Roundel - The Blind Homer

Object: Roundel

Place of origin: Florence (made)

Date: ca. 1520 - ca. 1525 (made)

Artist/Maker: Robbia, Giovanni della, born 1469 (sculptor)

Materials and Techniques: Polychrome tin-glazed terracotta

Museum number: 372-1864

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 50a, The Paul and Jill Ruddock Gallery, case WS

Public access description

The likenesses of famous persons from antiquity appeared on the outside of some Italian Renaissance buildings to show the owner's appreciation of classical learning. This roundel bears the head of Homer, traditionally said to be the author of the epic poems the Iliad and the Odyssey.

This roundel and two others (Mus. No. 370 and 371-1864), together with one with triple heads (369-1864), was stated on acquisition to have come from the Palazzo Guadagni, Florence. It cannot be assumed that they necessarily were from this palace, which contained a large collection of works of art, but the subject matter suggests that they were intended for a palace or villa. The roundels can be compared to a series of busts of Saints, Prophets, Apostles and other religious figures by Giovanni della Robbia in the Certosa (Charterhouse) di Galluzzo, near Florence (1523), which are set into the spandrels of the cloister arcade. They were probably designed for a similar setting.

The Della Robbia family was an Italian family of sculptors and potters. They were active in Florence from the early 15th century and elsewhere in Italy and France well into the 16th. Family members were traditionally employed in the textile industry, and their name derives from rubia tinctorum, a red dye. Luca della Robbia founded the family sculpture workshop in Florence and was regarded by contemporaries as a leading artistic innovator, comparable to Donatello and Masaccio. The influence of antique art and his characteristic liveliness and charm are evident in such works as the marble singing-gallery for Florence Cathedral. He is credited with the invention of the tin-glazed terracotta sculpture for which the family became well known. Giovanni della Robbia (1469 - ca. 1529) was one of three of the sons of Andrea della Robbia (1435-1525) to enter his father's workshop. He received his own commissions from 1497 and increasingly took over the running of the workshop. He was heir to the famous workshop in Florence and had the task of renewing its famous production to accord with changing tastes as directed by contemporary painting.

Descriptive line

Roundel, tin-glazed terracotta, Della Robbia ware, depicting The Blind Homer, by the workshop of Giovanni Della Robbia, Italy (Florence), ca. 1520-1525

Physical description

A circular relief in poly-chrome enamelled terracotta. With the head and shoulders of a bearded classical male. The figure, considered to be Homer, wears a toga knotted at the front and is white on a blue ground.

Dimensions

Diameter: 83.8 cm, Depth: 25 cm

Museum number

372-1864

Object history note

Purchased in Florence (Vendor not recorded), for £70.

Historical context note

This and the companion reliefs 369,370 and 371-1864 were stated on acquisition to have come from the palazzo Guadagni, Florence. It cannot be assumed that they were necessarily made for this palace, which contained a large number of works of art. The Palazzo Guadagni now the Palazzo Dufour Berte is situated on the Piazza Santo Spirito. Though not one of the more well known Florentine Palazzi, it became a model for many other Florentine houses such as Palazzo Ginori and the Palazzo Niccolini. The architect who built the palace in about 1506 has not been definitely established though the names of Cronaca and Baccio d'Agnolo have been proposed, with the former considered the more likely. A nineteenth century engraving by Durand portrays the facade of the palace and shows no indication of roundels or evidence of roundels having been present. According to J Shearmann's biography of Andrea del Sarto the entire facade was painted by the artist and a photograph of the facade which shows the work purportedly by del Sarto though heavily restored leaves no room for the placement of roundels.

This roundel with the three previously mentioned companions, are ascribed by Cavallucci and Molinier (Les Della Robbia,Paris,1884,p.268,Nos.389-92) to the shop of Giovanni della Robbia. This designation is retained by Maclagan and Longhurst (p.76).
All four roundels are ignored by Marquand. They are compared by Maclagan and Longhurst with the busts of Saints by Giovanni della Robbia in the Certosa di Galluzzo, and the date of these busts (1523) affords a general indication of the probable date of the present reliefs. All four roundels apparently represent figures from antiquity, and Pope-Hennessy proposes that five of the six heads derive from classical originals. The frames of 370, 371 and 372-1864 appear to have been made from the same mould.

The majority of works produced in the workshop of Giovanni della Robbia concentrate on religious themes, however roundels depicting the cardinal virtues, figures from the classical past and portrait busts were also produced. The bust roundels of the Certosa are set in the spandrels of the arcade which surrounds the large cloister. The present roundel would have originally been located high up on a facade probably one of a series set within spandrels.

Interest in the important figures of classical antiquity revived during the Renaissance. With poets and philosophers featured both as the subject of sculpture and as the providers of texts for the libraries of humanist scholars. The fifteenth century witnessed the systematic creation of libraries by means of copies, and the rapid multiplication of translations. Enthusiastic collectors shrank from no expense in their researches, to obtain works by classical poets and authors, especially that of the Greeks. One such collector was Pope Nicholas V, who while only a monk, ran deeply into debt through buying manuscripts or having them copied. As Pope, copyists wrote and spies searched for him. Perotto received 500 ducats for the Latin translation of Polybius; Guarino, 1,000 gold florins for that of Strabo, and he would have been paid 500 more but for the death of the Pope. Filelfo was to have received 10,000 gold florins for a metrical translation of Homer.

The most popular Latin poets, historians, orators and letter-writers, together with a number of Latin translations of single works of Aristotle, Plutarch, and a few other Greek authors, constituted the classical works which were most sort after. Petrarch, owned and kept with religious care a Greek Homer, which he was unable to read. A complete Latin translation of the Iliad and Odyssey, although a very bad one, was made at Petrarch’s suggestion, and with Boccaccio’s help, by a Calabrian Greek, Leonzio Pilato.

The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy
by Jacob Burckhardt
translated by S.G.C. Middlemore, 1878

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93099/the-blind-homer-roundel-robbia-giovanni-della/