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Incorruptible Nature: The Della Robbia Frames in the Marche*

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INTRODUCTION

In the past the scholarly interest in the Italian Renaissance frames often focused on gilded wooden examples.¹ Only more recently the analysis has expanded towards materials such as marble, *cartapesta*, stucco or glazed terracotta.² In her recent and extensive monograph on Italian Renaissance frames, Alison Wright has argued that frames embellished and honoured the images they encompassed.³ Due to the markedly non-materialistic perspective, Wright has mentioned the Della Robbia work only *in passim*.⁴ Building on Wright's theoretical framework, the present study discusses the Della Robbia frames in the Marche in terms of the artistic and cultural significance of tin-glazed fired clay for the practice of framing Renaissance images. In general, the renewed interest in the Della Robbia works is partially linked to the re-evaluation of terracotta as an independent sculptural medium, with important contributions to the field made by Giancarlo Gentilini.⁵ Moreover, exhibitions such as *La civiltà del cotto* in Impruneta, Tuscany in 1980 or *Earth and Fire. Italian Terracotta Sculpture from Donatello to Canova* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London in 2002 illustrated the significance of terracotta sculptures in the wider context of the early modern art and culture.⁶ Importantly for the present study, in 2014 Marchigian authorities and local historians organised an exhibition focused on the artworks of the Della Robbia family surviving in the territory. The exhibition

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¹ NEWBERY, BISACCA, KANTER 1990; SABATELLI 1992.

² CALLAHAN, COOPER 2010, pp. 33–55.

³ WRIGHT 2019.

⁴ WRIGHT 2019, pp. 37, 205, 244, 249.

⁵ *I Della Robbia* 2009; GENTILINI 1992.

⁶ *Earth and Fire* 2001; *La civiltà del cotto* 1980.

Sulle tracce dei Della Robbia e dei maestri plasticatori marchigiani (On the Trail of the Della Robbia and the Marchigian Sculptors in Clay) aimed to contextualise the artworks attributed to the Florentine family within the local tradition of terracotta painted in cold polychromy.⁷ Most recently, the show *The Della Robbia. Sculpting with Colour in Renaissance Florence*, curated by Marietta Cambareri at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 2016, has contributed to the raised awareness of the physical properties of this specific medium.⁸

The production of glazed terracotta required at least two firings. The first, the so-called biscuit firing, had to be done at a temperature not higher than between 800–1050° C, as terracotta overfired at this early stage would not be suitable for glazing. In order to decrease the risk of cracking both at the drying and firing stage terracotta sculptures were hollowed out, to ensure the even thickness of the clay throughout the figure. This practice is similar to sculpting in wood, where the sculptor had to take into account the differing character of the heart- and the sapwood. While the heartwood is stable, the sapwood expands and shrinks as atmospheric conditions change.⁹ In his treatise *De sculptura* published in 1504, Pomponius Gauricus, an Italian humanist, gave a brief description of sculpting in clay. He stressed that clay figures needed to dry first after modelling, then to be fired in a potter's oven and the parts reassembled by use of glue from chalk and egg whites, and finally painted with pigments mixed with linseed or nut oil.¹⁰

Leon Battista Alberti in his *Della pittura* (1436) singled out Luca della Robbia (1399/1400–1482) together with such giants of the early Quattrocento as Brunelleschi, Donatello, Ghiberti and Masaccio.¹¹ Luca was the founder of the workshop in Florence on Via Guelfa, where from the 1460s he collaborated with his highly-skilled nephew Andrea, who continued making glazed terracotta figures after Luca's death. Andrea trained his five artistic sons – Marco, Giovanni, Luca the Younger, Francesco and Girolamo. The workshop was thriving for almost hundred years as the practice of creating sculptures from various sections ensured the mobility of the product and guaranteed a growing fame of the Della Robbia both in Italy and abroad. The modelling and firing in sections allowed the artists to produce works on much larger scale than would otherwise be technically possible in the limited space of the early modern kilns. Moreover, this practice ensured that even very prominent structures could be sent to distant locations and assembled with the use of plaster. However, due to the documented tensions between Andrea's sons and the huge demand for the Robbiano, Luca the Younger left Florence to work first

⁷ *Sulle tracce dei Della Robbia* 2014.

⁸ *Della Robbia Sculpting with Color* 2016.

⁹ PERUSINI 1989, pp. 208–210.

¹⁰ GAURICUS 1969, pp. 240–241.

