

DISPLAYING ITALIAN SCULPTURE:  
EXPLORING HIERARCHIES AT THE SOUTH  
KENSINGTON MUSEUM 1852-62

TWO VOLUMES

VOLUME I : TEXT

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NOVEMBER 2014

## ABSTRACT

The South Kensington Museum's early collections were conceived in the wake of the Great Exhibition and sought a similar juxtaposition of the fine and applied arts. Whilst there is an abundance of literature relating to the Great Exhibition and the V&A in terms of their connection to design history and arts education, the place of sculpture at these institutions has been almost entirely overlooked – a surprising fact when one considers how fundamental the medium is to these debates as a connection between the fine and applied arts and historical and contemporary production. To date, scholars have yet to acknowledge the importance of sculpture in this context or explore the significance of the Museum in challenging sculpture's uncertain position in the post-Renaissance division between craft and fine art. By exploring the nature of the origins of the Italian sculpture collection at the South Kensington Museum, which began as a rapidly increasing collection of Medieval and Renaissance examples in the 1850s, we can gain a greater understanding of the Victorian attitude towards sculpture and its conceptual limitations. This thesis explores the acquisition, display and reception of the Italian sculpture collection at the early Museum and the interstitial position that the sculptural objects of the Italian collection occupied between the fine and decorative arts. In addition, it considers the conceptual understanding of sculpture as a contested and fluid generic category in the mid-Victorian period and beyond, as well as the importance of the Museum's Italian sculpture collection to late nineteenth-century revisions of the Italian Renaissance. In particular, I explore the nineteenth-century scholarly and artistic responses to the Quattrocento work of the della Robbia family, whose brightly-coloured ceramic relief sculptures dominated the Italian collection at the Museum.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the generous help and support of those around me. I cannot express enough thanks to my supervisors, Professors Jason Edwards and Michael Hatt, for their continued guidance and encouragement throughout this doctoral research and for welcoming me onto the *Displaying Victorian Sculpture* project. My deepest thanks also go to my examiners, Professor Lene Østermark-Johansen and Professor Elizabeth Prettejohn, for their invaluable comments and advice. I would also like to thank my colleagues on the project team - Claire Jones, Desiree de Chair, Eoin Martin and Gabriel Williams - with whom I have been able to share in the research experience and who have provided friendly advice and an indispensable team spirit.

I would also like to express my thanks to my host institution, the University of York, and to those who have provided me with advice on earlier chapters, including Dr. Sarah Turner and Professor Michael White of the Department of History of Art, and Marjorie Trusted of the V&A Museum. My research would not have been possible without the generous funding provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council to whom I am incredibly grateful.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends who have supported and encouraged me over the last three years and beyond. I could not have done it without you.

## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis entitled “Displaying Italian Sculpture: Exploring Hierarchies at the South Kensington Museum, 1852-62” is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of York or any other institution. Parts of Chapter 3 have been published in an article entitled “Luca della Robbia: South Kensington and the Revival of a Florentine Sculptor,” *Sculpture Journal* 23, no. 2 (2014): 171-83.

## INTRODUCTION

The Italian section of the National Collection of Sculpture at the Victoria and Albert Museum occupies an interstitial position between the fine and decorative arts. As one of the most comprehensive collections of European post-Classical sculpture globally, the nineteenth-century origins of the sculpture collection, within a Museum devoted to the applied arts, deserves serious attention. By positioning sculpture within a decorative arts environment, the specific nineteenth-century museological context of this collection broadens ideas concerning the Victorian understanding of sculpture and the sculptural and addresses sculpture's mutual relationship with both fine and ornamental art. Conceived in the wake of the Great Exhibition of 1851 as the Museum of Manufactures (later the South Kensington Museum), the early V&A sought a similar juxtapositioning of the fine and applied arts that would indirectly contribute to the improvement of British design and manufacture. However, the place of sculpture at this emerging public museum has, until recently, been almost entirely overlooked – a surprising fact when one considers how fundamental the medium is to the Museum's design history as a connection between the fine and applied arts and historical and contemporary production.

Christopher Marshall's 2011 book, *Sculpture and the Museum*, considered the importance of investigating sculpture from the perspective of the museum environment as part of the *Subject/Object: New Studies in Sculpture* series of publications at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds.<sup>1</sup> The *Subject/Object* series

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Marshall, ed., *Sculpture and the Museum* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

sought to “complicate the ways in which sculpture is understood,” examining the medium’s role within other disciplines and histories, such as that of the museum.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, by exploring the origins of the European sculpture collection at South Kensington, which began as a rapidly increasing collection of Italian Medieval and Renaissance examples in the 1850s, we can gain a greater understanding of the Victorian attitude towards sculpture and the medium’s conceptual limitations. The Italian Sculpture collection, in particular, challenged the art-craft divide. Its development at the Museum came at a time when the dual concept of the Medieval and Renaissance ‘artist-craftsman’ was undergoing serious scholarly revision in the work of Ruskin, Pater and others and the collection provided a tangible, visual basis for these revisions. Furthermore, late-nineteenth-century sculptors, viewing Italian Sculpture through the lens of contemporary Victorian scholarship, museums, arts education and artistic practice, incorporated the complex sculptural ideals of the period into their own work.

This thesis explores the acquisition, display and reception of the Italian sculpture collection at the early South Kensington Museum and the interstitial position that the sculptural objects of the Italian collection occupied between the fine and decorative arts. In addition, it considers the conceptual understanding of sculpture as a contested and fluid generic category in the mid-Victorian period and beyond, as well as the importance of the Museum’s Italian sculpture collection to late nineteenth-century scholarly and artistic revisions of the Italian Renaissance. In particular, I explore the nineteenth-century responses to the Quattrocento work of

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Le Feuvre, “Subject/Object: New Studies in Sculpture,” in *Sculpture and the Museum*, ed. Marshall, xvii. Other titles in the series include: Peter Dent, ed., *Sculpture and Touch* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); John C. Welchman, ed., *Sculpture and the Vitrine* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Paul Bonaventura and Andrew Jones, eds., *Sculpture and Archaeology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011) amongst others.

the della Robbia family, whose brightly-coloured ceramic relief sculptures dominated the Italian collection at the Museum in its early years.

## Acquisition

Sculpture in its unstable balance between fine art and manufacture, ideality and manual dexterity, was a clear example of the uncertain and not always easy relationship between standard excellence, whether technical or stylistic (i.e. effectiveness), and historical merit (antiquity, rarity, etc.). In the practice of museum arrangement, the opposition was between a collection as a means of education and as an illustration of historical development, and this opposition would emerge with still greater clarity in the debate in England in the 1860s.<sup>3</sup>

Donata Levi's 2000 essay, 'Between Fine Art and Manufacture,' in Cinzia Sicca and Alison Yarrington's, *The Lustrous Trade*, is one of the few historical accounts of the South Kensington Museum collections that has dealt exclusively with the mid-century acquisition of Italian sculpture. Levi focused on the Gigli-Campana collection of 1860, which comprised 85 examples of Italian Medieval and Renaissance sculpture. She considered the justification of this controversial acquisition within the decorative arts Museum at the hands of its first curator, John Charles Robinson. Robinson is a vital protagonist in the story of the early South Kensington Museum. His long and diverse career, throughout which he worked in art practice, architectural practice, collecting, curating, connoisseurship, design teaching, art dealing, art criticism and many other related occupations,

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<sup>3</sup> Donata Levi, "Between Fine Art and Manufacture: The Beginnings of Italian Medieval and Renaissance Sculpture at the South Kensington Museum," in *The Lustrous Trade: Material Culture and the History of Sculpture in England and Italy c.1700-c.1860*, eds. Cinzia Sicca and Alison Yarrington (Leicester: Leicester UP, 2000), 217.

began in his hometown of Nottingham, where he trained as an architect in the early part of the 1840s. In the middle of the decade he moved to Paris, where he studied painting at the atelier of Michel-Martin Drölling, a professor at the École des Beaux Arts.<sup>4</sup> Whilst in Paris, the young Robinson would spend his free time visiting public art collections and frequenting the dealers' shops of the Latin Quarter, where he developed a taste for collecting and began purchasing items to form his own private collection.<sup>5</sup> On his return to Britain in 1847, he was employed as Headmaster of the Hanley School of Design in the Potteries, where he remained until 1852. He became curator of the Museum in September 1853 and would remain there in various capacities until 1867. Robinson was an important driving force behind the early acquisitions of Italian sculptures, justifying their dominant presence within the Museum in his 1862 catalogue, *Italian Sculpture of the Middle Ages and Period of Revival of Art*, in which he described the "two-fold" nature of sculpture as both "a 'fine art,' and also, if we may so phrase it, as a decorative art or industry."<sup>6</sup> But he was not the only driving force behind the development of the collection and Italian sculpture had occupied various places within the Museum since its foundation in 1852.

With this in mind, I develop Levi's analysis of the early development of the Italian sculpture collection, exploring the Museum's major Italian sculpture acquisitions between 1852 (the opening of the Museum) and 1862 (the publication of Robinson's *Italian Sculpture* catalogue). This contextualizes the Gigli-Campana collection within the acquisitions policies of the early Museum, further

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<sup>4</sup> See Jacqueline Yallop, *Magpies, Squirrels and Thieves* (London: Atlantic, 2011), 52.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>6</sup> John Charles Robinson, *Italian Sculpture of the Middle Ages and Period of the Revival of Art: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Works forming the above Section of the Museum, with additional illustrative notices* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1862), viii.

probing Robinson's justification for the presence of Italian sculpture in the collection and the means by which he came to describe it as having a "two-fold" purpose. As Levi suggested, prior to his acquisition of the Gigli-Campana collection, Robinson's interest in Italian Sculpture "seems to have been a limited one."<sup>7</sup> If this assertion is true, what provoked this interest? What was the status of the Italian Sculpture that existed within the collection before and after the Gigli-Campana acquisition, and before Robinson took such an interest? When, how and under what guise was it acquired for the Museum before it became a legitimate category therein?

An understanding of the context of Italian sculpture at the South Kensington Museum requires knowledge of the complex early history of the Museum itself. An extensive portion of my research into the early Museum is taken from the archives and from contemporary publications. The archives at the National Art Library contain museum reports, curators' papers, Henry Cole's diaries, minutes, lecture notes and images of the collections, providing a wealth of primary information. In addition, comprehensive works on the Museum's history exist in the form of Malcolm Baker and Brenda Richardson's *A Grand Design* (1997)<sup>8</sup> and Anthony Burton's *Vision and Accident* (1999).<sup>9</sup> They provide a contextual background for the Museum and its authorities, introducing the "Great Exhibitor" and Director of the Museum, Cole, his artist-friend and Art Superintendent, Richard Redgrave and their curator, Robinson, as the three key contributors to the formation of the early Museum. The emergence of the South Kensington Museum

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<sup>7</sup> Levi, "Between Fine Art and Manufacture," 212.

<sup>8</sup> Malcolm Baker and Brenda Richardson, eds., *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: V&A Publications with The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Burton, *Vision and Accident: The Story of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: V&A Publications, 1999).



within the context of the Great Exhibition and design education of the mid-century has been a major point for discussion in these works.<sup>10</sup> These invaluable histories provide an overview of the South Kensington Museum ethos: its decorative arts focus; its educational, social mission; its influence on cultures of collecting in the nineteenth century; its amalgamation of the arts and sciences; and its roots in design education and international exhibitions.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, even isolating the first decade (1852-62) of the Museum's existence provides a complex, colourful history that could not be contained within one volume.

The history of the V&A is not a straightforward one. In an "alternative history" of the Museum appearing in a 2004 issue of *Museum and Society*, 'South Kensington Museum in Context,' Bruce Robertson rightly highlighted the fact that the modern V&A is not the result of a "steady progress toward a museum of decorative arts and design."<sup>12</sup> As the first chapter of the present thesis describes, the early Museum was a cultural, social, industrial and educational experiment. It was an institution in a constant state of physical and conceptual flux. In 1857, it underwent complete relocation from rooms at Marlborough House, Pall Mall to its current South Kensington site. Every year saw major new redisplay, as and when new, major collections were acquired. It changed names three times: from the Museum of Manufactures in 1852, to the Museum of Ornamental Art in 1853 and the South Kensington Museum in 1857 (and it would later become the Victoria

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<sup>10</sup> See particularly, Michael Conforti "The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts," Richard Dunn and Anthony Burton, "The Victoria and Albert Museum: An Illustrated Chronology," Peter Trippi, "Industrial Arts and the Exhibition Ideal," and Rafael Cardoso Denis, "Teaching by Example," in *A Grand Design*, eds. Baker and Richardson.

