Luca della Robbia as Maiolica Producer: Artists and Artisans in Fifteenth-Century Florence

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A Study

Presented to the Faculty

of

Wheaton College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for

Graduation with Departmental Honors

in Art History

Norton, Massachusetts

May 5, 2009
For LMRL, SJL, KAL, and MEA for all your love, support, and guidance. This would never have been possible without you.

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Introduction

The Renaissance saw many developments in how clay was treated and finished, primarily with the invention of maiolica, or tin glazing. The surface treatment of clay is especially important in that it affects the use and the look of the ceramic object: glaze (a vitreous surface covering the clay) renders the ceramic object non-porous and thus able to hold liquid, while pigments on the surface of the clay add color and decoration to the object. Tin glazing allowed for brighter and purer colors to be utilized as pigments were added to the glaze, which allowed ceramic objects to acquire aestheticizing qualities and still hold utilitarian purposes.

Luca della Robbia furthered the aesthetic value of tin glazed clay past surface decoration by applying the glaze to sculptural forms. Scholars such as Giorgio Vasari have argued that Luca della Robbia was the inventor of tin glazing and, as such, he could be considered the father of maiolica. Other scholars, such as Guiseppe Liverani have argued that Luca della Robbia was completely detached from maiolica, as della Robbia’s works were sculptures and maiolica vessels typically functioned as decorative arts.

Modern scholars, such as W.D. Kingery, have compared the chemistry of typical maiolica wares with della Robbia wares to differentiate the types of production. In this work I propose that Luca della Robbia was in fact an artist, with all the intellectual qualities implied by this term. In order to present Luca della Robbia’s position as an artist, I compare his work to that of maiolica artisans working in Northern Italian workshops.

The purpose of my thesis is to problematize the idea of a separation of the roles of artist and artisan in Renaissance Italy. I examine the role of Luca della Robbia in relation
to those of maiolica producers because it exemplifies this issue: the fifteenth-century was a time of social change and lacked clear-cut boundaries as the artist rose from the ranks of the artisan and created a new place for himself within society. The proposition of Luca della Robbia as an artist working in the craft medium of maiolica leads to two main questions: firstly, if Luca della Robbia was considered an artist, why were maiolica workers considered artisans? And secondly, is Luca della Robbia truly inventive?

I begin in Chapter One: Historiography by examining the literature written up to the present day on Luca della Robbia as an artist, maiolica as a medium, and the status of the artist and artisan in Renaissance Italy. This chapter shows that, within modern scholarship, Luca della Robbia is considered a separate artist and not a part of the maiolica production of the period. In this work I try to rectify the dearth of information dealing with Luca della Robbia and maiolica, and to place Luca della Robbia in a more definitive role and context.

Chapter Two: Luca della Robbia and Chapter Three: Maiolica serve as an introduction for the reader to both subjects and as a basis upon which I develop my argument. To fully compare and contrast the work created by Luca della Robbia and other maiolica workshops, as well as their respective statuses within society, it is necessary to understand what was produced, why both Luca della Robbia and other potters produced the objects, and the role of both the objects and producers within society. Chapters two and three explore both the producers and their production so that in Chapter Four: Artists and Artisans I am able to effectively place the producers within the social context of fifteenth-century Florence. This chapter looks at the role of the artist in society and how the artist developed from a craftsman to an intellectual scholar and
therefore rose on the social scale to a higher place in society. By looking at Luca della Robbia and other maiolica producers through this lens, I demonstrate the perceived social differences of the two.

Chapter Five: Luca della Robbia and His Maiolica Workshop takes the comparison of Luca della Robbia and other maiolica producers a step further by actually comparing the techniques, methods, skills, production and patronage of each to show where the two intertwine and where they diverge. Chapter five looks at Luca della Robbia in light of the culture and production of maiolica to prove his use of a pre-existing medium and to examine his inventiveness as a sculptor. This chapter clearly shows how Luca della Robbia influenced maiolica, how maiolica influenced Luca della Robbia, and how Luca della Robbia was inventive and unique in working with the medium of maiolica.

Overall this work argues that the differences between Luca della Robbia and other maiolica production is not as clear cut as most scholars claim, and while there is a social distance between Luca and other potters, there is an interplay and exchange of ideas displayed in the work created. Moreover, with many extant examples of purely sculptural maiolica aside from the della Robbia production, I demonstrate the artistic merits and qualities of the art commonly thought of as a craft. I champion Luca della Robbia as one of the many producers of art in the medium of maiolica, and as a artist who added an inventiveness and ingenuity that helped change the medium.
Chapter One: Historiography

The goal of my thesis is to explore the dichotomy of Luca della Robbia as an artist trained in marble and bronze who mainly produced maiolica, a tin glazed ceramic, which was primarily a decorative art. My focus is two-fold: to examine the social place of both Luca della Robbia as a maiolica worker and artist in fifteenth-century Italy, and to compare Luca della Robbia’s production with that of other maiolica workshops. The current state of art historical literature contains many voids and impediments within the areas I wish to study. First, there is a lack of literature comparing the works produced by Luca della Robbia and those by maiolica workshops. There is a strong basis in research and literature on Luca della Robbia as an artist and maiolica as a medium, but the scholarship lacks connections between the two. It also rarely addresses crucial subjects, such as the training of Luca della Robbia and the specific workshop practices of maiolica producers. Another hindrance is the lack of information on the social role of the artisan in fifteenth-century Italian society. Much has been written about the society and culture of Renaissance Italy and the rise of the artist from the ranks of artisan, yet the artisan has been more or less left out of scholarly discussions. It is however, possible to infer the status of the artisan from the culture and history of Italy during the Renaissance, and there is a wide range of literature on this subject.

Cultural History of the Italian Renaissance

Because the social status and role of the artist and artisan is a central focus of my thesis, a cultural look at the Italian Renaissance is an important basis for my inquiry. The art studied in this thesis is a product of a specific time and place, created for an Italian
Renaissance audience by an Italian Renaissance producer. Understanding the artwork means understanding the culture that produced it: therefore it is imperative not only to know why art was considered beautiful or skillful, but also why certain craft arts were important or useful to patrons. Culture and taste dictate what is considered beautiful and help to explain why patrons want to commission certain types and genres of art. This is especially true with decorative arts and ceramics, as these works were not only aesthetically pleasing but had a practical function and use in the life and culture of the consumer. The importance that certain craft arts held for the patron speaks to the role the artisans held in society. The necessity of craft production explains the need for artisans to exist.

The first author to give a complete socio-cultural account of the Italian Renaissance was Jacob Burckhardt in his book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. This social history is significant as it highlights the importance of individual identity for the development of the Renaissance in Italy. Burckhardt analyzes the culture and society to give a general overview of the entire Italian Renaissance and its main components, such as the rise of the individual, the formation of early-modern states and governments, and the significance placed on antiquity. In addition, Burckhardt’s discussion of the consequence of man discovering free will and intellectual pursuits directly correlates to the rise of the status of the artist. The rise of scholarly study that came with the discovery of man’s individual intellect brought about an appreciation for

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art, skill, and beauty. An emphasis on individual creativity and achievement prompted a rise of the previous mechanical arts of painting and sculpting to liberal arts.\(^2\)

Of the same vein is Peter Burke’s *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy, 1420-1540*.\(^3\) In his social approach to the Renaissance, Burke focuses primarily on the art works. He explores works of art and their production by linking them to the social status of the artists, as well as by analyzing the patron/client relationship, the function of a work of art, and the formation of taste. Burke’s analysis of the roles of producer and patron, and how each functioned within society are relevant to my discussion of patronage for both della Robbia’s workshop and other maiolica workshops. Specifically, artistic autonomy adds insight into workshop practices and the valuation of original creativity in a work of fine art versus the generic decoration of a craft art. That is, what portion of the commission provided specific instructions to the artist/artisan by the patron, and what portion was dictated by the artist/artisan himself.

A socio-economic approach to the art of the Italian Renaissance comes from the perspective provided by Richard Goldthwaite. His *Wealth and Demand for Art in Italy, 1300-1600* discusses the impact of the growth of wealth in Italy in the Renaissance as a catalyst for the first pre-modern consumer culture, the predecessor to modern consumer culture.\(^4\) For the first time art was a commodity, with supply and demand dictating the market. The rise in wealth and patronage of art created a new market and growth in demand for artistic workers and their production. This is important as the highest demand was not for panel paintings but for decorative arts in the form of household furnishings

\(^3\) Peter Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy, 1420-1540* (New York: Scribner, 1972).
and architecture.\textsuperscript{5} Both Luca della Robbia and other maiolica workshops filled this new
demand by creating items to be utilized in a household or architectural setting.

\textbf{Maiolica}

Goldthwaite connects the literature of social and economic history of the
Renaissance with the history of maiolica in his short study on maiolica.\textsuperscript{6} There is a lack
of social scholarship in art history that connects cultural values to the production of
decorative arts. Goldthwaite fills this absence in maiolica scholarship by looking at the
social conditions that were both precursors and catalysts to the rise of the popularity of
maiolica. He analyzes the changes in social decorum and values that created a market and
demand for ceramic tableware. This study also examines patronage, and defines it as an
important determinant of the popularity of maiolica in the Renaissance. The economic
aspect of maiolica production has often been left out by scholars, who do not delve
deeply into the specifics of the medium except in more general literature, such as
catalogues.

Indeed, most of the literature on Italian maiolica comes in the form of exhibition
catalogues. Prior to the nineteenth century and the emergence of archeology, maiolica
had been overlooked in the history of art. Maiolica (tin glazed earthenware) and other
forms of Italian Renaissance ceramics were highly sought after in England, as Timothy
Wilson notes: “Renaissance pottery was valued as an inspiration for the English pottery

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., see pages 224-243 for a discussion of the importance of domestic furnishings, including
furniture, paintings, and other decorative arts that were part of the new consumer culture surrounding the
growth in architecture, that Goldthwaite argues is the central focus in the formation of the art market in
Renaissance Italy.

\textsuperscript{6} Richard A. Goldthwaite, “The Economic and Social World of Italian Renaissance Maiolica,”
industry…”7 and thus beginning in the early 1850s private collectors and museums began to increase their collections of maiolica. C.D.E. Fortnum was one of the earliest enthusiasts and connoisseurs to publish a catalogue of maiolica in 1876 for the South Kensington Museum in England.8 Other collectors, such as the Pre-Raphaelite artist Henry Wallis wrote on the subject in the early years of the twentieth century.9 Wallis took inspiration from the purity of medieval and early-Renaissance art. He was one of the first collectors to advocate the collecting of pre-Renaissance Italian maiolica that was discovered and excavated throughout Italy at this time.

Catalogues continue to be the most popular form of scholarship produced on the subject of maiolica. Most catalogues, such as Bernard Rackham’s *Catalogue of Italian Maiolica*, are divided into two parts: a general history of the technique and progression of maiolica, and plates and descriptions of individual pieces.10 Earlier catalogues from the first half of the twentieth century focus mostly on an explanation of the technique of tin glazing to introduce the reader to maiolica and to separate it from other ceramic media, thus marking its importance as a pictorial and aesthetic medium. Later catalogues written in the second half of the twentieth century, such as those by Tim Wilson, build on the traditional catalogue format while including essays that elaborate on the styles and subject matter common to most maiolica of the Renaissance.11

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9 See Wilson, Ceramic Art, p. 20 for a further discussion of Wallis’ impact on the popularity of medieval and early Renaissance Italian pottery.
10 Victoria and Albert Museum, and Bernard Rackham, *Catalogue of Italian Maiolica* (London: Published under the authority of the Board of education, 1940).
11 For example, Timothy Wilson, *Ceramic Art of the Italian Renaissance*, 1987.
An expansive example of an earlier treatise on maiolica is Guiseppe Liverani’s *Five Centuries of Italian Majolica*.\(^\text{12}\) Liverani gives detailed descriptions of each type of maiolica, where it was produced, and the known artisans in each production center. Liverani also provides information on artisans who are otherwise forgotten, and actually compares the work of Luca della Robbia to that of other maiolica producers. In this discussion the author claims that works of the della Robbia workshop cannot be compared to maiolica, because even though both are tin glazed terracotta, Luca della Robbia creates sculpture (fine art) and maiolica is in fact a decorative art.\(^\text{13}\) His conclusion seems unlikely as he discusses in length and detail many different maiolica artisans and their work, yet claims that they still are not as worthy as Luca della Robbia, whom he only touches upon briefly. His choice to write a book about maiolica and then argue it is not a worthy form of art is unexpected. My comparison of the production of Luca della Robbia and the maiolica workers will build upon, yet argue against, Liverani’s conclusion that maiolica is not comparable to della Robbia works in any way.

While catalogues provide a general background on maiolica, as well as descriptions of individual objects, they generally lack information about artists and maiolica workshop practices. What is known about workshop practice and production of maiolica comes from Piccolpasso’s treatise, *I Tre Libri dell’Arte del Vasaio* (1548), and is cited by most scholars who examine maiolica production and its technique.\(^\text{14}\)

This treatise is the main primary source on maiolica in the form of a technical manual written by a courtier, Cipriano Piccolpasso (1524-1579), who attempted to learn

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., 25-26.

all the “secrets” of the art of ceramics from potters in Casteldurante. Written in 1548, the manuscript relates a step-by-step process of how maiolica was produced, from finding the clay, to glaze composition, up through the final firing. Piccolpasso’s work is essential as it is the only surviving technical manual of the Renaissance, describing the production process of maiolica. It also stands as a work by a courtier written for an educated, elite audience. The purpose of writing this manual was to give other courtiers interested in producing ceramics an idea of how to work with maiolica.15 This suggests an elevation of maiolica from the humble beginnings as a craft art to a more prestigious status. The aristocracy was allowed to practice the fine arts such as painting, where one would not dirty his or her fine clothing, but the lesser arts were looked upon as unsuitable for nobility.16 Contemporary scholars such as Tim Wilson and W.D. Kingery reference Piccolpasso at length in their work, relying heavily on his treatise to inform their research of maiolica.

An important development in the research of maiolica, informed by Piccolpasso, is W.D. Kingery’s scientific examination of the tin glazes in specific objects of maiolica. More recently Kingery has published two articles on the exact composition and technology of maiolica glazes. In “On the Technology of Renaissance Maiolica Glazes” Kingery examines Piccolpasso’s treatise in relation to specific samples of maiolica objects, comparing the recipes for glazes and the actual chemical content of the glazes.17 He also gives a complete breakdown of the layers of glaze for each piece and the minerals and chemicals used to create different colors. In Kingery’s article “Painterly

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16 Mendelsohn, Paragoni, 53.
Maiolica of the Italian Renaissance” the author contrasts the work produced by Luca della Robbia with generic maiolica pieces through glaze analysis. Essentially both glazes used by Luca della Robbia and other maiolica workers are tin based and created in the same manner. Yet Kingery concludes that the glazes have three main differences that separate the production and style of the della Robbia workshop from other maiolica workshops, and similarly to Liverani, Kingery separates Luca della Robbia’s work from maiolica production. This article will inform my discussion of the similarities and differences of maiolica and the work of Luca della Robbia, as it is one of the only scientific comparisons of the two to date. Kingery, though, does not further the discussion much past the similarities and differences of the chemical compositions of the glazes, whereas I will compare each based on style, function, and art historical precedents.

Another integral question to my thesis is one the literature tends to gloss over: that of the artistic status of maiolica. Can maiolica be considered art, or is it solely a craft object? Istoriato wares painted in minute detail with history scenes were highly valued for the skill of their producers and their material quality, and many of the master painters are known by name. Scholars usually dedicate their research to these producers, such as Nicola da Urbino, or the work Tim Wilson has done on Francesco Xanto Avelli da Rovigo. In addition, many catalogues contain examples of maiolica that either do not have an apparent functional purpose, or a function that is secondary to the aesthetic, sculptural quality of the object. Even the scholars who inadvertently approach the subject

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19 Istoriato wares are history and genre scenes painted onto tableware or plaques in minute detail with maiolica glazes. The plates usually portrayed classical scenes from Greek and Roman mythology and became very popular with rich patrons in the beginning of the sixteenth century. See Tim Wilson’s catalogue Ceramic Art of the Italian Renaissance p. 39 for a full explanation.
contradict themselves. In his article “Painterly Maiolica” Kingery states that “…decorative objects all became elevated to the status of art,”\textsuperscript{21} but then seems to refute this by saying that other precious stones and metals were more highly prized than “the best-quality maiolica,”\textsuperscript{22} and since maiolica was still used as dinnerware, it was a purely functional object. The issue of the status of maiolica is directly tied to the issue of the status of the maiolica worker in Renaissance society. Even if the work they produce could be defined as art, the status of the producers as either artists or artisans directly affected the status of the art they produced.

\textbf{Definition of Artist and Artisan}

The period of the Renaissance in Italy has been defined by Burckhardt as characterized by the rise of the individual, which in turn affected the rise in the status of man and the status of the artist.\textsuperscript{23} In the Middle Ages artists and artisans were just another type of worker, grouped together by the nature of their manual labor and the nature of the work they produced. The Renaissance saw both a differentiation between artist and craftsman, and a rise in the status of the artist. Because it represents an important shift in the history of art, this subject has been studied thoroughly by art historians, who have approached the topic from many different angles.

Art historical literature has amply discussed the rise of the artists in this time period, their new role in society, and the causes and effects of this change. Andrew Martindale expands on Burckhardt’s principles and describes the transition of artist from

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Kingery. “Painterly Maiolica,” 40.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 45.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Burckhardt, \textit{Civilization of the Renaissance}, 1960.
\end{itemize}
a member of a group, guild, and workshop to an individual with skill and status. Other scholars, such as Bram Kempers and Martin Wackernagel discuss the new role of the artist and how patronage affected the change in the status of the artist. Each author dissects the new place the artist held in society, as a guild member, and what the protocol dictated in terms of interactions with other members of society.

Other scholars, such as Michael Baxandall, delve deeper into the role of the artist and tie art theory of the Cinquecento and Renaissance Italy into their analyses. Karen-edis Barzman and Leatrice Mendelsohn both center their discussions of the artist in Renaissance Italy around contemporaneous art theory. By looking at the role of the accademia, scholars have traced the rise of the artist with the change of artistic training. The change in training was a product of the intellectual discussions surrounding art and the development of Cinquecento art theory. The theories created at this time are important as they shed light on what the intellectual elite thought about art.

While the literature is helpful to place the artist in context and define who the artist was at this time, it lacks clear definitions regarding the place and role of the artisan.

