

# i · Della Robbia

Arezzo

I Della  
Robbia

Il dialogo tra  
le Arti nel  
Rinascimento

21 febbraio  
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Museo  
Statale d'Arte  
Medievale  
e Moderna

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## The red of the family

Rubia Tinctorum

The madder (robbia) is a herbaceous, spontaneous and perennial plant, quite widespread in Asia Minor and all across the Mediterranean area, which is to be found in abundant quantities in Italy in Tuscany's uncultivated and woody areas. Hippocrates already was well aware of its roots' tonic and curative properties from which an intense red colouring agent was extracted – precisely, 'ruber' –which, from ancient times, had been used in the dyeing of skins and wool, and sometimes to obtain a good quality lacquer for painters. Usually picked in its natural environment, the madder plant could also easily be cultivated. In the 14th and 15th centuries, there were extensive plantations of it near Cortona, but it seems that Florence preferred to import it from the Romagna Region, from Flanders and, most of all, from the East. Alongside the term 'robbia', referred to the colouring agent itself (rosso di robbia (robbia red) or more simply, robbia), there thus emerged, and with greater success, the Gallicism garanza or also the originally Arab term alizarina, then extended to the synthetic product (alizarina) which now takes the place of the madder's extract: nowadays an insignificant plant whose name and existence is mostly forgotten.

However, in the art language, this sonorous and incisive word still evokes the highest science of colours, thanks to the ingenious work of a Florentine family who, through commerce and the use of this plant, received prestige and financial ease, deriving from it even their own family name, Della Robbia: an extraordinary range of colours for ceramics, brighter and more long-lasting than any other fabric or painting. But with one sole limitation: the absence of red.

Unfortunately, there exists no real detailed information about the Della Robbia family, already registered in Florence in the 13th century, or about Luca's father, Simone di Marco di Vanni della Robbia (1343-1435/38), that is sufficient to explain exactly what

was their particular relationship with the use of this dye.

Michele di Vanni and Lapo di Michele, respectively brother and uncle of Marco di Vanni, Simone's father, were enrolled in 1320 in the Guild of Medicine and Pharmacy, which induces us to imagine that they were already trading in the colouring agent (the dried and ground roots), which was both cultivated by them or, even more probably, imported; while Marco's sons (Filippo, Simone and Jacopo), enrolled in the Guild of Wool, as did Simone's sons (Marco, Giovanni and Luca himself) in 1427. This leads us to imagine them working in the art of dyeing or being more directly involved in the production of wool. In the 'portata' (register) of the Land Registry of 1427 – which was the first, detailed census of the Florentines' economic resources - Simone lists, in fact, amongst his own creditors several 'cutters', in other words, retail traders from whom, perhaps, he bought fabrics to be dyed; but there are also, amongst his debtors, some dyers and tanners, so that it can be presumed he sold madder powder for them to use.