

DONATELLO IN TIME

[by John H. Lienhard](#)

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Today, we ask: Of an age, or of all time?. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

In an article about [Donatello](#), art historian Kenneth Clark reaches a conclusion that opens up a wider issue. Clark says that the more famous [Bellini](#), who followed Donatello, was an artist for his times -- just as [Delacroix](#) has little place beyond the nineteenth century. But Florentine sculptor Donatello, whose name is *not* on every tongue today, was, in fact, an artist for *all* time.

He was born into the [post-plague late Middle Ages](#) -- a serious time. Art floundered as people struggled to rebuild. Life was more capital-intensive and more high-pressure than it'd ever been. It was Donatello's sculpture that finally caught the gravity of the times. His figures are wonderfully human and fearfully intense.

We see John the Baptist gazing with fervent perplexity at a world he means to change. Mary Magdalene is aging, emaciated, clad in rags, and infinitely noble. Clark sees seeds of the late-19th-century sculptor [Rodin](#) being sown here. This is renaissance humanism in its cradle. Donatello transmutes the themes of his age into an understanding of the human lot that serves any age.

Clark gives other examples. [Vermeer](#) was a great artist, but he belonged in his own seventeenth century, while his contemporary [Rembrandt](#) speaks to the needs of any age.

So let's move beyond art to other creativity. Science, for example, proceeds like art in a [sequence of revolutions](#). Science never looks the same after a revolution, yet it always retains some of what was once there. The Donatellos of science are the people who can still be seen in the science of later eras.

I offer you [Robert Boyle](#) -- the most influential scientist of the seventeenth century. He touched every aspect of science, asked the right questions, and was a huge formative agent. Yet little of his science survives. He was the scientist of his times, but the work of his contemporary Isaac Newton is still foundational today, while Boyle's is not.



[Louis Agassiz](#) was the Robert Boyle of nineteenth-century science. Agassiz worked on every front of biological science and justly deserves to be called great. He was woven into the fabric of his age, yet we find few fragments of Agassiz in our world. His contemporary [Charles Darwin](#) commanded nothing remotely resembling his stature. Yet Darwin's work is timeless.

So I offer you an odd meter-stick for measuring stature. Bellini is better known to us than Donatello. But Donatello holds as much meaning for us as for the people who first saw his work. Put that measuring-stick to your own heroes and see how they fare, but be cautious. I wouldn't take one stitch away from Bellini, Boyle, Vermeer or Agassiz. Without its formative agents, any age would be amorphous. The transcendent figures around us will serve our *progeny*. But we still live *here*. And I suspect that our lives are inevitably shaped by greatness of a slightly lower order.

I'm John Lienhard, at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

Clark, K. *The Art Of Humanism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970, 1981, 1983. Chapter 1, Donatello and the Tragic Sense in the Quattrocento.