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28 The accademia was formed as a school for artists, to more effectively train apprentices by offering classes, lectures, and workshop practice, and as a social network for artists. Through the discussions and lectures presented by the accademia in Florence, Benedetto Varchi and other theorists began discussing art theory, and helped elevate the status of art from a mechanical art to a liberal art worthy of intellectual discussion. The accademia also replaced the guild as a social network for artists, and separated the artist from the artisan, further elevating the status of the artist. This concept will be discussed in further detail in “Chapter Four: Artists and Artisans” of this work.
The artist is usually defined as breaking away from the social grouping of mechanical laborer into a more intellectual pursuit of the fine arts. However, the role of the mechanical laborer is not developed beyond the implication that he is below the rank of liberal artist. For the purposes of this thesis, I will define the terms artist and artisan as they were perceived within the Florentine Renaissance. An artist was defined as an individual who produces a work of art that displays genius, invention and design (ingegno, invenzione, and disegno); the object an artist creates comes from an intellectual pursuit and conception rather than the manual labor required to produce the object. An artisan is a manual laborer who practices their craft not through their mind, but through the mechanical act of creation. The artisan is not defined by invention or the creation of new forms or objects, rather they copy the forms created by the artist.

Another gap the literature has never bridged is that of the role of the sculptor as artist. The current scholarship that investigates the role of the artist and how the artist lived and worked within a Renaissance society mostly examines painters, the traditional fine artist, or focuses on case studies of individual sculptors instead of the profession as a whole. Workshop practices and the role of sculptors are handled in a general manner, omitted by studies that look deeply into theory and discuss painting and painters. This makes it difficult for scholars researching sculptors, as one can infer that what is known

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29 The fine arts will be defined in this thesis from now on as an object whose purpose is academic and intellectual, not a functional art. Art and fine art will be defined as a liberal art as opposed to a mechanical art as discussed by Leatrice Mendelsohn in Paragoni, 43. Also defined by Vasari as architecture, painting and sculpture that displays disegno as referenced by Robert Williams Art, Theory and Culture in Sixteenth Century Italy: From Techne to Metatechne, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 33. This concept will be discussed further in Chapter Four: Artists and Artisans.  
30 The definitions of the terms “artist” and “artisan” will be discussed in depth in Chapter Four: Artists and Artisans, and have been compiled from the ideas of Leatrice Mendelsohn, Leon Battista Alberti, and Giorgio Vasari, all mentioned in the note above.
about painters could refer to sculptors and other fine artists as well, but this is solely an assumption, and therefore cannot be used with authority and validity.

I will address the issues tied to the role of the artist in Renaissance society, particularly those pertinent to the early stages of the artist’s development from member of a group of artisans to an individual artist, highly regarded in society. Luca della Robbia is a challenging person to place in pre-defined categories as he was a sculptor trained in the materials of fine art, yet he chose to work in clay, a typical craft medium, creating sculptures that walked the line between decorative and fine art. Maiolica, as well, developed into an art that was not just functional, but was created for aesthetic purposes. Certain maiolica workers gained a reputation as talented painters of ceramics, yet remained within their societal role of artisan. In many ways the distinctions between artist and artisan seemed clear cut but, during the Renaissance, ceramics fell into a uniquely grey area where it was hard to distinguish between fine ceramic art and decorative ceramic art.

**Luca della Robbia**

Not much has been written about Luca della Robbia as an “important” Renaissance Italian artist. He was glossed over for many years, partially due to a lack of concrete information about him as a person, and partially due to a confusion of his role as an artist or artisan. Luca della Robbia began his career working in marble, but primarily focused on glazed ceramics for the majority of his mature artistic life. Therefore some scholars may have found Luca della Robbia a difficult subject, unsure whether to label him a sculptor (artist) or a potter (artisan). In her treatise, Marchesa Burlamacchi summed
up the confusion when she wrote, “the position of Luca della Robbia in Italian Art is one of great eminence, but it is not easy to compare his works with those of his immediate contemporaries, as he occupies a position quite removed from them. It is one which he himself created, and which he alone could fill.”

Aside from legal documents such as tax returns and his final will and testament, Luca della Robbia did not leave behind a clear record of his personal and artistic goals, achievements, or thoughts. One of the few solid documents currently available is a biography of Luca della Robbia by Giorgio Vasari in his famous Lives of the Artists (1568).

Vasari’s inclusion of Luca della Robbia is vital in that it tells the modern scholar that Luca della Robbia was considered an important enough sculptor (and artist) by his later contemporary, Vasari, to be included in an anthology of the most significant Renaissance artists. While Lives of the Artists is a great primary source for background knowledge of Italian Renaissance artists, one has to be careful as most of the information given was based mostly on oral histories and lore. Vasari may not always be factual, but it is important to remember that he still conveyed valuable information known in the mid-sixteenth century.

Vasari tells Luca della Robbia’s story with authority and ingenuity, claiming he had been trained as a goldsmith, and began work as a sculptor in bronze and marble. In his biography Vasari mentions most of Luca della Robbia’s important commissions,

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31 Marchesa Burlamacchi, Luca della Robbia (London: George Bell and Sons, 1908), 87.
including the decoration of the organ stall for Santa Maria del Fiore, the cathedral in Florence. As Donatello was commissioned for the pendant choir, Vasari compares the work of the two artists, and as might be expected lauds the work by Donatello over the work by the younger and less experienced Luca della Robbia.\(^{34}\) He does, though, mention that Luca was given the commission because his work was well-loved by the Medici, who became great patrons of Luca della Robbia in future years.\(^{35}\) Throughout the biography, Vasari speaks of Luca della Robbia’s talent and skill, especially in regard to his “invention” of glazed terracotta sculpture, but keeps his status in check with comparisons to “greater” artists such as Donatello.\(^{36}\)

A large gap exists between Vasari at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth-century literature on Luca della Robbia. The earliest monographs appear at the beginning of the twentieth century and are written by scholars such as Allan Marquand and Marchesa Burlamacchi.\(^{37}\) However, these early works deal mostly with issues of attribution and authentication of works thought to be by Luca della Robbia, and lack a focused discussion about him as an artist or artisan. Marquand especially provides insightful yet concise bibliographical information on Luca della Robbia, then moves quickly into the descriptions of his known works. In the 1980s John Pope-Hennessey attempted to fill the void in scholarship on Luca della Robbia with the only modern monograph of the artist.\(^{38}\) Pope-Hennessey collected all the known

\(^{34}\) See Vasari, *Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent*, vol. 1, 162-164 for a discussion of his work on the *cantoria* (organ stall) of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, and Vasari’s comparison of Donatello and Luca della Robbia.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 162.

\(^{36}\) Vasari attributes the invention of glazed sculpture to Luca della Robbia on page 175 of volume 1 of *Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*.


\(^{38}\) Pope-Hennessey, *Luca della Robbia*. 
information on Luca della Robbia and his family workshop, and organized it clearly into
different essays dealing with materials and themes in his work, and provided a complete
catalogue. This monograph, while comprehensive and offering a clear view of the life of
Luca della Robbia, provides information that was already published by previous scholars
and does not present new scholarship on the subject. While biographies and monographs
are extremely useful to scholars wishing to place Luca della Robbia and his work in a
context and time period, his art has not been reevaluated so as to produce relevant
information on his glazed terracotta sculptures and his debated artistic status.

The technology necessary to study the chemical composition of the glazed works
produced in the della Robbia workshop was only perfected at the end of the twentieth
century, and is one reason scholars have not fully dealt with issues linked to Luca della
Robbia’s work in ceramic. W.D. Kingery produced an article discussing “The Glazes of
Luca della Robbia,” in which he studied the chemical analysis of the glazes in depth.39
Such a study provides a great comparison point to his above-mentioned study of the
chemical analysis of maiolica glazes, and allows for further research into the technique
and production of the della Robbia workshop. Kingery provides a solid scientific
background to further inquiries but, as of yet, work has not been published linking the
chemical analysis to Luca’s style, his work in relation to maiolica, and the difference
between his production of glazed terracotta sculptures and other potters and sculptors
working in the same area and time period.

Much is still undiscovered about Luca della Robbia, such as the influence that the
practice of the maiolica worker’s tin glazing had on the development of Luca della
Robbia’s secret glaze recipe, and the connection between the average maiolica producer

and the della Robbia workshop. It is unknown if Luca himself had an influence on the later producers of maiolica, as his purely sculptural forms deviated from their traditionally functional wares. Previous scholarship and the available literature have found it difficult to assess Luca della Robbia’s specific role in society, as most art historians simply claim he is an artist based on Vasari’s statements and his role in the sculptor’s guild (L’Arte dei Maestri di Pietra e di Legname) and the confraternity of Saint Luke, the artist’s religious and social group. The majority of Luca della Robbia’s career was spent in production of tin glazed ceramic sculptures of the type called maiolica by early twentieth century scholars in reference to the technique of tin glazing. Yet scholars do not challenge the perception that Luca della Robbia is a sculptor, an artist, not a potter, even though he only delved into the finer arts of marble carving and bronze casting primarily at the beginning of his career.

My thesis will look at these issues and attempt to determine Luca della Robbia’s social role as an artist or artisan in Renaissance Italy. By examining Luca della Robbia’s place in society I will also define the role of the maiolica worker: I will situate the artisan and the potter into a society who highly valued art and artists and placed an emphasis on aesthetics, intellect and personal achievement. My thesis will attempt to answer definitively what the literature has overlooked. If maiolica can be considered fine art, not just a decorative art, then Luca della Robbia can without question be considered an artist, with enough talent to produce skillful works in three different artistic media.
Chapter Two: Luca della Robbia

The position of Luca della Robbia in Italian Art is one of great eminence, but it is not easy to compare his works with those of his immediate contemporaries, as he occupies a position quite removed from them. It is one which he himself created, and which he alone could fill.¹

Marchesa Burlamacchi’s observation on the state of Luca della Robbia’s place within the history of Italian Renaissance art is both poignant and concise. It is indeed hard to define his role in society and his place as an artist or as an artisan. This ambivalence can be explained by his use of multiple media that carried separate artistic and social values. Luca della Robbia’s position was therefore a liminal one, one that was completely new in regard to medium, and one that is complicated by the fact that not much is concretely known about his training and background. As discussed by Bruce Boucher, prior to Luca della Robbia all terracotta sculpture was painted with polychrome: Luca was the first person to apply a tin glaze, usually reserved for plates and pots, to sculpture.² Luca della Robbia is unlike any other Quattrocentesche Italian sculptor as he focused his career on perfecting a glazed terracotta relief sculpture that no other artist had used. While many scholars, like the sixteenth-century artist and writer Giorgio Vasari, credit Luca della Robbia with the invention of such glazed sculpture, the verity of these assertions should be analyzed.³ Luca della Robbia produced the first known examples of glaze on a sculptural object, but he did not invent tin glaze as Vasari indicates.

Biography

¹ Marchesa Burlamacchi, *Luca della Robbia*, (London: George Bell and Sons, 1908), 87.
Most of the information known about Luca della Robbia has survived in the forms of tax returns, contracts, his last will and testament, and the Florentine *catasto* of 1427. The few authors who discuss his life and career, such as Marchesa Burlamacchi, Allan Marquand, and John Pope-Hennessy, all compiled their facts based on these official documents. Most likely due to the dearth of solid primary information, there is also a lack of substantial literature on Luca della Robbia. Most of the literature is repetitive, as all of the information came from the same sources. The documents used by all scholars studying Luca della Robbia reveal that Luca was the third and youngest son of Simone della Robbia, a wealthy Florentine citizen involved in the wool trade. Simone della Robbia owned a farm in the surrounding Tuscan countryside, which classifies him as both a landowner and a member of the *Arte della Lana* (the wool guild). Simone was of a wealthier class and owned a villa in Tuscany, which he eventually passed on to his son Luca, who was born in Florence, circa 1399/1400, where he lived his whole life.

Nothing definite is known about Luca della Robbia’s training, but on March 21, 1427 he joined the *Arte della Lana*, his familial guild. His involvement in the guild and family business is not clear, but only five years later, in September of 1432, he joined the *Arte dei Maestri di Pietra e di Legname* (the stone cutters and wood carvers guild). That same year, Luca della Robbia was commissioned to make the marble *cantoria* for the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, his first known work (Figure 1). It is impressive that he was commissioned to make such a public work for the cathedral of his city as his first recorded, independent commission at the very beginning of his career. The Operai seemed willing to take a chance on the young, inexperienced sculptor even

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6 Ibid., 13.
though they commissioned Donatello, who was at the height of his career, to carve the pendant organ loft in the Duomo. Luca della Robbia’s career stems mostly from the commissions of the cathedral, as he produces work in marble, bronze, and ceramic for the church.

Like his father, Luca della Robbia was well to do in his own right, and on August 31, 1446 he bought a house with his brother Marco on the Via Guelfa for two hundred and twenty florins.\(^7\) To put this in perspective, according to the *catasto* of 1427, “a Florentine household possessed on the average, a patrimony of 1,022 florins before, and 790 florins after, deductions,” which Luca della Robbia’s house worth two hundred and twenty florins fits statistically as an average Florentine.\(^8\) Luca lived in the house with his brother and his brother’s five children, who continued to live with their uncle Luca after their father Marco’s death in 1448. This was partly possible because Luca della Robbia never married, but instead cared for and supported his nephews and nieces, and even taught his nephew Andrea the new family business of glazed terracotta sculpture. It is unknown why Luca della Robbia chose to remain a bachelor, but Martin Wackernagel explains Luca’s bachelorhood as devotion to his art:

> In connection with the old custom of monastic scholarship, non monastic scholars of the Renaissance also as a rule preferred to remain single. Thus it might also have seemed natural to many an artist to renounce marriage and a personal family life in the interests of the most undistracted pursuit of his professional goals. And instead of this, at most he might also do as Brunelleschi did with Lazzaro Cavalvanti and take an adoptive son unto his house or care for younger relatives in case of need, as Luca della Robbia did for Andrea and his brother…\(^9\)

It is possible that Luca chose to devote himself to his art and career rather than to raise a family of his own, which helps to explain why he treated his nephews and nieces like his

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\(^7\) Ibid., 12.
\(^8\) David Herlihy and Christaine Klapisch-Zuber, Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 95.
own children. He taught his nephew Andrea della Robbia his art, as if Andrea was his son and heir, and even left Andrea his workshop and business in his will.\(^\text{10}\) Luca della Robbia dispersed his other possessions and property among the rest of his nephews and nieces upon his death on February 20, 1482 at the age of 82 in Florence.\(^\text{11}\)

In addition to the official documents that present a basic timeline for the events in Luca della Robbia’s life, Giorgio Vasari wrote a biography of Luca della Robbia in his *Lives of the Artists* (1568).\(^\text{12}\) Some of his facts are actually incorrect, such as the date Vasari gives for Luca’s birth in 1388, since official documents now tell us that he was born in either 1399 or 1400; but Vasari provides a sense of character and continuity that helps to fill in the gaps left by tax returns and Luca della Robbia’s will.\(^\text{13}\) One of Vasari’s points deals with Luca’s connection to the Medici family, specifically their patronage and support of his art; Vasari implies that the patronage and assistance provided by the illustrious family began Luca della Robbia’s career. He even claims that it was the persuasion and persistence of one Vieri de’ Medici that persuaded the church to give Luca his first commission of the *cantoria* in Santa Maria del Fiore.\(^\text{14}\) Vasari also provides an explanation for the shift in material from marble and bronze to ceramic, claiming that Luca della Robbia found marble and bronze too time consuming, and switched to ceramics as an easier, more cost-effective alternative.\(^\text{15}\) He decidedly attributes the invention of tin-glazes and glazed ceramic sculpture to Luca della Robbia when he states,


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 160.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 162.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 165.
“For this process, then, Luca, as being its inventor, received the highest praise; and, indeed, all future ages will be indebted to him for the same.”16

Even more relevant for this study is Vasari’s discussion of another invention by Luca della Robbia: that of painting directly onto a flat, ceramic surface, later to be known as istoriato ware, a popular style of maiolica. In fact, Vasari claims to have seen examples of this artistic method with his own eyes:

…the master still sought to make further inventions, and laboured to discover a method by which figures and historical representations might be colored on level surfaces of terra-cotta, proposing thereby to secure a more life-like effect to the pictures.17

While the implications of mentioning invention and ingenuity will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters, Vasari describes Luca della Robbia as an artist with ingegno and invenzione, two qualities deemed necessary for artists, and not artisans, in the Reniassance. He also credits Luca della Robbia with the invention of a style of ceramic glazing and painting that was later utilized and popularized by maiolica workshops in Urbino. Vasari places Luca della Robbia, socially and culturally, as an artist who created new, inventive works for wealthy and important patrons such as the Medici of Florence, and was copied by other maiolica workshops.

**His Training and Career**

As with the paucity of information on the life of Luca della Robbia, nothing is definitively known about his training. Vasari claims that “he was placed by his father to learn the art of the goldsmith with Leonardo di Ser Giovanni, who was then held to be the best master in Florence for the vocation.”18 This assertion is rebuked in the footnotes of

16 Ibid., 166.
17 Ibid., 169-170.
18 Ibid., 160.
the text by the editors of the 1911 English edition of Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists*, Blashfield and Hopkins, and Lorenzo Ghiberti is mentioned as an alternative possibility. John Pope-Hennessy backs the declaration that Luca della Robbia worked in the workshop of Ghiberti, primarily and convincingly with written evidence: a letter from Pietro Cennini written in 1475 that “implies that he (Luca) was for a time a member of Ghiberti’s shop.”

Whoever Luca della Robbia’s mentor was is important to know as his mentor was very important to the formation of his style as an artist, his early commissions, and helps explain his choice of media and his ability to work in bronze, marble and clay. Some techniques, such as the use of tin glazing on his terracotta sculptures, may have been learned outside of his first apprenticeship and after his initial artistic training, by learning the secrets of the other maiolica workshops in Florence. However, because Luca della Robbia used different media in single works and is credited with the development of glazed ceramic sculpture, it is important to try and piece together how he learned all his skills and where he developed his talents and ingenuity. Ghiberti stands as the most likely master of Luca della Robbia when style, media and time period are taken into account.

Lorenzo Ghiberti had two successive major commissions for Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence: two bronze sets of doors for the east side and the north side of the baptistery. The first set was commissioned at the turn of the fifteenth-century and eventually finished and hung in 1424. Ghiberti’s extremely large project of twenty bronze panels for the doors allowed him the opportunity to take in many apprentices, and as

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Roberta Olson mentions, “During this time, Ghiberti’s workshop was a training ground for a new generation of artists (to name a few, Donatello, Michelozzo, Uccello and Masolino).”\textsuperscript{22} The 1475 letter of Pietro Cennini previously mentioned specifically refers to the second set of bronze doors, more commonly known as the \textit{porta del paradiso}, on which Luca della Robbia would have worked (Figure 2). This makes sense as there is no written documentation mentioning Luca della Robbia in the workshop during the first door campaign, while most of the other artists, such as Donatello and Masolino, are mentioned by name as working for Ghiberti.\textsuperscript{23} In addition, Luca was a member of the \textit{Arte della Lana} in 1427, only switching to the \textit{Arte dei Maestri di Pietra e di Legname} in 1432.\textsuperscript{24} While his membership in the wool guild does not mean that he was not apprenticed to Ghiberti prior to 1427, it does imply that his career was heading towards working with wool instead of stone or bronze in 1427. What is known is that by 1432 when he joined the woodcutters and stone masons’ guild, he had already received the commission for the marble cantoria in Santa Maria del Fiore, the same church for which Ghiberti was making the bronze doors. It seems likely, then, that Luca della Robbia was apprenticed to Ghiberti sometime between 1424 and 1431 while Ghiberti was working on the second set of bronze doors for Santa Maria del Fiore.