¹¹ ALBERTI 1950, pp. 53–54.

in Rome and then together with Girolamo in France, whilst Marco and Francesco settled in the Marche.¹²

The Della Robbia were the most celebrated artists working in the medium of glazed terracotta. The raw materials for their sculptures, which included clay, silica, tin and pigments such as cobalt, copper, manganese or antimony, were relatively cheap, and it was the technical ingenuity associated with ceramics that gave symbolic and spiritual meaning to these objects. Different secrets of the trade, which surrounded the successful glazing and firing, added to the aura of the supernatural and could have successfully conveyed the miraculous and otherworldly character of the represented saintly figures included in their altarpieces. At the same time, the relative cheapness of the materials significantly expanded the spectrum for potential patrons. Malleable clay allowed repeating various successful forms through the use of moulds. This enabled the workshop to sell works made on speculation, or to use those off-the-peg images as a stock repertoire from which the potential buyer could choose when asking for a more personalized work.¹³

Glazed terracotta was an important artistic medium for the cultural development of the Marche. After Tuscany, it is the region with the largest number of surviving Robbiana. Various works were sent there from Florence, as well as created *in situ* by the two sons of Andrea, Marco and Francesco. The brothers were both frocked by Girolamo Savonarola in the late 1490s and became Dominican friars respectively Fra Mattia and Fra Ambrogio. The significance of glazed frames in the Marche is apparent from the analysis of surviving altarpieces and contracts drafted in the region.

FRAMES IN THE DELLA ROBBIA WORKSHOP

The use of frames in artistic practice of the Della Robbia differed significantly between the three generations. Luca's sculptures were embedded in settings made of a variety of different materials but most frequently of wood. In relation to his smaller devotional works we know, from an account of another Florentine artist – Neri di Bicci, that in 1464 Giuliano da Maiano was responsible for creating a wooden frame for Luca's Virgin and Child relief, which belonged to a merchant Giovanni Benci.¹⁴ As we learn from other entries in Di Bicci's *Ricordanze*, such wooden frames had to be frequently restored and perhaps it is due to their poor survival that by now we are accustomed to seeing Luca's devotional reliefs without their original frames.¹⁵ Relatively little-known relief from Museo Capitolare in Atri is displayed without its original setting, which survives locked

¹² MATHER 1920, pp. 136–145.

¹³ BARBOUR, OLSON 2011, pp. 56–61.

¹⁴ DI BICCI 1976, p. 224, n. 440.

¹⁵ DI BICCI 1976, pp. 111–112, n. 217.

away in the museum's cupboard stripped of its original gilding and with heavily repainted polychromy [Fig. 1]. Such structure no longer seems to provide a suitable setting for Luca's typical blue and white sculpture.

While we are accustomed to viewing Luca's reliefs without any frames, we find it more difficult to consider works of the subsequent generations of the artistic family without their settings. It is largely because of the innovative approach of Andrea della Robbia, who promoted the production of frames and the main panels from the same material. This gave him a huge technological independence as his work was no longer constrained by collaboration with woodcarvers. His altarpiece for the Sforza family in the Castle of Gradara, in the Marche, commissioned after 1480, shows how figures in the central panel are enclosed within the glazed architectural setting formed by the entablature and pilasters [Fig. 2].¹⁶ It is possible that Andrea's idea of creating glazed frames was to some extent informed by the observation of the fate of his uncle's reliefs and the need of constant restoring of their wooden settings. The new glazed frames required no subsequent intervention; once fired nothing could affect their surface and only gilding could have been applied to different sections to enhance the material's luminosity.

Around 1500 the Della Robbia ware became an important alternative to marble or wooden frames, and a "desirable aesthetic complement" for painted altarpieces.¹⁷ The glazed frames became a separate branch of the Della Robbia production, and were employed both for the religious altarpieces and for secular reliefs, including the immensely popular glazed coats-of-arms. They were desirable because they guaranteed the material durability, permanent vividness of colours and unparalleled luminosity. Unsurprisingly, patrons were interested in a product that could successfully decorate the image and yield no subsequent expenses. The discussion of these material properties of glazed terracotta in the context of the Italian Renaissance frame illustrates Wright's point, based on a quote from Richard Trexler, about the "honorable" and "enduring" framing.¹⁸ Moreover, the Della Robbia ware was arguably the medium best-suited to celebrate the sculptural or painterly image and to play the key role in what Wright referred to as the "economy of honour."¹⁹ The frame acted as a mediator between the image and the devotee. From the perspective of the beholder, the luminosity of the Della Robbia frames directed the gaze of the devotees entering the space of a church or of a hermitage to the altarpiece. At the same time, the sensory appeal of the radiant liminal space formed of naturalistic motifs meant that the devotee had to be well-trained in focusing her/his attention not to be distracted from the contemplation of the holy image.

