

i · Della Robbia

Arezzo

I Della
Robbia

Il dialogo tra
le Arti nel
Rinascimento

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The epic history of a dynasty

The hard-working Della Robbia family

The hard-working activities of the Della Robbia family, sculptors and potters, lasted for a remarkably long time, from the early years of the 15th century to well after the second half of the 16th century: more than one hundred years which deeply influenced Western culture.

Its prominent personality was **Luca della Robbia** (Florence 1399 ca. – 1482), famous above all as the person who paved the way for the renowned production of works in glazed terracotta with which he made his fortune; and after him, that of his sons, nephews and grandsons. Considered to be one of the most important figures of 15th century Florentine sculpture, he was born into a family that was well known in the textile field, “an activity from which their surname originated, derived from the rubia, a red dye for fabrics, a colour that ironically is the only colour missing in the della Robbia’s palette of a vast range of colours.” During his many years of work, Florence was living an historical period where artistic and architectural methods were being analysed and revised, and Luca, as other artists of the time – Filippo Brunelleschi, Masaccio, Beato Angelico, Donatello, Nanni di Banco and Leon Battista Alberti – were inspired by the desire for a cultural transformation made to redefine the essential elements of a new art and a new figure of the artist himself. Although Luca della Robbia’s moral integrity and deep religious faith are well known, we know very little about his artistic formation: Pomponio Gaurico’s *De sculptura* (1504) and Vasari’s *Vite* both state that his early artistic education was as a goldsmith’s apprentice, a typical choice of the times, an example followed also by Brunelleschi and Donatello. He certainly was a pupil of Nanni di Banco in the Florentine cathedral’s building yard: from the ‘maestro’ he learnt the stern monumentality which, however, in Luca’s work took on more serene tones that bring him closer to Ghiberti. As for a comparison to Donatello, this is easier to evaluate as Luca made

a monumental marble Cantoria (choir stall) for the Cathedral, in competition with Donatello’s, which in fact exemplifies the first Florentine classicism where realism and volumetry merge majestically together. The success of the choir stall and Brunelleschi’s appreciation of it – to whom Luca, according to historical sources, was tied by deep friendship and respect – ensured him other important commissions on behalf of the ‘Opera del Duomo’ (the Cathedral’s Building Office); amongst these, are the completion of Andrea Pisano’s panels for the bell tower. His works also received praise from Leon Battista Alberti in his *De Pictura* (1436) in which he is celebrated as one of the pioneers of the Italian artistic Renaissance next to such artistic innovators as: Brunelleschi, Donatello, Masaccio and Ghiberti. In the following years, Luca ceased working with marble in order to dedicate his time to his **experimentation in glazed terracotta.**

This was an extraordinarily formal and refined technique that immediately met with great success, so much so that the Della Robbia family’s work flourished for over one hundred years. Luca’s first application of this technique was with polychrome inserts decorating the Tabernacolo del Sacramento in the Chapel of St. Luca in the Spedale (Hospital) of Santa Maria Nuova, now Santa Maria a Peretola (1441-1442). But already in the years 1442-1445, he worked only with this technique on the two lunettes of the Resurrezione and the Ascensione above the main doors of the sacristies of Santa Maria del Fiore. Other masterpieces of his of these years are the *La Visitazione* for the church of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas at Pistoia (1445) and the decorations for Piero de’ Medici’s study, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In August 1446, Luca and his brother Marco **purchased a house in via Guelfa**, in an area of vegetable plots and fields, just outside the city of Florence itself, probably to ward off the dangers of fire. The house, that was the centre of the Della Robbia family’s production for three generations, was demolished

halfway through the 19th century in order to widen Via Santa Caterina, nowadays called Via Nazionale.

In 1448, on the death of his brother, Simone, with whom he had lived, Luca adopted Simone's six children, one of whom was Andrea who was already working in his uncle's workshop. But in 1471, then an old man, Luca drew up his will in favour of his nephew Simone and not Andrea whom he judged as having "got rich by taking advantage of art and of its teachings".