Not only was Luca della Robbia given his first major commission from the church where he was most likely working as an apprentice, but the materials and methods Ghiberti used are the same that Luca adopted in his practice. Throughout his career, Luca della Robbia works in three sculptural media: marble, bronze, and ceramic. Ghiberti mainly worked in bronze, primarily on bas-relief panels for the east and north side doors

\textsuperscript{22} Olson, \textit{Italian Renaissance Sculpture}, 45.  
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., and Pope-Hennessy, Luca della Robbia, 16.  
of the baptistery of the Duomo, two projects that spanned from 1400-1452.\textsuperscript{25} It is likely that Luca would have worked on the second set of doors, and learned how to both cast bronze and create a set of doors (Figure 3). Luca shows proficiency in bronze as he himself created a set of bronze doors, consisting of ten panels, for the north door of the sacristy of the same church. While originally commissioned by the Operai for Donatello in 1437, Luca della Robbia began work in 1445 and completed the large project in 1475. Ghiberti is known to have worked in bronze, precious metals, stained glass, wood, paint, and architecture, and as a master of many media he would have taught Luca della Robbia the different skills and techniques necessary to properly manipulate each medium.\textsuperscript{26} It is also thought that Ghiberti worked in terracotta, if even just as a material from which to create models and studies as was the custom prior to carving in marble or casting in bronze.\textsuperscript{27}

The idea that Ghiberti worked in terracotta is quite important, as it means that Luca della Robbia probably learned how to work in ceramic from Ghiberti and did not necessarily have to learn the potter’s art from a potter. Allan Marquand discusses a terracotta panel that depicts the grouping of the Moses panel found on Ghiberti’s second set of bronze doors for the baptistery (Figure 4). Marquand argues that the terracotta panel is not a reproduction of the original bronze, but in fact a preliminary sketch in clay before the bronze was cast. Marquand also states that “Ghiberti himself tells us in his Second Commentary that he made many sketches in this material.”\textsuperscript{28} This demonstrates

\textsuperscript{25} See Olson, \textit{Italian Renaissance Sculpture}, 41-45 for discussion of the first set of doors, and pages 62-63 for the second set of doors.
\textsuperscript{26} Olson, \textit{Italian Renaissance Sculpture}, 45.
\textsuperscript{27} Boucher, \textit{Earth and Fire}, 5-6.
Ghiberti had knowledge of clay and its properties and thus would have passed it down to his apprentices who, most likely, would have worked directly with the clay models. According to Marquand, Ghiberti worked in clay while creating the second set of baptistery doors, which is the most likely time that Luca della Robbia would have worked in Ghiberti’s shop. This implication leads to the assumption that Luca della Robbia learned how to model and manipulate ceramic media while in Ghiberti’s shop.

A second example of Ghiberti’s knowledge and use of terracotta is mentioned by both Bruce Boucher and John Pope-Hennessy, and proffers another important idea: that Ghiberti was familiar with the process of glazing. Three relief tiles in a glazed terracotta survive in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, one resides in the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo in Florence, and all four are said to be by the hand, or workshop, of Ghiberti.29 The tiles depict scenes of Adam and Eve from the book of Genesis, and the three in London are mounted on the front of a cassone, or marriage chest (Figure 5). These reliefs have in the past been attributed to Luca della Robbia, but most scholars now agree to an attribution of Ghiberti, or at least his workshop.30 The cassone itself presents dating inconsistencies that John Pope-Hennessy admits make “it hazardous to claim… that the lead glaze anticipates the earliest glazed reliefs of Luca della Robbia.”31 The creation of Eve panel in Florence, though, differs from the London panels in size, and has been recognized as “the earliest surviving one of its kind” (a glazed terracotta relief sculpture).32 It is still important, though, that Ghiberti was familiar with glazing

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68 For a detailed description of past attributions see John Pope-Hennessy’s catalogue entry # 51, in *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture*, 58.
69 Ibid.
techniques and might have started Luca della Robbia’s experiments with glazed terracotta sculpture. This also offers a possible and better explanation of how Luca della Robbia learned to glaze terracotta sculpture, other than learning directly from a Florentine potter.

While an apprenticeship with Lorenzo Ghiberti would explain Luca della Robbia’s ability to work in bronze and terracotta, it does not explain his initial work in marble. John Pope-Hennessy suggests that he was trained by Nanni di Banco, who around the time of Luca’s training was the leading classicizing marble sculptor in Florence. Nanni di Banco also had many commissions that he could not have finished in a timely manner without significant help from apprentices.\textsuperscript{33} While this idea is conjecture, only few shops would have allowed Luca della Robbia to learn marble carving in Florence during the fifteenth century; therefore it makes sense that Luca would learn from Nanni di Banco. Even though no records of his training in either bronze, ceramic or marble survive, it is clear that he was skilled in marble carving by 1431 when the Opera del Duomo, assisted by Vieri de’Medici (Piero de’Medici) who suggested Luca della Robbia as the best sculptor for the job, commissioned him to create the cantoria, an organ loft carved completely out of marble, for Santa Maria del Fiore (Figure 1).\textsuperscript{34}

The commission of the cantoria was for one of two organ lofts for the cathedral, as the Operai had just ordered two new organs to flank the high altar and needed decorative supports for the instruments. The commission for the second organ loft, the pendant to Luca della Robbia’s loft, was given to Donatello, and both marble lofts focused on the same theme: Psalm 150, music in praise of God.\textsuperscript{35} Luca della Robbia created the marble relief sculptures for his cantoria, but John Pope-Hennessy argues that

\textsuperscript{71} Pope-Hennessy, \textit{Luca della Robbia}, 16-17.
\textsuperscript{72} Vasari, \textit{Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent}, 162.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 25.
Brunelleschi was the architectural vision behind the loft.\textsuperscript{36} It is not thought that Luca della Robbia was trained in the art of architecture; he would have been unable to produce the loft on his own without an architect to direct his artistic genius. The cantoria was created with ten separate marble reliefs: six surrounding the sides of the loft and four decorating the bottom. Each relief depicts children and putti singing and playing instruments such as tambourines, trumpets and citharas in praise of God. Three friezes containing the words of Psalm 150 circle the top, middle and bottom of the face of the cantoria. Many of the figures appear to be taken from Roman sarcophagi, and refer to classical sculpture.\textsuperscript{37} The cantoria is Luca della Robbia’s first known, independent work, and is the basis of his classical style that continues throughout his career. It is also an important work as it was most likely created entirely by his own hand, and shows the use of clay models. John Pope Hennessy claims:

\begin{quote}
The reliefs of Luca della Robbia’s Cantoria, on the other hand, are stylistically consistent and are likely to be almost wholly autograph. Clay models for them must naturally have been prepared, but they were translated into marble slowly, and the hand that carved them was in the main that of one sculptor.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

The final product was fully installed by August 1438, seven years after the original commission, which indicates that he had the time to create all the reliefs by himself.\textsuperscript{39} It is significant that the cantoria is primarily by his own hand and not that of an apprentice, as it is his first known work and it legitimizes his career and name as a sculptor. It shows that he is capable of carving a huge organ loft by himself with skill and references to classical art.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 20.  
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 23-24.  
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 26.  
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 19.
While Luca della Robbia’s first-known individual work is in marble and the majority of the works he produced later were ceramic, he also worked in bronze. His only large-scale bronze work was the north set of doors for the sacristy of Santa Maria del Fiore, situated beneath his marble cantoria. The doors were originally commissioned out to Donatello in 1437, but by 1445 the contract was cancelled and reissued to Michelozzo (Figure 3).40 A contract stipulation added by the Opera del Duomo requested that Luca della Robbia join Michelozzo in the following year. Later Maso di Bartolomeo was added to the commission to help the two sculptors create the bronze doors, but by 1463 both Michelozzo and Maso di Bartolomeo dropped the project, and left Luca della Robbia to finish the doors alone.41 All that had been created before Luca began work on the doors was the frame, the decoration between each panel and one of the proposed ten reliefs. The ten square relief panels, of which Luca della Robbia created nine, follow a compositional pattern featuring a saint in the center flanked by two angels, one on each side. The backgrounds are bare, except where an attribute is necessary to identify the saint: Saint Luke is seated with a bull behind his left shoulder. The doors were finally hung in 1475, thirty-eight years after the initial contract was awarded to Donatello.42 The bronze doors to the north entrance of the sacristy prove Luca della Robbia’s ability to work in bronze, a skill he would have learned in Ghiberti’s workshop. In the context of his career, they highlight his ability and versatility to work in various media while still maintaining his classicizing style. He did not work in bronze often, but he was still able

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78 Ibid., 258.
79 Ibid., 259-260. See John Pope-Hennessy’s Luca della Robbia for a complete description of the contracts and project associated with the north doors of the sacristy, pp. 67-72, pp. 258-261.
80 Ibid., 261.
to receive the commission for the doors and successfully produce a large scale, coherent program.

Underneath his marble *cantoria* and above the bronze sacristy doors in Santa Maria del Fiore is Luca della Robbia’s first documented, solely glazed terracotta sculpture: a lunette of the Resurrection of Christ (Figure 6). The lunette lies between his *cantoria* and the bronze doors, all on the same wall. This juxtaposition displays Luca’s expertise in all media and contrasts the three media of marble, terracotta and bronze. While all three pieces were created from different media, they tie together stylistically, as all are created by the same hand. Because it was begun in 1442 and hung in 1445, John Pope-Hennessy claims one of the reasons the Opera del Duomo was interested in the new technique of glazed terracotta sculpture was the speed with which the commissions could be completed. He also mentions that the bright colors of the lunette were desirable as the inside of the Duomo was dark, and the Operai were commissioning other artists to create stained glass windows and other works to brighten the inside of the church. The resurrection is glazed in Luca della Robbia’s signature blue and white, with all the figures solid white and the background solid blue. The risen Christ is surrounded by five sleeping guards and accompanied by four angels, two on either side. The use of brightly colored glazes makes the figures easily readable, and would have brightened the north sacristy doorway over which it was hung.

Two other important works by Luca della Robbia integrate marble and his new technique of glazed ceramic in one cohesive whole. In the funerary monument for Cardinal Federighi, now in the church of Santa Trinità, Luca della Robbia created a marble effigy of the cardinal, and framed the entire tomb in a mosaic of glazed terracotta

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81 Ibid., 37.
tiles (Figure 7). The marble effigy would have originally been pigmented and gilded, integrating the ceramic border more fully with the carved marble. The border features lozenges and roundels containing flowers and foliage. The whole frieze was created by fitting individual colored tiles of each component together in a cement backing, but gives the appearance of a continual frieze. Luca della Robbia also integrated his ceramic tiles from the ceiling of the Chapel of the Cardinal of Portugal with the fresco decorations by Antonio and Piero del Pollaiolo and a marble tomb by Antonio Rossellino to create a coherent and unified chapel featuring work in marble, fresco and ceramic (Figure 8).

John Pope-Hennessy notes that the use of ceramic enlivens the chapel and “…the colors of the ceiling must still have been stronger and more resonant than any others in the chapel, and Luca’s roundels were (as they still are today) the dominant works through which the message of the chapel was communicated.” In the chapel, Luca created a ceiling of yellow and green cubes, with roundels of the five cardinal virtues surrounding the dove of the Holy Spirit in the center.

Luca della Robbia was a master marble carver, bronze caster and potter. His ability to work in each medium and to integrate them all into a singular work of art is unique and speaks to his ability as a Renaissance man, an artist adept in all media who had the ability to choose the media that he wanted to use. Luca della Robbia chose to work in glazed terracotta for the majority of his life, even though he could have just as easily worked in marble or bronze, two materials normally associated with fine art rather than clay, a material normally associated with craft art. He adapted a tin glaze, of the type called maiolica, to sculptural forms, using a glaze that was usually applied to pots, plates

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82 Ibid., 47.
83 Ibid., 48.
84 Ibid., 49.
and other functional forms. Prior to Luca della Robbia, maiolica had never before been used to decorate terracotta sculpture: Luca della Robbia married the functional maiolica glaze with his classical aesthetic to create a completely new form of terracotta sculpture.
Chapter Three: Maiolica

The term “maiolica” in Italian has two connotations: first, the island of Majorca, and secondly a type of tin glazed earthenware pottery that was originally imported to Italy from Majorca. Maiolica is the term used for any type of Italian tin glazed earthenware pottery, usually of Renaissance production, but the term can apply to contemporary tin-glazed pottery as well. Scholars debate the exact usage of the term and its application, and to confuse the matter further the terminology associated with maiolica has changed over time. Writing in 1876, Charles Drury Edward Fortnum claimed that “the term ‘Maiolica,’ also spelt ‘Majolica,’ has long been and is still erroneously applied to all varieties of glazed earthenware of Italian origin.”¹ While this statement was correct at the time of Fortnum’s publication, currently it holds one main flaw. “Majolica” no longer holds the same meaning as “maiolica,” though in the early scholarship on the subject the two terms were interchangeable. Presently “majolica” is the term used to describe nineteenth-century ceramic works produced in England emulating the earlier Renaissance Italian ceramics.² Looking back at C.D.E. Fortnum’s statement that maiolica was a term wrongly applied to all types of Italian ceramics, it is obvious he had a very specific application for the term maiolica. Fortnum believed that the term maiolica should only be used in reference to lusterware ceramics. He based this on the fact that Italians originally referred only to lusterwares (a type of tin glazing with a metallic sheen in the coperta, or cover glaze) as maiolica, in reference to their similarity to the type of

lustered ceramic imported from the island of Majorca.\textsuperscript{3} Also, other types of ceramics were produced during the Medieval and Renaissance periods in Italy, such as lead glazed earthenware, whose glaze composition differed drastically from that of the tin glaze. Fortnum did not believe that anything but tin glazed terracotta should be referred to as maiolica, specifically tin glazed lusterware. For the purposes of this thesis, the term maiolica will refer to tin glazed terracotta from Italy during the Renaissance (mostly 1480-1600), and will include both tin glaze without luster and lusterware ceramics.

**History of Maiolica**

As mentioned above, the name maiolica derives from the island of Majorca, whose medieval Italian name was, in fact, maiolica.\textsuperscript{4} The name became associated with tin glazed earthenware objects as Spanish-Moresque ceramic wares were a very popular imported luxury item, and were brought to Italy from Spain via the island of Majorca. Thus tin glazing was introduced into Italy primarily through Spain and Northern Africa, nations who produced luster glazed ceramic wares and actively traded with Italy.\textsuperscript{5}

It is likely that these imports also came from the east and other Arab nations in the Middle East who produced tin glazed pottery. Fortnum claims that the early forms of maiolica, called *mezzamaiolica*, produced in Italy were derivations of lusterware imported from Persia, and not Majorca.\textsuperscript{6} *Mezzamaiolica* was produced in Italy in the fourteenth century to mid-fifteenth century, and usedly came in the form of *sgraffito* ware with a luster glaze. *Sgraffito* uses a deductive technique to create a picture or pattern

\textsuperscript{3} Fortnum, *Maiolica*, 19-20.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 1-2.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 19.
on the surface of the clay: a thin covering of white clay, called slip, is painted on the surface of the red terracotta, and an image is scratched through the layer of slip to reveal the red clay below (Figure 9). A tin glaze, which is usually a transparent, shiny glaze in green or brown and has a metallic sheen when viewed at the correct angle, acts as a protective cover layer for the slip.

Originally, ceramics were not introduced to Italy from other countries, but were produced by the Etruscans and Romans prior to the introduction of tin glazing, as Italy is a country rich in natural clay. Maiolica offered a new way to decorate and render ceramic objects non-porous (thus more functional as they could hold liquids), but was not an entirely new concept. Giuseppe Liverani argues that Roman ceramics, produced in the “paleo-Italian period,” focused on the form and shape of the vessel, while the eastern influences of Byzantium and the Arab east brought color through new techniques in glazing. Glazes and paints on ceramic objects have always been utilized in Italy, though the processes have been visibly changed by foreign uses and ideas. Liverani mentions that overall, “the continuity of ceramic tradition in Italy is also proved by the glazing process; gradually the transparent colored glaze used in Roman times was supplanted by the opaque glaze of the Middle Ages.” The ingenuity and creativity of Italian potters was usually evident in the form and shape of the vessels, with foreign ceramics mostly influencing Italian potters through new colors and types of glazes. There are exceptions of new forms, such as architectural basins and ceramic floor tiles, which were made popular through importation of these previously unknown items from other countries and introducing them into the Italian potter’s repertoire.

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8 Ibid., 11-13.
9 Ibid., 13.
Liverani categorizes ceramics based on decoration, stating that the gothic influence persisted until the end of the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{10} *Mezzaiolica*, a type of gothic proto-maiolica, typically has a non-narrative decoration that is heavily focused on line and color, and began with the use of *sgraffito* ornamentation but developed into rudimentary uses of colored pigments and tin glazes over a white surface.\textsuperscript{11} Over time the use of colors and tin glazes spread throughout Italy, and many potters perfected the technique. Workshops developed, and as the popularity of maiolica grew in conjunction with the development of technique and skill associated with the new tin glazing, potters began to mark their work. The “earliest recorded date is 1466…” on a ceramic object, which suggests that the development of technique and tin glazing had taken hold and began to be ubiquitous throughout Italy by the mid-to-late fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{12}

Mostly in central Italy, certain towns developed into hotbeds of maiolica production with a higher percentage of workshops than anywhere else, and also became associated with certain styles of maiolica. Gubbio became associated with lusterware, Urbino with *istoriato* maiolica, and Deruta and Faenza with high productions of quality ceramics.\textsuperscript{13} Along with the development of maiolica production centers came rivalry and pride, as each center and workshop stated they produced the highest quality and most unique type of maiolica. As Luke Syson and Dora Thornton discuss, anonymity declined as people and places became associated with maiolica: from 1450 and on “for the first time in post-classical Europe, (maiolica pieces) bear potters’ marks, dates, and other

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
written information about their manufacture.”

Certain wares, such as lusterware and istoriato even became associated with specific potters and painters. For example, Maestro Giorgio Andreoli da Gubbio who perfected lusterware, and Nicola da Urbino, a maiolica painter highly sought after for his classical narrative painting.