¹⁶ MARQUAND 1922, pp. 66–67.

¹⁷ CALLAHAN, COOPER 2010, p. 55.

¹⁸ WRIGHT 2019, pp. 26–27.

¹⁹ WRIGHT 2019, pp. 28–29.



Fig. 1. Anonymous artist, Frame for the relief by Luca della Robbia, *The Virgin and Child*, c. 1450, cold painted wood, h: 51 cm, w: 36 cm, Museo Capitolare, Atri. Photo: Author



Fig. 2. Andrea della Robbia, *The Virgin and Child Between Saints*, c. 1480, glazed terracotta, h: 213 cm, w: 172 cm, Castle of Gradara. Photo: Author

DESIGNING AND GILDING FRAMES

Andrea understood that the design of the frame was determined by the setting and thus closely related to architecture. Importantly, the interest in classically inspired architectural motifs in religious commissions from the Della Robbia workshop persisted. Francesco Quinterio's study showed various ways in which, Andrea and his sons active in Florence satisfied their patrons' taste for impressive architectural structures with naturalistic and classical motifs, incorporated into a fabric of various Tuscan church interiors.²⁰ Importantly for the present study, this interest in naturalistic and *all'antica* motifs remained apparent in the executed works commissioned by the Marchigian patrons. Fra Ambrogio and Fra Mattia made wide use of the classical vocabulary of forms, which was clearly of interest to the local audience. A contract drafted in 1527 between Fra Ambrogio and one Sebastiano di Amico di Galasso Ricci for the now dispersed *Pala di Macerata* includes a detailed description of all the classical elements of the frame such as the prominent cornice, ornamental frieze and engaged columns with modelled capitals and bases.²¹ Humanist learning informed the religious expectations of the faithful and classical ornament created a sense of divine order and magnificence, rather than merely highlighting the awakened interest of patrons in the antique.

The contract for *Pala di Macerata* made a reference to a drawing that visualised the appearance of the commissioned altarpiece. This drawing did not come down to us, but a design for a tondo commissioned from Fra Mattia by a Roman patron, the apostolic notary Alberto Serra, dated 1524, confirms the significance of the naturalistic frames in the Della Robbia works from that time. It is the only surviving drawing securely attributable to a member of this artistic family and is highly finished.²² It shows the seated Virgin with the Christ Child standing on her lap, with the young John the Baptist on the left and a figure of a nun kneeling below. The composition is encompassed by a precisely defined frame, which was supposed to consist of two concentric circles, the inner one with angels' heads and the outer with a vegetal festoon. The contract specifies that the frame with festoons and angels should have a considerable thickness amounting to one and a quarter *palmi*.²³

The altarpiece from Macerata and the tondo commissioned by Serra no longer survive. However, various works still *in situ* in the Marche reveal that the glazed architectural frame with prominent classical and naturalistic motifs was a vital structural component of the Della Robbia altarpieces. *Pala di Montecassiano* (completed in 1532) does not merely slavishly repeat the classical idiom adopted from the Florentine altarpieces but instead imaginatively transforms the Tuscan model to include paired

²⁰ QUINTERIO 1998, pp. 57–85.

²¹ ANSELMINI 1904, pp. 194–195.

²² BOYD 2014, p. 170.

²³ PARKER 1956, pp. 360–361.

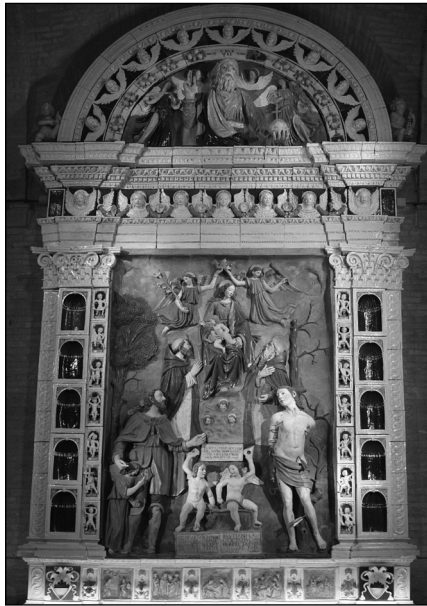


Fig. 3. Fra Ambrogio and Fra Mattia della Robbia, *Pala di Montecassiano*, completed around 1532, glazed terracotta, h: 7 m, w: 4.20 m, d: 40 cm, Collegiate Church in Montecassiano.