<sup>11</sup> Other works of note include: Leigh Ashton, "100 Years of the Victoria & Albert Museum," *Museums Journal* 53 (May 1953): 43-7; Elizabeth Boynton, *King Cole: A Picture Portrait of Sir Henry Cole, KCB, 1808-1882* (London: V&A, 1982); Anna Somers Cocks, *The Victoria and Albert Museum: The Making of the Collection* (Leicester: Windward, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Robertson, "South Kensington Museum in Context: An Alternative History," *Museum and Society* 2, no. 1 (March 2004): 9.

and Albert Museum in 1899). The collection grew from a small selection of teaching aids from the central School of Design at Somerset House, and exhibits of “manufacture” purchased from the 1851 exhibition, to a vast array of modern and historic, fine and decorative arts, casts, classroom aids, raw materials, industrial machinery, and even animal and food products on its move to South Kensington in 1857. Even Robinson himself described it as a “motley medley chaos.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, one cannot comfortably define the early South Kensington Museum as an “art museum,” nor even as an “art and design museum” as the V&A now describes itself,<sup>14</sup> and I strongly agree with Robertson’s notion that the history of the V&A should “demonstrate the danger of typological histories.”<sup>15</sup> The Museum’s history is not just the average story of an emerging art and design museum of the nineteenth century. This thesis aims to demonstrate further how the complexities that accompany the acquisition and categorisation of Italian sculpture, within a complex museum environment, challenged traditional, rigid typologies associated with both the medium exhibited and the platform for its exhibition.

## Display

After acquisition, perhaps the next inevitable question regards the contextualization of the Italian Sculpture collection within the display schemes of the Museum. How was Robinson’s Italian sculpture collection integrated visually within the Museum amongst its eclectic array of exhibits? Again, there is little secondary literature that has dealt directly with the display of Italian sculpture

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<sup>13</sup> Robinson, “Our Public Art Museums: A Retrospect,” *The Nineteenth Century* 42, no. 250 (Dec 1897): 955.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.vam.ac.uk> [Accessed 3 October 2014].

<sup>15</sup> Robertson, “South Kensington Museum in Context,” 9.

within the early Museum, save for Christopher Whitehead's, 'Enjoyment for the Thousands: Sculpture as Fine and Ornamental Art at South Kensington, 1852-62,' which followed Levi's in *The Lustrous Trade*.<sup>16</sup> Whitehead's essay dealt with "the popularization of the appreciation of sculpture on display in mid-nineteenth century London."<sup>17</sup> He examined how the redefinition of sculpture as both a fine and applied art was "expressed through the language of display"<sup>18</sup> at South Kensington by a revision of traditional pseudo-domestic arrangements that were "translated"<sup>19</sup> to better suit the educational, social inclusivity of the emerging public museum. Whilst Whitehead's essay did not focus on Italian sculpture throughout, he provided a brief analysis of a much-used photograph of the early Museum (Charles Thurston Thompson, *Interior of the Art Museum*, c.1859, V&A Archive [fig.1]) that provides us with a visual insight into the way in which Italian sculpture, and its contemporary copies, were displayed and defined. Using various primary sources including Museum reports, floorplans and images, I extend Whitehead's analysis to consider the broader context of Italian sculpture display at the South Kensington Museum, using the same time frame (1852-62). For the first time, I analyse, compare and contrast various other rare images of the Museum's display within this time period that have been overlooked, commenting on their reliability, and explore the specific place and purpose of Italian sculpture within the pseudo-private display schemes described by Whitehead. What part did Italian sculpture have to play in the pseudo-domestic displays and what does this tell us about the Museum's attitude towards the medium?

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher Whitehead, "Enjoyment for the Thousands: Sculpture as Fine and Ornamental Art at South Kensington, 1852-62," in *The Lustrous Trade*, eds. Cinzia Sicca and Alison Yarrington (Leicester: Leicester UP, 2000), 222-239.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

As previously mentioned, South Kensington's part in the vast array of literature on the emergence of the public museum in Britain has often depended upon its development from the spectacle of progress and empire that was the Great Exhibition. The South Kensington Museum was the first building within Prince Albert's complex of museums and schools that emerged from the proceeds of the Great Exhibition to form the 'Albertopolis' at Kensington Gore (which would eventually include the V&A, Natural History Museum, Science Museum, Royal College of Art, Royal College of Music and the Royal Albert Hall). Whilst maintaining the Exhibition's display of imperial and industrial power, it also emphasised an express purpose to educate and civilize the masses, who were, on various days, admitted free of charge. A theoretical reading of the emerging Museum, then, might be read in terms of Tony Bennett's 1995 book, *Birth of the Museum*.<sup>20</sup> Bennett's Foucauldian analysis of the nineteenth-century public museum dealt with the tensions between visitor and institution, as dictated by physical and architectural structures. Following Michel Foucault's analysis of Bentham's panoptical prison, Bennett's notion of, what he termed, the "exhibitionary complex" suggested that the physical structures of the public museum encouraged transparency and visibility, exerting a civilizing influence, or a "voluntary self-regulatory citizenry," upon its visitors.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Bennett's "exhibitionary complex" promised visitors, whomever they may be, a share in the powers on display – imperialism, industrialisation and economic and cultural capital.<sup>22</sup> However, it is difficult to apply Bennett's Foucauldian concept of

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<sup>20</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>22</sup> "Detailed studies of nineteenth-century expositions thus consistently highlight the ideological economy of their organising principles, transforming displays of machinery and industrial

visibility to the South Kensington Museum, where the displays, including those in upper galleries, were split into smaller, enclosed compartments to make wall space for the many exhibits. A collection of more intimate, enclosed spaces was the reality at both Marlborough House and in the early years of South Kensington. In contrast to Bennett's approach, therefore, I consider the Museum's history from the perspective of these densely arranged displays and exhibits. I examine how the structuring of the Museum display affected, or reflected, the understanding of the objects therein, exploring the question of how they were presented to the diverse range of visitors.

The idea of the exhibited object in the emerging public Museum has also undergone theoretical scrutiny. In particular, South Kensington, and its evolution from the capitalist spectacle of 1851 might encourage a Marxist interpretation, much like those relating to the Exhibition itself, focusing on the "commodity fetishism" brought about by the museum environment and the value of the objects exhibited therein.<sup>23</sup> But whilst these popular Foucauldian and Marxist theories are relevant to the formation and development of the early South Kensington Museum, they do not tell the whole story. This thesis approaches the Museum's display history from the tangible, material perspective of the Italian sculptures on

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processes, of finished products and *objets d'art*, into material signifiers of progress – but of progress as a collective national achievement with capital as the great co-ordinator. This power thus subjugated by flattery, placing itself on the side of the people by affording them a place within its workings; a power which placed the people behind it, inveigled into complicity with it rather than cowed into submission before it." *Ibid.*, 67. For other readings of the civilising nature of the emerging public Museum see also Carol Duncan, *Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London. Routledge, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> See particularly Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle 1851-1914* (California: Stanford University Press, 1990); Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things, Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986); D. Sherman, "Quatremère/Benjamin/Marx: Art Museums, Aura, and Commodity Fetishism," in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, eds. D. Sherman and I. Rogoff (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1994), 123-36.

show, and uses the context of the institution's decorative, educational ethos as a conceptual arena for discussion of the Victorian attitude towards Italian sculpture.

As Whitehead has pointed out, the displays at South Kensington combined the traditional arrangements of the pseudo-private palatial interior with the progressive spectacle of the Great Exhibition and both played an important part in the educational aims of the institution. Tensions between the various approaches to display favoured by Cole, Redgrave and Robinson caused animosity between them. Before Robinson, the emphasis on exhibiting works according to their material echoed the pragmatism of Cole's approach to education by example. The best example of Cole's pragmatic approach came in the form of the well-documented "False Principles" exhibition: a corridor within the Museum devoted to examples of bad design. Nicknamed the "Chamber of Horrors," it received ridicule and prompted Charles Dickens to model the famous, fact-loving Mr. Gradgrind of *Hard Times* on Cole, as is clear in the following diatribe about taste in design, delivered by Gradgrind to a young schoolgirl:

"You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk on flowers in carpets. You don't find that foreign birds and butterflies come and perch upon your crockery; you cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery. You never meet with quadrupeds represented upon walls. You must use," said the gentleman, "for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary

colours) of mathematical figures that are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste.”<sup>24</sup>

Robinson’s contrasting ideas about how the display of objects could educate visitors relied less on presenting material facts and more on suggesting aesthetic juxtapositions. Michael Baxandall’s concept of museum labeling in his essay, “Exhibiting Intention,” of 1991 seems particularly pertinent here.<sup>25</sup> Baxandall’s labels are not confined to those of a textual kind but constitute any move by the curator to articulate the intention or purpose of the object in the exhibited space. Baxandall suggested that: “an exhibition that confined its composition to material causality would fall short of representing culture. What is more, the viewer would not rest at this point. He [sic] works primarily with intention – intention not of course in the sense of mental events in the maker’s mind, but a posited purposefulness about the object.”<sup>26</sup> Cole’s early system of labeling and arrangement focused on the material aspects of the objects, the dry, physical facts, with little historic or cultural context. After Robinson’s appointment as curator in 1853, the factual labeling of the exhibits was combined with a subtle, contextualizing visual interplay with other objects. Robinson’s displays, inspired by the eclectic, aesthetic juxtapositions of pseudo-private domestic interiors, particularly those he has seen in Paris, managed to interweave a variety of contexts for Italian sculpture, allowing dialogues to open up between the fine and decorative arts, originals and casts, historical and contemporary objects, and

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<sup>24</sup> Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* [1854] (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 8. Relationship to Cole mentioned in Bridget Elliot and Janice Helland, eds., *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts 1880 – 1935: The Gender of Ornament* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Stephen D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 33-41.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

public and private domains. With this in mind, a broader understanding of the domestic interior in the nineteenth century has been considered, including the concept of the Victorian parlour, described by Thad Logan as the room in which both home education and public display were carried out simultaneously.<sup>27</sup> A more recent text on the Victorian domestic interior is Jason Edwards' and Imogen Hart's *Rethinking the Interior c.1867-1896* (2010).<sup>28</sup> Edwards and Hart have challenged the typological treatment of Aestheticism and Arts and Crafts interiors, as contrasting urban and rural spaces respectively.<sup>29</sup> However, *Rethinking the Interior* is confined within chronological limitations, beginning in 1867, and stating that the Grosvenor Gallery "is now credited with being one of the first and most influential galleries to have employed an elaborate domestic interior to make the case that the post-Renaissance distinction between fine and applied art should not be taken for granted."<sup>30</sup> I draw the discussion further back into the mid-century, focusing on Robinson's pseudo-domestic display scheme and the impact it had on an understanding of the objects involved. This thesis therefore provides a further reading of the domestic display structures created at South Kensington, from the perspective of Italian sculpture, and extends the discussion of the eclectic aesthetics of domestic display in the nineteenth century. In focusing on the place of Italian sculpture within these displays, I explore what is at stake for the medium within the changing contexts in which it was displayed and explore how these contexts reflected and affected the Victorian understanding of Italian

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<sup>27</sup> "[The parlour] is the most public space in the house insofar as the reception of visitors is concerned: hence (in part) it is strongly associated with decorative display." Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>28</sup> Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart, eds., *Rethinking the Interior c.1867-1896: Aestheticism and the Arts and Crafts* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



sculpture's place within the collection as a whole and between the fine and applied arts.