The apex of maiolica production coincides with the development of istoriato painting in Urbino and Castel Durante; invented around 1525, it lasted roughly fifty years until 1575. istoriato maiolica is a ceramic ware painted with a narrative scene on the object, usually from classical history or mythology, and was influenced by humanist ideals of the scholarly learning of the Renaissance (Figure 10). Kingery notes that “…in the istoriato ware of the Urbino area, paintings of narrative and historical scenes took precedence over shape, form, and texture.” The surface decoration of the vessel took precedence over its shape, which had previously been the most important element in Italian ceramics. This helped display the skill of the painter and glazer of the object, not just the potter. istoriato was primarily found on dishes and plates, relatively flat objects that could incorporate a historical scene. Maiolica was commissioned in sets of tableware and “(was) being ordered by people in the highest ranks of society, such as the Este of Ferrara.” It was admired and valued by scholars and patrons who could appreciate the skill of the artist, which was tested through the confines and contours of the shape of the ceramic object: it is difficult to fit a whole narrative into a circular object rather than a square, like a canvas. The painters’ skills were highlighted further because of the

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14 Ibid., 205.
15 Timothy Wilson, Ceramic Art of the Italian Renaissance (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1987), 59.
17 Poole, Italian Maiolica, 5.
challenge in working with the pigments on a ceramic surface: once placed it was impossible to remove or erase, so the painter had to have a very sure and exacting hand.\textsuperscript{18}

Luca della Robbia came into the field of tin glazed ceramics at a time of transition from \textit{mezzamaiolica} to maiolica, and before the genre achieved its fame and popularity through the production of \textit{istoriato} wares. As stated previously, the first recorded date for an Italian maiolica object that has thus far been identified is 1466, and the invention of \textit{istoriato} began in 1525 and lasted until 1575. Considered to be the height of maiolica production for many scholars, the mid-sixteenth century saw the largest quantities of works produced. Maiolica even reached an international fame, being exported from Italy to Northern European countries such as France and Germany.\textsuperscript{19} Luca worked roughly from 1430 to 1480, and used a similar tin glaze technique than other maiolica workshops in the production of his sculptural ceramics. While \textit{istoriato} did not begin until after his death, Luca della Robbia worked during a time when the ceramic medium was changing and developing, when the workshops were beginning production of a tin glaze that would lead to the colorful and detailed wares of later years. It is hard to place Luca della Robbia exactly within the development of this medium, as some scholars believe he must have learned the art of ceramics by a Florentine maiolica workshop, and other scholars argue that he invented his glazes on his own, and learned ceramics in the workshop of a master artist.\textsuperscript{20} Vasari even states that Luca invented istoriato ware, as Luca della Robbia was

\textsuperscript{19} Poole, \textit{Italian Maiolica}, 4.  
the first person to paint with tin glazes on a flat surface of clay.\textsuperscript{21} Luca placed himself within the tradition of maiolica, and even Vasari recognizes a connection between Luca della Robbia’s production and maiolica production. It is clear is that Luca helped develop the medium, adding his own techniques and knowledge to new glazes and their possible uses, and was working during a time of transition, when maiolica was solidifying its identity and growing from \textit{mezzamaiolica} with rudimentary monotone lustered glazes, to a brightly colored form of painting on clay.

\textbf{Creation and Technique}

During the height of maiolica production, particularly when \textit{istoriato} maiolica was popular, there was a specific practice for preparing and applying glazes. W. David Kingery has chemically analyzed finished products to deconstruct the process of creation. Each maiolica object is glazed in three layers: a white, opaque tin base to provide a blank surface on which to apply the second layer, colored pigments, and to protect the pigments and provide a smooth, shiny surface a third layer of a \textit{coperta}, or clear top glaze, is applied.\textsuperscript{22} The tin white \textit{bianco} layer provides a surface on which the pigments adhere and on which they appear brighter and truer to color, while the “…pigments permitted precision drawing, \textit{impasto}, and controlled shading to be employed.”\textsuperscript{23} Since the pigments were not glazes themselves but sandwiched in between two layers of glaze, they

\textsuperscript{21} Vasari, \textit{Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent}, 169-170.
\textsuperscript{22} See Kingery’s article “Painterly Maiolica…,” for a complete description of the three layers of glaze on maiolica, especially page 34.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 33.
did not run and bleed together when fired, thus allowing *istoriato* maiolica to be produced with fine details in the scene.\(^{24}\)

In his treatise *I Tre Libri dell’Arte del Vasaio* of 1548, Piccolpasso describes all the particulars of creating glazes from wine lees (*marzacotto*) and minerals, as well as how exactly to paint with the glazes once they have been prepared. Cipriano Piccolpasso, a nobleman from Castel Durante who wrote the first, and one of the only, primary source technical manuals on how to produce maiolica contemporaneous with production. His treatise *I Tre Libri dell’Arte del Vasaio* delves deeply into each step of the production of a maiolica vessel. Piccolpasso dissects how to create each color pigment from white, to green, blue, yellow, purple, black and brown. He describes the steps necessary to prepare the pigments and, like a recipe, gives the amounts of each ingredient and explains how one can change the colors slightly based on the mineral amounts used.\(^{25}\) Piccolpasso also mentions that red was not a color used by potters as no one had yet found a mineral that did not change color when fired.\(^{26}\) Thus it is clear that the color palette for maiolica was a little more limited than the color palette for painting on canvas or panel as the process of firing pigments had the effect of changing the composition of the pigment and sometimes altering the color. Making pigments and glazes was a science that took years to master and control, and consequently most maiolica shops had their own secret glaze recipes that were carefully guarded and passed down through generations. Piccolpasso mentions this in the introduction of his treatise as a disclaimer to the reader in case he left out a step or

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 34.


\(^{26}\) Ibid., 104.
ingredient, or if he does not have the composition exactly right as it was hard to obtain the information as an outsider.\footnote{Ibid., vol. II, 6.}

Piccolpasso also describes how a maiolica painter would actually apply the pigment on the pot:

Painting on pottery is different from painting on walls, since painters on walls for the most part stand on their feet, and painters on pottery sit all the time; nor could the painting be done otherwise, as will be seen in the drawing of it; and the ware that is being painted is held on the knees with one hand beneath it, I mean the flat ware, for the hollow ware is held with the hand inside it, I mean the left hand.\footnote{Ibid., vol. II, 101.}

As mentioned above, painting on the ceramic vessel was distinctly different from glazing the ceramic vessel: a primary white glaze would coat the whole piece, then the pigments would be painted on top of the white glaze, and finally a third coperta, a clear glaze, would cover the first two layers in a protective coating. The bianco, or primary white tin glaze layer, was usually applied to the piece by dipping the entire vessel into the glaze, thus ensuring a thin, even coat over the entire piece. As Piccolpasso described, the pigments would then be applied with a brush, a scene or decoration painted in color, like on a canvas, on top of the bianco. Finally, the coperta would be applied through splattering with a brush so that the pigment would not be disturbed and the glaze would be uniform over the entire vessel.\footnote{Ibid., 106. For a complete description of the process, see pages 104 -106.}

The act of glazing in the bianco and coperta layers required a skilled hand to apply the layer thinly and evenly over the whole object, but the painting process involved in the pigment layer required the skills of a trained painter.

\textbf{Botteghe and Important Maiolica Painters: Francesco Xanto Avelli da Rovigo, Nicola da Urbino, Maestro Giorgio Andreoli da Gubbio}
While the painted portion of a maiolica dish can be, especially in the case of *istoriato* ware, the most evident part of the whole piece, one vessel would actually be created by more than one worker. The function of a maiolica painter was a very specialized position, and the person who dealt with pigments usually knew only how to paint with the pigments onto the ceramic. Each piece would have been thrown on a wheel or molded to create its shape, fired once in a biscuit fire to make that shape permanent, and then glazed, painted, and fired a second time to adhere the glaze to the terracotta. Each portion of the creation process had a highly technical aspect mastered by one particular person, and it would have been an inefficient use of time for everyone in a workshop to create one piece entirely by themselves. In the introduction to the reprint of Piccolpasso’s *I Tre Libri dell’Arte del Vasaio* in 1980, Ronald Lightbrown and Alan Caiger-Smith estimate the smallest number of workers necessary in a maiolica workshop: “Thus the following composition could be suggested for a small, balanced workshop: 1 foreman – owner or manager, 2 throwers, 2 or 3 painters, 1 kiln man, 2 general workers making eight or nine people in all.” Each ceramic object would then be handled and created in part by at least four different people: a thrower to create the actual vessel out of clay, a kiln man to fire it twice, a general worker to glaze the piece, and a painter to decorate the final product.

Many painters gained reputations for the work they produced, and because they would be the most likely to sign the work, have been considered the author of most pieces. Syson and Thornton mention, “by the 1530s names of makers and places of production appear with greater frequency in the inscriptions on reverse of flat table wares, and it becomes possible to trace the fortunes of workshops, of individual artisans,

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and the migration of potters.” This is important, as the three maiolica painters discussed below, while highly regarded for their skill and invention, would have been forgotten had they not signed their work. Many talented maiolica painters are known only as “Master of the (insert subject of master work here),” with all identifying information forgotten. One exception to this overarching rule is Francesco Xanto Avelli da Rovigo, an interesting case study of an Italian Renaissance maiolica painter.

Much has been written about Francesco Xanto Avelli da Rovigo (name changes depending on the source: sometimes Xanto Avelli, sometimes Francesco Xanto da Rovigo, sometimes Francesco Xanto Avelli, etc…), though not much is definitively known about this eccentric man. Timothy Wilson begins an article on the maiolica painter by saying: “Francesco Xanto Avelli was not the most talented pottery-painter of the Renaissance, but he is the most interesting and eccentric personality in the history of maiolica.” His pottery is evidence of his eccentricities, as unlike many other potters, from 1530 until 1542 Xanto signed, dated, and annotated his works with poetry verses or a description of the scene portrayed (Figure 11). Xanto himself wrote poetry, and considered himself not just a potter but a painter, and thought he should be considered an artist, not a craftsman. His surviving writings and ceramic works provide a context for his persona, though he is most likely an exception rather than the rule for maiolica painters.

As he signed on the bottom of his vessels, Francesco Xanto Avelli da Rovigo worked primarily in Urbino (Figure 11b). He was contracted out to different workshops,

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31 Syson and Thornton, Objects of Virtue, 205.
33 Wilson, Ceramic Art, 52.
34 Wilson, “Xanto and Ariosto,” 322.
solely as a painter of maiolica, not as a potter who created the clay objects. Xanto was part of a legal dispute, asking the capo-bottega, or the head of the workshop, for more money as a painter which tells us that he worked only as a painter, and contracted out to different workshops. Mallet has deduced that “from this it is clear that the hiring of a painter such as Xanto by an employer was normally subject to competition and negotiation; in short that a good painter could readily change from one workshop to another.” Xanto considered himself to be not only a good painter, but an artist, and strove to be recognized as such by signing his work and fighting for better wages.

Nicola da Urbino was considered a better painter and artist than Francesco Xanto Avelli da Rovigo, and also worked as an istoriato maiolica painter in Urbino around the same time as Xanto. Many scholars over the years have argued over the identity of the painter who signed himself “Nicola da Urbino.” It has been claimed that one Nicola Pellipario was the maiolica worker, though recently a convincing case has been made for “a man called Nicola di Gabriele Sbraga (or Sbraghe), who is recorded in Urbino from 1520 and died in 1537/8.” This assertion makes the most sense, as the works signed begin mostly in 1520 and end in the 1530s. Timothy Wilson has called this maiolica maestro “the Raphael of maiolica painting” for his creativity, inventiveness, and “incomparable lyricism, touched with gaucheness.” Nicola da Urbino worked in the istoriato style, and created famous sets of tableware for patrons such as Isabella d’Este, Marchesa of Mantua, in classical themes mostly taken from Ovid’s Metamorphosis

\[\textsuperscript{36}\] Ibid., 287. \\
\[\textsuperscript{37}\] Wilson, Ceramic Art, 44. \\
\[\textsuperscript{38}\] Ibid.
In many ways Nicola da Urbino was the premier maiolica painter for istoriato, known throughout Italy for his work, and worked when the style was just beginning.

Another potter, famous more for style and technique than painting skills, was Maestro Giorgio Andreoli da Gubbio who was known throughout Italy for his invention and perfection of lusterware maiolica. The technique of luster glazing is what Fortnum claims gave maiolica its name, the lusterwares imported from Majorca (see above), but the technique was never perfected in Italy until in the workshop of Maestro Giorgio in Gubbio, a small town outside of Urbino (Figure 13). Maestro Giorgio was born circa 1465/70 and died circa 1553, but somewhere in between he learned the secrets to create gold and red lusterware. He quickly became world famous for his exports of lusterware maiolica as no other workshop was capable of similar work. Lusterware is a process of using metallic glazes to give the piece a metallic sheen of color wherever the luster is applied. Pieces that had a gold metallic sheen were very highly valued for their look, as they resembled plates of gold, and their rarity. While little is known about the person of Maestro Giorgio di Andreoli, the pieces he created speak to his skill in this invention and his creative capacity in the process of creating a new technique and type of glazing.

**Uses and Purposes of Maiolica**

Maiolica, as a glazed ceramic vessel, is primarily functional in purpose. The clay provides a hard shell or container, while the glaze renders the container non-porous, which is ideal for holding and storing foods and liquids, or waterproofing an architectural

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40 Ibid., 103.
element. Many of the early examples of Italian maiolica are in the form of decorative basins on the sides of churches, or the colored tile floors inside the churches.\textsuperscript{41} Ceramic tile floors are ideal for the durability of the glazed clay, the decorative element in the bright colors that could be achieved, and the use of earth (clay) as the base material made them very inexpensive.

The cost of making and firing an object out of clay and glazing it was very little. Since maiolica was very inexpensive and easy to replace, it was accessible to most stations of society. Very basic ceramic pots glazed only on the inside to act as a sealant were the cheapest one could buy, and served as cookware for most households.\textsuperscript{42} Maiolica was ideal as jars for an apothecary, who would carry hundreds of spices and powders in his store and needed a container to keep the contents dry and fresh. The pharmacy jars, or \textit{albarelli}, could also be labeled with the name of the contents in the glazing process, making it easier for the pharmacist, or apothecary, to find the necessary spice or powder (Figure 14). Kingery also makes evident the appeal of the colorful decoration on an \textit{albarello}: “pharmacy jars were clearly aimed at impressing clients, creating an image of success, and emphasizing the value of their contents.”\textsuperscript{43} Maiolica, as a colorful, waterproof, and inexpensive material made it a functional and accessible medium perfect for everyday usage.

The beauty of the glazing, the plasticity of the clay, and the ability to hold liquids made maiolica ideal also for creating inkwells for a studiolo or desk. Many examples

\textsuperscript{41} For more information and descriptions of the basins in the architecture of churches see Liverani, \textit{Five Centuries of Italian Majolica}, 13-14.
\textsuperscript{42} Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis, \textit{At Home In Renaissance Italy} (London: V&A, 2006), 336. See Piccolpasso \textit{I Tre Libri}, “Manner of Making Earthen Pots”104-105, for a discussion of the creation of cookware.
\textsuperscript{43} Kingery, “Painterly Maiolica…,” 45.
exist today of inkwells with a drawer or section for ink next to or underneath a small ceramic sculpture (Figure 15). As an item in a *studiolo*, the aesthetic value is very important, and a colorful, small maiolica statue that also functioned as an inkwell fit in perfectly with the other small sculptures and curiosities to be found in a Renaissance *studiolo*. Dora Thornton elaborates on the subject: “made of colored glass or tin-glazed pottery, it could bring vivid colour into the study; disguised as a box or book, or taking the form of desk-top sculpture imitating dignified classical models in miniature, an inkstand was the quintessential study object in that it combined playfulness with decorum.”

One of the most important uses of maiolica was as tableware, both as plain dishes and plates, as well as *istoriati* and other decorated styles of plates. Prior to the use of ceramic, pewter and other precious metals were used for dishware. The problem with pewter as a conveyer of food is that the metal plate infuses the food served with a metallic taste, thus affecting the taste of the dish. The importance of food and feasts grew in the late-fifteenth century, which in turn amplified the amount of plates and dishes used during a meal. Goldthwaite discusses the changing meal habits in Italy during the Renaissance:

> Italians not only changed the tableware they used, they needed much more of it to get through a meal. While other Europeans were still eating off pewter and wood and still shared common plates at table, the Italians built up complete services of dishes in the modern sense, so that each diner had his or her own place setting, with many dishes for specific uses; and dishes were changed frequently during a meal.


45 Ibid., 142.


Ceramic plates provided a surface that could hold food, sauces and liquids without changing the taste of the meal, and the inexpensive clay allowed for more pieces of tableware to be purchased.

With a change in eating habits and customs came a change in the type of tableware necessary to hold and serve all the new dishes being served. New plates, dishes, ewers and other tableware were created out of maiolica to support the larger amounts of food and new food creations presented at the table. In addition, now each diner had his or her own set of plates and dishes, one for each course, and no longer ate directly off of communal platters. Maiolica made it possible for many patrons to purchase a table-setting with many different types of containers and dishes, ranging from 50-300 items in the set, which would have been too expensive if every piece were pewter, silver or gold.\(^{48}\) As Goldthwaite writes,

\[\ldots\text{glass and ceramics (both mentioned by Pontano), were in fact relatively inexpensive; and their value seldom consisted in their cost. With the price of maiolica ranging from the equivalent of only 75 grams of silver for a large plate to somewhat less than 200 grams for the entire service of eighty-four pieces purchased by the Medici wife of Filippo Strozzi the Younger, Italians got much more for their money with ceramics than if they had melted down this bullion into plate…}\]\(^{49}\)

It was much more economical for Italians to purchase table settings of maiolica with a larger quantity of plates than it was to purchase a smaller table setting, for more money, in a more expensive material such as silver.

The ceramic also permitted decoration directly on the dishes, such as painted history scenes, that allowed a patron to demonstrate their knowledge and humanistic learning to their guests at a meal. Many times finer pieces of istoriato maiolica were not used strictly as plates for a meal, but kept on display as an objet d’art and luxury item:

\(^{48}\) Poole, *Italian Maiolica*, 5-6.
“increasingly, luxury maiolica was used for plates, wide flat-rimmed bowls, footed
dishes, and serving bowls that were designed for use at the table as well as for display.”

Maiolica thus became a luxury item that was used to portray the taste and learning of the
host/patron to a viewer, or guest.

While the actual cost of a table setting of maiolica was much more inexpensive
than the same made of a precious metal, as stated above, maiolica was highly valued for
its beauty, involved skill and the intellectuality it conveyed. Istoriatò ware was seen as
embodying all of these traits, with the beauty of the painting and colors most evident, the
skill of the painter apparent to the trained eye, and the meaning and significance of the
scene depicted appealing to the learning and knowledge of the viewer. It was highly
valued for these reasons as well as the fact that it was seen as the apex of all ceramic
work to date, and had actually surpassed the work produced by the Greeks and the
Romans: “…the value of these technological qualities was raised still further by their
marriage with the ‘noble’ art of painting. The brightly colored narratives of istorio (history-painted) maiolica were something not even the Greeks and Romans had
achieved.”

Most arts of the Renaissance emulated the work of the classical past, but
maiolica was actually thought to have surpassed the ancients in invention, skill and
quality.

