

The Allure of Glazed Terracotta in Renaissance Italy



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MAP 1

Map of Italy with modern regional boundaries, major cities, and ceramic production centres. Reproduced from Timothy Wilson, *Italian Maiolica and Europe*, Oxford, 2017, p. 42





FIG. 5

View of the façade of the Oratorio di Santa Monica in Fermo with replicas of the tin-glazed statuettes, showing their original locations

earthenware as the statuettes on the façade of the Oratorio di Santa Monica in Fermo, Marche (fig. 5). The figures, of which only four have survived in fragmentary state, can be dated to the period between 1423 and 1425, when Giovanni Guglielmi of Fermo ordered the construction of the oratory.²⁴ They portrayed male saints, including Saint Paul with a sword (fig. 6) and a book and Saint Anthony the Abbot (fig. 7) with his staff, believed to safeguard people and animals from plagues.²⁵ The colour scheme of the figurines, which combines intense blue and green with brown contours, seems to point to a local workshop, as ceramics with this decoration were to be found initially on the Adriatic coast (fig. 8).²⁶ Their reduced scale (h: 32 cm, w: 7 cm) means that the details would hardly be visible to a devotee entering the Oratory. This suggests the primacy of the medium. Through vivid colours and reflective surfaces the statuettes animated the upper section of the tall façade, in a similar way as the *bacini*. They could be understood as an instance in which glazed earthenware was used as an apotropaic material, the luminous surface of which was supposed to ward off evil spirits. Maiolica was used in this way on the exteriors of private homes, where brightly coloured vases were placed on roofs to guard the household from evil spirits.²⁷

Another set of glazed terracotta statuettes was designed for the Cathedral in Carinola, a province of Caserta in the region of Campania (fig. 9).²⁸ The fifteen figurines decorated the exterior of the ecclesiastical building from at least the mid-sixteenth century, but there is no certainty about their original collocation.²⁹ Local historians have speculated that the figurines formed part of a monumental tomb, or decorated the presbytery or one of the fifteenth-century chapels (fig. 10).³⁰ Their forms are unique in the context of the Regno di Napoli during the reign of Alfonso I of Aragon,

²⁴ Paolinelli 2014, pp. 110–111. See also Gelichi 1988, p. 102, figs. 40–43; Montuschi Simboli 1989; Gelichi 1992b, pp. 15 and 20; Ermeti 1997, p. 27; Montevicchi 2004; Annibaldi 2006.

²⁵ Fenelli 2011.

²⁶ Buerger 1974, p. 246.

²⁷ There are a number of surviving sixteenth-century examples in the Museo Civico in Ariano Irpino. See Fiore 1998.

²⁸ I am very grateful to Mr. Carlo Ceraldi from Carinola for drawing my attention to these fascinating artworks.

²⁹ Donatone 1967; Donatone 1974, p. 61.

³⁰ Merolle 2016, p. 26.



FIG. 6

Anonymous Marchigian artist,
Saint Paul, c. 1423–1425, tin-glazed
earthenware, h: 34 cm, w: 7.5 cm,
Oratorio di Santa Monica, Fermo



FIG. 7

Anonymous Marchigian artist,
Saint Anthony the Abbot, c. 1423–1425,
tin-glazed earthenware, h: 32 cm, w: 7 cm,
Oratorio di Santa Monica, Fermo



FIG. 8

Anonymous Marchigian artist, *Figure
of an Apostle*, c. 1423–1425, tin-glazed
earthenware, h: 32 cm, w: 7 cm,
Oratorio di Santa Monica, Fermo



FIG. 9
Anonymous artist (Catalan?),
Figure of Fortitude, c. 1450, tin-glazed
earthenware, h: 53 cm, Museo Parrocchiale
'LUCA MENNA', Piazza Vescovado, Carinola



FIG. 10
Anonymous artist (Catalan?),
Figure of Justice, c. 1450, tin-glazed
earthenware, h: 53 cm, Museo Parrocchiale
'LUCA MENNA', Piazza Vescovado, Carinola



FIG. 11
Anonymous artist (Catalan?),
Figure of Temperance, c. 1450, tin-glazed
earthenware, h: 53 cm, Museo Parrocchiale
'LUCA MENNA', Piazza Vescovado, Carinola

and it has been suggested that the artist responsible for the statuettes belonged to the Catalan milieu of architects and sculptors active in the city in the mid-fifteenth century (fig. 11).³¹

The impact of foreign ceramics can also be traced in the technique and palette of Renaissance glazed terracotta. Porcelain was produced in China from the first century AD, with wider use of those wares from the third century onwards, but the true development and mastery of the medium came about during the Sung Dynasty (960–1279) and again under the Ming Court (1368–1644) in Jingdezhen especially in the first half of the fifteenth century.³² In the late fifteenth century, with the importation of precious Chinese porcelain to Italy, white and blue ceramics became highly valued.³³ Before Chinese porcelain reached Europe, potters of the Islamic world, specifically in Persia, attempted to recreate its effects and colour scheme.³⁴ However, due to the lack of the crucial ingredient, a white siliceous clay, or kaolin, their efforts remained mere imitations of the tantalisingly unobtainable Chinese product. Persian fritware was produced by adding ground quartz (silica) to the potter's clay, and the resultant glassy frit was much coarser than true china-clay.³⁵ This resulted in a very durable, whitish ware, which through the application of a slip to its surface became luminous and close in appearance to porcelain but lacked its finesse and translucency.