## Reception

In 2004, the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds held an exhibition of Italian relief sculpture using items loaned by the V&A. The exhibition, entitled *Depth of Field: The Place of Relief in the Time of Donatello*, coincided with the redisplay of the V&A's Medieval and Renaissance Galleries. Many of the exhibits were from Robinson's early Italian sculpture collection and the organisers sought similarly to explore the "culture of relief in the early Renaissance."<sup>31</sup> In the publication that followed the exhibition, it was remarked that *Depth of Field*

aimed to continue the legacy of John Charles Robinson [...]. Bucking the [Victorian] period's disregard for this type of sculpture, Robinson exploited the museum's foundation as a repository of applied and decorative arts to justify his unpopular acquisitions. He then campaigned for recognition of these sculptures' significant content and artistic quality in a series of publications about the collections. The *Depth of Field* exhibition expanded Robinson's valorizing criteria to examine how relief sculptures, including those that are exclusively decorative and the work of artisans, were perceived and used by fifteenth-century Italians.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Penelope Curtis, ed., *Depth of Field: The Place of Relief in the Time of Donatello*, exh. cat. (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 23 September 2004 – 27 March 2005), 6.

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Blake McHam, "Now and Then: Recovering a Sense of Different Values," in *Depth of Field: The Place of Relief in the Time of Donatello*, eds. Donal Cooper and Marika Leino (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 306.

Thus, *Depth of Field* sought to broaden and analyse our understanding of Italian relief sculpture in particular – its place, purpose and artistic merit – as Robinson had done in the 1850s and 1860s. As part of *Depth of Field*'s original exhibition catalogue, Martina Droth's essay, 'Places of Display: The Renaissance Relief in the South Kensington Museum,' touched upon the concerns of the present thesis, stating that the 1850s and 1860s were "formative years for Renaissance scholarship, and Robinson can be counted among its early authorities."<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned, Robinson's catalogues that promoted and justified the place of the Italian sculpture collection within the Museum form a vital historiographical resource for research into the Victorian scholarly reception of Italian Renaissance sculpture. There are currently no prominent discussions of the emergence of the exhibition catalogue in the nineteenth century, an area that, as the examples discussed in this thesis demonstrate, may add further depth to our understanding of nineteenth-century art criticism. Robinson's catalogues, and indeed many of the catalogues produced by the South Kensington Museum, were not mere inventories of the collections but early prototypes of the scholarly exhibition catalogue. Through analytical essays and descriptions, they explained the nature of the collected objects as a group, contextualizing them within their geographical and stylistic histories and justifying their place and purchase within the context of the Museum, or exhibition, as a whole. Droth's essay considered that Robinson's analysis of relief sculpture was an unusual break from that of his contemporaries, who otherwise "wavered between vague characterisations of spatial values, and

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<sup>33</sup> Martina Droth, "Places of Display: The Renaissance Relief in the South Kensington Museum," in *Depth of Field*, ed. Penelope Curtis, 33.

didactic technical analyses of perspective.”<sup>34</sup> Droth’s suggestion seems to have been that no-one knew what to make of relief sculpture in the mid-century and that it was often “not really seen as sculpture at all.”<sup>35</sup> One exception, of course, as Droth points out, was Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* of 1873, which echoed Robinson’s intellectual analysis of relief sculpture and addressed the medium’s complicated place between plastic sculpture and illusory painting.<sup>36</sup> But Droth’s suggestion is that, aside from Pater, much of the discussion of relief found in Robinson is not repeated elsewhere in the late-nineteenth-century scholarly readings of the Italian Renaissance. This thesis challenges Droth’s research, suggesting that echoes of Robinson’s *Italian Sculpture* catalogue can be found elsewhere in late-Victorian scholarship, including in the later works of John Ruskin who, in the 1870s and 1880s, revised his own opinions on the Florentine Renaissance through the medium of relief sculpture. I further explore Victorian scholarly attitudes towards relief sculpture and demonstrate that it was both the tangible presence of the Italian sculpture collection at the South Kensington Museum and Robinson’s calculated scholarly promotion of it, in carefully chosen contemporary terms, that formed a contribution to late-nineteenth-century revisions of the medium and the Renaissance period in art.

The present study therefore contributes to research involving the reception of the Renaissance in the nineteenth century, viewing it from the perspective of

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<sup>34</sup> Droth, “Places of Display,” 35.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>36</sup> See Walter, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* [1877], ed. Donald Hill (Oakland: University of California Press, 1980). The first edition of 1873 was titled *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, but the second edition (1877) and subsequent editions were titled as above. Droth, “Places of Display,” 38-9.

sculpture studies in the Victorian era. Major works on the Victorian reception of the Renaissance consider the ways in which the concept of the ‘Italian Renaissance’ was invented in nineteenth-century literature and criticism, and how its chronological, geographical and cultural limitations were debated throughout the period. Indeed, the definition of the Italian Renaissance is still undecided today, as the opening lines to John Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen’s 2005 work *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance* suggested: “Ever since the Italian Renaissance emerged as a historical construct at the beginning of the nineteenth century, scholars have been concerned with its definition and periodization. [...] Despite its definite article, it remains as illusive, as suggestive as ever.”<sup>37</sup> Østermark-Johansen’s introduction also considered the importance of the Victorian conception of the Renaissance to modern Victorian studies: “In exploring the Italian Renaissance, the Victorians and Edwardians were exploring themselves, and in their ‘arguing with the past,’ they were shaping both the past and present, using the historian’s privilege to be selective in order to create a coherent whole out of a world of chaos.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed the Victorian attitudes towards the status of sculpture in Renaissance Italy represented a general change in attitudes towards the art of sculpture in nineteenth-century Britain, and vice-versa. Between Ruskin’s 1853 analysis of the Renaissance, or “The Fall” as he called it, in *The Stones of Venice*,<sup>39</sup> and Pater’s 1867 championing of the word,<sup>40</sup> the world of Italian Renaissance sculpture was opened up to nineteenth-century

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<sup>37</sup> Lene Østermark-Johansen, “Introduction,” in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, eds. John Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* [1851-3] in *The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition*, 39 vols., eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-12): IX-XI. Quotations from Ruskin’s published works are taken from Cook and Wedderburn. Hereafter, references are given by volume and page number thus: XXXVII, 311.

<sup>40</sup> Pater’s first conspicuous use of the term can be found in the essay on ‘Winckelmann,’ published in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in 1873, but first appearing in the January edition of the *Westminster Review* in 1867.

Britain in a way it had not been before. Thanks to the railways, access to the Continent for travellers became easier and cheaper and facilitated the collection of specimens for private collectors and public Museums. As mentioned above, even Ruskin was forced to change his mind as the more definite line he drew between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was further blurred by the introduction of previously ignored artists and artisans of the Quattrocento into Britain.

Hilary Fraser's *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* of 1992 considered that "our inherited idea of Renaissance Italy is, ideologically, politically and culturally, quintessentially a nineteenth-century one."<sup>41</sup> This suggests that there is much at stake for our modern understanding of both the Victorian and the Italian Renaissance periods, that our modern concept of the Renaissance is seen through a lens created by the critics of the nineteenth-century. Fraser, concentrating on literary sources, made no mention of the collection at South Kensington and the impact that these tangible pieces of Renaissance Italy within Britain had on the shift in scholarly attitudes.<sup>42</sup> However, as two recent studies - Elizabeth Prettejohn's *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture*<sup>43</sup> and Lene Østermark-Johansen's *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture*<sup>44</sup> - have shown, sculpture has an important part to play in Victorian reception studies.<sup>45</sup> The present thesis

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<sup>41</sup> Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 2. A similar idea is found in J. B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in the Nineteenth-Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

<sup>42</sup> Much of the modern discourse on the Victorian reception of the Renaissance focuses on literary sources such as Pater, Ruskin, John Addington Symonds's, *Renaissance in Italy: The Fine Arts* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1901) and Vernon Lee's, *Euphorion: Studies of the Antique and the Mediæval in the Renaissance*. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1885).

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture* (London: I. B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 2012).

<sup>44</sup> Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Emerging museums also played a significant role in the Victorian conception of the Renaissance. Prettejohn's 2011 Paul Mellon Lecture series, 'The National Gallery and the English Renaissance of Art,' addressed this role, considering the Victorian artistic and scholarly responses

approaches the Victorian interpretation of the Renaissance from the perspective of sculpture and the Italian sculpture collection at South Kensington. I begin from the tangible presence of the Italian sculpture collection at the Museum and track the rise to fame of the sculptors represented therein within subsequent scholarly and artistic revisions of the Renaissance canon.

With this historical starting point in mind, a close reading of the catalogues produced by Robinson and the Museum forms a vital part of my research, giving an insight into the way in which the museum authorities analyzed and justified their acquisitions. Robinson's *Italian Sculpture* catalogue endured as a survey of the Museum's Italian sculpture collection and it was not until over 100 years later, in 1964, that it was revised in the form of curator John Pope-Hennessy's *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum*.<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, Pope-Hennessy and Robinson shared similar backgrounds as self-made connoisseurs of Italian art, rather than formally trained art historians. Like Robinson, Pope-Hennessy contributed a great deal to the scholarly output of the Museum during his tenure as director and paid particular attention to the Italian Sculpture collections.<sup>47</sup> Rarely do we find echoed outside of V&A histories Droth's assertion that Robinson had made a similarly valuable, enduring, early contribution to the field.

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to Old Master paintings at the nineteenth-century National Gallery. Prettejohn, "The National Gallery and the English Renaissance of Art," Paul Mellon Lectures 2011 at the National Gallery, London (17 January – 13 February 2011).

<sup>46</sup> John Pope-Hennessy, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: V&A, 1964). And his subsequent book, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986).

<sup>47</sup> See, for example: Pope-Hennessy, *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1963); *Donatello Sculptor* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993); *Cellini* (London: Macmillan, 1985); *Italian Gothic Sculpture* (London: Random House, 1985); *Luca della Robbia* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980).

Indeed, there is little existing scholarship outside of the histories of the V&A that deals with Robinson as a key figure in Victorian art and design criticism at all. By far the most useful and comprehensive biography is a DPhil thesis by Helen Davies, *The Life and Works of Sir John Charles Robinson, 1824-1913*,<sup>48</sup> in which Davies asserted that “Robinson built up the unprecedented Italian sculpture collection at the South Kensington museum in the 1850s and 1860s. His catalogue of this collection, published in 1862, was the first of its kind, and a landmark in the scholarly study of sculpture.”<sup>49</sup> Davies’s biography inevitably delved into Robinson’s role at the Museum, paying especial attention to his contribution to the formation, development, display and promotion of the Italian sculpture collection. Like Droth, she highlighted the importance of Robinson’s scholarly catalogue, considering that “No such volume on sculpture had been produced before, and Robinson’s work set new standards for the scholarly connoisseurship of this kind of work of art.”<sup>50</sup> As many of the sculptures he was analysing had rarely been taken seriously before, Robinson’s research methods were reliant on unreliable sources such as Vasari, alongside the curator’s own connoisseurial inspection and visual analysis. His conclusions were, however, remarkably accurate in places and I consider how his detailed scholarly promotion of the objects acted as a catalyst for the subsequent serious discussion of the previously neglected Renaissance sculptors in the collection.

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<sup>48</sup> Helen Davies, "The Life and Works of Sir John Charles Robinson, 1824-1913," DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 1992. Davies’s work was later published as “John Charles Robinson’s work at the South Kensington Museum,” *Journal of the History of Collections*, part I, 10, no. 2 (1998); part II, 11, no.1 (1999).

<sup>49</sup> Davies, “The Life and Works of Sir John Charles Robinson,” 12.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

One such sculptor was Luca della Robbia, whose rise to popularity in the nineteenth century forms a case study for this thesis. The ceramic relief sculpture of the della Robbia family dominated the Italian sculpture section in the Museum's early years. By 1862, out of nearly three hundred specimens within the entire Italian collection, forty-nine were examples of della Robbia sculpture. The della Robbia family equally dominated the *Italian Sculpture* catalogue with a six-page introduction to their work, as well as the detailed visual analysis provided in each catalogue entry. Having been neglected in the first half of the century, the presence and promotion of della Robbia sculpture at South Kensington fuelled greater interest in his work. The sculptor Baron Henri de Triqueti, writing for the *Fine Arts Quarterly Review* in 1866, suggested that "The time has come for doing justice to [Luca della Robbia]. Amongst the men of genius of the middle ages who remained without appreciation, few were so long or so completely forgotten."<sup>51</sup> Over the course of the nineteenth century, Luca della Robbia arose from the forgotten realms of early Italian sculpture to become known as "the most popular sculptor of the fifteenth century."<sup>52</sup> By the time Pater's 1873 work on the Renaissance was published, della Robbia had grown so popular that he had become the lead name and heading for Pater's chapter intellectualizing the concepts of 'colour' and 'relief' in Quattrocento Italian sculpture.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, an initially "chromophobic"<sup>54</sup> and anti-Renaissance Ruskin, who, in 1845,

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<sup>51</sup> Baron Henri de Triqueti, "Tuscan Sculptors," *Fine Arts Quarterly Review* (1 Oct 1866): 281.