Maiolica was also valued for its purely aesthetic attributes, as an object of beauty
mixed with expressions of technical skill. To be able to turn a lump of earth into a
delicate and beautiful object was a feat of technical mastery, and the end result was
usually very pleasing to the viewer. As a commonplace, or everyday object, not much

50 Kingery, “Painterly Maiolica…,” 45.
51 Syson and Thornton, Objects of Virtue, 200.
was written (or survives today) about maiolica, but as Goldthwaite mentions, “the very few direct statements by anyone at the time about why he or she likes maiolica point to certain technical qualities, above all its fragility and the purity of the glaze.” The invention of tin glazing allowed for precise decoration, a variety of colors, and a thin application of glaze. The lightness and beauty of the painted decoration increased the value of the work. Each piece was valued as a functional object, and had a purely utilitarian purpose, but with the advent of istoriato ware and the popularity and ubiquity of art in the High Renaissance, the purpose of each object decreased as the beauty and aesthetic values increased. Certain works of maiolica became more an art form than a plate or bowl with any functional value. Liverani discusses the transition and dichotomy between a functional and beautiful ceramic object: “…even if the raison d’être of pottery lay in its fulfilling a useful function, this cardinal principle was slowly allying itself with another: that of delighting the eye.” The objects themselves display this transition with a focus on color and design on istoriato plates rather than the form of the plate, and in the creation of maiolica objects whose only function is that of aesthetics and to convey pleasure to the viewer.

**Sculptural Forms of Maiolica**

Examples survive today of maiolica objects that have no apparent use or function. Two sculptural maiolica objects are the circa 1490-1500 bust of a young woman at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, (Figure16) thought to have been produced in Montelupo, another maiolica production center, and the statuette of the Madonna and Child in the

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53 Liverani, *Five Centuries of Italian Majolica*, 25.
British Museum in London, also circa 1490-1510 (Figure 17).\textsuperscript{54} These two objects, like much of the work of Luca della Robbia discussed in detail further, are completely sculptural in form, yet are more brightly colored than Luca’s traditional figures in blue and white. Many decorative plaques survive as well, mostly with religious themes such as a Madonna and Child by one “Giorgio of Lombardy” from 1493 (Figure 18), or a low relief Saint Sebastian dated July 14, 1501 in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum and thought to be from Deruta (Figure 19).\textsuperscript{55} These wall plaques would have the primary function of being a decorative wall hanging, as well as a devotional object for the owner to use in his or her daily life.\textsuperscript{56} It was a popular practice for both men and women to keep a representation of the Virgin Mary in his or her bedroom as a private object of meditation and devotion. Many examples exist in clay, marble, wood, painted panel and canvas, which makes it easier to deduce the function of the ceramic wall plaque as it has other immediate references in both the painting and sculpture of the time. As independent sculptures without known precedents, the life sized bust of a woman and the small statuette are less apparent in purpose or function. The question that needs to be asked is can maiolica stand alone as an art form? Is it necessary for a ceramic medium to have a function, or can it be purely aesthetic?

\textsuperscript{54} This unusual bust of a young woman is in the permanent collection of the MFA, Boston (accession number 54.146) and more information can be found in J. Pierpont Morgan, The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Guide to the Loan Exhibition of the J. Pierpont Morgan Collection (New York: The Gilliss Press, 1914) 53 and 58. The Virgin and Child statuette is catalogue number 107 (page 76) found in Timothy Wilson, Ceramic Art of the Italian Renaissance, and is part of the permanent collection of the British Museum.

\textsuperscript{55} The Madonna and Child plaque is featured in Timothy Wilson’s Ceramic Art of the Italian Renaissance, catalogue number 37 (page 39), and is a part of the permanent collection of the British Museum. Saint Sebastian is found in Victoria and Albert Museum and Bernard Rackham, Catalogue of Italian Maiolica (London: Published under the authority of the Board of education, 1940), catalogue number 437 (vol. I page 149 and vol. II plate 68), and is part of the permanent collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{56} Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, At Home in Renaissance Italy, 192.
The relationship between sculptor and potter is seen by Bruce Boucher as symbiotic, with each party adding knowledge and a skill set unknown to the other: “indeed, pottery and terracotta sculpture can be said to have progressed together during the fifteenth century, and sculptors were as dependent upon the specialist services of potters as they were upon those of professional founders for casting bronze.” It is known that many sculptors worked in clay, though most examples, aside from the della Robbia workshop, were finished not in glaze but in polychrome. Artists also used clay to make models and preliminary sketches of projects, such as the example of Lorenzo Ghiberti creating clay models before casting the relief panels for the second set of bronze doors for the Baptistry in Florence, as discussed in the previous chapter. It is also likely that sculptors and potters worked closely together, sculptors relying on the potters for use of their kiln and materials, while the potters may have learned techniques for sculpting and forming shapes and objects from the sculptors. Is the clear difference, then, that what sculptors produced was essentially aesthetic, the purpose being to please the patron with its beauty, rather than potters who produced that held drugs or plates on which food was served? Yet there are lasting examples of sculptural maiolica, whose main function seems to be delighting the viewer, without apparent purpose.

It could also be argued that maiolica is not art because it is “mass” produced, in the sense that a patron does not have to commission a piece but has the ability to purchase a plate or tile or ewer that has already been created and decorated. Baxandall

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58 See Boucher, Earth and Fire, 5-6 for information on the use of terracotta models as preliminary sketches, and Allan Marquand, “A Terracotta Sketch by Lorenzo Ghiberti,” The American Journal of Archaeology and of the History of the Fine Arts 9, no. 2 (April-Jun 1894): 206-211 for information on Ghiberti’s use of terracotta models in his second set of bronze doors for the Baptistery in Florence.
59 Ibid.
has said that the mark of a quality work of art is the fact that it is custom made for the patron by the specific artist.\(^{60}\) Maiolica is a workshop-based craft, like painting, and both commissions and ready-made works were available for purchase in any type of workshop setting.\(^{61}\) As a result Baxandall’s argument suggests that maiolica is not art. However, there are stunning examples of commissioned works of maiolica by famous patrons, such as the allegorical set of dishes commissioned by Isabella d’Este from Nicola da Urbino.\(^{62}\)

Could certain pieces of maiolica be called art?

The argument for or against maiolica as an art form is complex and confusing, to the point where some scholars even contradict themselves. A case in point would be Kingery, writing in the same article that “…decorative objects all became elevated to the status of art” but then seemingly refuting this statement when he wrote five pages later that other precious stones and metals were more highly prized than “the best-quality maiolica” and that maiolica was still in use as dinnerware, as a functional, utilitarian object.\(^{63}\) Kingery seemingly calls maiolica a form of art, then changes his mind and declares it to be only a decorative, craft art. To define maiolica as a purely decorative art or craft, or as an actual fine art to the level of painting and sculpture is a complex issue that this work will attempt to clarify. To fully understand the status of the art, one must better understand the social status of the producer.

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\(^{61}\) Ibid.


\(^{63}\) Kingery, “Painterly Maiolica…,” 40 and 45, respectively.
Chapter Four: Artists and Artisans

The social definition of an artist and artisan in Renaissance Florence, as well as the role of each in material production needs to be determined in order to understand Luca della Robbia and other potters in Renaissance Florence. The Renaissance saw a rebirth of art as a noble and intellectual endeavor. Artists were seen as imbued with a god-given talent that separated them from the masses. Vasari spoke of Leonardo da Vinci as a human vessel of the divine, stating that “his every action is so divine as to leave all other men far behind him, and manifestly to prove that he has been specially endowed by the hand of God himself, and has not obtained his pre-eminence by human teaching, or the power of man.” ¹ The perception of the artist as the physical manifestation of God, of the divine, correlated the artist with the highest power in the Catholic world, which encompassed all of Italy. The shift resulting in the construction of the artist as an individual, worthy of fame and praise, was fluid over the course of hundreds of years. The artist was no longer socially construed as a craftsman, or grouped together with other craftsmen solely due to the common act of physically creating an object, rather than being differentiated based on the actual object produced. With the status of the artist in flux, it is hard to pinpoint exact social constructs and definitions of artists and artisans, which makes it especially difficult to place maiolica producers in this environment as maiolica was produced over the entire period of change in social status.

As a modern scholar, one must realize that contemporary ideas of art and artists are drastically different than they were in the Renaissance. As Leatrice Mendelsohn rightly states, “in the fifteenth century, the concept of the ‘fine or beaux arts’ was not yet

During the Renaissance new ideas about art emerged, but since this original germination they have grown to adopt new meanings in contemporary art-historical discourse. The difference between fine arts and craft arts was formulated in the Renaissance, as previously all art was seen as a craft. The important difference was, originally, between the liberal arts and the mechanical arts. It was not until the development of Cinquecento art theory that painting and sculpture were fully understood as liberal arts. Such theories allowed authors like Benedetto Varchi to define ideas surrounding the *paragone*, a comparison of painting and sculpture to determine which was the higher art.

It is imperative to my thesis to place both Luca della Robbia and other maiolica workers within a social construct and assign them a role and a social status. This is a difficult task, and from this perspective I will address the role of the artist in fifteenth-century Florence. I am otherwise not looking to answer any larger questions surrounding that definition, or even provide an absolute definition. This is a topic still debated and researched by many art historians, and too large to adequately cover and develop fully in this thesis. Art historians and theorists such as Leatrice Mendelsohn, Michael Baxandall, Bram Kempers and Martin Wackernagel, all referenced in this paper, further the discussion of the social role of the artist. Therefore I will determine a working definition for the purpose of this paper, and frame my argument within the boundaries of this definition.

**Definitions of Artists and Artisans**

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3 Ibid., 43.
It has been rightly realized that this term is anachronistic, that there was no single word in Italian or Latin in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that translates unequivocally as ‘artist’. Practitioners were almost always precisely defined by their trades: painters, sculptors and goldsmiths, as well as weavers, potters, embroiderers and woodworkers. Nevertheless, it has been generally accepted that the makers of particular kinds of product – chiefly pictures and sculptures – were increasingly viewed in such a way that they conform approximately to the modern concept of the artist: creators with innate imaginative talent.4

Luke Syson and Dora Thornton perfectly encapsulate the difficulties in defining artists and artisans in fifteenth-century Florence. The lack of the word ‘artist’ complicates the matter. Therefore the modern art historian has to use additional investigative tools to differentiate between the roles of artists and craftsmen. It is complicated to assign a social status or role to the artist or artisan, as such a person did not exist in such confined terms. The term ‘artist’ is an all-encompassing word for a person who creates art, but the Italians did not define someone as a creator of art, but a creator of a specific type of object. Thus a maiolica producer was called a vasaio, or potter, referring to the work they produced in clay. A painter was known as a painter, not an artist, and a goldsmith as a goldsmith. Individuals were defined by their particular professions, and not by a more generalized group.5

The question thus becomes the social status of Luca della Robbia, a scultore who worked primarily in clay, versus the social status of a potter. In tax returns and other official documents, Luca identified himself as a sculptor, not as a potter, and could make the claim as he was trained as a marble carver and bronze caster.6 He is therefore socially separated from maiolica producers who are identified as potters. To answer the question of social difference, it is necessary to know the stated differences between potters and sculptors. Alberti helped to define the terms in his 1435 treatise On Painting: “painting

5 Ibid., 229.
was honored by our ancestors with this special distinction that, whereas all other artists were called craftsmen, the painter alone was not counted among their number.”

Thornton and Syson point out that the original Latin of this quote refers to a *faber* and a non-*faber*, making the distinction between a maker and a non-maker, differentiating physical labor with mental labor, or thought process. In Alberti’s case, the maker was the craftsman, and the non-maker is the painter. While a painter physically produces an object, the distinction is made between the manual labor associated with sculpture and other objects (such as cutting stone, carving wood, or casting bronze) and a more intellectual pursuit of inventing a painted scene to represent a virtue or idea. Alberti furthers his definition of the craft person as one defined by the art of painting: “the stonemason, the sculptor and all the workshops and crafts of artificers are guided by the rule and art of the painter. Indeed, hardly any art, except the very meanest, can be found that does not somehow pertain to painting.” So according to Alberti, all other artists and artisans owe their craft, design and art to painting. Therefore the painter as thinker and artist is distinguished from all other artisans: he is above craftsmen as he produces a higher form of art.

Similar to Alberti, Leatrice Mendelsohn makes the distinction between the liberal arts (mental) and the mechanical arts (manual) when discussing Benedetto Varchi’s *Due Lezioni*. According to Mendelsohn, the mechanical arts require manual labor, and are related to craft arts. During the Middle Ages and before the shift in thought about art that occurred in the Renaissance, both painting and sculpture were relegated to the status

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8 Syson and Thornton, *Objects of Virtue*, 229.
10 Mendelsohn, *Paragoni*, 43.
of mechanical arts as both required physical labor to produce an image or figure. The liberal arts were knowledge based, and required immense thought process instead of physical labor. Therefore the seven liberal arts (dialectic, grammar, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy) were the basis of humanist learning and seen as symbols of nobility, as intelligence and leisure time were both requirements to study the liberal arts.\footnote{Ibid.} Mendelsohn argues for the shift in the status of painting and sculpture to liberal arts from mechanical arts based on the Aristotelian idea of art as “an intellectual activity” and the promotion of the arts through art historical discourse and writings.\footnote{Ibid., 51. Discussion of intellectual activity.} In his Due Lezzi
ci of 1547, Benedetto Varchi “prepared the way for the shift in status, not only by distinguishing the arts from one another, but by placing them into a philosophical structure within which they acquired moral significance.”\footnote{Ibid., 39.} The status of the painter and the sculptor rose from a mechanical art to a liberal art through discussions of art and art theory in the fifteenth century. Painting and sculpture were seen to have value in “fulfillment of a moral or intellectual function,” and therefore worthy of discourse on the intellectual value inherent in the work of art.\footnote{Ibid., 47.} As objects with an intellectual purpose, painting and sculpture were no longer seen as manual labors, but intellectual pursuits and therefore ranked among the liberal arts.

Other craft arts, such as ceramics, textiles and glass, were completely left out of the art historical discussion. Since the objects had a primarily functional purpose, like a plate to hold food or a glass to hold wine, they were not viewed as having intellectual purpose. In Mendelsohn’s discussion of the rise of the painter and sculptor from the
larger group of craftsmen to artists, the craftsmen are disregarded and not mentioned. From this it can be assumed that all other crafts may have held similar social statuses and did not rise like painting and sculpture, but continued to be regarded as mechanical art, objects manually produced without great thought given to their form or decoration.

Over time as the ideas of liberal and mechanical arts shifted, the terminology changed. Painters and sculptors were seen as fine artists, creating intellectually based works of art that displayed ingegno and disegno, the genius, design and skill necessary in a work of art. Vasari saw the arts as linked and defined by disegno: “design, the father of our three arts of architecture, sculpture and painting, proceeding from the intellect, derives from many things a universal judgment, like a form or idea of all things in nature.”

Vasari views the liberal arts as embodying nature and intellect, which are all expressed through the invention, design and skill of the artist. The artist would be the person who produced the work of art, or the painting, sculpture or building that displayed intellect and nature through design, though this was a definition of an artist contemporary to Vasari. As Burke mentions, “in the fifteenth century, artista had meant a university student of the liberal arts; in the sixteenth century… it means painter or sculptor.” The flux of the status of the artist also resulted in a flux of the definitions of the common terms such as artist and artisan. The guilds had a huge impact on the changing titles and statuses of each individual trade, and even in the Quattrocento the term for “art” was used to denote a guild.

Until the fifteenth century the term ‘artist’ had no particular significance, being virtually interchangeable with ‘artisan’ or ‘craftsman.’ The term commonly used for guilds – ‘arti’ – was indicative of this wide, generalized concept: there was an arte for the shoemaker, no more and no

16 Peter Burke, Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy: 1420-1540, (New York: Scribner, 1972), 71.
less valid than the arte for the goldsmith, which was itself merely a subdivision on the immensely powerful silk guild (Arte della Seta).\textsuperscript{17}

This change in terminology comes at a time when both the social status of the artist and artistic training was changing with the formation of the \textit{Accademia del Disegno} in Florence, and the power of the art trade found in the guild system switched to the \textit{accademia}.

\textbf{Guild System}

The formation of guilds and companies evolved parallel to the continual change in the identity of artists and artisans in the Renaissance in Italy. “A professional tradition of art gradually took root in Florence between around 1270 and 1350,” and the formation of guilds occurred out of a need for organization and standardization within professional fields.\textsuperscript{18} They were not strictly artistic groups, as any profession could have a guild, but functioned as an organizational head to the profession. There were four main purposes to guilds: to regulate relations between artist, client, apprentice, and any other workshop worker; to regulate quality standards; to lend out money to its members; and to perform religious and/or charitable functions.\textsuperscript{19} Renaissance guilds are similar in concept to modern day unions, and as Andrew Martindale noticed, “by the fourteenth century the principle aims of a guild were to protect the local craftsmen from unreasonable outside competition, to protect the local craftsmen from each other and to safeguard the quality of work produced by the members.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} Burke, \textit{Culture and Society}, 56-57.
The main function of a guild was to protect the interests of its members, though its members were not always of one specific profession. The “…painters formed part of a larger guild. In Florence they were part of the ‘doctors and apothecaries’ (Medici e speziali), though they had a social guild of their own, the Company of St Luke.”

Sculptors were members of the Arte dei Maestri di Pietra e di Legname, or the stone mason and woodworkers guild. Potters were also members of this particular guild, which is why maiolica producers could be found in this guild. Luca della Robbia was also a member of this guild, as both a marble carver and a sculptor of marble and ceramics. Interestingly, Luca della Robbia also belonged to the Arte della Lana, or the woolworkers guild: he joined at a young age as his family was in the wool market. It is very important to note that Luca della Robbia belonged to the same guild as other potters and maiolica producers, and there was no separate guild for craftsmen or for fine artists. Luca della Robbia did not belong to the painters’ guild, the guild for the only real liberal artists according to Alberti, but to the guild for sculptors and other craftsmen.

Luca della Robbia was highly involved in the Arte dei Maestri di Pietra e di Legname, and served as consul several times. It is also documented that he was asked to serve as the consul in 1471, “…but his great age and infirmity compelled him to decline this honor, which shows, however, in what consideration he was held by the citizens of Florence.” Luca must have been well respected by other artisans and potters since he was elected to be consul for their guild multiple times, even in his old age. He was also

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21 Burke, *Culture and Society*, 56.
24 Pope-Hennessy, Luca della Robbia, 13. Luca’s guild involvement is also discussed in Chapter Two: Luca della Robbia of this work.
an active member of the Compagnia di San Luca, or the Confraternity of St Luke, a religious and social guild for artists. Saint Luke is the patron saint of artists and the arts as he is supposed to have been the first person to draw the portrait of the Virgin Mary. The confraternity was more of a religious group and gathering of similar craftsmen than a guild. The confraternity provided “for the social and spiritual needs of its members,” and according to Mary Ann Jack, provided a basis for the Accademia del Disegno.

