

The Della Robbia and Their Contemporaries

The Della Robbia family of Florence specialized in tin-glazed terra-cotta sculpture, brilliantly colored and luminous. The technique of decorating *terra-cotta*, or baked clay, with colored glazes originated in ancient Egypt and the Near East. Introduced into Europe about the eleventh century, the method at first figured in the production of utilitarian objects, such as pottery and tiles. With the increasing importation of richly glazed vessels from the Near East and Spain, Italian potters began to perfect the technique in the fifteenth century, developing the elaborately glazed Renaissance earthenware known as *maiolica* (examples are on view in Gallery GN-8 on the ground floor).

In the mid-fifteenth century, the Florentine sculptor Luca della Robbia adapted the technique to the production of sculpture on a monumental scale. Less expensive than stone sculpture but more durable than plaster or unglazed clay, Della Robbia ware gained international popularity. Sculpture from the workshop included outdoor architectural ornaments, furnishings for church interiors, and objects for private devotion.

After Luca's death, the leadership of the Della Robbia workshop descended to his nephew Andrea, and finally to Andrea's son, Giovanni. Although sometimes cast from molds or produced in several variations, reliefs from the Della Robbia studio often received hand finishing, which, when applied to their best designs, resulted in works of the highest quality.



Luca della Robbia
Florentine, about 1400–1482
The Nativity, about 1460

The Nativity, attributed to Luca della Robbia, presents the essentials of the gospel narrative against a simple blue background. Mary and Joseph kneel in adoration of the Christ child, the aged Joseph gripping his staff for support. Above, four angels hover reverently on a bank of blue and white clouds. Jesus, lying in a brown wicker basket, tugs playfully at the fabric of his swaddling clothes as he gazes out at the viewer. The ox and ass examine him eagerly. Characteristic for Della Robbia works, the figures are glazed almost entirely in white. Delicate touches of brown glaze define their eyes.

Glazed terra-cotta, .565 x .479 m (22 1/4 x 18 7/8 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.1.3



Luca della Robbia
Madonna and Child, about 1475

Luca della Robbia was born in Florence, where he may have trained in the workshop of Nanni di Banco. He also worked with Lorenzo Ghiberti on the bronze doors of the Baptistery there. An accomplished sculptor of marble and bronze, Luca is best known today for his colorfully glazed terra-cotta works.

This popular composition by Luca is known as the "Rovezzano Madonna" after the presumed earliest version, still preserved in the church of S. Andrea in the Tuscan village of Rovezzano, near Florence. As a sign of her submission to God's will, Mary sits on a cushion on the ground, in a representation known as the Madonna of Humility. In her lap she holds the Christ child, who turns his upper body away from his mother to grasp the stalks of a nearby lily plant. The lilies are both symbols of the Virgin's purity and an allusion to Christ's Resurrection.

The child's energetic, twisting pose is typical of the later fifteenth century, when Florentine artists became increasingly interested in depicting the movement of figures in space. The delicately hand-painted grass beneath the figures illustrates the level of detail that marks each sculpture as a product of the Della Robbia workshop.

Glazed terra-cotta, .483 x .389 m (19 x 15 1/4 in.).
Widener Collection 1942.9.141



Andrea della Robbia
Florentine, 1435–1525
Saint Peter, about 1480

In this relief fragment, Saint Peter is portrayed in three-quarter length, with his head turned slightly to the left. In his left hand he holds a book, and in his right the key that identifies him as keeper of the gates of heaven. A uniform layer of white glaze covers the figure; only the pupils and eyebrows are emphasized in brown. Naturalistic details, such as the curly hair and beard, or the veins in the saint's hands, indicate the delicacy of modeling often found in Andrea's work.

The original function of this sculpture, perhaps designed as a portion of a larger composition, is unclear. The frame, embellished with the characteristic Della Robbia garland of fruit and foliage, may be a later addition.

Glazed terra-cotta, .950 x .550 m (37 1/2 x 21 1/2 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.329



Andrea della Robbia

Florentine, 1435–1525

The Adoration of the Child, after 1477

John Ruskin, the noted Victorian art critic, once owned this relief by Andrea della Robbia, which he called “a perpetual pride and care, quite one of the most precious things I have.”

Mary kneels with clasped hands to adore the child on the ground before her; he acknowledges her with his left hand. Angelic hands over her head hold a crown symbolizing Mary’s role as Queen of Heaven. Lilies, symbols of the Virgin’s purity, spring from the earth behind Jesus’ head. In contrast to the Adoration of the Child theme in the *Nativity* relief also in this gallery, here the Virgin and child constitute an isolated devotional image.