Photo: Author

pilasters and entablature, which serves to animate the upper section below the prominent tympanum [Fig. 3]. We can only imagine how much more vivid and luminous the architectural frame would have seemed to contemporary viewers, with its gilding intact and when viewed by candlelight (KUPIEC 2020, pp. 83–98). The present display of the altarpiece includes strong artificial lighting that predominantly illuminates the lower section. The conservation works concluded in 2010 rather surprisingly did not include restoring of the original gilding which would have made the glazed frame significantly more radiant. A local Marchigian historian, Servanzi Collio, in the late nineteenth century indicated the sections, in which at that time gilding was still visible.²⁴ He recalled in 1870 that the Corinthian capitals, pilasters and the entablature were all covered in the finest gold (“oro finissimo”), though as he observed little had survived of that precious metal (“poco rimastovi di questo prezioso metallo”²⁵).

Gilding frames of the altarpieces in the Marche points to the continuity between the approach to the purely white surfaces of pilasters and other architectural elements included in the Della Robbia frames. We know from the contract for the altarpiece created in Florence by Giovanni della Robbia for Arcevia, that the gilding was executed by a local Marchigian artisan – Pierfrancesco da Sassoferrato, who received

²⁴ SERVANZI-COLLIO 1870, p. 7.

²⁵ SERVANZI-COLLIO 1870, p. 7.

the payment in 1515 for the acquisition of gold and subsequent gilding of the figures.²⁶ From the analysis of the details, it seems that in this and other Marchigian altarpieces gilding of glazed terracotta was based on the same principle as gilding wood or marble, whereby gold leaf was applied onto bole. Working with the smooth texture of the glazed terracotta required a different expertise and thus the Della Robbia production prompted local artisans in the Marche to expand their specialisation onto the new, unfamiliar material.

EXECUTING THE NATURALISTIC FRAMES

Luca della Robbia was intimately aware of the significance of framing for the cult of the holy images. In his canopy for the icon of the Madonna del Impruneta the artist made an extensive use of the naturalistic representations of vegetal motifs.²⁷ The act of including garlands of fruits and vegetables in framing of the Renaissance images has been linked to the abovementioned social practices of actual honouring them.²⁸ Active in the Florentine workshop in the first decade of the 16th century, Fra Ambrogio and Fra Mattia would have been aware of these practices and would have had access to the moulds used in the production of the naturalistic motifs. When they moved away from Tuscany, they deemed appropriate to link their work to the famed shop on Via Guelfa through drawing on the recognisable and memorable features such as the prominent pinecones, partially peeled pomegranates and robust cucumbers. In executing the glazed frames, the Della Robbia artists relied greatly on the moulded elements. This ensured a speedy production of a high artistic quality and the introduction of visual rhythm through the repetition of motifs. The analysis of three notable examples of the Della Robbia altarpieces in the Marche, namely: the *Altarpiece of the Assumption of the Virgin* (c. 1520), the *Altarpiece of the Annunciation* (c. 1532) at the Santa Maria del Soccorso in Arcevia, and the *Pala di Cupramontana* (c. 1532), shows the continuous importance of naturalistic components of the glazed frames.

The *Altarpiece of the Assumption of the Virgin* [Fig. 4], now at the Palazzo Comunale di Pergola, was commissioned by the Observant Franciscans to decorate the high altar of their hermitage high up in the mountains at Monterubbio, near Pergola. The architectural motifs of the frame are reduced to an absolute minimum and greater prominence is given to the fruits and foliage. This artistic solution was not uncommon already in the Florentine workshop of the Della Robbia. The vegetal motifs created an opportunity to show the versatility of the medium of glazed terracotta. The material was used both a successful substitute for marble architectural

²⁶ MARQUAND 1920, doc. 4.

²⁷ POPE-HENNESSY 1980, pp. 245–46, no. 15.

²⁸ WRIGHT 2019, p. 27.