The Accademia del Disegno was founded in Florence in 1563 as a society for artists (strictly painters, sculptors and architects) to gather, assist one another, hold discussions and lectures, and teach young apprentices the necessary skills and techniques to become master artists. The formation of this society was instigated by artists, but approved and supported by the Grand Duke of Tuscany Cosimo I de’Medici (1519-1574), who was elected the Protector of the Academy of Design. The accademia took over the role of the guild in that the regulations between artists and clients were set by the rules of the accademia, the quality standards were cemented in the program of training and process of approval that was necessary before an apprentice could be considered an artist, and the social and religious aspects that were associated with the confraternity became part of the accademia in celebrating the feast day of Saint Luke and preparing funeral rites for its members. The new roles of the accademia made the guild system obsolete for the artists of Florence, so they put forth to the Duke “a petition of the

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28 Ibid. See page 8 for information on the founding of the accademia, and page 11 for restrictions on who was admitted into the academy.
29 Ibid., 9.
30 Ibid, 4 and 6.
academy asking freedom from the restraints of guild membership in December 1571.” 31 The petition was granted, and Florentine painters, architects and sculptors no longer belonged to their separate, specialized guilds, but fell under the same rules and regulations and “free(d) themselves from association with men whom they considered to be mere craftsmen.” 32

Rise of the Artist in Society

The shift that took place from the control of the guilds to the control of the accademia in the art world is directly associated with the change in the perception of the artist as an intellectual. The emergence of the accademia also changed the view of the arts of painting, sculpture and architecture as liberal and not mechanical arts. Artists were trained in mathematics, anatomy, and design to promote the “belief that the key to artistic creativity was the ‘idea’ that lay buried in the mind of the artist.” 33 The accademia became a place for art historical discussions, and for the artists to converse intelligently, conforming to the ideals of humanist scholarship. Due to the ducal support of the accademia and the new intelligence acquired by the artists from both artistic and academic training, the accademia took on the atmosphere of a courtly society and the ideal of that society was the artist. 34 Bram Kempers also argues that the accademia created an elite court artist outside of the guild system, in which the craftsman was still working.

Increased control of technique and a greater fund of knowledge were the most visible fruits of that culture, but countless other developments were aspects of the same process taking place in Florentine society; these included a growing appreciation for art and the evolution of a critical...

31 Ibid., 10.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 17-18.
34 Ibid., 20.
vocabulary and artistic theory as well as an increasing awareness of history. In diverse ways professionalization... was embedded in a civilizing process in which merchants and humanists, goldsmiths, architects and painters were all caught up and to which all contributed.\textsuperscript{35}

The whole of Florentine society was involved in the rising social status of the artist, as the ideals and ideas that surrounded trades and the professionalization of the market shifted from individual merit to merit based on profession. The rise of the social status of the Italian Renaissance artist culminated in the 1570s with the \textit{accademia} and the liberation from guild regulations and association with craftsmen.

The culmination in the social status of the painter, sculptor and architect as intelligent, educated liberal artists worthy of a courtly society developed slowly and fluidly over the course of a century. The social status of the artist rose in conjunction with the changing definition of the terms artist and artisan. The change began in the shift from the middle ages to the Renaissance, with the development in learning and a focus on the individual that Burckhardt explores throughout \textit{The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy}. He states that the rise of individuality is the basis of the growth in society and change that occurs from the Medieval period to the Renaissance period.\textsuperscript{36} Burckhardt also discusses the rise in the importance of fame and glory in the Renaissance, how individuals were venerated for their intelligence and the qualities that differentiated them from everyone else. He cites the example of the formation of cults surrounding individuals such as poets, writers, artists and historians other than saints, in which pilgrimages were made to the site of the individuals’ birth or death locations, such as the tomb of Dante in Ravenna.\textsuperscript{37} The individual became all important, separate from the group, and no longer known just by profession or social status, but by merit. As

\textsuperscript{35} Kempers, \textit{Painting, Power and Patronage}, 211.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 89-90.
Mendelsohn points out, “in the Quattrocento, the artist’s social status, based on his occupation rather than, as in the past, on genealogy, was determined by merit.” This was due partly because a hierarchical caste system no longer existed in Italy, which allowed the profession of the artist to rise higher on the social scale.

Burckhardt discusses the lack of a hierarchical social class system based on occupation and inherited social status in Italy during the Renaissance, which made it possible for the individual to gain in importance based solely on merit. “In the other countries of Europe the different classes of society lived apart, each with its own medieval caste sense of honour….But in Italy social equality had appeared before the time of the tyrannies or the democracies.” This is not to say that a social hierarchy did not exist in Italy during the Renaissance, but that in the Italian cities and towns all the classes lived in conjunction with one another, with certain rules regulating interactions between the classes. The system was more open than in the rest of Europe, with the possibility of changing social status based on individual achievement and merit, one was not stuck in a profession or position solely because of the work of one’s father.

Prior to the rise of the social status of the artist there was an economic boom in Italy in the early fifteenth century. Richard Goldthwaite discusses the effect of the Black Death of 1348 as being economically beneficial for those who survived the plague. With the dramatic drop in population, the same amount of wealth was dispersed among fewer people. Also, as there were fewer people to house, feed and clothe, there was a resulting surplus of necessities, which pushed down the cost of living. Therefore the

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38 Mendelsohn, Paragoni, 54.
majority of the population was spending less money on what they needed, and had more
money available to spend on luxury, or otherwise extraneous, goods. The additional
wealth affected Italy in two ways: one, demand for luxury items such as painting,
sculpture, larger houses and furnishings to decorate and fill those houses produced the art
market modern scholars associate with the Renaissance; and secondly, to fill the demand,
“the period saw an impressive increase in the number of men in the middling rank of
skilled workers.”41 The professionalization of the artisan that necessitated the guild
system grew out of the economic boom after the plague, as new jobs and social statuses,
through increased wealth, were created.

For the fifteenth century, in terms of income and life style, “the artist, considered
generally, belonged in the social scale to the middle or upper artisan class.”42 As the artist
was differentiating himself from the artisan, he rose in status and wealth within the
artisan class, became more successful than the average artisan, and thus able to rise in
society as a whole. The guild system made all professions, such as merchants, weavers,
doctors, painters, goldsmiths, and cobblers, equal under the law as they had to follow the
regulations of the guild, regardless of profession. Each job held a professional status, but
it was not like the life-style of the aristocracy who did not have to manually labor or even
work. In addition to guilds, families were the institutions who upheld social laws and
decorum. Renaissance Florence was a patriarchal society that relied on kinship and used
the family as the basic unit of society. Florence was also an independent state that relied

41 Ibid.
42 Martin Wackernagel, The World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist: Projects and Patrons,
348.
on business and trade as the basis of the economy; the aristocracy was constituted of
government officials and wealthy merchants and bankers.

Florentine society in the Renaissance is different from any other Italian city-state
as it was a merchant republic, ruled by elected officials who held short terms in office
instead of a king, prince, or duke. The government officials constituted the top of the
social scale, and were “conceived as a fraternity of equals regulating merchants and
governing the liminal groups of society.”\textsuperscript{43} Called the \textit{Signoria}, there were eight priors
and a \textit{gonfaloniere} who presided over larger groups of lesser elected officials.\textsuperscript{44} The
wealthiest and oldest families were typically elected as officials, though other families,
such as the Medici, monetarily controlled the government from behind the scenes.
Outside of the government, but still in a ruling position on the social hierarchy were
members of the clergy. Church officials did not hold any official government offices, but
were advisors and respected members of the community.\textsuperscript{45} Aside from the government
and clergy, the ruling class in Florence was typically families that had a direct, noble
lineage.\textsuperscript{46}

The artisans and merchant and working classes fell below the ruling class in three
sections according to Richard Trexler. First, guild members, then members of
confraternities, then everyone else in society:

\begin{itemize}
  \item [-Gilds: the upper gilds compososed of substantial citizens of property with diversified
  interests and investments, the lower containing more specialized shop owners with political ties to
  major gildsmen
  \item [-Confraternities: preponderantly made up of taxpaying nongildsmen, but led by
  members of important gilds
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 17.
Women, adolescents, youths, and adult salaried workers: excluded from occupational associations and, generally, from religious groups until the later fifteenth century.  

Christaine Klapisch-Zuber shows this differentiation economically, with statistics taken from the catasto of 1427. Monetarily, this is not as clean cut, as some guild members did not make as much money as others, and some of the aristocracy was far wealthier than most others. Overall, though, the statistics show an economically uneven society:

about 14 percent of Florentine households possessed no taxable assets; after the allowable deductions were taken, the proportion climbs to 31 percent. At the other end of the social scale, the richest 1 percent of the urban households – about 100 families – owned more than a quarter of the city’s enormous wealth.  

While not a part of the ruling or the intellectual elite, the guilds were actually on the higher end of the social scale, in the middle sixty-eight percent of Klapisch-Zuber’s statistics. This makes it easier for the artist to rise in society, as the profession was gaining in wealth and fame and most painters were guild members. Luca della Robbia is a good example of the artist gaining in wealth and prominence, while also gaining in reputation through his activities in his guild and confraternity, as he was elected to positions of power in the guild system several times.

Social Definitions Applied to Luca della Robbia and Other Maiolica Producers

Mendelsohn accurately explains that “…the status of artists was dependent on the status of their respective arts…” and the merits of their fathers no longer counted for everything. This is true in the case of Luca della Robbia, who despite his unknown father became very famous in his own right. On the other hand, Luca della Robbia did grow up the son of a fairly wealthy wool merchant, who owned land and a villa in the

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47 Ibid., 15.
49 Mendelsohn, Paragoni, xxiii.
Tuscan countryside.\textsuperscript{50} He was born into what would be considered the middle class, the artisan class: not poor, but not the aristocracy either. His profession as a sculptor, which while he was working was still part of the guild system and was considered a mechanical art, was of a similar social level to his father’s position. Luca, though, did gain in wealth and fame in a way that his father Simone never did: he worked for the Medici, the ruling family of Florence, to create ceiling tiles for the \textit{studiolo} of Piero de’Medici.\textsuperscript{51} Giorgio Vasari considered Luca della Robbia important and famous enough to include in his anthology \textit{The Lives of the Artists}, a compilation of the lives of the most important and influential artists (defined as painters, sculptors and architects) of the Renaissance. The publication of the book provided for posterity and further fame and renown posthumously, and proves that he was an active part of the oral history and tradition even one hundred years after he was working. His workshop was extremely lucrative, even as an artisan Luca became very wealthy, which is evidenced by the fact that in 1470 he wanted to give “his cash legacy, which was fairly considerable” to his nephew Simone because Luca already left Andrea his workshop and glazing secrets, which were equal in monetary value.\textsuperscript{52} As mentioned in the discussion of the guild system, Luca della Robbia was highly respected by his fellow artisans, and held many positions of power (such as consul) in the \textit{Arte dei Maestri di Pietra e di Legname}. Socially, Luca was a well-respected, wealthy and famous sculptor, but was still considered to be of the social status of an artisan.

\textsuperscript{50} Marquand, Luca della Robbia, xxvi.
\textsuperscript{52} Wackernagel, \textit{The World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist}, 345. Also see Rufus Mather’s “Documents Relating to the Will and Testament of Luca di Simone della Robbia,” \textit{American Journal of Archaeology} 24, n. 4 (October – December 1920): 342-351 for further discussion of Luca’s assets and how he divided them between his nephews and nieces.
Maiolica workers, on the other hand, were not typically wealthy or famous. Very few names of potters are currently known, and most of them are painters, such as Maestro Giorgio who invented lusterware, or Nicola da Urbino who painted services for courtly personages such as Isabella d’Este. Most potters have been forgotten, even if their work has survived, because they did not sign their work and/or nothing was written about them. But as Goldthwaite mentions “…a few, like several of the painters at Urbino and Maestro Giorgio of Gubbio, undoubtedly had a certain status as a result of their own cultural pretensions and their association with princes.”

Maiolica workers typically, as manual laborers, did not receive artistic or intellectual training aside from learning the art of glazing or manipulating clay. This lack of education made it difficult for them to be recognized as liberal or fine artists in the academic sense, as their work was a reflection of their superficial knowledge. Potters remained artisans throughout the Renaissance in Italy, even if they gained wealth (as a capo-bottega, or workshop owner, in a famous maiolica center like Faenza would) or fame (such as Nicola da Urbino, who many regard as the best maiolica painter). Unlike Luca della Robbia, who was considered a sculptor and gained renown because he was academically trained, maiolica producers were left behind on the social hierarchy, as they lacked the training necessary to become worthy of acclaim or part of the art historical discussion.

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Chapter Five: Luca della Robbia and His Maiolica Workshop

To be considered an artist (in the sense of a liberal artist) one needed to prove intellectual creativity through *invenzione* and *ingegno*, as well as *disegno* and mastery of that particular medium. Luca della Robbia, according to Vasari, invented maiolica glazing and *istoriato* ware, and therefore showed the necessary *invenzione* and *ingegno* to be considered a sculptor.\(^1\) While the veracity of this statement will be further explored below, it is true that Luca della Robbia was considered a sculptor and not a potter. Part of this is due to his training under an artist and thus his learning of *disegno* through drawing, marble carving and bronze casting. In addition, Luca della Robbia considered himself a sculptor and not a potter, and called himself thus on tax forms and official documents.\(^2\) The ideas of *invenzione* and *ingegno*, while essential, cannot entirely frame the discussion of maiolica because of the common practice of maiolica painters to borrow and copy figures from other artists. It was indeed common practice for apprentices to learn *disegno* by copying the works of famous artists, an idea that was pushed by the *Accademia*, as the modern ideas surrounding copyrights and invention were not the same in Renaissance Italy.\(^3\) A copy, or the equivalent Italian word *copia*, did not hold a negative connotation, or necessarily a lack of ingenuity and originality: according to Lisa Pon, “in medieval Latin, the word *copiare* meant to make more, to multiply.”\(^4\) Copying could then even be a good thing, to multiply and copy the work of a master artist would prove the mastery of the copyist. Maiolica painters were known to use similar motifs, to take figures from

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other works of art, yet would make each plate individual and unique, proving that \textit{copia} could be utilized to create \textit{ingegno} in an object.

\textbf{Comparison of Techniques}

1. Luca della Robbia’s Glazing in Comparison to Other Types of Maiolica

Luca della Robbia applied tin glazes used in maiolica to sculpture, and is praised by Vasari and others as the inventor of this glazing technique. To truly understand how Luca della Robbia’s techniques were new and inventive and what he gave to ceramic art, one must first understand how he deviates from what came before. As has been discussed in previous chapters, the glaze used for maiolica was threefold: a primary \textit{bianco} layer of a tin based glaze, colored pigment, and then a clear \textit{coperta} glaze.\footnote{W. David Kingery, “Painterly Maiolica of the Italian Renaissance,” \textit{Technology and Culture} 34, no. 1 (January 1993): 33-4.} W.D. Kingery has chemically analyzed maiolica objects to deduce the glaze composition and layers, and has studied Luca della Robbia and his glazes in a similar way. It is easy to see the stylistic differences between della Robbia ware and other maiolica as della Robbia ware tends to be uniform color blocks of white and blue (with some additions of purple, green, yellow, and brown depending on the object), but most other types of maiolica tend to have multiple colors in different amounts throughout the composition. This stylistic disparity is due to a variation in the application of della Robbia glazes. Luca della Robbia streamlined the maiolica three step process into one step: he added the tin white, color and clear \textit{coperta} in one layer, thus suspending the color pigments in the glaze and giving a more uniform color throughout.\footnote{W. David Kingery, “The Glazes of Luca della Robbia,” \textit{Faenza} 5 (1990): 222.} This also prevented Luca from being able to successfully “paint” a section of clay more than one color at a time without the two
glazes running and mixing when fired, hence his color block application of the glazes. The tin *bianco* in maiolica was a uniform layer throughout, with an even amount of the tin white in the applied glaze layer. Luca della Robbia made his colored glazes uniform by adding pigment to the homogeneous white tin layer, which also gave the added effect of making his glazes opacified. Kingery mentions the use of an opacifier in the glazes as one of the two main differences, both chemically and stylistically between Luca della Robbia and other forms of tin glaze:

> There are two major differences between the Della Robbia glazes and potters’ maiolica. First, Della Robbia used a substantially larger tin oxide opacifier concentration (20 wt.%), about three times greater than the potters’ *bianco* (6 wt.%). Also, while the potters added sand to the glaze a mill addition to increase translucency, no such addition was used for the Della Robbia glazes. As a consequence, the Della Robbia glazes are more opaque, less translucent, and whiter than the potters’ *bianco*.7

The slight changes that Luca della Robbia made to the basic maiolica glazing differentiated his production from other typical maiolica glazes.

Luca della Robbia did in fact begin with a basic maiolica glaze, as Kingery has proven. While examining both the glazes of maiolica objects and glazes from the *Stemma of King René of Anjou* by Luca della Robbia now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Kingery concluded that the minerals used for the pigments and glazes in the work by Luca “are the same pigment materials described by Piccolpasso and which we (Kingery and his colleagues) have identified in mid-sixteenth century Pesaro maiolica.”8

The blue color came from cobalt, the purple from manganese, the white from tin, the yellow from lead antimonite, and the green from copper. All of these are the same minerals and colors used in other types of maiolica, and were the materials recommended by Piccolpasso in his recipes for maiolica pigments and glazes. Kingery even mentions

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7 Ibid., 223.
8 Ibid., 222.
that Luca della Robbia must have originally learned how to fire and glaze pottery specifically from Florentine potters, so it makes sense that he applied known maiolica glazing methods and materials to his own work.\(^9\)

### 2. Techniques, Glazes and the Invention of Luca della Robbia

In regard to glazing, Luca della Robbia based his glazes on the traditional maiolica tin glazes that had been utilized in Italy since their introduction from Persia, Northern Africa and Moorish Spain in the middle of the fourteenth century. As stated above, he made changes to the glaze used (such as its tin content and opacity), and the technique used to apply the glazes (streamlining the process from three layers to one), but he did not, as Vasari states in his biography, invent tin glazing in Italy. In his discussion of the history of maiolica, Fortnum agrees with Vasari:

> In Italy history has always awarded the honour of its (tin glaze) discovery to Luca della Robbia, whose first great work was executed in 1438; and however recent observation may lead to the assumption that its use was known in the Italian potteries before his time, there can be no doubt that his was not merely an application of a well-known process to a new purpose, but that he really did invent an enamel of peculiar whiteness and excellence, better adapted to his purpose and of somewhat different composition from that in use at any of the potteries of his time.\(^10\)

Luca della Robbia applied maiolica glazes to his sculptures, and, as Fortnum argues, his glaze was different from any other potters’ glazes of the time, but his materials, basic techniques and methods all come from known potters practices of the time. If a slight difference in the amount of tin used constitutes a new invention in glazing and a new type of glazing, then Luca della Robbia invented a new glazing technique. His inventiveness, though, is not primarily in the glazes, which had been used in Italy with proto-maiolica and prior to Luca della Robbia’s work in maiolica potteries in the area. Instead, his

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\(^9\) Ibid., 221.

inventiveness is apparent more with his *application* of the glazes and not with the actual glazes themselves.

