

Throughout history, artists have tried to capture the struggle of man over his ignoble self. Two works of art in the Dallas Museum of Art collection convey this theme: the *Durga Mahishasuramardini*, a sculpture from 12th-century India, and *Ugolino and His Sons*, a French sculpture by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux from the year 1860. Through their references to moralistic stories and use of symbols, the artists of these sculptures depict the eternal struggle of good and evil.

The *Durga Mahishasuramardini* sculpture demonstrates the Hindu belief in the dual nature of mankind and the necessity to transcend the material world in order to achieve enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> In it, the sculptor wishes to convey that humans should be above lowbrow, benighted thoughts and actions in order to become enlightened. He does this through a depiction of a popular religious story in order to make it accessible. This story is that of the battle between the goddess Durga and the buffalo-demon Mahisha. The sculpture depicts the climax of the battle, when the head of the buffalo is severed and Mahisha appears from its neck as a man with a sword and shield.<sup>2</sup>

Durga's face is calm and serene demonstrating that she is enlightened and not troubled by earthly, materialistic matters. Durga's foot is on the buffalo, which represents the arrogance and hubris of mankind. This intimates that one should control these flaws and not allow them to take over oneself. The demon Mahisha appears from the buffalo's severed head, symbolizing that evil lurks hidden in human emotion and action. The artist places the buffalo and demon on the lower segment of the sculpture, indicating their petty and materialistic influence that inhibits mankind from reaching the upper level of enlightenment with the gods. The energetic activity of the demon and the buffalo contrast with the calm and serene Durga, who, as she defeats her opponent, exemplifies the theme of order over chaos and enlightenment over ignorance.

The sculpture *Ugolino and His Sons* by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux vividly portrays the grief and anguish of Ugolino when presented with the dilemma of eating his own children.<sup>3</sup> The real-life Ugolino della Gherardesca, an Italian nobleman in the 13th century, was imprisoned with his sons for treason and left to starve. Additionally, this atrocious figure was featured in Dante's *Inferno*, in which he was banished to hell after devouring his offspring's corpses.<sup>4</sup> He was driven mad with hunger and so his children offered to let him eat their bodies. Carpeaux captures this agonizing and damning moment in which, while chewing on his fingers, Ugolino's children offer themselves up to him as food.

The first features one notices are the head and hands of Ugolino. The starving Ugolino is chewing his fingers with rage, demonstrating his attempt to resist the temptation to commit cannibalism. Additionally, his brow is furrowed and his mouth is upturned. Ugolino is portrayed as a tragic noble, suffering as his sons watch. Tormented by his anguish, they beg that he eat them instead of having to die of starvation. Carpeaux imbues a strong anatomical realism in this piece, showing the twists and turns of the body and the limbs. He attempts to provide as genuinely as possible the extreme emotion of the individuals. In the end, hunger proved stronger than grief and Ugolino could not overcome temptation. Thus, humanity is forever shackled to its limits and is unable to crawl out of the mire of sin.

Are humans inherently good or evil? Every culture has its own view on whether mankind is capable of being something greater than itself. While the *Durga Mahishasuramardini* demonstrates how humanity can improve itself and achieve spiritual enlightenment, *Ugolino and His Sons* depicts mankind's tragic fall and regression to ignorance and despair. The differing outcomes in these works allow one to understand the views of their respective cultures on humanity and its morality.

<sup>1</sup> Nilima Chitgopekar, "Mahishasura," in *Book of Durga* (S.I.: Ubs Publishers, 2009), 13-38.

<sup>2</sup> David Kinsley, "Durga," in *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 95-98.

<sup>3</sup> "Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History," Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux: *Ugolino and His Sons* (67.250), Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/67.250> (accessed November 7, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Lombardo, Steven Botterill, and Anthony Oldcorn, "Canto XXXIII," in *Inferno* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2009), 162.