Italian workshops, including those in Faenza and Pesaro, had already begun to experiment in the fifteenth century in order to obtain a

List of Illustrations

Map 1. Map of Italy with modern regional boundaries, major cities, and ceramic production centres. Reproduced from Timothy Wilson, *Italian Maiolica and Europe*, Oxford, 2017, p. 42. Copyright: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford / Oxford Designers and Illustrators

FIG. 1. Fra Mattia della Robbia, *The Annunciation*, c. 1532, glazed terracotta, h: 260 cm, w: 395 cm, Santa Maria del Soccorso, Arcevia. Photo: author

FIG. 2. Anonymous Marchigian artist, Pesaro (?), *The Virgin and Child with an Initialled Escutcheon (Malatesta?)*, c. 1480, tin-glazed earthenware, h: 58 cm, w: 34 cm, private collection, Cento. Photo: Sam Fogg

FIG. 3. Islamic *Bacini* from the façade of the Church of San Sisto, Pisa; earliest examples from the eleventh century. Photo: Creative Commons

FIG. 4. Islamic *Bacino* with a seated oriental figure from the façade of the Church of San Sisto, Pisa, eleventh century. Photo: Reproduced from Graziella Berti and Marcella Giorgio, *Ceramiche con coperture vetrificate usate come "bacini": importazione a Pisa e in altri centri della Toscana tra fine X e XII secolo*, Florence, 2011, FIG. 130.

FIG. 5. View of the façade of the Oratorio di Santa Monica in Fermo with replicas of the tin-glazed statuettes, showing their original locations. Photo: author

FIG. 6. Anonymous Marchigian artist, *Saint Paul*, c. 1423–1425, tin-glazed earthenware, h: 34 cm, w: 7.5 cm, Oratorio di Santa Monica, Fermo. Photo: author

FIG. 7. Anonymous Marchigian artist, *Saint Anthony the Abbot*, c. 1423–1425, tin-glazed earthenware, h: 32 cm, w: 7 cm, Oratorio di Santa Monica, Fermo. Photo: author

FIG. 8. Anonymous Marchigian artist, *Figure of an Apostle*, c. 1423–1425, tin-glazed earthenware, h: 32 cm, w: 7 cm, Oratorio di Santa Monica, Fermo. Photo: author

FIG. 9. Anonymous artist (Catalan?), *Figure of Fortitude*, c. 1450, tin-glazed earthenware, h: 53 cm, Museo Parrocchiale "LUCA MENNA", Piazza Vescovado, Carinola. Photo: Museo Parrocchiale "LUCA MENNA"

FIG. 10. Anonymous artist (Catalan?), *Figure of Justice*, c. 1450, tin-glazed earthenware, h: 53 cm, Museo Parrocchiale "LUCA MENNA", Piazza Vescovado, Carinola. Photo: Museo Parrocchiale "LUCA MENNA"

FIG. 11. Anonymous artist (Catalan?), *Figure of Temperance*, c. 1450, tin-glazed earthenware, h: 53 cm, Museo Parrocchiale "LUCA MENNA", Piazza Vescovado, Carinola. Photo: Museo Parrocchiale "LUCA MENNA"

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FIG. 15. *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, illustration on f. 91r, 1380–1399, Codex Vindobonensis series nova 2644, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna. Photo: Creative Commons

FIG. 16. *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, illustration on f. 53v, 1380–1399, Codex Vindobonensis series nova 2644, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna. Photo: Creative Commons

FIG. 17. Detail of FIG. 13, showing the failed attempt to create lustre decoration on the haloes. Photo: author

FIG. 18. Anonymous artist from Deruta, *Saint Roch*, c. 1520, tin-glazed earthenware with lustre, h: 75 cm, British Museum, London, inv. no. 1905.0722.1. Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved

FIG. 19. Detail of FIG. 18. Photo: author

FIG. 20. Anonymous artist from Pesaro, Jug with a face of a man in relief, c. 1470–1490, tin-glazed earthenware, h: 17.5 cm, d: 10 cm, Museo Archeologico, Cesena. Photo: author

FIG. 21. Side view of FIG. 20. Photo: author

FIG. 22. Anonymous artist from Emilia-Romagna or Marche, *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, 1487, tin-glazed earthenware, h: 74.9 cm, w: 162.6 cm, d: 30.5 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 04.26a-h. Photo: public domain

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FIG. 24. Detail of FIG. 23. Photo: author

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