<sup>52</sup> Pope-Hennessy, *Luca della Robbia* (Oxford, Phaidon, 1980), 10.

<sup>53</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, 41. Although, as Lene Østermark-Johansen points out in a 2006 essay, Pater uses della Robbia as a chapter title but does not mention any of his works therein. See Østermark-Johansen, "Relieving the limitations of sculpture and text: Walter Pater's della Robbia essay," *Word and Image* 22, no. 1 (Jan 2006): 27-38.

<sup>54</sup> The term 'chromophobia' is taken from David Batchelor, "Chromophobia: Ancient and Modern, and a Few Notable Exceptions," Leeds: Centre for the Study of Sculpture to accompany *The Colour of Sculpture* at the Henry Moore Institute 12 December 1996 – 6 April 1997, 1997.



had referred to della Robbia's polychrome reliefs as "signpost barbarisms,"<sup>55</sup> gradually became so enamoured with the sculptor's work that, in 1880, he installed his own della Robbia relief in his private study at Brantwood, Coniston [figs.2, 8]. The della Robbia acquisitions at the South Kensington Museum in the 1850s, and the contemporary, Ruskinian rhetoric with which Robinson described them, firmly reintroduced della Robbia into subsequent Victorian scholarship concerning the Italian Renaissance period. Adrian Hoch's essay 'The Art of Alessandro Botticelli through the Eyes of the Victorian Aesthetes,' in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, considered a similar change of heart on the part of Ruskin towards the Quattrocento painter, Sandro Botticelli, as the present thesis finds in Luca della Robbia.<sup>56</sup> Artists such as Botticelli and della Robbia, "virtually unknown to the English until the mid-nineteenth century,"<sup>57</sup> became household names in subsequent years, both appearing as chapter titles in Pater's landmark text on the period and becoming firmly rooted in an enduring canon of Renaissance masters.

## Artistic Responses

The Italian sculpture collection and its subsequent scholarly promotion made a significant impact upon artistic and sculptural practice in the latter part of the nineteenth century. This thesis considers the late-nineteenth-century artistic response to the Italian Renaissance, taking into account the contextual 'lens' through which Italian sculpture was presented to contemporary sculptors and

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<sup>55</sup> John Ruskin, "Letter from John Ruskin to his father, May 29<sup>th</sup> 1845" in *Ruskin in Italy: Letters to his Parents 1845*, ed. Harold Shapiro (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 87.

<sup>56</sup> Adrian Hoch, "The Art of Alessandro Botticelli through the Eyes of the Victorian Aesthetes," in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, eds. Law and Østermark-Johansen, 55-85.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

craftsmen by the South Kensington Museum and related scholarship. Not every sculptor could follow in the footsteps of John Gibson and Alfred Stevens and spend extensive periods studying in Italy itself, and thus Robinson's collection provided them with their first (and sometimes only) glimpse of the original works. This was particularly true for those sculptors educated within the National Art Training Schools system, who would have studied under the shadow of the Museum's collections from an early age. In an 1865 article for the *Edinburgh Review*, an anonymous author expressed their hopes that Robinson's collection and catalogue, along with subsequent scholarship in its wake, "may lead our sculptors to the study of their Tuscan predecessors both here and in Italy."<sup>58</sup> The "two-fold" nature of Italian sculpture as both fine and decorative art, as promoted by Robinson, was indeed explored by sculptors in the latter part of the century. In particular, Robinson suggested that the great sculptors of the Renaissance had not considered architectural ornament to be beneath their dignity and that the modern artist-workman should follow suit.<sup>59</sup> Subsequent Victorian sculptors would reinterpret Italian Renaissance sculpture, forming a synthesis of fifteenth-century Italian and nineteenth-century British styles and techniques that fuelled important artistic movements such as the Arts and Crafts Movement and the New Sculpture. In doing so, these sculptors broadened the traditional hierarchical limitations of the medium, turning their sculptural talents to architectural decoration and domestic wares in a variety of non-traditional materials.

In its exploration of the diversity of sculpture production in the nineteenth century, the field of Victorian sculpture studies is constantly evolving. From the

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<sup>58</sup> Lister, Sir. Thomas Villiers, "ART. VIII. -1. Tuscan Sculptors: their Lives, Works and Times," *Edinburgh Review* 121, no. 248 (Apr 1865), 552.

<sup>59</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, ix – x.

landmark works of the 1980s, *Victorian Sculpture* by Benedict Read<sup>60</sup> and *The New Sculpture* by Susan Beattie,<sup>61</sup> has sprung renewed interest in the nature of sculpture throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>62</sup> The New Sculpture movement of the latter half of the century has received particular attention in recent years in major publications such as David Getsy's *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877-1905*<sup>63</sup> and *Sculpture and the Pursuit of a Modern Ideal in Britain, c.1880-1930*<sup>64</sup> and Edwards's *Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism*.<sup>65</sup> More recently, a 2014 exhibition of sculpture organized by Droth, Edwards and Michael Hatt at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, entitled *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837 – 1901*, considers sculpture of the period more broadly, expanding the field into the mid-century and exploring its “cultural and political significance.”<sup>66</sup> The ubiquity of nineteenth-century sculpture is displayed, in *Sculpture Victorious*, as a diverse range of funerary monuments, portrait busts,

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<sup>60</sup> Benedict Read, *Victorian Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

<sup>61</sup> Susan Beattie, *The New Sculpture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>62</sup> Earlier texts on sculpture in the period include, for example: Adrian Bury, *The Shadow of Eros. A Biographical and Critical Study of the Life and Works of Sir. Alfred Gilbert* (London: Dropmore Press, 1952); Richard Dorment, *Alfred Gilbert* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and *Alfred Gilbert Sculptor and Goldsmith*. exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy of Arts with Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986); Alison Yarrington, *The Commemoration of the Hero 1800-1864: Monuments to the British Victors of the Napoleonic Wars* (London: Garland, 1988). Elfrida Manning, *Marble and Bronze: The Art and Life of Hamo Thornycroft* (London: Trefoil, 1982); H. W. Janson, *Nineteenth Century Sculpture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988).

<sup>63</sup> David Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877-1905* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>64</sup> Getsy, *Sculpture and the Pursuit of a Modern Ideal in Britain, c.1880-1930* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>65</sup> Jason Edwards, *Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism: Gilbert Amongst Whistler, Wilde, Leighton, Pater and Burne-Jones* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006). See also, for example: Joanna Barnes et al. *Leighton and his Sculptural Legacy: British Sculpture 1875-1930* (London: Joanna Barnes Fine Arts, 1996); Brooks, Chris, ed., *The Albert Memorial: The Prince Consort National Memorial: Its History, Context and Conservation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Martina Droth et al., *The Cult of the Statuette in Late Victorian Britain*, Essays in the History of Sculpture, 31 (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2000); Jason Edwards and Michael Hatt, eds., “British Sculpture c. 1757-1947,” *Visual Culture in Britain* 11, no. 2 Special Issue (2010).

<sup>66</sup> <http://britishart.yale.edu/exhibitions/victorian-sculpture> [Accessed 1 November 2014]. See Jason Edwards, Michael Hatt and Martina Droth, eds., *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention 1837-1901* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

ideal figure sculptures, architectural relief, medallions and decorative items in marble, bronze, silver, ceramic and many other materials.

In a September 2014 interview concerning the opening of *Sculpture Victorious* for *Apollo* magazine, Droth suggested that the highlight of the show is “a seven foot tall majolica elephant produced by Minton & Co.”<sup>67</sup> This elephant [fig.3], one of a pair, was created by the Minton factory in Stoke for the 1889 Paris Exhibition and has since resided in the window of luxury china and glassware store, Thomas Goode of Mayfair. It is a testament to the diverse nature of the *Sculpture Victorious* exhibits that this decorative ceramic elephant should be described as one of the highlights of an exhibition of nineteenth-century sculptures. It challenges our traditional view of Victorian sculpture through its material, subject matter, polychromy and the fact that it was produced by an industrial manufactory rather than a lone sculptor. Indeed, amongst the recent interest in sculpture of the period, ceramic examples have rarely been taken seriously, aside from a few atypical works dealing with the parian ware of Minton and Copeland.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps there is a certain stigma attached to the material – particularly with the highly-coloured majolica wares that were so popular in the period - stemming from its association with mass industry, gaudy colour and, in modern times, antiques dealing. Essentially, polychrome ceramic sculpture and majolica of the late-nineteenth century is everything that our traditional concept of the ideal, white marble sculpture, or early twentieth-century ‘studio pottery,’ is not. Whilst Victorian attitudes towards polychromy have been discussed in Andreas Blühm’s

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<sup>67</sup> <http://www.apollo-magazine.com/first-look-sculpture-victorious-art-age-invention-yale-center-british-art/> [Accessed 3 October 2014].

<sup>68</sup> See particularly Dennis Barker, *Parian Ware* (Aylesbury: Shire, 1989) and Robert Copeland, *Parian: Copeland’s Statuary Porcelain* (Woodbridge: Antique Collector’s Club, 2007).

publication and exhibition, *The Colour of Sculpture 1840-1910* (1996-7)<sup>69</sup> and Elizabeth McCormick' and Gülru Çakmak's more recent conference, *Polychromy and its Environments* (2012), at the Henry Moore Institute, there have been few investigations that deal directly with the relationship between relief and colour in *ceramics*. Yet ceramic sculpture, both coloured and colourless, appearing in architectural, ideal and decorative contexts, was ubiquitous in the late-nineteenth century. Indeed, it is astounding that there is no existing scholarship that explores Victorian sculpture from the perspective of the ceramic material, considering that every single sculpture produced in the period most likely began its life as a clay model. Every sculptor could manipulate clay and many well-known sculptors who studied at the government Schools of Art, such as George Frampton, Frederic William Pomeroy, William S. Frith, Charles John Allen and Albert Toft, were made to understand the vital importance of the clay modelling process by their French masters such as Jules Dalou, Alphonse Legros and Eduoard Lanteri.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, ceramic relief, and the versatile ways in which it could be applied to architecture and manufacture, was a vital part of the Victorian sculptural response to the Italian Renaissance. As discussed in the first chapter of this study, there is no doubt that Minton's popular, colourful majolica was inspired by the Italian Quattrocento examples that Herbert Minton made sure were in plentiful supply at the South Kensington Museum. The aesthetic was carried through to architectural sculpture too, and this thesis suggests that a renewed scholarly interest in della Robbia relief in the late-nineteenth century gave rise to various artistic responses

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<sup>69</sup> Andreas Blühm, *The Colour of Sculpture 1840-1910* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996). See also David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

<sup>70</sup> For information on the French school of sculptors and their relationship with ceramics and the decorative arts see particularly Claire Jones, *Sculptors and Design Reform in France, 1848 – 1895* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

to the Quattrocento family, providing a variety of contexts for polychrome ceramic sculpture between the fine and decorative arts.