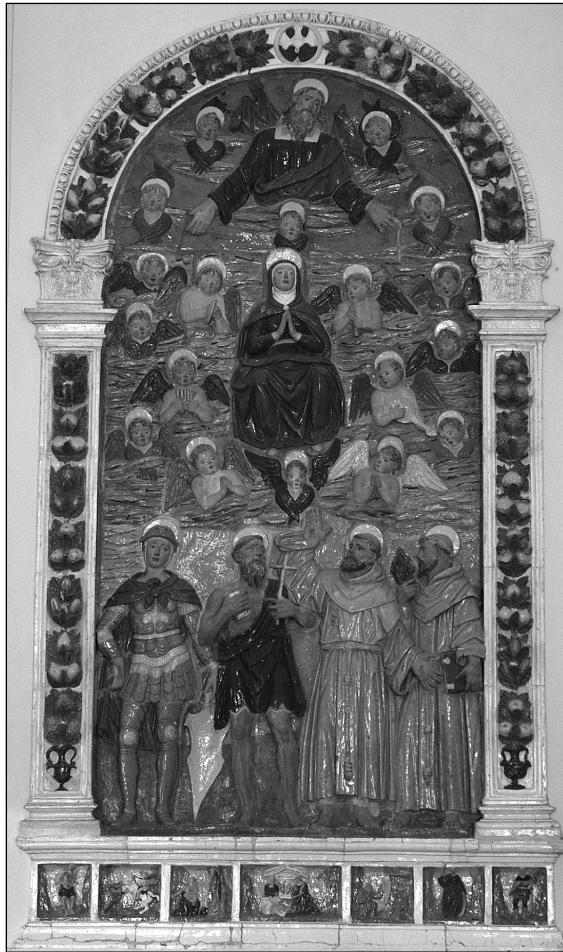


Fig. 4. Fra Ambrogio della Robbia, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, c. 1520, partially glazed terracotta, Palazzo Comunale, Pergola. Originally Hermitage of the Minori Osservanti di San Giorgio in Monterubbio. Photo: Author

frames and to mimic the bountiful nature. The colourful life-like fruits, vegetables and other naturalistic elements transformed the *all'antica* frames and promoted the ideas of the glory of the divine creation. The simple frame of leaves and fruits would have ostensibly linked the work to the Della Robbia workshop and at the same time it created an effective link between the praying space of the hermitage and the divine natural world. The devotees were able to contemplate God in nature through the agency of the frame. The specific conditions of viewing the altarpiece could also explain the simple and unusually thin frame with leaves and fruits that encompasses the main scene, perhaps to link the altarpiece to the natural world that the hermits chose to contemplate, away from the cities. Moreover, even small

variations in colours of the glazes within the floral and vegetal compositions made the product diverse, distinctive and exciting for the patrons. The altarpiece would have been brought in sections to this location from the workshop in Monte Santo and assembled *in situ* by the local *muratori*. Therefore, it would seem possible that the patrons decided on the way, in which the fruits and foliage were mounted on the wall. However, the recent conservation of a monumental roundel of the *Prudence* (c. 1475) by Andrea della Robbia from the Metropolitan Museum of Art has revealed marks on the sides of individual pieces of the frame, likely intended to ensure that the sections are correctly plastered. Thanks to these marks the conservators understood that the vegetal frame has been incorrectly assembled when the work was first displayed in the galleries in New York²⁹. The change in the composition of the frame dramatically influenced the rhythm of the frame and revealed the significance of the fruits and foliage for the perception of the image they encompassed [Figs. 5 and 6].

Certain elements in the frames of Marchigian altarpieces point to the less engaged execution of naturalistic details important for the Florentine audience, but perhaps not so significant in the Marche. If we look at the vase at the bottom of the pilasters framing the central composition in the *Altarpiece of the Assumption of the Virgin* from Pergola it is clear that it references porphyry, the material of great interest to Florentine patrons.³⁰ Andrea della Robbia skilfully imitated with glazes this notoriously hard to carve material. This practice was continued by his sons but the friar-brothers in the Marche were not engaging with the motif to the same extent as, for instance, Giovanni working in Florence. Fra Ambrogio referenced porphyry in the vases, but he was not invested in reproducing the material properties to the same extent as his brother catering to the Florentine patrons. Similarly, Fra Mattia in *The Annunciation* in Arcevia [Fig. 7], attempted to mimic with glazes the visual properties of serpentine imitated with great skill in various altarpieces by Andrea. He painted the space above the Virgin using the dark manganese glaze onto which he painted a circular surface covered with copper green, with lead white showing from below in various areas to create a rather poor effect of white crystals, characteristic of porphyry. At the same time the frame of *The Annunciation* altarpiece includes many interesting solutions and reveals the ambition to show such curious details as concealed lizards and frogs. This practice was undoubtedly inspired by Giovanni della Robbia's ambition to include naturalistic details into his frames. In the first two decades of the sixteenth century Giovanni developed a rich vocabulary of amphibia, invertebrates and reptiles incorporated into the lush

