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# Della Robbia: Sculpting With Color In Renaissance Florence



## Synopsis

The brightly hued and technically sophisticated ceramics of a Renaissance master and his workshopThe glazed terra-cotta technique invented by Luca della Robbia, along with his exceptional skill as a sculptor, placed him firmly in the first rank of Renaissance artists in the fifteenth century. The Della Robbia studio produced dazzling multicolored ornaments for major Florentine buildings, delicately modeled and ingeniously constructed freestanding statues, serene blue-and-white devotional reliefs for domestic use, charming portraits of children and commanding busts of rulers, along with decorative and liturgical objects. Important patrons from the Medici family to the French court enhanced the reputation of the Della Robbia style and technique, which in turn inspired imitation by rival artists.In recent years, renewed attention from art historians, backed by sophisticated technical studies, has reintegrated Della Robbia into the mainstream of Renaissance art history and illuminated the originality and accomplishments of the family's studio, which operated into the 16th century. This beautifully illustrated companion to the first major Della Robbia exhibition in the United States brings readers into the workshops of these ingenious artists to experience one of the great inventions of the Renaissance.Luca della Robbia's (1400-1482) invention of an innovative technique for creating glazed terra-cotta sculptures was a major scientific and artistic discovery of the Italian Renaissance. Passed down to family members and developed further by each generation, the closely held technique achieved new heights of refinement and durability in modeling and color, and was praised for combining elements of painting and sculpture into a new and (in Vasari's words) "almost eternal" medium.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Transcendently beautiful throughout. (Marietta Cambareri Philadelphia Enquirer)...dramatically beautiful...reminds us that genius never loses its lustre. (Nathaniel Silver Burlington Magazine) Marietta Cambareri makes us look at the Della Robbiasâ™ work in a new light...beautiful installed and perceptively lit...as if you are seeing them for the first time. (Xavier F. Salomon Apollo) explores faith through sculpture (Donis Tracy The Boston Pilot) excellent exhibition book (Bruce Cole The Wall Street Journal) Pure Beautyâ | expertly documented by Marietta Cambareri, the museumâ™s curator of European decorative arts and sculpture (Holland Cotter The New York Times) fine catalogâ |. overlapping themes of hope, love and faith â • values of Renaissance Florence. (Susan Saccoccia The Bay State Banner) astonishingly, preternaturally, gloriously stunning. (Michael Levin The Huffington Post) Renaissance mastery. A revelationâ | as dazzling and joyous as sunlight. (Sebastian Smee The Boston Globe)

This beautiful book accompanies the exhibition of the same name at Boston's MFA's Museum of Fine Arts from August to December 2016 and then at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. from February to June 2017. It does not have the usual exhibition catalogue format of scholarly essays followed by a section of commented plates of exhibited objects. Rather, in a series of essays, the primary author of the catalogue, Marietta Cambareri, the MFA's Curator of Decorative Arts and Sculpture, discusses general topics such as Luca della Robbia's (1400-1482) invention of a process of color-glazing terra cotta around 1440, when he was already an established and sought-after Florentine sculptor in marble; his subsequent devotion to refining and expanding his technique and the establishment with his nephew of what became a highly successful studio business; the influence of classical models on the studio productions; the manufacture of domestic sculpture along with their chief activity, which was the creation of religious items for clerical commissions; and Della Robbia's in the New World, a final chapter dealing with the rediscovery of this art in the nineteenth century and the increasing interest of connoisseurs and collectors outside Italy, and especially in the U.S. (One fascinating aspect of that discussion is the way the objects gained more cachet and aesthetic seriousness as they were increasingly recognized by scholars and curators as being legitimate pieces of sculpture and not merely ceramics; the degree to which American collectors took special interest in this work is indicated by the fact that, of the twenty-three institutional lenders to the exhibition, only

four are not American, those four being Italian.) Although this is the first American exhibition dedicated to the glazed terra cotta sculpture of the Della Robbia, Dr. Cambareri's book is more than an introduction; it amounts, rather, to a comprehensive survey of the Della Robbia family and the activities of their workshop over the span of three (long-lived) generations and about 100 years (1440s to 1550s) when their new and proprietary method of firing the glazed terra cotta came into great demand and became highly influential before eventually, inevitably, losing favor to other artistic mediums. Some other workshops which were inspired and influenced by the Della Robbia, such as those of the Buglioni family and Giovanni Francesco Rustici are also mentioned and illustrated when appropriate. There are no numbered plates, but the 108 illustrations in the curatorial list (most of which are reproduced full-page and with superb clarity and color) are arranged in the order in which they are discussed in Dr. Cambareri's text, so that one can read easily from page to page without flipping back and forth between text and illustrations. There are also about eighteen full-bleed enlargements, which are wonderful for bringing the surfaces (æwarts and all) into sharp focus. The text itself is clear and conversational, completely free of scholarly jargon and very easily approachable by the non-specialist. Some catalogues can be a bit stressful to read through, but this one is a relaxing and engaging experience. One feature which will be very welcome to those who know little about terra cotta, firing, glazing or other procedures of ceramics, is the technical essay by Abigail Hykin, an Objects Conservator at the MFA, who explains clearly and in detail the various materials and methods involved in the production of these sculptures. According to the editor, this essay is the first in English to present a synthetic overview of the materials and manufacturing practices used in the studio, and it benefits from a good deal of recently discovered information and international collaboration. Many readers tend to skip over the (increasingly common and now virtually de rigueur) conservatorial essays in catalogues because of the technical demands they make, but this is an excellent example of why even the scientifically challenged should pay attention: chemical and physical analysis of the clay, glazes, etc. is highly pertinent to the dating of works (especially in the case of a hundred-year bottega), thus to attribution, and thus to constructing a picture of the aesthetic history of the tradition, the place and value of an individual contribution, and finally to a deeper understanding of the work itself. Almost everyone who has seen some Italian Renaissance art has seen some Della Robbias, most probably by Luca or his nephew and successor Andrea, and will recognize the familiar scintillating-white-on-startling-blue reliefs, but it may come as a surprise to encounter the much wider range of subjects, styles, colors, etc. presented by the exhibition. To see so much of this art together is to understand why it was so powerfully influential

