

DESMET

FINE ART



Giovanni della Robbia (Florence 1469 – 1529/1530)

FRAME *MODANATA* , ADORNED WITH A GARLAND OF
FRUIT, FOLIAGE AND FLOWERS WITH SMALL ANIMALS

Polychrome glazed terra cotta
Florence, *c* 1520 - 1525

Provenance:
Private Collection (Florida - U.S.A.)
Art Loss Register: S00253657
TL-test by Ciram: 1015-OA230X-2

Exterior diameter 150 cm – Interior diameter 98 cm
Exterior diameter 59 inch– Interior diameter 38 1/2 inch

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Festive and captivating, this unpublished glazed frame - featuring a lush garland of fruit and flowers inhabited by small animals, modelled with striking naturalism and enlivened by brilliant polychromy - stands out as a remarkable and representative example of an ornamental type that became emblematic of the *Arte Robbiana* during the Renaissance. Indeed, similar garlands, used to frame heraldic medallions, antique-style effigies, and Marian reliefs, symbolising familial or civic prosperity or the abundant outpouring of divine grace, frequently appear from the mid-fifteenth century and for over a century in the works of the della Robbia family. These motifs were variously interpreted by Luca, his nephew Andrea, and Andrea's five sons, who inherited the mastery and renowned workshop.¹

Their extraordinary ability to replicate nature's gifts - immortalising in maiolica the ephemeral fragrance of fruit, vegetables, foliage, and the delicate beauty of flowers - achieved an illusionistic virtuosity that emulated the legendary creations of the Greek *coroplasta* Possis, as celebrated by Varro and Pliny. This was one of the most distinctive and admired results of the prolific and multifaceted activity of this famous family, as already noted in Vasari's *Lives* (1550, 1568).² These flourishing garlands became a hallmark of *Arte Robbiana*, leaving a lasting impression on the collective imagination to the point where, in America, popular Christmas decorations in the form of wreaths with pine cones, apples, and other fruits are referred to as "della Robbia Wreaths".³

The work under examination consists of a broad *fascia*-style frame, bordered on the inside by a egg-and-dart moulding, glazed in white to imitate marble. Resting on this surface is a luxuriant garland composed of an abundant variety of fruits (apples, bunches of grapes, pomegranates, pine cones, plums, almonds, and others), citrus (lemons, yellow oranges, citrons), and vegetables (cucumbers, peas, garlic bulbs) with their accompanying leaves, interspersed with wildflowers in white, blue, and yellow (roses, bellflowers, *parnassia*, gentians, and others). Nestled within the verdant foliage are small animals, likely shaped using casts taken from life, a practice described by Cennini (c. 1400) and well-documented in Renaissance terracotta and bronze sculpture,⁴ as well as in the maiolica of Bernard Palissy.⁵ Among these creatures are three small frogs perched atop the foliage (figs. 1a-c), a sinuous lizard, a snail, and a crab busily grasping a piece of fruit (figs. 2a-c).

The exuberant vegetal profusion is carefully regulated by a masterful mathematical and geometrical arrangement, adhering to the Albertian principle of *varietas* disciplined by *compositio*. The larger, more recognisable fruits and vegetables forming the garland are grouped into eight clusters, each composed of five fruits of the same botanical species (with the sole exception of the bunches of grapes alternating with lemons). These are arranged symmetrically - two pairs followed by a single fruit at the centre, with the largest placed at the outer edges of

¹ Gentilini 1992.

Quinterio 1998.

² Gentilini, Mozzati 2009.

³ Gentilini 2016.

⁴ Gramaccini 1985.

⁵ Klier 2004.

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the sequence - often accompanied by smaller, secondary fruits and vegetables, such as garlic bulbs, peas, plums, and wildflowers that fill the spaces between the clusters.

The clusters follow a regular cadence and counter-clockwise direction, with each one modelled above one of the eight sections into which the frame was divided to facilitate drying, firing, and transport. Determining the original sequence of these sections is not straightforward (some pieces, however, bear conventional marks incised into the fresh clay near the points of junction, as well as numbers traced in black, aiding in the correct assembly *in situ* (figs. 3a-c)). The della Robbia workshop did not adhere to a fixed rule regarding the order of vegetal varieties represented in frame segments. Nonetheless, it is likely that the garland alternated colourfully between clusters dominated by yellow fruits (apples, lemons, oranges, citrons) and those featuring green (pomegranates, cucumbers) and reddish fruits (grapes, pine cones), creating a balanced distribution of the six small animals.