²⁹ Wendy Watson, Roberta Olson, Daphne Barbour and Rachel Sabino have all made important discoveries in that respect, which in some instances allowed to question the previous assembling of sections particularly of the frames of Della Robbia works.

³⁰ For the analysis of the significance of porphyry in the Della Robbia works see SARNECKA 2020.



Fig. 5. Andrea della Robbia, *Prudence*, c. 1475, glazed terracotta, diameter: 164,5 cm, inv. no. 21.116, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image of the relief before the conservation. Photo: Public Domain

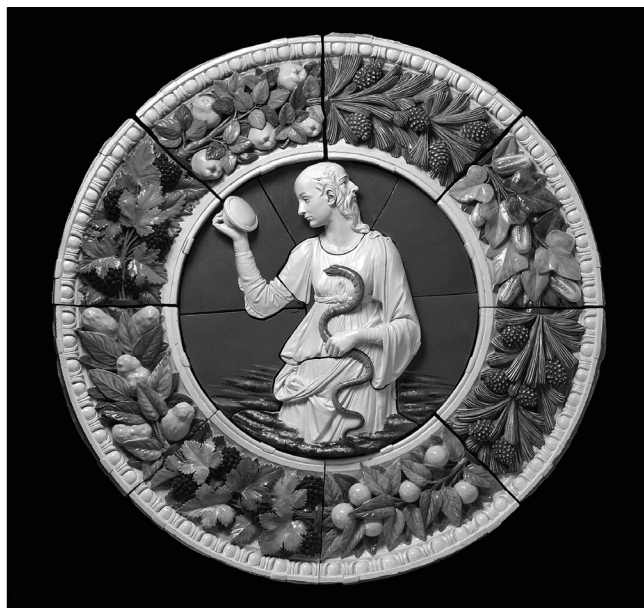


Fig. 6. Andrea della Robbia, *Prudence*, c. 1475, glazed terracotta, diameter: 164,5 cm, inv. no. 21.116, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image of the relief after the conservation. Photo: Public Domain



Fig. 7. Fra Mattia della Robbia, *The Annunciation*, c. 1532, glazed terracotta, h: 260 cm, w: 395 cm, Santa Maria del Soccorso, Arcevia. Photo: Author

fabric of his fruit garlands and foliage. In turn, the creative expansion of the motifs incorporated into the Marchigian altarpieces influenced the local artists working in cold painted terracotta.³¹

In the *Pala di Cupramontana* [Fig. 8], from Hermitage of the Grottoes of Cupramontana, now in the Pinacoteca di Jesi the architectural forms are reduced even further than in the *Pala di Pergola*, and the unusually narrow frame is composed almost entirely of vegetal motifs.³² Because of various obvious technical shortcomings, in the past scholars were reluctant to attribute this piece to the Della Robbia brothers and instead proposed an attribution to Pietro Paolo Agabiti, whose activity in the medium of glazed terracotta is undocumented.³³ We know

³¹ It is echoed in the *Nativity* altarpiece attributed to Pietro Paolo Agabiti with the main scene encompassed by a frame that includes various small creatures, such as snails and lizards. *Pinacoteca Civica Jesi* 1988, cat. no. 26, pp. 71–72.

³² MARIANO 1997, pp. 5, 8; CAPOGROSSI 1963, p. 15; ANNIBALDI 1925, pp. 83–86.

³³ ANSELMINI 1886, pp. 5–6; Giovanna Comai found no evidence of Pietro Paolo Agabiti's experience in glazing terracotta sculpture. See COMAI 1971, p. 82.



