

Andrea Della Robbia (Florence 1435 - Florence 1525)

Medallion bust of a laureate

Circa: c. 1492

c. 1492

41 cm diameter

The figure all'antica, placed against a blue background, wears a crown of laurels. Further laurel leaves frame his face, as well as a pair of white ribbons that contrast beautifully against the azure background. Around the figure's neckline his tunic and mantle add a touch of light blue, violet and green. Cast in a heroic mode, his handsome face shows thoughtfulness with slightly furrowed brow, strong cheek bones, and an expressive mouth. The reflective quality of the glaze enhances the liveliness of the surface.

This bust used to form part of the decoration of the great room at Poggioreale, the famed palace built for Alfonso of Aragon outside of Naples by Giuliano da Maiano in the late 15th century. From the grand decorative scheme that accompanied its construction only three precious elements remain. Two medallion busts comparable to the present one are extant, one in the Louvre Museum, Paris and the other at the Capodimonte Museum, Naples. These are both considerably damaged, while the present tondo is in remarkably good condition. The fact that it survived, 'lost' for centuries before its reappearance in Italy in the early 1900s through the legendary dealer Stefano Bardini, is almost miraculous.

From 1485 until his death in 1490 Giuliano da Maiano was active in Naples in the service of Alfonso,

then Duke of Calabria, for whom he designed the elegant Porta Capuana, the adjacent Villa Duchesca (unfinished) and, most importantly, the villa at Poggioreale, which was begun in 1487 but whose decline sadly started soon after. One of the most significant suburban residences of the Renaissance, the villa was a two-storey, rectangular structure with a large, brick-paved, interior courtyard[1]. Four towers at the corners of the edifice were joined by ground-floor porticos and arcaded loggias above, while a large fountain and flanking porticos extended along the axis of the structure into the extensive gardens.

Carlo Celano, who visited Poggioreale in the late 17th century, gave a detailed description of the villa. In his Notizie published in 1692, which are of crucial importance, he wrote “Fra le volte degli archi e su le porte delle scale vi erano molti tondi ornate di alcuno festoni e dentro molti ritratti di mezzo rilievo degli Eroi della casa Aragona di creta cotta invetriata, opera di Luca della Rubbia, eccellente scultore fiorentino che inventò questo modo di così fare” (between the arches and above the doors there were many tondi with festoons and inside numerous portraits in relief of heroes from the house of Aragon in glazed terracotta, by Luca della Robbia, the excellent Florentine sculptor who invented this type of work) [2]. Celano thought Luca della Robbia was responsible for the reliefs, yet since the artist died in 1482 it is his nephew Andrea, who took over the della Robbia studio, who created the tondi for the villa. Indeed the quality of the relief, as well as the range of colour it displays, are characteristic of his work. Another precious document in Neapolitan archives, and quoted in Roberto Pane’s seminal work[3], record the arrival on 12 October 1492 by boat in Naples of “Quattro casse de teste invitrate con le rote venute da fiorencza” (four crates of glazed heads with circular frames came from Florence).

Of Tuscan extraction, the architect Giuliano da Maiano understandably asked his compatriot Andrea della Robbia, one of Florence’s most celebrated artist, to create for Poggioreale tiles for the floors, as well as a series of portraits to be placed between the arches of the courtyard, and above the doors. Their iconography was in keeping with the taste of reigning families of the time, who liked to adorn their residences with portraits of ancestors, tracing their lineage back to antiquity and thus affirming their legitimacy.

The villa was barely finished before it was abandoned. When Charles VIII of France invaded Italy in 1494, King Alfonso fled to Sicily. What he could not take with him, the French army destroyed or looted – Charles taking paintings, sculpture, tapestries and, most significantly for the development of French Renaissance gardens, the designers of Poggio Reale’s celebrated formal grounds. The villa crumbled, its park returned to swampland, and a malaria outbreak in the area was followed by bubonic plague. The site was a battleground in the 16th century, a burial ground for lepers in the 17th, and a cemetery by the early 19th century. Yet the villa’s fame had been assured by its inclusion in Serlio’s Treatise of Architecture of 1540, and features in traveller’s accounts in the following centuries.

Nephew of Luca della Robbia (1399-1482), who is credited with the invention of a new type of polychrome glazed terracotta, Andrea trained with his uncle and assisted in his workshop. By 1470 he had taken over the running of the studio, producing works that are more complex and ornate than Luca’s, with expressive figures and compositions. His glazed terracotta were highly sought after in Tuscany and Umbria, and he worked for cathedrals and churches in Florence, Siena, Assisi and Arrezzo. For the Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence he created circa 1487 the famous roundels depicting charming swaddled children (now in the cloister).

Combining elements of painting and sculpture into a dazzling multi-coloured medium, his art is quintessentially Florentine.

[1] See P. Modesti, 2014, for digital models of the villa, fig. 6, 7, 8

[2] C. Celano, Notizie del bello, dell'antico e del curioso della città di Napoli, Naples, published in 1692, and quoted in Pane, 1977, vol. 2, p. 41

[3] see Pane, p. 42-43

Provenance

Provenance:

Alfonso of Aragon (1448-1495), Duke of Calabria and later King Alfonso II of Naples and Jerusalem (1494-1495), Villa Poggioreale, Naples

Stefano Bardini (1836-1922), Florence, offered Christie's, London, 27 May 1902, lot 511, withdrawn from the sale (with a molded frame)

Stefano Bardini, Florence, sold American Art Galleries, New York, 23-27 April 1918, lot 367 (framed with a later della Robbia garland wreath)

Jean-German-Léon, Baron Cassel van Doorn (1882-1952), New York and Englewood, N.J. until circa 1952

With Blumka, New York

Private collection from circa 1962

Literature:

Literature:

Marquand, Andrea della Robbia and his Atelier, vol. I, Princeton, 1922, reprinted New York, 1972, n. 16, pp. 29-30

R. Pane, Il Rinascimento nell'Italia meridionale, Milano, 1977, vol. II, p. 43, fig. 26

J.-R. Gaborit and M. Bormand, Les Della Robbia: Sculptures en terre cuite émaillée de la Renaissance italienne, exh. cat., Paris, 2002, p. 47, fig. 1