To date, Victorian ceramic sculpture has been considered *infra dig.* to sculpture historians and has rarely been taken seriously by the leading commentators on the period. Part of the problem with nineteenth-century ceramic sculpture may well be attributed to its interstitial position between ceramic studies and sculpture studies. Much of the serious scholarship on British ceramics forms part of craft history, focusing on the turned and thrown works of the studio potters of the twentieth century, such as Bernard Leach, William Staite Murray and Michael Cardew.<sup>71</sup> The earthy, perhaps *primitif*, aesthetic of these ceramic artists, and their small studios and methods of production, may well have set the tone for the more theoretical study of British ceramics as an art form. Recently, we have begun to see the works of these potters combined with that of their sculptor contemporaries. For example, Penelope Curtis' and Keith Wilson's 2011 exhibition, *Modern British Sculpture*, at the Royal Academy of Art, juxtaposed the earthy ceramic wares and small-scale sculptures of Leach [fig.4], Barbara Hepworth [fig.5] and Ben Nicholson [fig.6].<sup>72</sup> In contrast, the highly-coloured, more sculptural aesthetic of popular Victorian majolica couldn't be further from Leach or Hepworth's 'modernist' aesthetic. Let us bear in mind, however, that Getsy's *Sculpture and the Pursuit of a Modern Ideal in Britain* began with the premise that "Conventionally, an unbreachable divide between the nineteenth and

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<sup>71</sup> See, for example: Emmanuel Cooper, *Bernard Leach: Life and Work* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003); Edmund de Waal, *Bernard Leach* (London: Tate, 1997) and Tanya Harrod, *The Last Sane Man: Michael Cardew: Modern Pots, Colonialism and Counterculture* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>72</sup> Penelope Curtis and Keith Wilson. *Modern British Sculpture*, exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2011).

twentieth centuries has characterized the study of modern art in Britain and of sculpture in particular.”<sup>73</sup> Whilst Gettsy’s work, along with the more recent work of Droth, Edwards and Hatt, pulled the serious discussion of British sculpture further back into the nineteenth century, so too should the discussion of British ceramics be drawn back, to challenge the turn-of-the-century divide that has, to date, favoured the ceramic production of the early-twentieth century.

Furthermore, a large majority of British ceramic histories that deal with anything prior to the studio potteries of the early-twentieth century tend to be written within the context of the modern antiques trade – how to identify maker’s marks etc. – providing overviews of the wares and straightforward histories of their production. Whilst these works are helpful for the antiquarian study of ceramics in Britain, they do not offer a conceptual, contextualizing place for the medium within the culture and society of the era. Examples include, Paul Atterbury and Maureen Batkin’s *The Dictionary of Minton*, published by the Antique Collector’s Club in 1990<sup>74</sup> and Geoffrey Godden’s numerous, encyclopedic works on pottery and porcelain.<sup>75</sup> One of the few exceptions to this body of work is Howard Coutts’s *The Art of Ceramics: European Ceramic Design 1500 – 1830*.<sup>76</sup> Coutts’s introduction suggests that, whilst a number of informative histories of various European wares exist, “less attention has been paid to the quality of their visual impact, or their place within modern early European society.”<sup>77</sup> The same can be

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<sup>73</sup> Gettsy, *Sculpture and the Pursuit of a Modern Ideal in Britain*, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Atterbury and Maureen Batkin, *The Dictionary of Minton* (Woodbridge: Antique Collector’s Club, 1990).

<sup>75</sup> Geoffrey A. Godden, *Minton Pottery and Porcelain of the First Period 1793-1850* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1968); *British Pottery: An Illustrated Guide* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1991); *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of British Pottery and Porcelain* (London: Magna, 1992).

<sup>76</sup> Howard Coutts, *The Art of Ceramics: European Ceramic Design 1500 – 1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

said for Victorian ceramics, which, it should be noted, even Coutts stopped just short of mentioning in his work, ending his survey in 1830.

As Coutts has pointed out, however, the study of ceramics remains a vital piece in the modern historian's understanding of social and cultural histories. Indeed, Coutts rightly suggested that the further back into history one delves, the more reliant the historian becomes on ceramics for their primary source material: often the only surviving artifacts uncovered in archaeological digs that can tell us something about the society that made them are fragments of pottery.<sup>78</sup> But ceramic production in the Victorian era was so ubiquitous, so diverse and formed such a cohesive bond between art and utility, aesthetics and necessity, that its contribution to the social and cultural history of the period cannot be ignored. Indeed, Michael Stratton's *The Terracotta Revival* (1993),<sup>79</sup> is one of the few publications that deals with the diverse application of ceramics within Victorian public and domestic life. Stratton highlighted the contribution of the South Kensington Museum to the "Terracotta Revival" in architecture of the second half of the nineteenth century, suggesting that "the proponents of [design] reform gave ceramics an elevated status. Clayworking was not only a long-established and seemingly ubiquitous industry, it involved, ideally, a combination of science and art, and of utility with a simple beauty."<sup>80</sup> The ceramic material was ideal for public and domestic use. It could be moulded, painted and applied to architecture or domestic wares and its glazed, non-porous surface meant that it revolutionized

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>79</sup> Michael Stratton, *The Terracotta Revival: Building Innovation and the Image of the Industrial City in Britain and North America* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1993).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 53.



sanitation in the modern home and the crowded public spaces of smog-filled London.

Still, even Coutts and Stratton have not dealt directly with ‘ceramic sculpture’ and the direct fusion of the fine and decorative arts that the term suggests. As long as Victorian sculpture historians continue to focus on more traditional materials and ceramic historians ignore the nineteenth-century, or focus purely on domestic wares, the Victorian ceramic sculpture that draws these two fields together will fall into the rift between them. With this in mind, the final chapter of this thesis positions late-nineteenth-century ceramic sculpture as a vital element of the Victorian artistic response to the Italian Renaissance.

I focus on polychrome ceramic sculpture in the latter half of the nineteenth century, beginning with the decoration of the South Kensington Museum itself and subsequent areas of ceramic production where the hierarchical boundaries between sculpture and ceramics, and even sculpture and painting, are addressed. In particular, I investigate how artistic responses to della Robbia sculpture developed alongside the sculptor’s popularity in the nineteenth century. I question the contribution of the South Kensington collection to subsequent sculpture production, and the promotion of della Robbia in the hands of Robinson, Pater and Ruskin. Østermark-Johansen’s 2006 essay in *Word and Image*, ‘Relieving the Limitations of Sculpture and Text: Walter Pater’s della Robbia Essay,’ considered della Robbia’s place at the South Kensington Museum as having a

diachronic and synchronic function: [della Robbia's] glazed terracotta reliefs were important objects in documenting the history of taste in the applied arts, and all the Victorian glazed tiles, decorating the exterior as well as the interior of the building, testified to his powerful influence on contemporary taste and manufacture.<sup>81</sup>

Østermark-Johansen's essay thus positioned della Robbia between historical and contemporary practice and she has highlighted the decoration of the South Kensington Museum as an area where artistic responses to the sculptor's work were initially concentrated. For the first time, I provide an analysis of Minton's interpretation of della Robbia polychrome ceramic relief on an architectural, industrial scale at the Museum. I consider Minton's *Ceramic Staircase* (1865-71, V&A London [fig.7]) as a project that transmuted, modernized and reflected the spirit of the Italian sculpture collection and applied it to the walls of the building that housed it. John Physick's *The Victoria and Albert Museum, the History of its Building* of 1982 is the definitive guide to the construction of the V&A and a rare example of a secondary account that describes the subject matter and history of the Staircase.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, my analysis of the Staircase considers its place within Stratton's "Terracotta Revival," its close relationship to the collections alongside which it was built, and the extent to which it forms an 'industrial' ceramic response to the work of the della Robbia family therein.

In addition, I look at a neglected sculptor who could be considered the "della Robbia" of the Victorian era. Various Victorian sculptors have been referred to,

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<sup>81</sup> Østermark-Johansen, "Relieving the limitations of sculpture and text," 30-1.

<sup>82</sup> John Physick, *The Victoria and Albert Museum, the history of its building* (London: V&A, 1982).

either in their own time, or in recent years, with reference to their reflection of a particular master of the Italian Renaissance. George Frederic Watts has been named “England’s Michelangelo,”<sup>83</sup> whilst the Michelangelesque style of Alfred Stevens and the Donatellesque adolescent figures of Alfred Gilbert are often commented upon.<sup>84</sup> Yet no-one has sought the della Robbia of the Victorian age, despite the popularity of the Quattrocento sculptor in the late-century. Della Robbia relief sculpture became increasingly popular amongst critics, artists and private collectors, providing accents of Tuscan colour to the private dwellings of Ruskin [fig.8], Pater, Watts [fig.9] and William Holman Hunt [fig.10], to name but a few. The sculptors working for the Della Robbia Pottery company in Birkenhead, amongst them, Conrad Dressler, sought to disseminate their modern response to the della Robbia aesthetic throughout the industrial towns and cities of Britain; applying the aesthetic to public buildings and domestic interiors. Dressler is all but forgotten within Victorian sculpture studies, again, perhaps, a victim of the rift between ceramic and sculpture studies of the period. I consider how his work, and the productions of the Della Robbia Pottery company in general, were integrated within modern sculptural and artistic practice of the day, infiltrating movements such as the Arts and Crafts movement, Aestheticism, late Pre-Raphaelitism and the New Sculpture. In doing this, I wish to demonstrate how viewing sculpture from a ceramic perspective further blurs the typological histories of these movements.

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<sup>83</sup> Wilfrid Blunt, *England’s Michelangelo: A Biography of George Frederic Watts* [1972] (London, Virgin Books, 1989).

<sup>84</sup> For example, the similarities between Gilbert and Donatello’s adolescent nude figures are discussed in Edwards, *Alfred Gilbert’s Aestheticism*, 50. For more information on Stevens see, for example, Selwin Brinton, “Alfred Stevens at Dorchester House,” *Architecture, a magazine of architecture and the applied arts and crafts* 5, no. 24 (April 1927): 348 and Beattie, *Alfred Stevens, 1817-75* (London: V&A, 1975).

The thesis thus explores the categorisation and reception of Italian sculpture at the early South Kensington Museum to gain a greater understanding of the Victorian attitude towards sculpture and its conceptual limitations. It links South Kensington with the scholarly revisions of the Renaissance that occurred throughout the mid- to late-century and the artistic responses that followed. The thesis is split into two parts: the first deals with the Museum's categorisation of Italian sculpture and the second with its subsequent reception. The first chapter considers the acquisition of Italian sculpture between the period of the Museum's foundation in 1852 and the publication of Robinson's *Italian Sculpture* catalogue in 1862, tracking the development of the Italian sculpture collection and how it was justified according to the ethos of the Museum, as and when it was acquired. Following on from this, the second chapter deals with the display of sculpture at the Museum and how Italian sculptures were contextualised amongst other objects within Robinson's pseudo-domestic arrangements. The third chapter focuses on the scholarly reception of the collection, tracking Ruskin's change in attitude towards Luca della Robbia as a case study, and addressing the contribution made by Robinson's collection and catalogue to the nineteenth-century revision of the Quattrocento sculptor. The final chapter addresses the late-Victorian sculptural responses to della Robbia, seen through the lens of the South Kensington collections and its related scholarship. Seeking the "della Robbia" of the nineteenth century, I take polychrome ceramic sculpture of the nineteenth century as a case study, demonstrating how traditional views of 'sculpture' and the 'sculptural,' of the boundaries between the fine and decorative arts, and of traditionally separate typological artistic movements of the late-nineteenth-century can be challenged from a ceramic perspective.

PART I

CATEGORISATION

CHAPTER I  
ACQUISITION

How Italian Sculpture Emerged from “the Motley Medley Chaos”<sup>85</sup>

Finally, it may be observed that it is the intimate connection of mediæval and renaissance sculpture with the decorative arts in general, which clearly indicates the Museum as the proper repository for this class of the National acquisitions.<sup>86</sup>

There are two important conclusions that can be drawn from the above extract from the introduction to Robinson’s 1862 catalogue of the Italian sculpture collection at the South Kensington Museum. The first is that Robinson considered the province of the Museum to be focused on the “decorative arts.” The second is that he believed “mediæval and renaissance sculpture” to fall within this province and, therefore, justified its presence within the Museum. By the time the catalogue was published, original works of Italian “mediæval and renaissance sculpture” dominated the Museum’s permanent, decorative art collections. They even shared centre-stage in the newly constructed exhibition courts alongside Robinson’s *Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Medieval, Renaissance and More Recent Periods*; a popular temporary loans exhibition put together to complement (or perhaps rival) Cole’s 1862 International Exhibition on the opposite side of the road. In less than a decade since his appointment as curator in 1853, then,

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<sup>85</sup> Robinson, “Our Public Art Museums: A Retrospect,” 955.

<sup>86</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, xi.