Fig. 8. Anonymous Artist, *Cupramontana Altarpiece*, c. 1532, glazed terracotta, h: 225 cm, w: 130 cm, Pinacoteca di Jesi. Photo: Author

that both Fra Mattia and Fra Ambrogio had experience of firing purely white statues in the early sixteenth century in the Florentine workshop and therefore such errors as, for instance, the bluish-green colour of the flesh of the saints in the foreground, seem hard to explain. The frame also remains at odds with other frames created by the Della Robbia artists in the Marche with its almost uniformly green tone. The use of green glaze for fruits is not unusual in the Della Robbia practice and can be illustrated by the frame from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London [Fig. 9] or the upper section of the *Pala di Pergola* by Fra Ambrogio. However, these examples show the intertwined figs and foliage, suitably painted green, whilst the fruits in the *Cupramontana Altarpiece* resemble lemons. Thus, it seems likely that the colour of the frame resulted from errors in the application and firing of the glazes. The documents related to the commission of the *Pala di Cupramontana* did not come down to us, but the payments to the assistants are described in the aforementioned contract for the *Pala di Macerata*. A section that described Fra Ambrogio's role in the making of the altarpiece specified that he was allowed to have an assistant and that they were both to be financially rewarded for the suc-



Fig. 9. Andrea della Robbia, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1487–88, glazed terracotta, h: 160 cm, w: 85 cm, inv. no. 7630-1861, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Photo: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

cessful completion of the work.³⁴ Perhaps the green tone that affected the frame of the Altarpiece from Cupramontana, and which, to an extent, we also encounter in various sections of the frame of *Pala di Montecassiano*, point to the elements glazed by other artists working in the orbit of the Della Robbia brothers. The glazing of all the haloes in the *Cupramontana Altarpiece* contains vast quantities of air bubbles, which indicates the difficulty in controlling the air circulation in the kiln,

³⁴ “continuo assistente et aiutante ad comporre dicta opera con un garzone” cited in: ANSELMINI 1904, pp. 194–195.



Fig. 10. Anonymous Artist, Altarpiece from the Church of San Giacomo della Romita in Cupramontana, c.1535, partially glazed terracotta. Photo: Author

perhaps due to the insufficient technical expertise of the local artists.³⁵ These technical constraints might have discouraged these artists from attempting to glaze the large areas of the central images and instead apply the cold polychromy, which did not require the risky second firing. The glazed components of the frames are significantly smaller, and their firing would have been more similar to the firing

³⁵ Gentilini when discussing the improbable kiln in Barga stressed the importance of a well-organised workshop, skilled assistants and a sophisticated kiln for the successful glazing. See GENTILINI 1983, p. 205.

of ceramics with which the Marchigian collaborators of the Della Robbia may have been familiar.³⁶

The comparison of the specific details such as the capitals from the *Pala di Pergola* with that from the altarpiece executed in 1513 in Florence by Giovanni della Robbia and subsequently sent to the hermitage in Arcevia reveals that friar brothers in the Marche had access to the same moulds as those used in the Florentine workshop. The moulds were also crucial for satisfying the ever-growing demand for the naturalistic frames in the region and in establishing the representations of fruits and foliage as a trademark of the Della Robbia workshop. It seems that these moulds were exploited by the local artists after the death of Fra Ambrogio and Fra Mattia. The altarpiece from the Church of San Giacomo della Romita in Cupramontana (c. 1535) [Fig. 10], is an example of the instance when the central panel is much below the level of artistic production of the Della Robbia brothers in the Marche. However, the grotteschi and various architectural forms of the frame suggest that it was produced using the detailed knowledge if not the moulds from the Della Robbia workshop. In particular the details of the entablature seem close to the discussed above *The Annunciation* altarpiece with white putti on the blue background decorating the frieze. Moreover, the foliage in these two frames also seems nearly identical though in the altarpiece from San Giacomo della Romita the alternating leaves are enhanced with colour, perhaps to make them seem more three-dimensional.

The analysis of two other Marchigian frames for the abovementioned *Pala di Montecassiano* [Fig. 3] and the unfinished *Pala di Ripatransone* reveals that the moulds were used not only for the vegetal motifs but also for the figurative elements, which included putti with the *arma Christi* [Fig. 11], or the lions' heads that divides narrative scenes of the predella. The practice of decorating pilasters with narrative cycles was introduced in an altarpiece by Giovanni della Robbia for the *Pieve di Santo Stefano di Lamporecchio*, in Tuscany, dated c. 1524.³⁷ It was subsequently explored in the workshop of the Della Robbia competitors, the Buglioni family, in an altarpiece from the *Chiesa dei Cappuccini* in Camerino attributed to Santi Buglioni, c. 1530, with *arma passionis* depicted in the frame.³⁸ It was continued in the Marche, as is clear from the aforementioned contract for the *Pala di Macerata*. The “colonne quadre”, or pilasters, described in the contract for *Pala di Macerata*, were to include stories from the life of Mary Magdalene.³⁹

When compared with the analogous details from the *Pala di Montecassiano* rather unexpectedly, the forms in the unfinished *Pala di Ripatransone* seem to be worked out with greater precision. The use of moulds in the Della Robbia practice

³⁶ SARNECKA 2017 in passim.

