

# Della Robbia

## Sculpting With Color In Renaissance Florence

*At The Museum Of Fine Arts, Boston*

By Laura Beach



Detail of "Prudence" by Andrea della Robbia, circa 1475. Glazed terracotta. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

BOSTON, MASS. — Many a visitor to a great American museum has wandered into a gallery of European art, glanced up and been utterly struck by the beauty of an Italian terracotta defying classification. The medium, of course, is clay; the rendering, sculptural. The luminous palette, striking in its lead- and tin-rich glazes of celestial blues and milky whites, has the depth, gloss and constancy of paint, yet the purpose of the piece is architectural.

Chances are this masterpiece of Renaissance ceramic art was made by a member of the Della Robbia family or by one of their Florentine contemporaries. Their lives and oeuvre are the subject of the much-praised exhibition “Della Robbia: Sculpting With Color In Renaissance Florence.” On view through December 4 at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), Boston, the show presents 46 freestanding sculptures and architectural elements gathered from more than two dozen public and private collections in the United States and abroad. Six pivotal loans — among them “The Visitation” of 1445, from the Church of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas in Pistoia — traveled from Italy and are seen in the United States for the first time. John Singer Sargent sketched “The Visitation,” which probably served as inspiration for his Boston Public Library murals.

Marietta Cambareri, a curator of European decorative arts and sculpture at the MFA, organized the exhibition and is the



“Madonna and Child” by Luca della Robbia, about 1441-1445. Glazed terracotta. Museo Nazionale del Bargello-Firenze; courtesy of the Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo, photo Antonio Quattrone.





“Virgin and Child With Lilies” by Luca della Robbia, about 1460–70.  
Glazed terracotta. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

catalog’s principal author. The present project, whose origins date to 2004, grew out of her research into a Sixteenth Century Florentine glazed terracotta sculpture, now attributed to Giovanni Francesco Rustici, of St John the Baptist in the MFA’s collection. New scholarship on materials and techniques by MFA conservator Abigail Hykin and research scientists Richard Newman and Michele Derrick prompted the team to delve more deeply into a subject first taken up in the United States roughly a century ago, when Allan Marquand published his 1912 monograph, *Della Robbias in America*.

Luca della Robbia, the clan’s patriarch, was born in Florence around 1400. From a family of artisans, he established himself as a sculptor by 1431. A decade later, in his first documented use of glazed terracotta, he finished a tabernacle for the church of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence. Writing about Luca more than a century later, art historian Giorgio Vasari acknowledged the sculptor’s originality and influence, insisting that no follower of the Della Robbia had surpassed the perfection of his durable, colorful creations. Luca, who died in 1482, was succeeded by his nephew and principal collaborator, Andrea della Robbia (1435–1525), who in turn passed the tradition to his sons Giovanni (1469–1529/30), Luca the Younger (1475–1548), Marco (1468–1534) and Girolamo (1488–1566). Another son, Francesco (1477–1527/28), continued the tradition in France. Rivals to the Della Robbia included Benedetto Buglioni (1459/60–1521), who may have trained in Andrea’s workshop; Santi Buglioni (1494–1576),

a distant relative adopted by Benedetto in 1513; and Giovanni Francesco Rustici (1474–1554), a presumed nobleman who enjoyed Medici patronage.

The fashion for glazed terracotta sculpture faded in Italy a century after Luca della Robbia took Florence by storm. Cambareri writes that the decline “was accompanied by a decisive shift in the Sixteenth Century away from the use of color in sculpture, as marble became the preferred medium, thanks to the overwhelming influence of Michelangelo, who also disparaged the act of modeling in clay. As the century progressed, bronze statuary became more important as well, as demonstrated by the virtuosity of sculptors like Benvenuto Cellini and Giambologna.”

While supremely innovative, Florentine glazed terracotta sculpture also reflected the Renaissance interest in antiqui...

[\(Continue Reading on Page 30\)](#)

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“Nativity with Gloria in Excelsis” by Luca della Robbia, about 1470. Glazed terracotta. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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