Robinson had transformed a “Museum of Manufactures;”<sup>87</sup> a modest, educational collection of examples of ornament, casts and copies directly connected with the teaching at the government Schools of Design, into an internationally renowned public “Art Museum,” visited by thousands and boasting the finest and most comprehensive collection of Italian Renaissance sculpture outside of Italy. Furthermore, as we can see from the title of Robinson’s scholarly catalogue, the category, “Italian Sculpture,” had gained an autonomy at the Museum that may have seemed out of place in an institution that had initially categorized its contents according to their material (e.g. “Metal Work,” “Woven Fabrics”) and that had actively tried to separate itself, to a certain extent, from the Fine Arts and their stylistic histories. So, how was it that original Italian sculpture, then attributed to the likes of Michelangelo, Donatello and Luca della Robbia,<sup>88</sup> came to dominate in what originated as an educational, and predominantly modern, collection of casts, copies, textiles, pottery, metalwork, glassware and furniture? The following chapter explores the ways in which Italian sculpture at first infiltrated, and then dominated, the Museum’s decorative art collections, directly addressing the blurred distinction between sculpture as a fine and decorative art therein. To do this, I focus on the changing attitudes towards Italian sculpture at the Museum, tracking an evolution from the inclusion, through the individuation, to the predominance of the Italian “mediæval and renaissance” sculpture collection. By concentrating on these contemporary catalogues and reports I explore the various

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<sup>87</sup> As the Museum is referred to in the 1853 Report. See Department of Practical Art, *First Report of the Department of Practical Art* (HC 1852-3, 1615, LIV.1)

<sup>88</sup> Many of Robinson’s attributions have since been confirmed or rejected, though not until well into the twentieth century.

ways in which the Museum dealt with this class of objects as they gradually emerged from the “motley medley chaos”<sup>89</sup> of the collections.

The acquisition policies of the early South Kensington Museum are hard to pin down and purchases or donations were often opportunistic. Whilst sculpture, amongst other objects, trickled slowly into the Museum as individual pieces were gifted or purchased, there were a number of major collections acquired at great expense for the Museum in the 1850s that brought in Italian sculpture in ever-increasing waves. These larger collections were documented and justified publicly using catalogues. To limit my enquiry, I focus on the catalogues and reports that accompanied some of the first major collections acquired between 1852 (the opening of the Museum) and 1862 (the year Robinson published the Italian sculpture catalogue), as well as the full Museum catalogue that Robinson was continually updating throughout the 1850s. The catalogues introduced Italian sculpture into the Museum within very different contexts at each acquisition and provide an excellent, and largely overlooked, historiographical resource. At South Kensington, descriptive catalogues were used as an educational and promotional accompaniment to the collections, as well as a public forum for justifying purchases that had been made using government funds. Far from being mere descriptive inventories of the Museum, the various catalogues of the South Kensington collection evolved into important scholarly documents that considered the exhibits not only in terms of detailed visual analysis, but also within their historical, geographical, theoretical and relative contexts.<sup>90</sup> Under Robinson’s influence, the catalogue also became a major public forum for the discussion of

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<sup>89</sup> Robinson, “Our Public Art Museums: A Retrospect,” 995.

<sup>90</sup> The contemporary (nineteenth-century) impact of the Italian sculpture catalogue is discussed in Chapter 3.



sculpture's place within the decorative arts context of the Museum, as suggested by the opening quotation above. The early catalogues discussed in the following study include: the *Catalogue of the Articles in the Museum of Manufactures Chiefly Purchased from the Exhibition of 1851* (1852); Ralph Nicholson Wornum's *Catalogue of Ornamental Casts of the Renaissance Styles* (1852-4); Robinson's *Catalogue of a Collection of Models in Wax and Terracotta by Various Ancient Italian Masters known as the Gherardini Collection* (1854); Robinson's *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection* (1856); and, finally, Robinson's *Italian Sculpture* catalogue (1862).<sup>91</sup> It is in these first catalogues, and their collections, that we find very different contexts for the inclusion of the Italian sculptures that they describe: from good examples of "Metalwork," to sketch models, to architectural ornamentation and ceramic manufactures. Italian sculpture did not have a place at the early South Kensington Museum, but occupied *various* places amidst the "motley medley chaos."

### The Early South Kensington Museum

The early development of the Museum collections was, indeed, chaotic and provides a complex study for the historian. There was no other permanent British institution quite like South Kensington and therefore no precedent for it to follow, save for the temporary Great Exhibition of 1851 and similar initiatives on the Continent.<sup>92</sup> Consequently, the Museum's first years were largely experimental and its administration, acquisition policies and displays were, to borrow a concept

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<sup>91</sup> Various interim catalogues were produced by Robinson, which will also be referred to in this study.

<sup>92</sup> Such as the École des Beaux Arts and Musée de Cluny in Paris.

from Francis Haskell, “ephemeral.”<sup>93</sup> Whilst new objects were introduced into the collections at an increasing rate in the 1850s, and alternative locations were sought to house them, the organization of the whole establishment had to be continually revised. Much of the collection was built upon temporary loans, and permanent exhibits were circulated around the provincial Schools of Design, meaning that objects flowed both into and out of the central Museum and were constantly rotated therein due to lack of space. The Museum was no stagnant repository, then, but an active series of changing displays without a real sense of permanence. In addition, various experts from different fields (art, government, industry, education) and with contrasting opinions regarding the proper running and organization of the Museum, moved in and out of the mix, contributing to the confusion with their separate views and expertise. It is no wonder that, in this state of constant flux and without a definitive model to follow, the changing ideals upon which the fledgling South Kensington Museum was founded were as difficult to follow then as they are to pin down now.

No discussion of the proper place of Italian sculpture at such a unique and chaotic Museum can proceed, therefore, without a brief understanding of the circumstances from whence that sculpture emerged. Following the Great Exhibition of 1851, and building on the collections at the government School of Design, the initial ethos of the “Museum of Manufactures” was commercial, practical and strived to be actively educational. The idea was to support the Schools of Design by providing examples of good quality ornament for its students whilst simultaneously refining public taste, thereby qualitatively

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<sup>93</sup> Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

improving the supply and demand of British manufactures. It had long been considered that the Schools of Design had not yet had the substantial impact on the quality of British manufacture that had been projected at their foundation in 1837. Consequently, and following the success of the Great Exhibition, the Board of Trade decided to group the Schools and their new Museum under a “Department of Practical Art,” so-named to “dispel associations” with fine art.<sup>94</sup> This dissociation was purposeful. It had become clear that talented students were using the Schools of Design as a pathway to a career in the fine arts, rather than specializing in some particular trade that would consequently benefit the British manufacturing industry. An example is given in the first report of the Department in 1853:

One student, although recommended from the Spitalfields School to hold a scholarship, upon being required to go through a course of designing for silk weaving, after a little while resigned his prospect of a scholarship, avowing that he aimed to be a portrait painter. It should not be concealed that a considerable time must elapse before a more correct feeling towards Ornamental and applied Art as a study will be generated among students.<sup>95</sup>

A preference among the students for a career in the fine arts was seen as a failure on the part of the Schools to actively promote the status of the “Ornamental.” After all, who could blame this particular student for wanting to pursue a career as a painter when it was still perceived by most to be a role of higher status than that of a silk weaver or designer, especially when the elementary training given at the

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<sup>94</sup> Davies, *Sir John Charles Robinson*, 72.

<sup>95</sup> Henry Cole, *First Report of the Department of Practical Art* (1853), 27.

School, by accomplished fine artists such as Redgrave, Henry Townsend and Stevens, was similar to that of any fine arts academy? Training at the Schools began with the copying of pictures, Antique plaster casts and natural objects (including life models) and only when the students were proficient in drawing, painting and modelling would they then turn their talent towards specializing in a certain medium or manufacture. By then it was too late: why paint plates for Minton, or weave silk in Spitalfields when you had the talent and the tools to be a self-employed portrait painter or sculptor?

One of the most important missions of the Department, therefore, was to raise the status of decorative art amongst both the students of its Schools and the public at large. The Great Exhibition had gone some way to achieving this by turning the manufactures of all nations into a public spectacle on a grand scale. Perhaps the answer, then, was to make this type of exhibition more permanent. Still reeling from his success as one of the leading Great Exhibition Commissioners, and with a history of bringing artists and manufacturers together,<sup>96</sup> Cole became the Department's first General Superintendent and Redgrave, an artist and headmaster at the central School of Design, was named his Art Superintendent. Together they were to run a permanent Museum that was both conceptually and physically connected to the central School of Design and that closely followed the organization and arrangement of the 1851 Exhibition. Thanks to the active involvement of Prince Albert, various rooms at Marlborough House - a Royal residence on Pall Mall - were loaned by Queen Victoria to house the Department

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<sup>96</sup> Cole, under the pseudonym, Felix Summerly, had successfully created what he termed "art-manufactures" by inviting artist friends working at the Schools, including Redgrave and Townsend, to design objects of utility that were then manufactured by Minton, who was also a close friend. "Summerly's Art Manufactures," founded by Cole in 1847, did not, however, last long as his involvement in the Great Exhibition became increasingly demanding.

offices, its central School, and supporting Museum and Library. Once the existing casts and copies had been transferred from the School's old premises at Somerset House, the next step for Cole and Redgrave was to select appropriate and affordable exhibits that would meet the ambitions of the Department in raising the status of ornamental art.

The logical place to begin the search was at the Great Exhibition itself and the Department released £5,000 to a Committee, headed by Cole and Redgrave, for the selection and purchase of objects from the Exhibition residuum, which would then be installed alongside the School's casts and copies at Marlborough House. As the Museum was government funded, systems were put in place to ensure that money was wisely spent for the benefit of the public at large and the purchase of every exhibit had to be recorded and justified. At the same time, however, the Museum accepted gifts and loans from private donors, including Queen Victoria herself. These were, perhaps, assessed less stringently before being placed within the Museum – a government institution with little ready cash for the purchase of exhibits could not, after all, look a gift-horse in the mouth. Therefore, at the opening of the Museum in 1852, exhibits ranged from the cheaper paper copies and plaster casts belonging to the Schools, through manufactures from the Great Exhibition, to priceless ornamental art objects gifted by the Queen and other important private collectors who followed her lead. The types of objects themselves, and their geographical origins, were various. From Antique plaster casts and stained glass windows to Axminster carpets, Japanese writing desks and Sèvres porcelain, the “motley medley” collection of original and copied works from Italy, France, Britain, Japan, India and so on, would have to be sorted and

displayed under some fathomable system. They would then have to be used in conjunction with lectures and descriptive catalogues in order for the Museum to be perceived as actively educational. The last thing Cole wanted was to create a bewildering cabinet of curiosities, or as he phrased it “a mere unintelligible lounge for idlers.”<sup>97</sup> The education of the design student, the general refinement of public taste and subsequently, the improvement of British manufacture, was his ultimate ambition.

### 1.1 The First Collections: Italian Sculpture as “Metalwork” and Renaissance Architectural Relief at the Museum of Manufactures, 1852.

As a first principle in making the selections, the Committee felt it to be their duty to discard any predilections they might have for particular *styles* of ornament, and to choose whatever appeared especially meritorious or useful, if it came within the limits of the means at their disposal, without reference to the style of ornament which had been adopted.<sup>98</sup>

In the *Quattrocento* (1400), the next style, we have a far more positive revival. Lorenzo Ghiberti may perhaps be instanced as its great exponent or representative in ornamental art.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Cole, *First Report* (1853), 30.

<sup>98</sup> Department of Practical Art, *First Report* (1853), 230.

<sup>99</sup> R. N. Wornum, *Catalogue of Ornamental Casts of the Renaissance Styles* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1854), 6.

The above quotations, taken from two separate catalogues written in the early 1850s, relate to two different collections at Marlborough House. The first is a description of the founding collection purchased from the Great Exhibition and actively denies the objects any stylistic context. Selections had instead been made based on evidence of excellence in workmanship observed in the material construction and design of the objects themselves. The second is a more scholarly introduction to the collection of “Ornamental Casts of the Renaissance Styles,” which does exactly the opposite, focusing on the historical and stylistic context of the objects rather than evidence or observations of a material nature – it is difficult, after all, to focus purely on the technical excellence of bronze casting or marble carving when the examples one possesses are made from painted plaster. Despite their differences, these collections were housed under one roof, forming the Museum of Manufactures at Marlborough House, and, interestingly, Italian sculpture appears in both.