³⁷ ANSELMINI 1903, p. 146.

³⁸ SANTARELLI 1998, p. 27.

³⁹ “storiato de tucta la vita de S. Maria Magdalena come appare nel disegno” cited in: ANSELMINI 1904, pp. 194–195.



Fig. 11. Fra Mattia della Robbia, *Putto with a scroll*, from Pala di Ripatransone c. 1532, glazed terracotta, Museo Civico, Ripatransone. Photo: Author

assumed certain amount of modelling of the details after the clay was removed from the mould. These details in the *Pala di Montecassiano* are much less pronounced than in *Pala di Ripatransone*. Similarly, the glazing seems to be done with less attention as the white from the handles runs towards lion's mouth, which was not the case in the same motif in *Pala di Ripatransone* where the white glaze of the handle did not run during firing. The use of the same motif to divide the scenes in the predella and the same putti in the niches, both very recognisable and specific details, points to the attempt by the workshop to create an easily recognisable product. The two frames were destined for relatively distant geographic locations. However, workshop practice of modelling the final forms reveals clear differences in approaches to the same forms, which may be justified by the speed of production, less significant commission or a different hand. For now, we know very little about the Della Robbia brothers' assistants in the Marche and similar comparisons joined with archival research can in the future reveal more information about this interesting topic.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the frames and their role in the workshop practice of successive generations of the Della Robbia family allows us to consider the specific artistic strategies and to address the production of glazed terracotta by Fra Ambrogio and Fra Mattia in the Marche. The arched frames, which frequently included foliage, animals or putti, formed an integral part of one of the most distinctive Renaissance artistic products. These vital structural components drew attention to the central design with their luminosity and, at times, with the way they extended the main narrative. The analysis of frames created in the Marche allows to answer important questions about the changes of taste over the decades of the Della Robbia production and to observe the developing vocabulary of ornament. Such analysis informs also the technical aspects of their work and it seems that the Della Robbia brothers working in the Marche focused their efforts on glazing the frames as a respond to specific needs of their patrons, who acknowledged the artistic significance of the space around the central image. What becomes apparent from the analysis of their works is that the frames always make use of the vitreous surface and that the motifs are largely inspired by the forms explored in the Florentine workshop, at times creatively transformed. Altarpieces such as the one from the church of San Giacomo della Romita raise important questions about the subsequent fate of the Della Robbia moulds and specific technique of glazing after the death of Fra Mattia in the early 1530s.

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the Della Robbia frames created for the altarpieces in the Marche – a largely understudied region of the Italian peninsula. It proposes that the frames of the Marchigian altarpieces were instrumental in establishing the fame of the Florentine artists in the region. Two Della Robbia brothers, both Dominican friars, Fra Mattia (1468–after c. 1532) and Fra Ambrogio (1477–1528), moved to the Marche in the mid-1520s and established a workshop in Monte Santo – present-day Potenza Picena. Whilst the local frames of the Della Robbia altarpieces are invariably covered with coloured vitreous paste, the central scenes are often largely painted in cold polychromy. This artistic choice, likely spurred by technical constraints, meant that fruits, vases with flowers and lions' heads included in the frames had the potential of capturing the viewer's attention in a more immediate way than the religious images they encompassed. Furthermore, through the agency of the innovative medium of glazed terracotta and the naturalistic repertoire of motifs, the frames both structured the devotional experience and testified to the endurance of the Della Robbia sculptures. In many instances sections of the glazed frames survived intact to our times whilst the elements modelled in unglazed terracotta had been irretrievably lost or severely damaged. Moreover, as the glazed frames made wide use of the realistic vegetal motifs and of blue and white – the signature colours of the Della Robbia ware – they became the trademark of the workshop in the Marche. From the 1530s, thanks to the use of the moulds, the glazed frames constituted the most accomplished components of the terracotta altarpieces created by anonymous local artisans active in the region after the death of the Della Robbia brothers.