and attractive at its time (and why we still have designers describing their styles and products as *alla Della Robbia*): despite the brilliant innovation of the new glazing technique and the workshop's very adroit marketing strategies, its products would never have been so successful had it not been for the fact that Luca and Andrea (not to speak of Andrea's sons Giovanni, Luca, Marco, and Girolamo, who carried on the tradition into the third generation) were both brilliant sculptors. It must be one of the most intriguing (and fateful) twists of Western art history that Luca, who had already worked for several years on the extremely prestigious and valuable commission for the Cantoria (the organ loft) in the Florence cathedral, with its elegant carving style and phenomenally naturalistic joyously dancing children—certainly one of the wonders of Renaissance marble sculpture—turned his attention in mid-career to glazing terra cotta. Had he not done so, he may well have become a marble artist worthy of mention in the same breath as Michelangelo. But it is certain that some of the faces and figures he and Andrea created in terra cotta, some of the Madonnas and secular portraits represented in this exhibit, for example, are among the most stunningly beautiful creations of the fifteenth century in any medium. The modeling of the Virgin's facial features in Andrea's *Madonna and Child* (*Madonna of the Architects*, 1475) or in Luca's *Madonna and Child with Lilies* (c. 1460-70) is, to me at least, unsurpassed by anyone at any time. This is not the Della Robbia book for art historians, but it is probably all the average aficionado of Renaissance art will ever need in terms of general information, and it is a wonderful collection of gorgeous art that ought to be far better known. If you can't see the exhibit either in Boston or Washington, be assured that the catalogue is a good second best and that you can purchase it with confidence. Don't miss it.

Beautiful and well written book about one of the lesser known gems of the Florentine Renaissance. Although Della Robbias all over Florence and other Tuscan and Umbrian churches and museums, most people have really never "seen" them. This book covers the 2016 exhibit at the MFA in Boston, and traveling to other museums. One of the amazing things about these gorgeous Della Robbias, is that they look like they are brand new although they are about 500 years old. The quality of the photo reproductions is outstanding.

If you can't make the exhibit, but are interested in, or love Della Robbia, this is a fabulous book. There are details about production, development of the style, glazes, uses in architecture—it's a really great well researched book. I also learned through a podcast about the exhibit that the

curators are also constantly learning. They put the pieces for the cover photo together in a way that made sense to them, then took the photo. Sometime later they looked on the back of the pieces, only to discover that they had ordered the border incorrectly--too late to make the change in the print version of the book. It's a lovely book and well worth the price!

Beautiful, informative guide to a once-in-a-lifetime exhibit. One caution: you have to be alert to the fact that many large, handsome illustrations show items not in the exhibition at all -- neither in Boston nor in DC. Once understood, however, this is a huge plus.

Book arrived in perfect condition!

I grew up seeing Della Robbia in the context of Italy. The MFA (Boston) show this book is more or less a catalogue for was masterfully curated and wonderfully presented, as is this book. Surely Robbia is the most humane artist the Western world has produced. The marble choir stall in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence: the Cantorie by Luca della Robbia. It illustrates Psalm 150 illustrates this humane view of life. As a father and grandfather it sums up as it were all my feelings for art and childhood. Real children were the models for the youths who dance and sing their way around this exquisite frieze. The commission may have been religious but the art itself became the message. The older children wear contemporary costumes and are playing fifteenth-century citharas and other instruments. Della Robbia made careful note of the Greco-Roman works he was inspired by and then made his own drawings from life. As a result, the choir stall is the ultimate Renaissance expression of lovingly building on the epicurean past while also pushing the boundaries of art into the future. The subject is not religious, it is humanistic, in other words the art celebrates the actual beauty of childhood itself and the actual beauty of the craft that captures the beauty of childhood. The love Della Robbia has for the mystery of childhood, for the tenderness of a child's vulnerability, and for the sheer joy of that stage of life when all activities are undertaken with earnest sincerity is stunningly true to life in the frieze. The same spirit is found in so many of his terracotta pieces so beautifully portrayed in Marietta Cambareri's wonderful book.

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