The colorful garland of fruit and foliage framing the image is a characteristic and appealing element of many works from the Della Robbia studio. The coat of arms that appears on the decorative console beneath the image suggests that the relief may have been commissioned in celebration of the marriage of Antonia Girolami and Bernardo Donati in 1477. To the left on the field is the rampant lion of the Donati family. The bishop’s miter and saltire cross of the Girolami arms appear on the right.

Glazed terra-cotta, 1.278 x .774 m (50 3/8 x 30 1/2 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.1.2



Andrea della Robbia

Madonna and Child with Cherubim, about 1485

A nephew of Luca della Robbia, Andrea became head of the family workshop after his uncle’s death in 1482. He was active primarily in Florence, where he continued to work in the medium of glazed terra-cotta, popularizing the images first introduced by Luca in the 1440s.

During the Renaissance, the circle was considered the ideal geometric form. Thus, the round shape of this relief, called a *tondo*, can be interpreted as a reference to the perfection and eternity of God. The concave background echoes this concept by presenting the Virgin and child in a setting that illusionistically opens the wall onto a limitless, cloud-filled sky.

Accompanied by two cherubs, the half-length Virgin Mary stands in an indeterminate space. With slender, graceful hands, she supports the body of her son who leans somewhat unsteadily against her, his feet resting on folds of her mantle. The Christ child grasps his mother’s thumb and a corner of her veil as he looks out on the world. Mary’s downcast gaze suggests her meditation on the child’s fate.

Its harmonious composition and its fusion of devotional solemnity with human tenderness made this one of Andrea’s most popular compositions. Of more than a dozen examples that survived, this one is perhaps the finest.

Glazed terra-cotta, .953 x .883 x .146 m (37 1/2 x 34 3/4 x 5 3/4 in.). Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.122



Giovanni della Robbia

Florentine, 1469–1529/1530

Pietà, about 1510/1520

The devotional image known as the *Pietà* seems to have originated in northern Europe in the thirteenth century. Before appearing in Italian sculpture at the end of the fifteenth century, it gained great popularity in Germany and the Netherlands. Perhaps the most famous example is Michelangelo’s marble *Pietà* of about 1498–1500, now in Saint Peter’s Basilica, Rome.

In contrast to Michelangelo’s serene treatment of the subject, in which a youthful, idealized Mary holds the seemingly sleeping Christ on her lap, Giovanni’s *Pietà* is a more harshly emotional work. Here, the Virgin is depicted as a grieving, elderly woman. Christ’s tortured body stiffens in the early stages of rigor mortis. While the figures’ garments are colorfully glazed, their skin tones are suggested by the unglazed terra-cotta. This innovative approach displays Giovanni’s willingness to experiment with traditional techniques, and reveals his interest in creating visual effects through textural contrasts. The irregular shape of the base suggests that the group may once have been part of a larger ensemble with attendant figures.

Glazed terra-cotta, .720 x .440 x .327 m (28 3/8 x 17 5/16 x 12 7/8 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.70



Benedetto da Maiano

Florentine, 1442–1497

Saint John the Baptist, about 1480

Benedetto was born in the Tuscan town of Maiano, near Florence. Trained by his older brother, the architect and woodworker Giuliano da Maiano, and influenced by the marble carver Antonio Rossellino (whose sculpture can be seen in Galleries 6 and 9), Benedetto joined the Florentine sculptor’s guild in 1473. Producing works for Siena, Florence, and Naples, he was the most important Florentine sculptor from 1480 onward. (A *Madonna and Child* relief by Benedetto may be seen in Gallery 9.)

Saint John the Baptist, a patron saint of the city of Florence, was frequently portrayed as a young boy in fifteenth-century Italian art. In this life-sized bust, recalling Benedetto’s marble statue of the young Baptist of about 1476–1481 in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, John is depicted as an ascetic youth with relatively individualized features. His long hair is modeled in unkempt, swirling waves. With his mouth slightly open, the saint looks as if he is already preaching. His partially closed eyes and distant gaze suggest a mood of inward contemplation.

The bust has retained much of its original polychrome decoration. A dark red cloak with green lining is draped over the shoulders and tied at one side. Beneath his cloak, the characteristic camel-hair shirt John wore for his life in

Painted terra-cotta, .489 x .520 x .260 m (19 1/4 x 20 1/2 x 10 1/4 in.). Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.130