This compositional rigour is also reflected in the structural aspects, as the dimensions of the pieces (approximately 58 x 35 cm) correspond to the unit of measurement of the time - the *braccio fiorentino* (58.36 cm). Moreover, the modelling technique, observable when examining the reverse of the work (figs. 4a-b), demonstrates craftsmanship consistent with the established practices of the finest della Robbia production.⁶ The pieces, meticulously hollowed out, feature a box-like structure of uniform thickness, with large vent holes corresponding to the larger fruits, which were modelled by aggregating clay over the surface of the *fascia*-style frame. Additional features, such as recessed and perforated internal partitions, further facilitated the interlocking of the various elements and the secure anchoring of the work to the wall (figs. 5a-b).

The sides and partitions are now irregularly chiselled, suggesting that the frame was firmly embedded into a masonry wall. Consequently, given its dimensions, it is plausible to imagine that it originally enclosed a coat of arms, much like the countless *Stemmi Robbiani* that still adorn civic buildings throughout Florentine territories.⁷ However, as mentioned and as will be further elaborated, garlands of this type were also employed to frame depictions of the Madonna and Child and other sacred images, intended for both domestic devotion and places of worship. These were often embedded externally, where the glazing ensured the vibrant polychromy remained striking and durable - a characteristic particularly prevalent in the works of Giovanni della Robbia, to whom this piece can be confidently attributed.

The especially dense and varied composition of the garland, the full-bodied modelling of the fruits accompanied by fleshy leaves and thick-petalled flowers, the intense and saturated colours of the glazes, the presence of numerous small animals, and the classical egg-and-dart moulding all find numerous parallels in the works of

⁶ Vaccari 1998; 2009, cf. fig. 9.

⁷ Marquand 1919.

Dionigi 2014.

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Giovanni della Robbia. Giovanni was the most prolific and independent of Andrea della Robbia's sons, who shared their father's bustling workshop on Via Guelfa until his death in 1525.⁸ Giovanni's autograph works - he was the only family member to occasionally sign his pieces - are distinguished by a pronounced decorative flair, emphasising ornamental elements inspired by both archaeological and naturalistic motifs. This tendency to include festoons and lush garlands replete with diverse vegetation appears from his earliest documented works, such as the Lavabo of the Sacristy of Santa Maria Novella (1498) (fig. 6).

In contrast to the garlands produced by his father Andrea,⁹ which appear more measured, sparse, and rarefied - often with bunches of fruits interspersed with ribbons - those attributed to his brothers Luca the Younger and Girolamo exhibit softer tones and sharper, more incisive modelling.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the abundance characterising the vegetal ornaments crafted by his brothers Marco and Ambrogio tends to appear cluttered, repetitive, and disjointed.¹¹

Among the most significant autograph works by Giovanni della Robbia that offer particularly precise comparisons in affirming the authorship of our garland are the festoons framing the monumental *Natività*, formerly in San Girolamo delle Poverine in Florence and now housed in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello. This piece, signed and dated 1521 (fig. 7), features similar compositions of bunches containing five fruits each. Comparable also are the festoons of the imaginative *Tabernacolo delle Fonticine* in Via Nazionale, completed in 1522 (fig. 8), which display a wealth of small animals, including crabs. These creatures, previously absent from della Robbia garlands, suggest a date for the present work around 1520.

Further compelling evidence confirming this attribution and a dating to the early 1520s is provided by the three Marian medallions and four heraldic medallions executed by Giovanni della Robbia for the portico of the Ospedale del Ceppo in Pistoia.¹² Commissioned in 1525 by Leonardo Buonafede, also known as *Spedalingo* - one of the most prominent religious patrons of the time (figs. 9a-d) - these works exhibit similar vegetal arrangements, the recurring egg-and-dart moulding, and the same colourful and bustling fauna. Particularly notable is the medallion depicting the *Assunzione di Maria* (fig. 10), where, in addition to small frogs, lizards, and snails, an identical crab can be observed clutching a leaf between its robust claws (fig. 11).

⁸ Marquand 1920.

Gentilini 1992, pp. 279-238.

⁹ Marquand 1922.

Gentilini 1992, pp. 169-271.

¹⁰ Marquand 1928, pp. 65-130.

Gentilini 1992, pp. 329-371.

¹¹ Marquand 1928, pp. 1-63.

Gentilini 1992, pp. 372-389.

¹² Capecchi, Masdea, Tesi, Tucci 2015, pp. 117-125.

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