly" side of human nature, particularly women. However, Mary Magdalene remains a vibrant work of art. Even to this day, she still has the power to stir our deepest emotions.

## David



“David” is another dramatic piece of sculpture by Donatello. The statue stands at 158.2 cm and is cast in bronze using the Lost Wax Method. This was the first life-sized nude statue produced in c. 1000 years, making it one of the most important sculptures of the Early Renaissance. The statue depicts a scene from the Old Testament where David, a heroic shepherd boy, kills the giant Goliath. Most artists favoured the action and moment when David claims victory, however, Donatello chooses to portray the moments after the battle. David is depicted as a vulnerable, beautiful youth who overcomes evil with the power of God on his side. Donatello captures his youthful beauty perfectly. He stands in a contrapposto with one leg on the head of Goliath. The gentle “S” shape of the body echoes classical statues but the slim youth is quite different to the powerful nudes characteristic of ancient Greek statues. The casual contrapposto stance is graceful, however, the left hand supporting Goliath’s oversized sword caresses his hip making it also very sensual and effeminate. The absence of muscles and overall roundness of the figure also reflects that. The detail on the leather wear of David’s foot and the helmet of Goliath’s reveal

Donatello's goldsmith origins. Even though David was supposed to have overcome the monster Goliath, his face does not express imminent joy. His furrowed brow and hooded lids looking downwards give him a look of vulnerability, a silent acknowledgement that killing is a sin. He does not celebrate the act of murder, just as the piece does not celebrate the struggle for victory. Portraying David, a heroic biblical figure in this way showed his inner strength and power, in addition to the beauty and sensuality of the human form.

In conclusion, Donatello made radical changes to the art of sculpting during the 15th century through his dramatic works of art. His focus on humanism and the expression of the individual was a big influence on artists that followed and therefore a key player in the development of Renaissance art.