

***Della Robbia: Sculpting with Color in Renaissance Florence*****Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, August 9, 2016 – December 4, 2016****By Catherine O'Reilly**

*Della Robbia: Sculpting with Color in Renaissance Florence*, currently on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, celebrates the glazed terracotta technique developed by Luca della Robbia and his workshop. Though highly valued in the fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries, and popular among American collectors in the nineteenth century, the medium has largely been overlooked by scholars and museum audiences alike. The MFA's exhibition, the first of its kind in the United States, redresses this lacuna by introducing visitors to the expressive and accessible qualities of reliefs and free-standing figures sculpted by three generations of the Della Robbia family and rival Florentine workshops.

Upon entering the gallery, visitors encounter Giovanni della Robbia's monumental *Resurrection of Christ* (1520-25), on loan from the Brooklyn Museum. The lunette's composition and grand scale, measuring over five by eleven feet, announce the astounding possibility of its medium. Visibly distinct sections piece together an enlivened, high-relief surface. More than a sculpture, however, *Resurrection* is also an expressive painting. The richly colorful narrative is further enhanced by a framing garland of naturalistic vegetation that repeats its brilliant hues. Woodland creatures inhabit and animate the garland with a playful appeal that imitated the lunette's original garden setting.

*Resurrection* offers an important point of comparison as the visitor explores the exhibition of nearly fifty sculptures from American and Italian collections. Three sections, titled Hope, Love, and Faith, structure the content of *Della Robbia* with simple yet effective themes. Hope gathers small-scale, domestic objects associated with both secular and sacred ideals. Representations of children, such as Andrea della Robbia's remarkably life-like *Bust of a Boy* (about 1475), and devotional images of the Christ child similarly expressed optimism in the home. In Faith, these youthful faces are replaced by three near life-size, free-standing figures of aged Franciscan saints, made around 1550 by the Santi Buglioni workshop. Sculpted with the same ambition as Giovanni's *Resurrection*, the saints' preaching hands and expressive features exploit the technical qualities of their medium.

The centerpiece of Love, and of the exhibition itself, is also Luca della Robbia's masterpiece. While *Resurrection* stuns with color, *The Visitation* (about 1445) absorbs the viewer in quiet reverence. Sculpted in-the-round and glazed in pure, glossy white, Elizabeth kneels at Mary's feet, seemingly overwhelmed by their miraculous pregnancies. The sculpture's appearance in Boston is a triumph, having been lent by the Church of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas in Pistoia, for which it was originally created.

*The Visitation* highlights the exhibition's important collaboration between curators and conservators. Wall-text describes the conservator's opportunity to dismantle the four large sections composing the figure group. Close inspection of other works revealed notations in areas of unglazed clay, including incised sketches and indications of order for each section of terracotta. Luca developed his innovative ceramic technique in the early fifteenth-century and his family, namely nephew Andrea and great-nephew Giovanni, guarded his secret recipes. The inventive materials and elusive process are

central themes of the exhibition and demonstrate the growing interest in materiality among scholars of Renaissance art.

The overlapping presentation of secular and sacred, decorative and liturgical object-types suggests the multivalent function of glazed terracotta in Florence. Appearing both within and on the exterior of homes and palaces, churches and political offices, the sculptures were central to the city's visual culture and artistic identity. The MFA installation summarizes this breadth of display; reliefs hang high on gallery walls to suggest their original architectural contexts, while small domestic and devotional objects admit intimate viewing experiences. A modest design aesthetic allows *Della Robbia* to shine with glassy glazed surfaces of ceramics awash in brilliant color and encourages visitors to reflect on the virtuous themes that guide the gallery's layout. Sculpted clay, gathered from the banks of the Arno River, combined with the artistic ingenuity of Renaissance Florence form objects of distinct presence that transcend their humble origins.



*The Visitation* (in situ), Luca della Robbia (Italian, Florence, 1399 or 1400–1482), Italian, Renaissance, about 1445. Glazed terracotta.

\*Church of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas, Pistoia

\*Scala / Art Resource, NY

\*Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*Resurrection of Christ* (before conservation), Ca. 1520-1524  
Giovanni della Robbia (Italian, Florentine, 1469–1529/30) Italian, Renaissance. Glazed terracotta.  
\*Brooklyn Museum, Gift of A. Augustus Healy 99.5  
\*Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*Bust of a Young Boy*, Andrea della Robbia (Italian (Florentine), 1435–1525)  
Italian, Renaissance, about 1475, Glazed terracotta

\*Museo Nazionale del Bargello-Firenze

\*Photograph: Antonio Quattrone

\*Courtesy of the Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo

\*Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*Saint John of Capistrano*, Santi Buglioni (Italian, Florence, 1494–1576)  
Italian, Renaissance, about 1550. Glazed terracotta.

\*Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of The Ahmanson Foundation

\*Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston