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Communication of Values and Morals Through Andrea della Robbia's *Prudence*

Caylin Wigger
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Created by Andrea della Robbia in 1475, the circular relief of *Prudence*, executed in tin-glazed terracotta, exemplifies an intrinsic relationship to religion, morals, and virtues in both medium and subject matter, typical of Renaissance Art. From the development of the della Robbia family workshop, to modern conservation efforts, the della Robbia tin-glazed terracotta method elucidates a timeless and extreme dedication to moral values. The inherent humility of the terracotta, a simple clay dug from the earth, had been recognized even before Andrea created *Prudence* by close followers of the Christian faith. Not only were the basic elements of *Prudence* high in moralistic value, but this work was also created as a reminder to follow the virtues set in place by Christian doctrine. In this paper, I use formal and iconographic analysis alongside contemporary conservation reports on this work to help us understand the intricate layers and humble meaning literally baked into the terracotta medium, the ethereal and divine sheen of the glaze, and the reverence the figures hold in communicating virtues.

Prudence (fig.1) was created in the groundbreaking workshop of the della Robbia family by Luca della Robbia, the innovative uncle of ceramicist Andrea. Luca invented the tin-glazing method sometime before 1440. The dates are not exact due to our reliance upon unreliable tax records of the time in relation to conclusions reached by modern dating of the sculptures. Luca's new method was centered in Florence, Italy due to the use of clay directly collected from the Arno River, which cuts through the city.¹

Like any artistic process, Luca had to undergo many steps in his development of the workshop. First, Luca modeled his design directly onto a clay slab which he then used to create an open face plaster piece-mold which necessitates the use of plaster keys. Then, he pressed the fresh slab of clay into the created mold, removed the clay, and next he chased, refined, and

¹ Abigail Hykin, "The conservation of della Robbia Sculpture: An Exhibition as Initiator of Work." *Objects Specialty Group Postprints* vol. 24 (2017): 1-5.

individualized each surface to achieve the artist's desired effect.² Once Luca completed this process, he fired the clay, glazed it, and then fired it again within a kiln at extraordinarily high temperatures.³ Renaissance kilns contained fires so large and hot that they demanded a reverence similar to that given to della Robbia sculptures (fig. 4). Although terracotta is a rather inexpensive and readily available medium to work with, Luca fetched higher prices because of his accreditation as the inventor of the method; his reputation earned prices that these works would not attain otherwise. The high demand and high prices continued even after Luca passed the workshop onto Andrea.

Following Luca's death in 1482, Andrea inherited the workshop, and its "mercantile element developed more and more."⁴ Wealthy patrons, and common people alike, recognized in these works both value and meaning represented by the religious motifs and relics of spirituality that could be displayed with pride in the home or chapel. Indeed, the della Robbias were emerging as a household name. As more and more people desired these sculptures for their religious value, how did the popularity affect the quality of work that the workshop released? Scholars like Maud Cruttwell say the quality was extremely diminished⁵ whereas conservatists Carolyn Riccardelli and Wendy Walker say that this "advanced the family business to include the production of glazed terracotta sculpture for architectural use on a grander scale."⁶

This increase in mercantilism indicates another level of evolution within the practice that Luca established in the late 15th century. Luca may have never anticipated the full extent and

² Daphne Barbour and Roberta J. M. Olson, "New methods for studying serialization in the workshop of Andrea della Robbia: technical study and analysis." *Della Robbia diece anni di studi dix ans d'études*, Genova, Italy: Sagep Editori, 2011: 57.

³ Hykin, "The conservation of della Robbia Sculpture," 6.

⁴ Maud Cruttwell, *Luca & Andrea della Robbia and their Successors* (Ballantyne Press, 1902), 29.

⁵ Cruttwell, *Luca & Andrea della Robbia*

⁶ Carolyn Riccardelli and Wendy Walker, "The Treatment of Two Terracotta Architectural Reliefs by Andrea della Robbia at the Metropolitan Museum of Art." *Objects Specialty Group Postprints* vol. 24 (2017): 115.

richness that his technique would achieve in the public market, but Italy was eager for della Robbia sculptures imbued with holiness and a visual sign of the patron's own faith.

Commissioned by eager Florentines, Andrea created many *tondi*, or circular reliefs, as well as generated new altarpieces, and even more household devotional pieces. Andrea carried the workshop past the limits that his uncle could not pass, and Andrea's son, Giovanni, carried it even further before the method fell out of popularity, and the workshop closed in the late 1520s.

The multifaceted nature of the tin-glazing method resulted in different moral and virtuous aspects, all of which were considered very valuable to the owner's spiritual journey. As art historian Stephanie Miller explains, "Desire for a humble, simple art form, as well as the desire for adornment that was popular and novel."⁷ Her choice of the word "humble" highlights her view on the symbolic nature of art and the materials used to create it, but Miller also does not overlook the prominence the della Robbias experienced because of the popularity of their name and method. Terracotta, she explains, truly embodies the characteristic of humility. Ancient mediums like terracotta and clay are heavily imbued with moral values, especially in reference to Christian doctrine, "God first used clay to fashion man."⁸ With this statement, a clear line of descent is formed from God and the Creation Story to modern artists using clay to fashion art in their own image. The humble material also serves as a call to the humility of Christ and reminds patrons and consumers of the importance of materiality. Terracotta was a wise choice to use for the depiction of virtues like *Prudence* because of the "fear that precious materials might diminish true piety."⁹ Patrons feared that the use of bronze, marble, or other expensive materials would place more emphasis on the material rather than the message that is being portrayed.¹⁰ Since

⁷ Stephanie R. Miller, "A material distinction: fifteenth-century tin-glazed terracotta portraits in Italy," *The sculpture journal* 22, no. 1 (2013): 10.

⁸ Miller, "A material distinction," 9.

⁹ Miller, "A material distinction," 9.

¹⁰ Miller, "A material distinction," 10.

humility is a core value of Christianity, the emphasis placed on this quality makes sense, especially in the della Robbia workshop, where they were constantly creating a “vast number of devotional works,”¹¹ that centralized religion, spirituality, and morals.

Another layer of virtue comes from the sheen and color of the glaze used to coat, decorate, and finish the terracotta sculptures, Instead of the white color being an underlayer exposed due to the passage of time, the white glaze was intentionally decided by Luca della Robbia to reflect the moral tones of the piece; “Describing the white reflection as symbolizing the invisible light of God and ‘terrestrial purity.’”¹² Skin tones could not be created by the glazes available, so the della Robbias used white to reflect the divinity and purity of the color. Light also has a unique way of refracting off the white color: another nod to the ephemerality of the Christian God as understood by the Renaissance audience. Art historians Roberta Olson and Daphne Barbour describe this effect as, “luminosity... that transcended that heaviness of marble.”¹³ The sheen of glaze reacts in a completely different way from marble. Not only was the coloring and sheen of the *tondo* important, but the way Andrea composed *Prudence* increased the virtuosity of the piece as well.

Andrea’s figures served as a physical representation of the virtues being communicated from artist to recipient. Cruttwell describes this relationship between viewer and sculpture as a “direct and personal appeal to the emotions.”¹⁴ The use of figures to represent virtues is a way of directly connecting to the viewer; when the viewer sees another person acting virtuously, or speaking for the utility of virtue, the recipient is more likely to apply that virtue to their own life.

¹¹ Barbour and Olson, “New methods for studying serialization,” 57.

¹² Carlo del Bravo, “L’umanesimo di Luca della Robbia” *Paragone*, 24, 285, Nov. 1973, 26, quoted in Stephanie R. Miller, “A material distinction,” *The sculpture journal* 22, no. 1 (2013): 10.

¹³ Daphne Barbour and Roberta J. M. Olson, “Toward a new method for studying glazed terracottas: examining a group of tondi by Andrea della Robbia.” *Apollo* vol. 154 (September 2001): 44.

¹⁴ Cruttwell, *Luca & Andrea della Robbia* 153.

Indeed, the National Gallery in Washington D.C. states that these figure pieces are more adequate to show the depth and range of emotions that emerge from the della Robbia workshop, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston classifies these pieces as some of the most expressive and best examples of art within the Italian Renaissance.¹⁵ Not only were the figures themselves demonstrative of the level of reverence necessary regarding the subject matter, but the structure itself also demanded respect. Tondi -- large, circular structures¹⁶-- typical of Andrea, would be displayed at a height that is above eye level, a distinction of height that forces a sense of spiritual subjectivity from the viewer. Similar to the terracotta, this subjectivity stems from the humility requested by Christianity. Like sculptures and figures at the Florentine church, Orsanmichele, the act of looking up at figures in elevated niches along the sides of the church cements the idea of these figures having moral superiority over viewers on the street.¹⁷ In sculptures like *Prudence*, the depiction of the virtue and its placement serve as a constant visual reminder of the correct moral path that can be seen by all regardless of knowledge of any deeper messages or allusions. The eye-catching nature of *Prudence* lies not only in its size and grandeur, but also della Robbia's interesting and unique depiction of her.

The figures in any della Robbia piece are usually of significant importance, but how does the dual figure of a young woman and an old man Florence's version of *Prudence* stress the virtue's presence in Andrea's depiction? Prudence, the virtue itself, is depicted as a woman -- a representation of the mother of all virtues (fig. 2). Some of Prudence's defining aspects include being entirely good, a measure of justice, temperance, and fortitude. These values lie beyond the physical manifestation of the virtue, yet they are implicitly connotative of the word "prudence."

¹⁵ "Della Robbia Sculpting with Color in Renaissance Florence," The Museum of Fine Arts, Accessed 25 Feb 2022, <https://www.mfa.org/exhibitions/della-robba>.

¹⁶ Diameter of 108 cm (Barbour and Olson. "Toward a new method for studying glazed terracottas," 44-45.)

¹⁷ Miller, "A material distinction," 15-17.

Within Andrea's sculpture, human figures are not the only figures presented. The snake featured in the center of the piece is a representation of wisdom and careful thought, and the mirror depicted in the hand of the female figure is an allusion to the Delphic inscription, "know thyself."¹⁸ This was not the only rationale for including the mirror; the *tondi* were equated with mirrors according to Olson and Barbour. The mirror, as a reflective device, served as a sign of the "regeneration of lay piety" that emerged in the Renaissance.¹⁹

A rather unique aspect of *Prudence* includes the depiction of a centric figure with two faces: both the face of a young woman and an old man. The old man is a symbol of the wisdom of old whereas the woman, previously described as Prudence, is looking to the future. It is interesting that neither figure is exhibited to be looking at the present. Perhaps, this is the place of the viewer. The recipient is given an active participation in the piece; the viewer must take the knowledge of the past into their current lives, as well as have the foresight to look ahead. Della Robbia reiterates the relationship between past and present with the colorful garland depicted in figure 3. Surrounding the central figures is a multitude of greenery and fruits as a call to Eden as well as a future Paradise promised to those that follow the example set by the virtues.²⁰ The bright colors and plentiful resources reveal the bright and hopeful future that lies for those who lead virtuous lives; they will live like Adam and Eve in paradise. Andrea's *Prudence* was not the first della Robbia sculpture to demonstrate this virtue, though.

Andrea della Robbia's *Prudence* was created in 1475, but before that, Luca created a sculpture by the same name which resides in a cathedral in Portugal, in the Chapel of the Cardinal of Portugal. Luca's *Prudence* is only one aspect of a ceiling decoration that resides with

¹⁸ Riccardelli and Walker, "The Treatment of Two Terracotta Architectural Reliefs," 124.

¹⁹ Barbour and Olson, "Toward a new method for studying glazed terracottas," 45.

²⁰ Riccardelli and Walker, "The Treatment of Two Terracotta Architectural Reliefs," 124.

several other spiritual *tondi*. While clearly having international appeal, *Prudence* experienced the most success with Andrea in Florence. It is assumed that Andrea was aiming to achieve this same goal of a series of virtues, yet he was not able to complete the full set. Although Andrea duplicated the subject matter from his uncle's work, "the lush sculptural border of the Museum's [MET] Prudence would have appealed to the Florentines in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, the graceful gestures and pure silhouette of the central figure recall the artist's point of departure in his uncle's work at midcentury."²¹ This direct distinction of Andrea from his uncle enforces the idea of an interconnected workshop where the timelines of each artist can get confusing as they are muddled with other family members trying to discover their own style while also learning the form that defines their workshop. This intermingling of artists is yet another layer that makes dating these pieces so difficult. Today, conservation efforts delve into this effort with the same vigor as the preservation they are tasked with.

The conservation effort of *Prudence* has revealed several aspects of the sculpture that were previously unknown. One of these aspects includes the discovery of numbered sections that could be removed and reassembled in an exact order. There were seven sections for the inner circle and eight garland sections. Although this seems like a simple discovery, different questions arise, like where does the first section go? How can the directionality shift? Did Andrea intend for the sculpture to be seen differently from how it is now? Riccardelli and Walker delve into these relations closely in their article regarding the restoration and conservation of several pieces from the della Robbia workshop in preparation for the first exhibit of these works in the USA in 2016-2017 at the National Gallery in DC and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The multiple sections had to be disassembled and reassembled with great care to

²¹ "Prudence," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accessed 17 Sept. 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/194838?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=florence+naturalism&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=20>.

maintain the dignity of the piece within the exhibit (fig. 5). As previously mentioned, the glaze resists the deleterious effects of time and weather. Early conservation efforts were made by creating a layer of paint over the glaze. Once this overlayer was removed, modern conservatists truly recognized the extent of the preservative nature of these specific glazes.²² Another illuminating aspect of the conservation efforts include the use of Cobalt as a colorant for the glazes in the della Robbia workshop. This helps to determine the works of the della Robbia family from the other workshops of the Italian Renaissance that used similar glazes and glazing styles.²³ Not only was the glaze a way of defining the workshop, but the clay itself was as well. The specific chemical makeup of this clay harvested from this specific area of the Arno was distinct enough to differentiate from other works by other families.²⁴ Conservatists have done deep analytical work into the symbolic significance of the sculptures, but also into the materiality of these pieces and the significance they have to Florence and the Italian Renaissance.

Andrea della Robbia's *Prudence* is a landmark sculpture that presents many of the moralistic and virtuous characteristics typically of concern to Italian patrons in Florence during the Renaissance. He created an ethereal work from the low-priced and modest material of terracotta that is still debated, studied, and preserved today. Not only are the messages of the piece understandable from past to present, but the resolute glazes signify the ethereal nature of *Prudence*. Della Robbia created large, complex sculptures that held multiple interconnected layers of meaning. From the significance of materiality, and the specific clay used, to modern conservative insight, the *Prudence* is an excellent example of a multifaceted work that directly engages with the audience. This piece from the Italian Renaissance embodies the infusion of

²² Riccardelli and Walker. "The Treatment of Two Terracotta Architectural Reliefs," 123-129.

²³ Miller, "A material distinction," 8.

²⁴ Barbour and Olson, "New methods for studying serialization" 58.

spirituality and religion into everyday spaces. The della Robbia workshop -- Luca, Andrea, and Giovanni – created terracotta tin-glazed works to stimulate the creative mind and to link the viewer's understanding of humility with visual satisfaction. The luminosity and brilliance of *Prudence's* glazes challenge the faithful to believe in the infusion of spirituality and religion in the most simple of materials when crafted in the right hands.

Illustrations



fig 1: Andrea della Robbia, *Prudence*, 1475, MET



fig 2: detail of Andrea della Robbia's *Prudence*, 1475, MET



fig 3: detail of Andrea della Robbia's *Prudence*, 1475, MET



Fig 4: renaissance kiln, 1400-1500 AD, Pozzo della Cava



Fig 5: Michael Morris and Carolyn Riccardelli dismantling the tondo (Courtesy of C. Riccardelli

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art), 2016, MET

Images

Artist: Andrea della Robbia (Italian, 1435-1525). ca. 1475. Prudence. Tondo, Sculpture. Place: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/>. https://library.artstor.org/asset/SS7731421_7731421_11775934.

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