### Selections from the Great Exhibition: Italian Sculpture as an Example of Skill in “Metal Work”

In 1852, a committee consisting of Cole, Redgrave, Owen Jones and Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin was formed to purchase a selection of original objects for the proposed Museum from the Great Exhibition of 1851.<sup>100</sup> These objects, it was suggested, would become “the nucleus” of the “Museum of Manufactures.”<sup>101</sup> A heterogeneous group of objects was chosen by the Committee, whose only criteria for selection was that the objects should exemplify “some right principle

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<sup>100</sup> Their selections had been conducted during the final week of the Exhibition, on the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> October. No record of their discussions exists. See Elizabeth Bonython and Anthony Burton, *The Great Exhibitor: The Life and Work of Henry Cole* (London: V&A, 2003), 146.

<sup>101</sup> Department of Practical Art, *First Report* (1853), 229.

of construction or of ornament, or some feature of workmanship to which it appeared desirable that the attention of our Students and Manufacturers should be directed.”<sup>102</sup> As indicated in the above quotation, a preference for certain *styles* was ignored. The Committee was careful to choose a wide variety of objects from every geographical section of the Exhibition, showcasing works in various materials and with differing decorative applications (architecture, pottery, furniture etc.): different styles were therefore well-represented, yet no particular style was favoured over another. As Cole and Redgrave’s interests lay predominantly in modern European manufactures, they enlisted the help of Jones and Pugin, no doubt, for their unmatched knowledge of the design principles of Oriental and historical, architectural ornament respectively.<sup>103</sup> What the Committee was effectively doing in its initial search for objects was creating a microcosm of the Great Exhibition at the Museum.

Unlike the 1851 Exhibition, however, the Museum did not employ a general system of categorization that relied upon geographical distinction.<sup>104</sup> Within the five rooms allocated to the Museum at Marlborough House, exhibits from Britain, France, Germany, India, etc., were grouped together under the following main divisions that focused instead on material composition and industry: “Woven Fabrics,” “Metal Work,” “Pottery,” “Glass,” and “Furniture and Upholstery, Wood Carvings, Papier Maché and Japanned Wares.” A final division, “Various,” included works in ivory, marble, leather, paper hangings, basket-work and even

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>103</sup> Both Jones and Pugin had been involved in organizing themed displays at the Great Exhibition.

<sup>104</sup> At the Great Exhibition, exhibits were categorized first according to their country of origin, with further subcategories thereafter. See the *Official, Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*, 4 vols. (London: Spicer Brothers, 1851).



coconut.<sup>105</sup> Although there was certainly no hint of a specific “Sculpture” category yet, there were certainly ‘art’ sculptures present, grouped according to their material (such as Italian bronze busts within the “Metal Work” section and terracotta Clodion statuettes within “Pottery”) and hundreds of items that might fall under the category of ‘applied sculpture.’ The catalogue stated that not only would the Museum endeavour to further sub-categorise its items within each division, but that it also hoped to eventually display an “historical series of manufactures.”<sup>106</sup> In the meantime, within each division, items were put together to show a visual comparison of the different, yet successful, approaches to a particular manufacture or material (see floorplan, [fig.11]). Thus, an embroidered silk scarf of Tunisian origin, an embroidered French shawl, a contemporary Axminster carpet and a piece of Renaissance Venetian embroidery all co-existed in the same space underneath the heading “Woven Fabrics,” demonstrating the very different effects of various types of weaving or needlework applied to different threads (embroidery, lacemaking, machine vs. handmade carpet weaving, in silk, wool, cotton etc.). No information was given concerning their very different historical, geographical or stylistic backgrounds. Only the best examples were included and “observations” to their excellence were provided by members of the Committee (and other experts affiliated with the School) in the catalogue.

*A Catalogue of the Articles in the Museum of Manufactures Chiefly  
Purchased from the Exhibition of 1851, 1852.*

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<sup>105</sup> Department of Practical Art, *First Report* (1853), 283.

<sup>106</sup> Cole, *First Report* (1853), 233.

The accompanying catalogue provided little in the way of further historical or stylistic background to the objects. The following is a typical entry:

W 113. – SILK SCARF EMBROIDERED WITH GOLD

*Purchased at £7.*

W 114. – SILK SCARF EMBROIDERED WITH GOLD

*Purchased at £6.*

*Manufactured in Tunis.*

*Observations.* - Remarkable as good illustrations of the use of gold; also for the forms of ornamentation, well adapted in their lines and elongations for the working in the loom; good distribution of form and general harmony in colour.<sup>107</sup>

Each entry in the catalogue listed the object's place of manufacture, its purchase price, and some included further observations as to the excellence of the workmanship, relying mainly on visual analysis with only very brief allusions to historical or geographical context: there were no dates, few authors and little hint towards style or provenance. Some sections had short introductions, written by various 'experts' affiliated with the Schools,<sup>108</sup> that included general observations pointing out the particular quality of certain items in the collection that were worth the attention of the student. As a result, the catalogue appears more like a commercial sales catalogue: a reference to go to whilst perusing the wares, rather than a scholarly, contextualizing text that accompanies and enlightens a visual display.

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<sup>107</sup> Department of Practical Art, *First Report* (1853), 248.

<sup>108</sup> The introduction to the Metal Work section was written by Gottfried Semper, who was the metalwork master at the School at this time. An introduction to the Woven Fabrics section was written by Owen Jones.

The catalogue's focus on commercial, material properties and industrial processes, as opposed to stylistic or historical contexts, can be seen in the sole mention of the word 'sculpture.' Sculpture enters the collection and the catalogue here, just once, in the description of two bronze portrait busts, both grouped under "Metal Work" between an enameled cup-and-saucer and an Italian bronze door-knocker. The two sculptures, a "Bronze Bust of Pope Alexander VIII" (c.1690, V&A London [fig.12]) and a "Bronze Bust of Pope Leo X"<sup>109</sup> (c.1690, V&A London [fig.13]) are described thus:

M 107. – BRONZE BUST OF POPE ALEXANDER VIII

*The Property of* Mr. John Webb

M 108. – BRONZE BUST OF POPE LEO X

*The Property of* Mr. John Webb

*Observation.* – These two works are in a grand style of portrait sculpture, and very fine specimens of bronze casting and chasing.<sup>110</sup>

Whilst they are acknowledged as portrait sculptures with a vague allusion to a "grand style," it is clear that their presence in the collection is based on the success of the process by which they have been made, the "bronze casting and chasing." Nothing is mentioned of their place in history, in Italy, or of the Baroque style of the works, which are now attributed to Domenico Guidi. Notice also that these were not purchased from the Great Exhibition, but loaned by the private art dealer and connoisseur, John Webb, who acted as an auction sales agent and adviser at the Museum. Therefore, sculpture was accepted (free of

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<sup>109</sup> This is an error as the sculpture actually depicts Pope Innocent X. Department of Practical Art, *First Report* (1853), 263.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

charge) in this collection, purely for its material nature and the technique of its construction: as an example of high-quality bronze work. As shall be discussed in the second chapter of this study, at the time the catalogue was printed and before Robinson was appointed curator, these bronze busts were displayed alongside other good examples of *repoussé* and *chasing* work in different metals by a follower of Benvenuto Cellini, the Italian Renaissance goldsmith and sculptor, and by Antoine Vechte, a modern French silversmith. This was a practical arrangement,<sup>111</sup> as well as one that allowed for a comparison of the various surface-finishing techniques of different metals. Robinson would later go on to completely re-categorise these two busts in terms of their stylistic, art-historical and geographical context, placing them within his Italian sculpture collection alongside other sculptures of Italian origin, rather than alongside objects of like material.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, to show the development of the ways in which Italian sculpture was represented at the early Museum, this study will continue to track the categorization of these particular busts to demonstrate how they were constantly reclassified in the catalogues throughout the 1850s and eventually emerged from the collection in Robinson's 1862 catalogue as "Italian sculpture."

### Wornum's Collection of "Ornamental Casts of the Renaissance Styles" in Room 22.

The rooms at Marlborough House were arranged, as mentioned above, with an emphasis on material, industry and the high-quality finish of fine objects. There was, however, one exception. Room 22 contained a collection of "Ornamental

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<sup>111</sup> The busts and the small selection of metal objects they were grouped with were too large to fit anywhere else. See Chapter 2, 140.

<sup>112</sup> See Chapter 2, 139-41.

Casts of the Renaissance Styles,” curated by Wornum, an artist and critic who had been lecturing at the Schools of Design since 1848 and who had been made Librarian and Keeper of the Casts on the opening of the Museum. Wornum’s collection constituted a “choice though small gallery of Renaissance relief ornament,”<sup>113</sup> and is described by Cole in the Report in the following manner:

A portion relating to the best period of the Renaissance, A.D. 1400 to 1600, has been arranged chronologically in one of the rooms of the Museum. Seventy casts have been repaired, framed where necessary, painted to indicate the character of the original, whether executed in metals, colours and gilding, marble, wood, &c., and each specimen labeled.<sup>114</sup>

According to the Report, the Department was in possession of around 1,700 casts in varying states of repair, representing different periods in history from the Antique to the modern.<sup>115</sup> Wornum’s intention was to split the whole cast collection into three divisions: Antique, Medieval and Renaissance, each with a descriptive catalogue. This would offer the Museum a cheap way of displaying a complete history of the “progress” of European architectural ornament, contextualising its casts and copies according to the stylistic developments of their originals – quite a different approach from that found throughout the rest of the

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<sup>113</sup> Cole, *First Report* (1853), 292.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 288. Repair works were carried out on those casts that had been damaged at the Schools of Design prior to their move from Somerset House. Wornum stated in the report that at Somerset House, “many of these casts were stowed away in dark and ill-ventilated cellars, and the process of decay had already commenced.” *Ibid.*, 292.

collections. However, it was only the Renaissance division that was fully realized before Wornum resigned as Keeper of the Casts in 1855.<sup>116</sup>

Wornum's reason for beginning with these seventy Renaissance casts, that would form the third and final section in his proposed history, was based, he suggested, upon the lack of Renaissance examples of the like available to the public in London.<sup>117</sup> The casts were all architectural in nature: cartouches, arabesques, cornices, architraves, pilasters, paneling, and capitals, all decorated in sculptural relief. The collection did not focus entirely on Italy, with many examples from France and England, but the catalogue reflects a greater interest in the development of Italian Renaissance architectural relief. Wornum's approach, therefore, was a scholarly one, and this can clearly be seen in the detailed introduction to his catalogue, which provided more than a mere descriptive inventory of the various objects in the collection or observations of excellence. Following contemporary ideas arguably borrowed from Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*, which was published at the time Wornum was putting the collection (and the Library)<sup>118</sup> together, the Keeper of the Casts had produced his own brief but academic critique of the development of Renaissance architectural relief ornament, both visually in Room 22, and in the catalogue. In contrast to the rest of the Museum, Italian sculpture entered here in the form of painted casts that placed the original works within a specific stylistic context: a context relevant to

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<sup>116</sup> He went on to become Keeper at the National Gallery and to complete his full treatise on the history of ornamental styles in his book, *Analysis of Ornament* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1859) written at the same time as, and in a similar style to, Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* (London: Day & Son, 1856), though Wornum's *Analysis* was not published in the form of a catalogue or in connection with the collection at Marlborough House.

<sup>117</sup> Department of Practical Art, *First Report* (1853), 378. Although Wornum starts with 70 examples in 1852, the catalogue describes 124.

<sup>118</sup> All three volumes of Ruskin's work appear in the first Library inventory in Department of Practical Art, *First Report* (1853), 339.

important, contemporary art-historical scholarship. Unlike the catalogue produced for the rest of the collection, Wornum's was a scholarly accompaniment that enlightened a chronological display of historical styles.