In fact, **Andrea** (Florence, 1435-1525) begun a sort of 'industrial' production, gaining remarkable economic benefits from it, even more than those of his uncle. And thanks to his truly tireless activity, glazed terracotta spread all over the surrounding area: a really incredible success, in part thanks to Andrea's long-term business vision which was capable of widening the types of objects he could make so that he could accept an enormous number of both religious and non-religious commissions; and in part thanks to the fact that these glazed terracottas were easy to transport – not like marble statues – as they could be taken to pieces and then put together again on the spot. His vast production – at the beginning, similar to Luca's so much so that it was sometimes difficult to recognise his own work from his uncle's – later developed into a more ostentatious and superficial form with special pictorial effects obtained with the brilliance and liveliness of colours: compositions rich in pathos, often inspired by contemporary paintings as, for example, in the decorations for Santa Maria delle Carceri at Prato where Andrea's work brings to mind Filippino Lippi's painting in the same church and the works realized for the chapel of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Arezzo. Amongst his most famous works are: the Putti in the porch of the Spedale degli Innocenti in Florence (1487); the reliefs in the sanctuary of La Verna; and the lunette with the Incontro dei Santi Francesco e Domenico in the loggia of the Florentine hospital of San Paolo (1490-1495). This latter work mirrors Andrea's endorsement

of the religious ideals of the Ferrara priest, Savonarola, whose voice - according to Andrea – could perturb souls, bring back sensible customs and give a reply to the requests for spiritual renovation during the ethical-political and religious, end-of-century crisis. In fact, one can observe in his works of these years, a simplification of the composition – in a similar way to what was happening in the paintings of Perugino and Frà Bartolomeo – as seen in the works present in the collegiate church of San Lorenzo at Monteverchi (1495-1500), while production of 'Pietà' groups increase, so dear to Savonarola's preachings due to their dramatic content and to their emotional participation.

Starting from the last decade of the century, the enormous quantity of commissions forced Andrea to employ more and more assistants: production became almost industrial using conventional decorative characteristics, causing a certain confusion in knowing which artist had produced which work of art. Andrea della Robbia died in Florence in 1525 at the end of a long life during which he realized, as Vasari said, "many, or rather, numberless works of art". Five out of Andrea's twelve children stayed in the family business. The most famous of them was **Giovanni** (Florence 1469-1529/30) whose great merit was also to continue the business and to spread the family production with almost proto-industrial results. In particular, Giovanni had to face the difficult and sometimes controversial task of adapting the former Della Robbia production to new tendencies of taste which had profoundly altered over the years, mixing the sophisticated religious themes with antique mannerisms and with the monumental emphasis which would become popular in the first decades of the 16th century. After having worked beside his father for many years, so that some of his works have no doubt been erroneously attributed to Andrea, Giovanni changed his style in favour of an artistic expression that is marked by a bright and lively polychrome character which recalls, in its plastic compositions,

the works by Verrocchio and Filippo Lippi. Giovanni's production, apart from elegant, antique-style vases and polychrome coats-of-arms, included also house furnishings and important religious commissions. One of his most significant works is the Lavabo in the Sacristy of Santa Maria Novella (1498), while amongst the figure sculptures, particularly remarkable are the reliefs of San Gerolamo at Volterra and the Natività in the Bargello (1521). Out of Giovanni's four brothers who worked with him, **Francesco** (1477-1527) and **Marco** (1468-1534) entered the Convent of San Marco in 1495 to realize glazed terracottas for the churches and convents of this religious Order. However, more than these two Dominican monks, Girolamo (Florence 1488 – Paris 1566) and Luca the Younger (1475-1548) were the only ones capable of proving the international value of the family art. Probably, starting from the early nineties of the 15th century, **Luca the Younger** worked with his other brothers in the workshop's activities, carrying out commissions such as the altar in Santa Maria delle Grazie in Arezzo and the decorations of Santa Maria delle Carceri at Prato. Despite the few documents mentioning his work, he was described by Vasari as being a refined sculptor "highly expert in glazed terracotta", and was called to Rome by Raffaello and commissioned by Pope Leone X to realize the floors in the Vatican Loggias. **Girolamo**, the last of Andrea's sons, was already working, under the supervision of his elder brother, Luca, with some glazed terracottas in the Certosa of Florence; and even more interestingly, with some important altar-pieces realized in a rather Manneristic way, with evident references also to Raffaello, Sansovino and Andrea del Sarto. Both brothers, in fact, seem to have wished to bring up-to-date the Della Robbia art, with their own cultural base influenced precisely by Andrea del Sarto and following the example of Raffaello and early Florentine Mannerism. Evident examples of this can be seen in the polychrome altar-pieces

in Signa, Lizzano and Gubbio. In 1517, Girolamo left the workshop to live in France where, amongst other works, he contributed to the Fontainebleau decorations; and so in the second half of the 16th century, the fascinating Della Robbia adventure, began by Luca more than a century earlier and finally gathered up by Benedetto and Santi Buglioni, came to an end. Thus, Vasari wrote that between 1550 and 1568 "all that remained of that art was sorely lacking in the true way of working glazed terracotta".

