

# i · Della Robbia

Arezzo

I Della  
Robbia

Il dialogo tra  
le Arti nel  
Rinascimento

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Statale d'Arte  
Medievale  
e Moderna

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## “The secret of glazed terracotta”

The art of the Della Robbia family  
between technique and creativity

Glazed terracotta sculpture signifies a fundamental innovation in the Renaissance's artistic activity: a brilliant idea that consists in **applying a stannifero (or white man) enamel layer to monumental clay sculpture** (solidified during the second firing and coloured with metal oxides) of the majolica.

Glazed enamel sculpture was the result of an **expert combination of artistic genius, creativity and technique** following a long tradition of study and research into the materials and how they were used; and it was Luca della Robbia who turned such art into an, until then, inconceivable shape. “....considering that clay and earth were easy and manageable to work – wrote Vasari on this subject – and all that was missing was the technique to make this product last in time, he (Luca) took it so much into his head that, in the end, he succeeded in finding a way of defending his works of art from the ravages of time; because, after having made many experiments, he found that by covering them with a glazed enamel finish, made of lead, rough earth, antimony and other minerals and mixtures, fired in a special furnace, a lovely effect was produced that made these earthenware works practically eternal”. “**An invention**”, totally unprecedented in the traditions of the Western world, which was immediately judged to be “a new, useful and beautiful art” for which “we will be indebted to him for centuries to come”.

The glazed terracotta's formula was for years a **real and absolute mystery**; the family **kept it hidden as a jealous secret** for decades, never leaving any indications or notes on their methods or technical processes and convincing their contemporaries that it was actually an exceptional invention; this was **due to the keen rivalry and competitiveness between workshops** - a place where the creative process blended together with production itself – which was in fact a typical characteristic of the Renaissance artistic world. The story is told that Benedetto Buglioni managed to take possession

of the “**magical recipe**” thanks to a **woman of the Della Robbia household** and thus the mystery was unveiled. Essentially, the glazed terracotta technique was not a revolutionary invention at all but simply the “rebirth” and development of an art that had been much loved in ancient times. The majolica technique had actually been developed in eastern civilizations, inherited by the Roman and Byzantine worlds and then brought by the Arabs, into European regions of Moorish culture, particularly in Spain on the Island of Mallorca (or Majolica), which was a centre for the commerce of crockery, glass and silverware, and enamels.

However, it was Luca della Robbia who cleverly rediscovered the technique itself, made it his own, raised it to extremely high standards, and combined it to an exceptional artistically creative capability using it for the first time for earthenware sculptures, sometimes on a monumental scale and – last but not least, it was Luca della Robbia who gave the world for centuries the “**fascination of the “top secret”**”.

The **phases of production** – after preparation of the raw materials –included firstly that of the **moulding** carried out by hand or by the use of a mould. Once the working of the raw material had reached the consistency of “hard as leather”, it became necessary to reduce the relief or the statue's interior mass by **emptying** it, from the back or from below, to avoid and limit the formation of cracks or breaks during the drying and firing processes.

At the same time as this process, for the same reasons and for practical ones, too, the extremely large works had to be **cut into various parts** with a copper wire, concealing the cuts along their contours and on the edges of the garments. After firing, they were **reassembled** on the wall while the statues could use wooden hinge pins. Once the moulding was completed, during which the clay had to be kept damp,

the works were left to **dry out for several days**; then they underwent firing at a temperature between 750 and 950°C.

Equally important and careful was the **preparation of the enamels**, made up of a mixture of lead, tin, silica, an alkaline element and with metal oxides added to obtain the various colours. The enamel was usually applied by brush. With the second firing, **at slightly lower temperatures**, the enamel was subject to a process of vitrification and became permanently fixed to its clay support making it resistant both in outside and inside environments.