



Della Robbia: Sculpting with Color in Renaissance Florence

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“A new, useful and most beautiful art...” So Giorgio Vasari, in a 1568 biography of Luca della Robbia (1399/1400–1482), described Luca’s colorful glazed terracotta sculpture. Produced in the family workshop over three generations from the 1440s to about 1530, Della Robbia sculpture became a distinctive creation of Renaissance Florence.

Luca was already a successful marble sculptor when he began to experiment with his new technology around 1440. Modeling and firing forms in carefully prepared riverbed clay, he covered them with special glazes that after a second firing provided a hard, opaque, shining surface. The resulting material, sometimes misunderstood as merely a cheaper and less laborious substitute for marble, had merits of its own. The weather-resistant surfaces with their bright, unfading colors, praised by Vasari as “almost eternal,” enlivened and exalted the humble underlying material. Large white figures in relief, in action against a sky-blue ground, were far easier to read than a painting or a marble relief when seen from a distance in a dimly lit church. Luca had created something luminous, legible, and lasting.

The glazes combined ground glass with oxides of tin and lead for brilliant opaque white, while other metal compounds were added for colors. The



technique recalled not only the colorful pottery known as maiolica, but also the late medieval luxury art of enameled gold sculpture (Luca reportedly started out as a goldsmith). The pure white against deep blue, perhaps inspired by earlier Florentine marble sculpture set onto a ground of blue ceramic tiles, was augmented with green, purple, yellow, and brown. Painting in nuanced shades of glaze could define details such as clouds, plants, or colored stone, as well as figural compositions.

Since clay lends itself to replication in molds taken from three-dimensional models, favorite designs could be reproduced, often with details individualized by hand. The works filled many needs in Renaissance life: statues for church altars (ABOVE); multifigure reliefs for altarpieces; portraits and images of the Madonna and Child for private homes (LEFT); coats of arms to proclaim identity, and colorful reliefs to brighten the architecture of chapels, street facades, courtyards, and villas (TOP). The cheerful fruit and flower garlands that often surrounded an image, celebrating God’s abundant creation while demonstrating intensive nature study, may in some cases have been cast from life.

Luca passed down his methods to his nephew and collaborator Andrea (1435–1525). Competition emerged

around 1480 when the Buglioni workshop began to emulate Della Robbia methods, with mixed success. Five of Andrea’s sons continued the art form into the mid-sixteenth century. After Luca’s serene, simpler figures, Andrea developed a more elegant naturalism in the 1490s, but also introduced a humbler approach using unglazed clay for flesh areas. Andrea’s son Giovanni pursued a wider range of colors, elaborate detail, and heroic figures, as well as landscape painting in glaze. Another son, Girolamo, worked in France for King Francis I, adapting to different clay and glaze materials. Della Robbia sculpture, appreciated internationally in its own time, in the nineteenth century won the affection of American visitors who sought to bring home something of Renaissance Florence. Most of the works in this first American exhibition of Della Robbia sculpture come from collections in the United States.

The exhibition is organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in association with the National Gallery of Art.

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TOP: Giovanni della Robbia, *Resurrection of Christ*, c. 1520–1525, Brooklyn Museum, Gift of A. Augustus Healy. The conservation of this work was made possible by Marchesi Antinori S.p.A.

ROOM 1

ABOVE, CENTER: Luca della Robbia, *The Visitation*, c.1445, Church of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas, Pistoia. Photograph: Scala/Art Resource, NY

ROOM 3

LEFT: Andrea della Robbia, *Madonna and Child with Cherubim*, c. 1485, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

ROOM 4

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SELECTED SCULPTURES



Andrea della Robbia, *Prudence*, c. 1475, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1921 (21.116). Image © 2017 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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Andrea della Robbia, *Bust of a Boy*, c. 1475, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Courtesy of the Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo. Photograph: Antonio Quattrone

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Luca della Robbia, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1450–1460, Oratory of San Tommaso Aquino, Florence. Photograph: Emanuele Vergari Fotografo, Firenze. Conservation funded by Friends of Florence

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Girolamo della Robbia, *Francis I King of France*, 1529, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of George Blumenthal, 1941 (41.100.245). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Image Source: Art Resource, NY

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Santi Buglioni, *Saint John of Capistrano*, c. 1550, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation. Image © 2015 Museum Associates/LACMA, Licensed by Art Resource, NY

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Luca della Robbia the Younger, *Adoring Angel*, c. 1510–1515, Private collection. Photograph: Bruce Schwarz

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