Ghiberti’s Baptistry Doors (3Rd Set) Essay, Research Paper

The work of art that I chose to do my research paper on was Ghiberti’s 3rd set of Baptistry Doors. These doors are known as “The Gates of Paradise.” The doors were commissioned in 1427; they were finally completed and installed in 1452 at the eastern entrance of the Baptistry of San Giovanni. The replication of the doors is located in San Francisco, at Grace Cathedral. The doors consist of ten square panels, gilded together. Surrounding the panels are small heads, floral motifs, and niches that contain miniature statues of Prophets.

Leonardo Bruni created the iconographic formula, taken from stories of the Old Testament. Ghiberti followed the plans and created 10 scenes ranging from the Creation of Adam and Eve to the reign of King Solomon. The top left panel is the scene of the Creation, Temptation and Expulsion of Adam and Eve. The top right panel is the scene of Cain murdering Abel. The next panel is of Noah and the Flood; then Abraham sacrificing Isaac; Jacob and Esau; Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers; Moses receiving the Ten Commandments; Joshua and the battle of Jericho; David and Goliath; and finally Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

All the panels were gilded in gold, giving them a uniform and seamless perspective. Ghiberti was a master of using perspective in his works. The attention to detail is apparent when you examine closely the sculpted figures in each panel. They all seem three-dimensional. The way in which Ghiberti sculpted each figure, gives them a shadow against the background which is key to the three-dimensional perspective of each figure. The way in which the panels were positioned on the doors is interesting. Instead of using smaller panels, which would allow for more scenes, Ghiberti chose to use large panels that are easy to see.

The miniature figures and heads surrounding the ten panels is another interesting point. The full body figures are Prophets. There are 20 prophets surrounding the panels. Most likely they were also taken from the Old Testament. Each of these prophets is in the motion of some type of action. Their action is probably what they were known for and why they became Prophets. Again, Ghiberti gives each a three-dimensional pose. He is past the old ways of symmetry and each figure looks realistic in pose. They have a weight shifted stance that adds to the realism of each. The detail on each is also magnificent. The folds in the garment are clearly depicted. The way the clothes drape on the bodies is also realistic. They gather more on one side as opposed to the other side. The way the bodies limbs press underneath the garments also show great attention to detail.

There are 24 heads also placed on the outside of the panels. The people that these heads depict are unknown. The only head that is known is of Ghiberti himself. His head is located at the lower right corner of the Jacob and Esau panel. As you can tell by his self-portrayal, Ghiberti was a man about 30-40 years of age. Again, Ghiberti chose to pay great attention to detail for these heads. The way the heads were fashioned is like the techniques used by the Romans. Their heads come out of a circular ring, and part of their upper body is visible. The ways in which the heads are sculpted give them a background shadow that adds to their three-dimensionalism. Its been argued that the people that these heads represent friends of Ghiberti.

The perspective used in each of the panels is unique. They all use linear perspective, which Ghiberti became known for. Like Massacio, Ghiberti used the perspective of building and how they relate to certain viewpoints. As the figures and buildings recede into the background, they all have a certain detail of spatial depth. The figures and buildings in the background are considerably smaller than those in the foreground are. The scenery in the background adds to the sense of depth in the panels. If you look at a certain panel, the horizon extends well past the current scene in each panel. Ghiberti knew how to use the vanishing point and could manipulate it to give each panel a certain view of the scene. The perspective of each panel adds to the three-dimensionality of each one. The way the buildings are sculpted is like those in Massacio’s paintings. Each panel holds a certain story of the Old Testament. In each panel, they’re different scenes of each story. Characters in the panels appear in different places, so that the whole story can be told instead of a particular scene.

The panel of Jacob and Esau is one of the more interesting ones in the set. In this panel, Ghiberti tells the story of Esau and his son Jacob. Esau is choosing one of his sons that will take his place. Jacob’s mother was able to get Jacob into Esau’s room while he was about to choose his successor. Esau eventually chooses Jacob to take his place. Jacob and Esau are in many locations in the panel. In the panel, you can see Esau’s birth, Jacob talking with Esau, Esau hunting, and Esau’s mother talking with Jacob and also Jacob giving Esau his birthright. The building in the middle of the panel are interesting because of its use of perspective and how it recedes into the background. The building is an open hallway with a stairs. Columns with Corinthian capitals support the arches of the hallway. On top of the arches is a balcony. The ways in which the floor tiles are sculpted lead to the belief that there is a vanishing point that they all point to. Again, Ghiberti uses background scenery to add to the perspective of depth. The different scenes in the panel also add to the uniqueness of the door panels. In this panel, off in the distance, on the right, Esau can be seen hunting on a hill. On the left side of this panel, is the scene of Esau’s birth. In the middle of the panel, Jacob is seen talking to Esau. On the right foreground, Jacob is bestowing upon Esau his birthright. The figures in this scene are sculpted in the subtractive method. Ghiberti took great care to make sure that each figure was fully represented in detail. The garment on each of the figures is realistic in the way they drape across the bodies. The folds of the cloth add to the sense of realism. You can tell that Ghiberti understood how clothes flow on a body. Each figures’ limbs can be seen pressing against the garments, allowing the viewer to see how the limbs bend and stretch underneath the clothes.

Another interesting panel, is the one of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. Ghiberti uses the horizon to add to depth of the panel. It seems as though the background extends indefinitely to the horizon. The tents in the background are shown as progressively smaller objects. This makes them seem as though they are far away from the scene in the panel. Each of the trees is of a different size, giving the sense of depth and distance from the viewer. The scene of Moses on top of Mt. Sinai, could have been done better. It seems that Mt. Sinai is more of a hill than a mountain. Ghiberti could have made Moses smaller in size or maybe the crowd below smaller in relative size. The depiction of God handing Moses the Ten Commandments is unique. God is shown as some sort of flowing cloud floating with a convoy of angels. Two angels are playing trumpets to sound the coming of God. The crowd below is seen praying and also some are cowering before God and this holy spectacle. The way in which Ghiberti chose to carve each figure and object in this scene is interesting. The figures in the foreground received a lot of attention to their detail and the way they seem to stick out of the panel. The buildings in the back don’t have much detail in their carving. They don’t stick out as much as those figures in the foreground.

The scene of David and Goliath is also noteworthy. In the lower portion of the panel, David is seen chopping Goliath’s head off. The rest of the panel deals with the battle against the Philistines. It’s interesting how Ghiberti chose to portray David. According to the story, David is in his early teens. In the panel, David seems as though he has the body of an adult. The expression of the soldiers watching David kill Goliath is dealt with great detail. They are in shock and awe of this sight. Toward the right of the panel, the battle rages on as the two armies fight. The figures seem as though in motion, because of the way they are carved and the pose they are in. Again, Ghiberti uses the technique of linear perspective in this panel. As the viewer looks toward the background, the images and figures seem to fade. This gives the objects in the background, such as the city, a sense of distance in relation to the battle in the foreground. The armor of each soldier is in great detail. You can see the different folds of leather of the soldiers’ skirts. The multitude of figures in the scene is handled well. Ghiberti was able to carve many heads and helmets onto the panel to give the appearance of many figures.

Overall, the 3rd set of Baptistry Doors, also known as the “Gates of Paradise”, are a magnificent work of art. Even to this day, these doors are considered a masterpiece. They represent many of the styles and techniques used in the Renaissance. The original panels are now in the Museum of the Opera del Duomo. Ghiberti chose to use the gold highlights to give the panels a precious finish. These panels are well known for the use of perspective and pictorial effects. Ghiberti was a master of his art and created something unmatchable even today.

34e