

## Grades 8–12

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## Modeling Power: Considering The Meaning Of Gesture Through Andrea Del Verrocchio's *David*

### Georgia QCC:

#### Visual Arts:

- Ceramics and Pottery: Artistic Skills and Knowledge: Creating, Performing, Producing
- Critical Analysis and Aesthetic Understanding: Historical and Cultural Context
- Art History and Criticism: Connections
- Art History and Criticism: Historical Context

#### Social Studies:

- Humanities: Renaissance Humanism

#### Language Arts:

- Reading/Literature

Multiple Intelligence: Kinesthetic, Aesthetic, Narrative, Experiential, Interpersonal

Targeted grade levels:

Grades 8–12

(lesson can be adapted for other grades)

### Goal

Students will increase their understanding of the meaning of gesture in art and experiment with ways to communicate through use of body language in art.

### Objectives

Students will engage in critical observation, description, and comparison of large scale figurative sculpture. Students can consider the historical context of a work of art, particularly the civic importance of sculpture in the Italian Renaissance. Students can practice modeling the human figure in clay.

### Materials

- slides or pictures of figurative sculptures are helpful, but not necessary
- paper and pencils
- a small square of clay (basic terra cotta clay is best, any self-hardening clay would work) on a waxed paper or plastic surface for each student
- tools to work clay, including armature wire if desired

This project works best over two consecutive class periods of 45 minutes to 1 hour or one 2 to 3 hour session.

## 1. Motivation

Terminology for lesson:

*bozzetti* — refers to a preliminary (often three dimensional) sketch that clearly communicates sculptors intention

*maquette* — similar to bozzetti but often looser, more rough

*mass* — a body of matter without definite shape

*The Quattrocento* — art historical term referring to the late 15th century development of Renaissance art

*Giorgio Vasari* — artist, architect, and writer best known for his history of Italian artists first published in 1550 as *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*

*working drawings* — structural drawings made to help organize form when creating a sculpture

In the early Florentine Renaissance sculptors competed for prestigious public commissions funded by wealthy patrons, such as the Medici. Small maquettes of bronze or clay were made to win commissions, communicate the artist's intentions to his patron, and to work out problems in the early stage of development of a project.

According to Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*, Verrocchio's small bronze sculptures were highly praised.

2. Lesson can start with having students assume a posture of power, accomplishment, and confidence. Students can take a few minutes to think about their poses and ask them to keep this pose for less than a minute. It may help students to close their eyes when assuming a position to avoid distraction.

Ask students to think about their poses and ask questions such as:

What did it feel like to keep the pose?

Where were their centers of gravity?

What supported their body weight?

Where were their shoulders, hips, and head in the pose?

Consider any shared physical elements between poses and ask students to refine their position to communicate the their intentions best.

3. Directly after having assumed a pose, students can make **working drawings** of that pose. Ask them to reassume the position when in doubt and pay careful attention to placement of the shoulders, spine, and hips. These drawings can be as simple as stick figures, but should contain enough information to plan the sculptural model. Detail is not necessary at this stage.

4. Assign students the task of communicating gesture with a small terra cotta **maquette**. Using hand building techniques students can work from their drawings and from memory. Challenge students to consider the areas that are masses and those that are voids. Encourage students to revise the pose they chose for visual strength, turning their maquettes into **bozzetti** by smoothing forms and adding essential details. Note that if an armature is not used, figures should be small and lightweight to avoid falling. If an armature is used, pieces should not be fired.
5. Set up finished sculptures for students to critique. Ask students to group sculptures by similar poses. Remind students that the goal of the bozzetti were to communicate power. Which sculptures are successful and why?

**Extensions:**

1. As a group, elementary students can discuss a story with multiple characters and settings. Each student can make a model of one of these characters or places using a self-hardening clay, such as Crayola's Model Magic or salt clay (see recipe in resources section of this lesson). The finished parts could be assembled in the classroom to make a visual version of the story. Students can be challenged to change the story in some way when retelling it in model form.
2. Middle school students can discuss the purpose of public sculpture by critiquing sculptures around the community and planning a proposed sculpture.
  - A. Through brainstorming, students in a civics course can consider a place in town which would benefit from public sculpture. When is there a civic need for sculpture? Does the community need a memorial, a place of reflection, or a unifying center? When agreed upon a need, students can draft a request for proposals which clearly states the need of the community, the space where this proposed sculpture or architectural form would be placed, and what artists should submit. Students in the civics class could plan a process for jurying submitted models and plans and displaying successful plans.
  - B. Art students could be assigned to answer this call with models and plans.
3. High school students can consider the importance of the development of the Italian Renaissance, specifically that of Renaissance Florence, by writing short papers on artists, architects, and writers and comparing information these individuals have in common (shared patrons, shared subject matter).
  - A. Students can consider such artists as Andrea del Verrocchio, Donatello, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Sandro Botticelli, Filippino Lippi, Paolo Ucello, Luca della Robbia, and Lorenzo Ghiberti. Students can consider architects like Filippo Brunelleschi and Leon Batiste Alberti, or such writers as Dante, Giorgio Vasari, and Machievelli.
  - B. How do all of these artists, writers, and architects approach the human figure, mind, and soul?

**Resources (please double check all web sites before using):**

*Basic recipe for salt clay:*

Stirring constantly, combine 2 cups of salt with 2/3 cups of water in a small pan over low heat for about 4 minutes (do not boil). In a separate container mix 1 cup cornstarch and 1/2 cup cold water. Remove salt and water mixture from heat and quickly add cornstarch and water mixture. Stir. Consistency should be that of a thick paste, if not, place salt clay back on the stove over a low heat and stir for about a minute.

Salt clay feels a lot like bread dough and can be kneaded until it is a smooth lump. Store salt clay in plastic or airtight container and use within 1 week for best results.

*More information about Andrea del Verrocchio:*

- The webmuseum has images of Verrocchio's paintings and sculptures at <http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/v/verocchi/index.html>.
- See <http://easyweb.easynet.co.uk/giorgio.vasari/verrocc/verroc.htm> for images and excerpts on Verrocchio's life.

*Renaissance writings and information online:*

- Selections from Vasari's *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* is online at <http://easyweb.easynet.co.uk/giorgio.vasari/>
- Art historian Chris Witcombe has an extensive site of art history related internet resources, for his list of Italian Renaissance resources see, <http://witcombe.sbc.edu/ARTHLinks2.html#Italy15>.