Kingery, as well as other scholars, argues that Luca della Robbia did not invent tin glazes, but was the first to apply them to sculptural forms: “While tin-glazed maiolica had been made by Florentine potters for more than a century, it was a sculptor, Luca della Robbia, who first employed the glaze as an art medium in the 15th century.”¹¹ His *ingegno* and *invenzione* were therefore not in the physical invention of glazes, but in the application and use of those glazes to an artistic medium (sculpture) that had never been connected to glazed terracotta. Bruce Boucher clarifies that terracotta had been used as a sculptural form before Luca della Robbia, but it had always been painted with polychrome instead of glaze.¹² Glaze had, though, previously been applied to other architectural forms, and to smaller decorative arts.

Luca della Robbia’s application of glaze to sculpture had few precedents, especially in the four small relief sculptures attributed to Ghiberti of *Adam and Eve* that most likely decorated a cassone (Figure 5).¹³ This small relief is glazed in a brown lead glaze, a monochrome decoration that looks to the work of Luca della Robbia in its simple, monochromatic glaze and the relief style of Luca’s many Madonna and Child relief plaques. This is an important object as it was most likely created by Ghiberti, who was in all probability Luca’s master. If Ghiberti knew how to glaze, it is likely that he would have taught Luca at least the basic skills and techniques associated with glazing. Even if Ghiberti was only familiar with molding and working the clay, he presumably

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had business relationships with potters who fired his sculptures. As Boucher mentions, “there is evidence that a number of clay sculptures were fired alongside more mundane ceramic items.”\(^{14}\) Therefore, Ghiberti could have introduced Luca to local potters who would have helped in the firing and glazing process. Glaze was also applied to ceramic tiles for floors and ceilings, and basins in the façades of churches.\(^{15}\) Glazed ceramic had architectural purposes and though the tiles and basins were not sculptural, they were a part of the architectural composition. On a smaller scale, dishes and cookware were produced in Italy in the form of *mezzamaiolica* and in the early stages of maiolica, but glaze was applied to decorative arts, to utilitarian objects. A precedent for glazing terracotta exists prior to Luca della Robbia, though not for larger sculptural objects.

His invention of glazed sculptural terracotta places him in a liberal art context, and not in a mechanical art position, mainly because it is in fact sculpture. Also the display of *ingegno* and *invenzione* in the use of a typical craft material for sculpture reassesses the discourse that defines Luca della Robbia’s place as an artist. Even though he was trained in the liberal arts as a marble carver and bronze caster, Luca della Robbia switched to working in clay in the beginning of his career. Historians have not explained Luca’s transition to clay as there is no documentary evidence for it, and nothing is definitively known about his training, to whom he was apprenticed or what he learned. The earliest source to write on Luca della Robbia, Vasari, explains the conversion as merely cost effective:

> But when, at the conclusion of these works, the master made up the reckoning of what he had received, and compared this with the time he had expended in their production, he perceived that he had made but small gains, and that the labour had been excessive; he determined, therefore, to abandon marble and bronze, resolving to try if he could not derive a more profitable return from some other source. Wherefore, reflecting that it cost but little trouble to work in clay, which is

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 5.

easily managed, and that only one thing was required, namely, to find some method by which the work produced in that material should be rendered durable…  

It is definitely true that clay was much more lucrative than marble as the materials were cheaper, it was easier and faster to work, and therefore more could be made in a shorter amount of time with fewer funds than with marble. Vasari is a difficult source to take at face value, because even though he relayed valid information, he was also working eighty years after the death of Luca della Robbia, relied primarily on oral histories for information, and included some false information that has later been recanted (such as stating Luca della Robbia’s birth year as 1388, when records show he was not born until 1399/1400). Other scholars, such as Marchesa Burlamacchi, rely on Vasari’s explanation of Luca della Robbia’s cost effectiveness and claim that he tried to imitate marble with clay, creating a cheaper version of the stone with his white glazes. Another argument for the use of clay as a more inexpensive imitation of marble is that marble was considered a medium used in the liberal arts, a noble material, but clay was a base material, used primarily in the decorative and craft arts. Therefore the white glaze that looks like a marble surface could help elevate the status of clay by associating it with a finer type of medium.  

Other scholars argue against the theory that Luca della Robbia created white glazes to make clay an imitation marble, as clay has its own aesthetics and qualities that do not resemble marble, but are beautiful in their own right. According to Boucher, clay was more malleable, flexible, easier to shape, and therefore “it had its own aesthetic cachet and could also present distinct challenges” that separated it from marble.

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17 Ibid., 160.  
18 Marchesa Burlamacchi, *Luca della Robbia*, (London: George Bell and Sons, 1908), 89.  
Another attractive aspect of working with clay may have been the inventive qualities associated with it, as sculptural clay had not been treated with glaze before, so the use of glazes by Luca della Robbia made it an “invention,” a new, unique and (one would think) exciting endeavor. As Luca della Robbia was, in a sense, “married to his job” (he never married and devoted much of his time to his workshop and guild membership), it would makes sense that he would want to advance his art. Especially in an age of innovation and change such as the Renaissance, Luca della Robbia most likely took pride in creating the new medium of glazed sculptural maiolica. There are many possible reasons for why Luca della Robbia decided to apply tin glazes typically used on functional objects to objects of art, but the important point is that Luca della Robbia took two popular materials, clay and tin glaze, and made sculptural forms eventually thought to be fine art.

Luca della Robbia’s workshop

Unfortunately, when it comes to Luca della Robbia there is a dearth of information, especially about his working habits and workshop, as glaze recipes were secrets kept by the family. With this in mind, what is known about Luca’s workshop practices can be gathered from his actual production, how each piece was created, and how many copies of each exist. Clay is a malleable medium that is easy to cast in plaster, and also easily molds to fill plaster casts. Many forms of the same Madonna and Child exist by Luca della Robbia, with slight differences in the background, which was possible as Boucher mentions because “Luca developed a method of reproductive relief for compositions suitable for molding in wet clay.” Andrea, Luca’s nephew who learned

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21 Boucher, Earth and Fire, 14.
the art of glazed terracotta sculpture from his uncle, took this method further, and according to Boucher he developed mass production of relief sculpture through molds.\textsuperscript{22} Luca’s title of artist, as he was known as a sculptor and not as a potter, is called into question by his use of molds and multiple copies of the same object. One reason scholars consider maiolica workers to be artisans and not artists is because of their practice of mass production of ceramics. It is thought that better quality objects were individually commissioned by patrons to their specific desires, but in maiolica workshops it was always possible to buy a pre-made table setting.\textsuperscript{23}

The distinction between mass produced objects and an original work of art, though, is less obvious in the Renaissance. Workshops were standard practice in the creation of any type of art and decorative object, as it was almost impossible for one person to carry out multiple commissions at one time, and it allowed a hands-on training experience for apprentices. Workshops for all types of art, including painting, sculpture and pottery, would be directed by a master, who would teach his apprentices how to make an object, create a design or pattern to be applied, and oversee the production of the object. The issue of whose “hand” created a work of art was not highly contested, though many contracts would stipulate that the master of the workshop would have to create a specified amount of the work, or at least the finer features. Syson and Thornton explain that “it is true that contracts might sometimes stipulate that the master in question should execute the work on his own, but, in practice, authorship was judged by who had

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\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 14-15.
invented the figure types and ornamental motifs included in a work.” Moreover, terminology to determine how much was created by the hand of the master was different in the fifteenth century than it is today, as “da sua mano” (or “of his/her hand”) had three meanings in Renaissance Italy: first, supervision of the artist, second, the style and maniera of the artist, and third, the actual touch of the artist’s hand. So Luca della Robbia would have been considered the creator of each work even if he did not physically make the work himself, but instead made the mold that then formed the clay.

If Luca della Robbia can be considered an artist and mass produce clay objects, then why were maiolica workers not considered artists when they also mass produce clay objects, as well as take commissions for works? The question here has more to do with the idea of the original concept, the hand of the artist as the idea and the invention of the figures and motifs in a certain piece. It was typical practice for maiolica workers to use figures and motifs from other artists. Francesco Xanto Avelli is known especially for using figures from Marcantonio Raimondi prints after works painted by Raphael (Figures 11a and 11c). Certain types of maiolica had conventional motifs, which Piccolpasso outlines at the end of his treatise. Piccolpasso provides the reader with templates for cerquate (or oak leaf) pattern, for common types of flora and fauna, grotesques and trophy decorations that could be used as borders or decorative motifs for maiolica. The difference between maiolica and della Robbia ware as a sculptural form is that there were patterns and styles available for maiolica painters to use and rely on if a customer asked

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27 See Timothy Wilson, *Ceramic Art of the Italian Renaissance* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1987), 74-75 for reproductions of all the motifs and plates provided by Piccolpasso in his manuscript.
for a certain style. It was, though, up to the maiolica painter to use his personal discretion and *invenzione* to make the style unique, or add personal elements. It is unlikely that maiolica painters used their skills of *disegno* and *invenzione* with every object if there were already set styles and patterns to choose from, but it would also be dull if they were painting the same thing onto hundreds of plates. The most famous maiolica painters are known for their unique compositions (typically *istoriato* wares) and their mastery and style of painting.

**Sculptural Maiolica versus Della Robbia Production**

Another comparison point between Luca della Robbia’s workshop and other maiolica workshops is a production of sculptural forms: portrait busts and Madonna and child reliefs. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), the J. Paul Getty Museum in California, and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, England all own examples of maiolica busts created in unknown workshops, and the Bargello (Museo Nazionale) in Florence contains an example of a bust by the della Robbia workshop (Figures 16, 20, 21 and 22). All four busts stop directly below the shoulders of the figure, and are brightly glazed to look naturalistic in coloring. The major difference in style is the coloring, as would be expected with the differences in glazing: the della Robbia bust of a lady (possibly a female saint) is composed of separate blocks of color, while the other three maiolica busts are decorated with colorful patterns, especially in the clothing. The Getty Bust of Christ (Figure 20) and the Bargello della Robbia bust of a woman (Figure 22) both have white glazed faces, and all four busts have blue or purple glaze outlining their eyes and eyebrows. The Fitzwilliam (Figure 21) and MFA (Figure 16) busts both have
attempted a skin color, the Fitzwilliam through the addition of pigmentation to the cheeks and the MFA bust has an uneven, but otherwise successful, peach glazed skin.

The purposes of these busts are as of yet unknown. One could guess they could have held a private devotional use, such as the bust of Christ, or an entertainment value inherent in the busts of figures such as old women. I believe that the purpose of the MFA’s bust of a woman is as a portrait created in commemoration of a betrothal or wedding. Even the della Robbia bust of a woman does not have a clear function, though John Pope-Hennessy claims a devotional use to the bust as she has a hole in her head that would have most likely held a halo, making her a bust of a saint. As works of maiolica, though, none of these busts have any apparent functional use; they are purely sculptural forms of maiolica. To explain this phenomenon, Catherine Hess argues that the Getty bust of Christ was created by two main contributors, a potter and a sculptor:

It does appear that the Getty bust resulted from the collaboration of a sculptor and ceramist. From the underside one learns that the basic form of the bust was built using coils of clay of varying lengths that were attached to one another and smoothed together on the exterior surface. This method is one of the most basic and widespread of all pottery-building techniques, and one must assume that a potter was responsible for this phase of manufacture. However, the important job of modeling the face appears to have been left to a talented sculptor, possibly one who was active or educated in the circle of a Florentine master toward the end of the fifteenth century. Finally, to judge from the colors and patterns employed, the surface decoration – its glazing, painting and firing – was the work of a ceramist who was working in Tuscany or influenced by Tuscan sculpture.

While her argument may sound convincing, is it not possible that potters were indeed capable of modeling a naturalistic and beautiful form? It is clear from the construction of the bust and the glazing of all three maiolica busts that they were produced in maiolica

29 Alicia LaTores, “Marriage and Maiolica: A Look at the MFA’s Bust of a Woman,” unpublished paper, Wheaton College, spring 2006. In this paper I argued that the bust at the MFA was not created for any functional purpose, but was made as a portrait bust to commemorate a betrothal.
workshops (or at the very least glazed in maiolica workshops by maiolica painters), but no solid evidence points to direct collaboration between a sculptor and the workshop. There are records of the collaboration of sculptors and potters in the renting out of kilns and other such activities, but these particular busts, aside from the evident skill of the modeler, do not speak directly to such a collaboration. Therefore, it is possible that a talented potter molded and a single workshop created the whole work from start to finish, without the aid of a sculptor.

Another sculptural form common to both della Robbia and other maiolica workshops is that of the Madonna and Child relief plaque. These plaques did not have any function aside from being devotional objects that one would keep in his/her room and use for personal prayers. There was a large market for private devotional images in Catholic Florence, especially since “the principle devotional focus within the Renaissance home was the holy image – sometimes a representation of Christ or one or more of the saints, but most often of the Virgin and Child.” John Pope-Hennessy adds that due to the large number of extant Madonna and Child reliefs in terracotta, stucco and even marble, that most Florentine households must have owned such an item. It makes sense that both Luca della Robbia and other maiolica workshops would mass produce terracotta Madonna and Child plaques since they were in high demand. This also provides another similarity in production between the two types of maiolica.

Stylistically there are a few differences and similarities between della Robbia’s and other workshop productions, primarily in glazing and form. Typically, della Robbia Madonna and Childs have purely white figures against a blue background, with blue

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accents on the eyes and eyebrows (Figure 23). The Virgin Mary is shown cut off at the waist (half-length) with both arms fully included and a veil over her head. She is usually supporting the Christ Child, who is situated on her left and shown in full. Sometimes the Virgin’s veil is gilded, or there are accents of gilding or coloring in the background. Other maiolica reliefs tend to be of similar compositions, but are more brightly colored with decorations in the garments of the Virgin and painted backgrounds. Otherwise, the reliefs are of similar styles, and always for private devotional use. The Madonna and Child plaque in the British Museum is a flat painted panel without any relief, but still fits into the category of Madonna and Child plaques made for private devotional use (Figure 18). The Virgin is shown in half-length like the della Robbia type, and the Christ child is painted in full on the right side of the Virgin. As with most della Robbia Madonnas, Mary has her arm around the Christ child, supporting his weight. A similar maiolica Madonna and Child from circa 1510 is in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, but is closer to the style of the della Robbia in that it is in relief and the full Christ child stands supported on his mother’s left side (Figure 24). The Virgin is, as usual, in half-length, and the maiolica plaque is thought to be a copy of “a stucco relief attributed to the Florentine sculptor, Antonio Rossellino (b. 1427, d. 1478, in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum.”35

The main difference between the della Robbia Madonna and Child plaques and the other maiolica plaques is the technique in glazing. The della Robbia reliefs are strictly blue and white glaze, very simple and classicizing even in color. The other maiolica plaques are colorful in the clothing decoration, the background decoration, and the skin

35 Victoria and Albert Museum and Bernard Rackham, Catalogue of Italian Maiolica (London: Published under the authority of the Board of education, 1940), vol. I, 122.
and other features of the mother and child. In addition, it is more likely that the della Robbia wares were gilded, which would give a richer feel to the della Robbia reliefs. The blue and white color blocks are to be expected from the della Robbia glazes, and is the one obvious difference between the different productions. Is the difference in glazing and the look it gives to the objects the reason why Luca della Robbia’s ceramic work is considered art by most art historians? The inventiveness of his use of tin glaze on terracotta sculpture and in the streamlining of the glazing process gives his objects invenzione and ingegno, but he is still producing similar works to other maiolica workshops, and in mass amounts. It seems odd that Luca’s Virgin and Child plaques were considered fine art as sculptural forms, but most other maiolica Virgin and Child reliefs were thought to be decorative art, even though they typically had very similar compositions and similar uses.

**Luca della Robbia’s Month Series versus Istoriato wares**

Luca della Robbia was creating primarily sculptural forms of maiolica, but he also knew how to use tin glazes to paint on ceramics, similar to istoriato wares from Urbino. The fact that Luca della Robbia worked in a popular maiolica style is important as it shows another connection and possible exchange of ideas between the della Robbia workshop and other potters. In addition to his statues, doors, and cantoria, Luca della Robbia made both floor and ceiling tiles (as mentioned already in the discussion of the Chapel for the Cardinal of Portugal in San Miniato al Monte). One such instance of a creation of ceiling tiles is mentioned by Vasari as the decoration to the studiolo of Piero de’Medici, and as Lethaby mentions in his article about these tiles: “Vasari specially tells
us that Luca worked in painted majolica (maiolica) on flat surfaces – nay, that he invented the very method of which our panels are the most beautiful examples. This at least proves that some such works by Luca were known to have existed.”

(Figure 25) As previously mentioned, Vasari claims that Luca della Robbia was in fact the inventor of istoriato ware, a type of historiated maiolica that became popular in Urbino around 1525. The maiolica roundels of the month that decorated the ceiling of Piero de’Medici’s studiolo are slightly curved, circular pieces of flat terracotta whose sole ornamentation is the blue and white painting of the labors of the months.

The labors of the month are the theme of each roundel, with one roundel for each month. The characteristic labors of the months are the central feature, painted in dark blue and white on a light blue background. Each roundel is labeled with the month, the zodiacal symbol, and the number of hours in the days of that month. John Pope-Hennessy mentions that the theme of the labors of the month “seems to originate in Northern miniatures,” as they were a common component of Books of Hours. Luca is adopting a more classical theme than his typical religiously based sculpture for the Duomo or his ubiquitous Madonna and Child reliefs. This is in line with the later istoriato ware, which was typically a depiction of a classical myth or theme on a roughly flat plate or dish. It is also very important to note that Luca della Robbia knew how to paint using glazes and to create objects similar to those produced in other maiolica workshops. His work was not solely sculptural, but also utilized the medium of clay and pushed the boundaries to not just glaze in blocks of color, but to paint defined figures and scenes.

Andrea della Robbia, Luca’s nephew to whom he passed on his workshop and business, took painting on a flat surface further by creating objects like the lunette with God and the Angels (Figure 26). He continued istoriato work into the beginning of the sixteenth century, when it began to become fashionable for plates and dishes. This lunette in its color and painting looks more like a large scale work by Nicola da Urbino, as it is completely flat and very brightly colored, unlike the characteristic della Robbia relief sculpture in blue and white glazes. Otherwise, the use of the fruit and foliage on the border is a common della Robbia motif, and the figures look light flattened relief figures from Andrea’s hand. Both the maiolica ceiling tiles in Piero de’ Medici’s studiolo and Andrea’s later endeavors into flattened painting on ceramic show knowledge of the techniques and skills of glazing and foresight into the trends and styles of popular maiolica. Examples such as these beg the question: how much did Luca della Robbia influence other potters and maiolica producers, and how much did those other potters and producers influence Luca della Robbia?

