

Ⓜ OBSERVATION: How to make a 'David'

Moulding minds

Florence

A workshop in Florence reveals the mysteries of classical sculpture. Our correspondent gets hands-on to see it all take shape.

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Occupying a former church since 1860, the Galleria Romanelli, one of Europe's oldest surviving classical sculpture workshops, has been making recreations of famous statues in plaster for generations. Crammed with hundreds of busts and figures, the space is home to Napoleons and Dantes, Greek gods and a 4-metre-high copy of Giambologna's *Neptune*. And everywhere – this is Florence, after all – is Michelangelo's *David*: *David's* giant and dashing head, *David* in miniature, *David's* eye, *David's* hand, foot and torso.

These sculptures take shape in the hands of fifth-generation owner Raffaello Romanelli, who is preparing to carve a mythological scene from Ovid when MONOCLE visits. As I peer over his shoulder, Romanelli strokes bits of clay onto a board, then drags a wooden ruler across his incipient creation, scraping it smooth with a dancer's full-body allongé to create a tablet. "It's slow work but I like to think of Ghiberti taking 20 years to sculpt his doors," says Romanelli, his hands caked in grey clay.

I am here to make my own sculpture. Galleria Romanelli offers courses from three-hour intensives to weekly sessions for more serious students. "They're designed to teach



1. The eyes have it
2. Carving a niche
3. Work in progress
4. Nose to the grindstone
5. Owner Raffaello Romanelli
6. Completed sculptures



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you to make with your hands everything that you can see with your eyes," says Romanelli. "We welcome everyone who'd like to engage with art, teaching students the basic grammar of sculpture." You learn by copying the great masters. The first step is Michelangelo's *David*, naturally. It is to be approached by novices in fragments; in my case, his nose.

A sculptor like Romanelli works in clay to create a model by adding material and shaping it with fingers, palms and a tool with a loop of wire at its end. The clay model is then covered in silicone to create a mould for casting liquid plaster or molten bronze. When working with marble, pantographs (the mechanical linking of two pens so that one can produce exactly the same movement as the other) do some of the work, though Michelangelo chiselled his *David* with his hands.

My lump of clay sits formless on the wooden board next to the supple plaster nose I'm attempting to copy. Yet, after many steps of rotating the wood and working the clay in one direction at a time, eventually, something emerges that looks just about nose-like. I step back to see the two noses side by side from a distance. There's a reassuring process to all this – an accessible faith in the mechanics of craft. "The secret of this work is to keep changing perspective," says Romanelli.

Meanwhile, a neighbouring student, playing hooky from his job in finance, has nearly finished a figure of a seated man. "This place is a parallel world to the one we live in," he says, referring to technology, the frenzy of modernity and office jobs. "Here, I enter the world of the *bottega* ["workshop"]. When I exit, I see things in a different way; I look at how I could sculpt them."

I try to thin the nostril walls of my clay nose and remove a bit of the nasal root to make it more delicate but it still looks as though my *David* has suffered a few punches to the face. "Grace takes practice," says Romanelli, smiling reassuringly. But I realise that I am staring at his nose – an Ancient Roman-style prominent triangle nose – and thinking about how I would make it in clay. After I leave, everyone's noses appear novel. I imagine feeling their contours, and think of how I would carve them out. After one class in Romanelli's workshop, I am already envisioning the world anew, its three-dimensional forms now more fathomable and unmediated. All excellent subjects for sculpture. — Ⓜ

