

Skill and Devotion: Religious Terracotta Sculpture in the Papal States 1450-1550

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Description for the General Public

The research project aims to write the first comprehensive study of the artistic and cultural significance of devotional terracotta sculpture in the Papal States from 1450 to 1550. The chronological span corresponds with the period of the intensified technical developments in the field of terracotta sculpture. Hitherto, the research on terracotta as sculptural medium was limited to the enquiries about works by celebrated masters, such as Luca della Robbia or Donatello. However, at the territory of the Papal States, and particularly in Umbria and the Marche, due to the limited access to marble quarries, the terracotta became the material used to create the most innovative and significant sculptures.

The main goal of the project is to gather and analyse possibly exhaustive group of artworks, which would allow to characterise the art of the hitherto neglected region of the Renaissance Italy. Moreover, the analysis of unpublished objects and archival documents will permit to re-evaluate terracotta's role in shaping the social relations and devotions of specific groups of beholders from the territory of the Papal States. The new perspective with its focus on the technical aspects of production, will allow to constructively compare the works made by celebrated artists with these made by mostly anonymous and local artisans.

The preliminary investigations have revealed that workshops in the Papal States during the investigated period at times created works that were technologically more innovative than sculptures produced in Tuscany and Lombardy, for instance thanks to the development of the technique of third firing of large-scale figures. The project's focus on the significance of the material includes in the research hitherto almost unknown objects such as statues of saints covered with lustre or maiolica models of chapels, which, in fragmentary state, survive in various local museums in Italy, but which are widely documented in inventories of the Renaissance public and private interiors.

The analysis of diverse forms of terracotta sculpture opens new modes of interpretation of this material, by shifting the emphasis to the function and to the described in contemporary archival sources multisensory ways of interacting with these figures. Through limiting the investigations into the single artistic technique, the project assumes a broad geographical perspective. This will allow to show the role of devotional terracotta sculptures in various public and private spaces and to analyse the impact of this material across the entire social spectrum.

Particularly important and promising for the future research seems the project's ambition to link the study of the function of devotional works not only with the iconography, but with the analysis of materials and techniques of production. The type of research, which takes into account a wide range of sources from iconographic, through literary and musical, to archival documents, will allow to present the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art in the new light, namely as a collection of skilfully designed and executed objects, whose makers were not solely apt artisans, but also members of the communities with which they formed religious, cultural and social ties that directly influenced the character of the produced terracotta sculptures.