Influences

There are no obvious and verified influences of Luca della Robbia on maiolica production or vice versa. Since Luca was a member of the same guild as all the other potters, and one purpose of the guild was to help conduct business and associations between its members, it can be assumed that Luca della Robbia was acquainted with some of the potters in Florence. It also has been noted that “he must have first learned the fundamentals of glaze preparation and firing from potters” since no other sculptor was
working in glazed terracotta at the time. While Luca della Robbia is seen as inventive through his application of tin glazes to sculptural forms, other maiolica workshops produced sculptures that, in the case of the Madonna and Child reliefs, could compete with the production of the della Robbia workshop. As Luca della Robbia began his experiments with glazing during the beginning of the growing popularity of maiolica, it could be argued that the popularity of the work of Luca della Robbia helped the growing popularity of other types of maiolica. On the other hand, Luca della Robbia did not invent maiolica, and the styles and glazes that were being produced when he began to make ceramic objects must have influenced his work and production.

Both Luca della Robbia and other maiolica workshops were an active part of a vibrant artistic life and dialogue, though there is a lack of surviving contemporaneous written material on either subject. Even the present literature discusses the influences not of Luca della Robbia and maiolica producers on each other, but of painters and other fine artists on craftsmen through the issue of copia. Maiolica painters working in the istoriato style are known to have used classical myths and literary sources for inspiration and themes in their work, and some of these have been traced to specific prints or paintings. Nicola da Urbino used Ovid’s Metamorphosis for inspiration for the table set he made for Isabella d’Este, which is seen on the plate with the depiction of Perseus and Andromeda, a story told in Metamorphosis, at the MFA, Boston (Figure 12).

One maiolica painter in particular, Francesco Xanto Avelli da Rovigo, is notorious for using figures from print sources and sometimes even “cutting and pasting”

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39 Syson and Thornton, Objects of Virtue, 248-249.
the exact figure into another landscape or composition (Figures 11a and 11c).40 Xanto also had high aspirations, and wanted to be called not just a vasaio (potter) but a pittore (painter).41 Xanto wrote his own poetry, and used literary sources such as Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso as a source for scenes for maiolica pieces.42 His use of his own poetry and others literature proves that he was scholarly and well read, not only an artisan, but also an intellectual.43

Many scholars, such as Bernard Rackham, believe the use of figures from prints and other sources to be “plagiarisms of engravings” and therefore lessens the artistic merit of the maiolica vessel.44 Others disagree, such as Patricia Collins, and argue that instead the use of famous works of art show the maiolica painters were aware of current art, and were attempting “to produce, in a different medium, fine works of art.”45 Does Xanto’s use of direct print sources, specifically from Marcantonio Raimondi, and “cut and paste” technique nullify the ideas of ingegno and invenzione that a fifteenth-century artist was supposed to possess? Or does it comply with those ideals? While Xanto is not formulating his own figures, the settings and themes are all his own invenzione, so his works are partly “used” and partly new. It could be argued further that Xanto had more genius and invention for taking a figure from another artist and making it all his own creation in a new composition. Unfortunately, in many cases Xanto exhibits a lack of artistic knowledge and disegno “when figures are juxtaposed without any allowance

40 See Collins, “Prints and the Development of Istoriate…,” 228 for a discussion of Xanto’s cut and paste technique of borrowing figures from other sources.
42 Wilson, Ceramic Art, 52.
43 Wilson, “Xanto and Ariosto,” 322.
being made for the effects of perspective,” rendering the scene awkward and the figures appear incoherent.\textsuperscript{46}

Francesco Xanto Avelli wanted to be considered an artist, a painter, but in order to be considered a liberal artist one needed to have invenzione, ingegno, and disegno. The work that Xanto produced does not display amazing skills in drawing or perspective, yet the debate still continues over Xanto’s invenzione and ingegno. Syson and Thornton further problematize the question of Xanto’s status of artist or artisan by comparing his actions of copia with famous painters and theorists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries:

By the third decade of the sixteenth century we have seen that the works of particular heroicized painters and sculptors – Raphael, Michelangelo and Giulio, to take the most obvious instances – were considered canonical. Models need no longer be local and could justifiably be sought in their works, in exactly the same way as artists continued to cite ancient visual paradigms. By combining them in new compositions in landscapes and architectural settings of their own invention, Xanto, and the other ceramic painters who worked in this way, follow precisely Alberti’s advice in the second book of his treatise On Painting on the composition of istorie – depending on the way the figures are posed in relation to one another, and in which the beholder should be delighted by the ‘copiousness’ and ‘variety’: ‘Composition is that rule of painting by which the parts of the things seen fit together in the painting.’ And by doing so they were not differing substantially from painters like Rosso Fiorentino, whose inventiveness was not doubted, when he borrowed figures in action from Raphael.\textsuperscript{47}

Copying other sources and looking to other artists was not just a practice done by maiolica workers. Painters, engravers, sculptors, and many other craftsmen included figures or elements of other artists work in their own art. The practice of copia is important in that it shows an emulation of other artists and an exchange of ideas; it is the physical result of the influence on one artist/artisans work on another artist/artisan. It is obvious that maiolica painters were looking to paintings, to engravings, and to literary sources for inspiration, and there is even “evidence that three-dimensional medals and

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 228.
\textsuperscript{47} Syson and Thornton, Objects of Virtue, 259.
plaquettes were on occasion used as a source for maiolica designs.” As there is evidence for maiolica producers looking to other sculptors and artists for inspiration, it is likely that potters looked to Luca della Robbia, especially since he worked in basically the same medium, for inspiration and ideas. While it is difficult to prove this assertion, most potters looked to other artists and works of art for inspiration, and as shown above, both Luca della Robbia and other maiolica producers created similar types of objects in busts, religious relief plaques, and pieces in the *istoriato* style.

**Patronage**

In addition to looking at what Luca della Robbia and other maiolica workshops produced as a comparison point between the two, it is also important to note who bought and commissioned objects from each workshop, and how the objects were used by the patrons. Luca della Robbia made many sculptural objects for architectural decoration, both inside and outside the structures, such as his *Resurrection* lunette for the cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore and his smaller *Madonna and Child* reliefs made for personal devotion in bedrooms and private spaces (Figures 6 and 23). Luca primarily worked for institutions such as churches, guilds and hospitals, as well as for politically powerful families. According to Allan Marquand, “Luca’s chief patron was the Opera del Duomo (Florence), by whom he was employed for many years.” Marquand continues to list other churches, institutions and families who commissioned works from Luca della Robbia: San Piero Maggiore, Florence; San Pierino, Florence; San Giovanni Fuorcivitas, Pistoia; San Jacopo, Pescia; San Domenico, Urbino; the *Mercanzia; I Medici e Speciali*;

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49 Marquand, *Luca della Robbia*, xxix.
Renaissance Florence was a republican society, with the wealthiest families in power deciding the governing laws and principles. It is important to note that these were the same families who commissioned art. The guilds, as previously mentioned, were also on the top of the social hierarchy, and had an overarching influence on the lives of all the members. The most politically important individuals and institutions commissioned art as a public statement of their power and influence. Many of Luca della Robbia’s patrons were churches, guilds and important families, so his work was displayed publicly and visually accessible to the majority of Florentine citizens. Due to the large amount of traffic in churches, guild halls and palazzi of the most prominent citizens, these corporations and individuals became arbiters of taste, influencing not only the laws and governance of Florence, but the art commissioned and produced in the city.

The Opera del Duomo commissioned item such as the marble *cantoria* and bronze doors for Santa Maria del Fiore to decorate the church. Many other works commissioned by private individuals also had a religious purpose and setting: his tomb for Cardinal Federighi was originally created for the church of San Pancrazio, but was later moved to Santa Trinità (Figure 7). Other examples like the tomb for the Cardinal of Portugal in San Miniato al Monte and the Pazzi Chapel in Santa Croce were commissioned by private citizens, yet still were created for locals within churches (Figure 8). An example of a secular commission by a private citizen for a private space would be the roundels of the months of the year in the *studiolo* of Piero de’Medici (Figure 25). Piero de’Medici was

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50 Ibid.
arguably the single most important Florentine man during the years he controlled the Medici family. More than anyone else, Piero determined taste through his extensive art patronage and the public was given access to his collection due to his political prominence. For the most part, though, Luca della Robbia produced religious works for public spaces, usually commissioned by institutions or politically important families. Since everyone had access to churches, hospitals, and piazze where the social life of the city was centered, most Florentine citizens viewed these works.

Luca della Robbia’s larger scale commissions were meant to be public works of art, whereas most other maiolica production was privately owned and used. Maiolica was commissioned for use in a private domestic setting, and typically had a secular theme. There are many possible types and uses of maiolica such as inkwells, pharmacy jars, sculptural objects, devotional wall plaques, dishes and plates, though most maiolica purchased was in the form of table wares. In addition, table wares were most likely to be decorated with a coat of arms or heraldry, which makes it possible to identify the patron or owner of the set. For this reason, the following discussion of maiolica will focus on dishes and plates (typically istoriato wares) that contain heraldic images.

Maiolica, as an inexpensive material to work with, typically was economical to purchase. This made it more accessible to a wider audience, and attractive for aristocratic patrons who wanted to purchase large table settings to accommodate up to one hundred guests. istoriato was purchased also as a luxury item, and many times displayed on credenzas for purely aesthetic reasons. Watson discusses the multiple uses of aristocratic maiolica:

While some pieces – such as pharmaceutical wares – were certainly intended for utilitarian functions, others were most likely meant as part of the household decoration of an aristocratic family. The display of such istoriato wares in ones palazzo would also, of course, serve to point up
the host’s level of erudition by the choice of subjects on the maiolica. The selection of themes on the Pucci service, for example, is a direct reflection of the cinquecento preoccupation with the revival of antique literature, as well as the strong interest in ‘moderns’ such as Ariosto and Petrarch.\footnote{Wendy Watson, \textit{Italian Maiolica from the William A. Clark Collection} (London: Scala Books Ltd, 1986), 132.}

The service mentioned in this quote with the Pucci coat of arms, is by Francesco Xanto Avelli da Rovigo (Figure 27). The service is thought to have belonged to Piero Maria Pucci, who acted as \textit{Gonfaloniere} to Pope Leo X.\footnote{Ibid.} The Pucci were a very wealthy, aristocratic family with close ties to the Pope and other politically powerful figures. Other powerful and influential figures who commissioned maiolica sets were rulers such as Isabella d’Este, the Gonzaga in Mantua, the della Rovere family of Urbino, and the Medici of Florence.

Due to its popularity among the aristocracy, maiolica became a status symbol. Isabella d’Este is said to have treasured her collection of maiolica so much that when a piece she loved broke in 1494 she sent it back to the workshop in Ferrara (from her home in Mantua) to have it repaired.\footnote{J.V.G. Mallet, “The Gonzaga and Ceramics,” \textit{The Splendours of the Gonzaga}, ed. by David Chambers and Jane Martineau, (London: The Museum, 1981), 39.} It was not enough to buy a new plate, but she valued that specific plate (most likely for the skill and beauty of its decoration) enough to have it repaired. The fame and popularity of Italian maiolica spread throughout Europe so that the Frenchman Anne de Montmorency, “the greatest non-royal patron of the French Renaissance,” had a table setting commissioned at Urbino.\footnote{Wilson, \textit{Ceramic Art}, 131.} It must have been a true status symbol especially for foreigners to have Italian maiolica of the highest quality, not only to display their knowledge of antiquity and art, but also their knowledge of other cultures and societies. In addition, maiolica was seen as a proper gift from one aristocrat.
to another. Malatesta used maiolica as a diplomatic gift for Lorenzo de’ Medici to inspire favors. Maiolica was also a proper gift to honor marriages and births, two events that strengthened politically powerful families.\footnote{For information on Lorenzo de’ Medici and diplomatic gifts see Laurie Fusco and Gino Corti, \textit{Lorenzo de’ Medici: Collector and Antiquarian} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 79, and for information on maiolica as a gift for betrothals, marriages and births see Watson, \textit{Italian Renaissance Maiolica}, 18.} It was socially acceptable to give gifts of maiolica, to be used to impress and honor the recipient. Lorenzo de’ Medici thanked Malatesta for the gift of maiolica in words of praise for the clay medium: “two days ago I received along with a letter from your Lordship those clay vases you deigned to send… I esteem them more than if they were of silver, being very excellent and rare, as I say, and quite novel to us here.”\footnote{Fusco and Corti, \textit{Lorenzo de’ Medici}, 79.}

While maiolica was commissioned primarily for private individuals and domestic settings, rather than the institutional and religious commissions typical of Luca della Robbia, the social statuses were similar for the patrons of both types of maiolica. Rich, powerful families and figures commissioned both expensive works of maiolica and della Robbia wares, though works from less renowned maiolica workshops were more accessible for the bourgeoisie to purchase. Another difference lay in the use and themes of the works: della Robbia made many works for religious settings, and his themes tended to be more Christian than classical. While other maiolica workshops did produce religious objects, the overwhelming amount of extant material is in the form of classically themed table wares.

Lastly, the works of Luca della Robbia held public places of prominence in Florence, commissioned by influential patrons who were arbiters of taste. Luca’s maiolica work became famous and popular through the attention of these taste-making
patrons. While other forms of maiolica were purchased by similar families and powerful individuals, they remained domestic items found within the private sphere of the house, and therefore did not have influence over public taste and judgment. The audience for one piece of Luca della Robbia’s work was much larger than the audience for a single maiolica service of istoriato tableware. The difference in audiences explains the dissimilarity in patronage and in the function of each work.
Conclusion

Recent scholarship has not adequately addressed Luca della Robbia as a producer of maiolica. This work has tried to reconcile the conflict inherent in the fact that Luca della Robbia was perceived as a sculptor and artist, yet he worked in a purely craft material. Therefore I examined the status of the artist, how Luca della Robbia fit within the discussion, how other maiolica producers added to this discussion, and compared the materials, techniques, uses, forms and patronage of each. I have argued that Luca della Robbia is considered an artist even though he primarily worked in a craft medium, maiolica. This status is due to his wealth, fame, artistic training, and his use of *disegno*, *invenzione* and *ingegno*. In the process I have answered the two questions I posed at the outset: one, if Luca della Robbia was considered an artist, why were maiolica workers considered artisans? And two, is Luca della Robbia truly inventive?

In sum, maiolica producers were considered artisans due to the status of their craft, working with clay, and their lack of liberal arts knowledge and education. Certain producers, however, were educated, literate, and knew the work of master artists, yet they never reached the status of Luca della Robbia. This is most likely due to a perceived lack of *ingegno* and *invenzione* displayed through the use of patterns, the common trends and styles of maiolica, and the mass production of many products.

Luca della Robbia, on the other hand, was viewed by contemporaries, such as Giorgio Vasari, as the inventor of tin glazing and the inventor of *istoriato*, or painting a scene with glazes on a flat surface. This is not entirely true, as maiolica (or tin) glazes were used in Italy prior to Luca della Robbia’s use of the glazing technique, but only as a craft art. However, it contributed to elevating Luca della Robbia’s fame as an artist. Some
sculptural pieces were glazed, such as Ghiberti’s *Adam and Eve* cassone panels, but Luca della Robbia was the first sculptor to apply tin glazes to his large scale sculptural works. Luca developed an individualized style in ceramics, and left behind both marble and bronze to produce objects in maiolica for the majority of his career. Luca della Robbia was based in the maiolica tradition and the ceramic tradition of Italy, but was inventive in his use and application of glazes. In addition, in looking at the objects produced, there is an obvious dialogue between Luca della Robbia as a ceramic artist and other maiolica workers as ceramic producers since similar styles and types of objects were produced by della Robbia and other maiolica producers.

Luca della Robbia is not an anomaly in Italian Renaissance art, creating a whole new art from scratch, but rather a product of his culture and society who had the means and ability to elevate a popular craft to an art form. He used *invenzione* in the application of glazes to sculpture, and his *ingegno* and *disegno* are apparent in the modeling and creation of ceramic sculpture. Luca della Robbia applied his artistic training and skills onto a typical craft art to perfect a medium and turn glazed terracotta into a sculptural, fine art medium.
Glossary

albarelli (singular: albarello) – Pharmacy jars.

bianco – First layer of glaze on a maiolica object. A white tin glaze that provides a solid white surface or primary white tin-glaze layer to more easily and uniformly apply the second layer of pigment on the clay.

cantoria – An organ or choral loft, usually an outcropping on the second story of a church. Luca della Robbia made a marble cantoria for Santa Maria delle Fiore, which he began in 1432 and completed in 1438.

capo-bottega - The head (sometimes owner) of an artisan workshop.

cassone – Marriage chest, commissioned as a part of a dowry and was used to hold and transport the contents of a woman’s dowry, such as linens and clothing.

catasto of 1427 – Official tax documents that were mandatory of all Florentine citizens. Therefore they provided census information for 1427 and give a statistical outline of the income and lifestyle of all Florentine citizens.

coperta – A clear and shiny cover glaze. The third layer of glaze on a maiolica object, used to protect the pigment and bianco layers.

disegno – Design. One of the three components necessary for a work of art.

ingegno – Genius. One of the three components necessary for a work of art.

invenzione – Invention. One of the three components necessary for a work of art.

istoriato – Begun around 1525 in Urbino, a popular style of maiolica decoration where the object is painted with a narrative scene on the object, usually from classical history or mythology, and was influenced by humanism and the scholarly learning of the Renaissance. Thought to be the apex of all maiolica production, and lasted 50 years until 1575.

maiolica – Any type of Italian tin-glazed earthenware pottery, usually of Renaissance production, but the term can apply to contemporary tin-glazed pottery as well.

majolica – Nineteenth-century ceramic works produced in England emulating the earlier Renaissance Italian ceramics. Prior to the nineteenth-century this term was used interchangeably with “maiolica.”

Mezzamaiolica – Gothic influenced early forms of maiolica produced in Italy in the fourteenth century to mid-fifteenth century. Mezzamaiolica usually came in the form of sgraffito ware with a luster top glaze.
paragone – A comparison of painting and sculpture in Cinquecento art historical discussions used to define which medium was the higher art.

scultore – Sculptor.

Sgraffito – A type of mezzamaiolica that uses a deductive technique to create a picture or pattern on the surface of the clay: a thin covering of white clay, called slip, is painted on the surface of the red terracotta, and an image is scratched through the layer of slip to reveal the red clay below. The piece is usually covered in a yellow or brown tin luster glaze.

vasaio – Potter.

Florentine Guilds:

Arte della Lana - The wool guild. Luca della Robbia joined this guild in 1427.

L'Arte de'Maestri di Pietra e di Legname - The stone mason and woodworkers guild, primarily joined by sculptors and also included potters. Luca della Robbia joined this guild in 1432.

Arte dei Medici e degli Speziali - The doctors and apothecaries guild, which included painters.

Arte della Seta – The silk guild.

Compagnia di San Luca – Company of Saint Luke, a social confraternity of artists that was the basis of the later Accademia del Disegno. Luca della Robbia was an active member for most of his life.
List of Figures

1. della Robbia, Luca. **Cantoria.** 1432-1438. Marble. Museo del’Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy.


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