*A Catalogue of Ornamental Casts of the Renaissance Styles, 1854.*

The catalogue of the collection took two years to complete and the introduction described the Renaissance as an evolution of styles in architectural ornament over three periods in Italy from the "Tre-cento," to the "Quattro-cento," and finally to what Wornum considers the most successful, "Cinque-cento," period or "the most perfect of all the modern styles."<sup>119</sup> This stylistic progression, he suggested, coincided with a gradual move away from Christian symbolism: "The essence of all middle-age art was symbolism, and the transition from the symbolism to the unalloyed principles of beauty, is the great feature of the revival. Art was wholly separated from religion in the Renaissance; but this transition was, of course, gradual."<sup>120</sup> For Wornum, the development away from Christian symbolism was a positive move for ornamental art as it was no longer reliant upon, or secondary to, religious sentiment but existed as an art in its own right: "the decorators of the Renaissance were in fact the first *artists* in ornamental art since the time of the Romans: they suffered no limits or restrictions but those of harmony or beauty, and whatever may be the varieties of opinion regarding their success, their aim was strictly aesthetical."<sup>121</sup> If this tripartite development, focusing on the move away from Christianity in Renaissance architectural ornament, sounds familiar, it is because it existed as Ruskin's model for "The Fall" in *Stones*, though Ruskin's

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<sup>119</sup> Wornum, *Catalogue of Ornamental Casts of the Renaissance Styles*, 10. There are two more periods that Wornum mentions: the "Renaissance" in France and "Elizabethan" in England, but for the purposes of this study I wish to focus on the Italian periods only.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

development is a negative one, considering how architectural ornament of the Renaissance was gradually corrupted as it moved through three stages; the “Early Renaissance,” the “Roman Renaissance,” and the “Grotesque Renaissance” – the latter referring mainly to the Cinquecento that Ruskin loathed. Perhaps Ruskin’s negative view is one of the “varieties of opinion” directly referred to by Wornum above.<sup>122</sup> What Ruskin considered a gradual corruption of Christian sentiment during the Renaissance, Wornum saw as a gradual liberation for the ornamentist. Wornum’s early sympathy with what would become the ideals of late nineteenth-century Aestheticism is undeniable, and can be detected in the language used in his description above of the “strictly aesthetical” aims of Renaissance ornamental artists. Whilst a study of his proto-Aesthetic tendencies has not yet been conducted, such a study would serve to lengthen the established early boundaries of Aesthetic ideas in the nineteenth century and highlight the role played in its development by institutions such as the South Kensington Museum.

Despite their different agendas, both Ruskin and Wornum positioned the artist, Lorenzo Ghiberti, and his *Gates of Paradise* (c.1425-52, Baptistry of St. John, Florence [fig.14]) as a central turning point between their contrasting developments – as an artist-workman who handled both aesthetic ornamentation and didactic or “symbolic” art.<sup>123</sup> Wornum’s display and catalogue opened with the *Gates* (he did not have any earlier examples in the collection) and it is the most comprehensively described item, despite the fact that there were only a few choice panels on display. By 1864, when Charles Perkins wrote his chronology of

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<sup>122</sup> The anti-Ruskinian sentiment of this apparently agreeable development away from morality and towards “art in its own right” is tantamount to pre-Paterian Aestheticism. Like Wornum, Pater would later form an alternative and more favourable reading of the ‘Renaissance’ to Ruskin’s own.

<sup>123</sup> Both Wornum and Ruskin also focus on the relief decoration of the Ducal Palace at Venice as examples of Quattrocento styles.



*Tuscan Sculptors*,<sup>124</sup> Ghiberti would be widely considered one of the major sculptors of the Italian Renaissance and the *Gates*, his *magnum opus*, would be accepted without question as a (positive) turning point for Florentine Renaissance art. It is for this reason that I want to focus in briefly on this artist and the casts of the *Gates* chosen for the display in Room 22, to consider how he and his work were interpreted and portrayed by Wornum at the Museum in the mid-century.

I use the term ‘artist’ as it is necessary to be cautious about the designation of ‘sculptor’ when considering the mid-nineteenth-century discussion of the work of Ghiberti. Vasari had described him as “the first *sculptor* who began to imitate the work of the ancient Romans,”<sup>125</sup> but since that time, British scholarship in particular had somewhat glossed-over Ghiberti’s status as an innovative ‘sculptor,’ instead focusing on the artistic status of his followers, Michelangelo and Donatello. For example, Ghiberti’s *Gates* were described in the context of sculpture as part of Flaxman’s *Lectures on Sculpture* of the early nineteenth century, yet Flaxman referred to the artist himself (albeit briefly) as merely an “illustrious contemporary of Donatello,” paying him little further attention other than this comparative comment.<sup>126</sup> It was in Palgrave’s 1840 account of “The Fine Arts of Florence,” which explicitly dealt with the notion of the Italian Renaissance artist as artificer – the ‘artist-workman’ - that we see a desire to give Ghiberti the credit he deserves: “[Donatello] was the great rival of Ghiberti, in common opinion excelling him – an opinion which may perhaps require more examination

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<sup>124</sup> Charles C. Perkins, *Tuscan Sculptors Their Lives, Works and Times*. 2.vols. (London: Longman, Roberts & Green, 1864).

<sup>125</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conaway and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 92. My emphasis.

<sup>126</sup> John Flaxman, *Lectures on Sculpture* (London: John Murray, 1829), 310.

than it has yet received.”<sup>127</sup> By the time we get to Wornum in the early 1850s, the designation of ‘sculpture’ was rarely given directly to Ghiberti’s work and instead he was considered in terms of this dual concept of the ‘artist-workman.’ At no point does Wornum’s catalogue describe the *Gates* purely as ‘sculpture’ or Ghiberti as a ‘sculptor.’ Instead, he referred to him as the “great exponent or representative in ornamental art”<sup>128</sup> of the Quattrocento style: the intermediate style in Wornum’s Renaissance progression. The usual sculptural comparison to Donatello and Michelangelo was completely omitted from Wornum and Ruskin’s accounts and Ghiberti the ‘artist-workman’ was considered in his own right. Equally, Ruskin avoided referring to Ghiberti purely as a sculptor, preferring to consider him as an enlightened “workman,”<sup>129</sup> mentioning his work in the context of sculpture on only one or two occasions in *Stones*.

Thus, Ghiberti’s place within the Museum was emphasized in relation to his status as a “great exponent” of the Quattro-cento style of architectural ornament. In support of this, where Vasari and Flaxman had focused only on the sculptural “symbolic” rendering of figures and biblical scenes cast in bronze on the *Gates*, Wornum focused instead on the surrounding relief panels of an architectural and decorative nature. This can be seen in his selection of panels for display, which demonstrate Ghiberti’s intermediate position as an ‘artist-workman.’ Although the Museum possessed a full set of casts of the *Gates*,<sup>130</sup> Wornum chose to display only the following:

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<sup>127</sup> Palgrave, “The Fine Arts of Florence,” *Quarterly Review* (Sep 1840): 38-9.

<sup>128</sup> Wornum, *Catalogue*, 6.

<sup>129</sup> Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, XI, 14.

<sup>130</sup> These were given to the Museum in 1844 by the École des Beaux Arts, Paris. See Council of the School of Design, *Fourth Report of the Council of the School of Design for the year 1844-45* (HC 1844-5, 654. XXVII.455), 11.

- I. Portion of cornice.
- II. Ditto, of ornamental frieze of traverse.
- III., IV. Ditto, of architrave of the jambs.
- V. Panel, angels appearing to Abraham, and the sacrifice of Isaac.<sup>131</sup>

In his selections, Wornum physically detached the architectural features decorated with fruits and foliage found on the *Gates*, giving the ornamental, ‘aesthetic’ architectural features such as the architraves, cornices and friezes, prominence over the didactic figural relief panels, of which only one was represented. This served to emphasise his notion of Ghiberti as both an architectural “ornamentist” as well as a sculptor of the figure and of moral, Christian scenes. Thus, Ghiberti was the perfect example of the intermediary ‘artist-workman’ of the Italian period. In Room 22, using carefully selected casts, Wornum had portrayed him as such.

So, at the dawn of the South Kensington Museum, when it was still known as the Museum of Manufactures, we can see how certain Italian sculptures had entered into the collections in these two rather different contexts: first, as an example of excellent technical skill in “Metal Work,” and displayed alongside other examples of good metal chasing and *repoussé* finishing; and second, as an example of the dual quality of the Italian Renaissance artist-workman that followed on from and perhaps even critiqued, in a spirit akin to proto-Aestheticism, the canon provided by Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice*, thus rooting the collection and its catalogue firmly into contemporary discussions of Italian Renaissance art. It would be this latter,

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<sup>131</sup> Wornum, *Catalogue*, 19.

more scholarly approach that Robinson would continue to maintain on his appointment to the Museum in 1853.

### The Chamber of Horrors.

One more exhibit at this stage in the Museum's history is worth mentioning as it highlights the very different approaches to acquisition and display taken by Cole and Robinson. In addition to the examples of good design found in the collection purchased from the Great Exhibition and Wornum's casts, Cole created, as we have seen, a controversial display of objects that were considered to be of poor quality manufacture in a pragmatic attempt to contrast items of good and bad design. Reasons for the choices were printed in the catalogue. His good intentions somewhat backfired as the False Principles exhibit, or "Chamber of Horrors," as it was nicknamed, became the most popular display of all, allowing the discerning visitor to compare their own possessions with those at the Museum. An account of its public reception was elegantly satirized in an article for *Household Words*, in which a fictional character, Mr. Crumpet, after visiting the Museum and being instructed on correct taste, descends into an ever-increasing state of "mental apoplexy" at the poor quality objects that adorn his everyday life:

I was ashamed of the pattern of my own trowsers [sic.], for I saw a piece of them hung up [at the Museum] as a horror. I dared not pull out my pocket-handkerchief while anyone was by, lest I should be seen dabbing the perspiration from my forehead with a wreath of coral. I saw it all; when I went home I found that I had

been living among horrors up to that hour. The paper in my parlour contains four kinds of birds of paradise, besides bridges and pagodas.<sup>132</sup>

The reaction to Cole's False Principles exhibit was not a positive one and those manufacturers represented within the "Chamber of Horrors" were furious, demanding that the exhibit be dismantled. At the beginning of September in 1853, Robinson entered the museum as its first curator. In a retrospective account of his work at the Museum from 1880, we can see how he too opposed Cole's exhibit: "[...] setting aside the angry reclamations of indignant manufacturers whose productions were thus gibbeted, the British public showed a most conservative leaning towards the old accustomed 'horrors,' or at best treated the experiment as a somewhat incomprehensible joke."<sup>133</sup> His first task was to immediately dismantle Cole's exhibit and to set about forming a methodic system for the acquisition and arrangement of the Museum displays that focused solely on high quality objects.

### Robinson's influence

Robinson is both the protagonist and antagonist of the early South Kensington Museum story. His own practical art education, as an architect in Nottingham and a painter at the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris, had alternated between the decorative and fine arts. In Paris, he developed a taste for collecting, visiting the renowned private collection of Charles Sauvageot and Alexandre du Sommerard's

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<sup>132</sup> "A House full of Horrors," *Household Words* 6, no. 141 (Dec 1852): 266.

<sup>133</sup> Robinson, "Our National Art Collections and Provincial Art Museums," *The Nineteenth Century* 7, no. 40 (Jun 1880): 987.

medieval collection at the Musée de Cluny.<sup>134</sup> As Headmaster of the Hanley School of Art in the Potteries, he held a prominent and important position within the school system, considering his direct links with ceramic manufacturers such as Minton and Wedgwood.<sup>135</sup> During his appointment at Hanley he travelled extensively on the Continent, falling in love with Italy in particular, as this excerpt from an 1851 letter to his artist friend, William Egley, suggests:

Florence – I am too excited and too hot to go to bed therefore with a famous stout flask of Montepulciano before me to keep me awake if needs be, I may as well get to work and finish my letter – I have been here two days, and am all in a fever of enthusiasm. [...] I feel as if I have got home at last, who knows but this may prove true, for if this fit lasts, I shall be strangely tempted to set up my easel here and forget everything else.<sup>136</sup>

His love of Italy would, no doubt, contribute to his fervor for collecting Italian art objects for the Museum. Exposed to countless works of art, he became an amateur art connoisseur and would continue to hone these skills during his curatorship at the Museum. In addition, the vast knowledge that he possessed concerning Continental collecting and art markets; European art history; the French approach to art and design education; as well as first hand knowledge of the running of the Schools of Design, made him the prime candidate for the curatorial position.

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<sup>134</sup> Details of the influence of these Parisian collections upon Robinson's work at South Kensington are further discussed in Chapter 2 of this study.

<sup>135</sup> Minton was a mutual friend of Robinson and Cole.

<sup>136</sup> Robinson, "Letter from J. C. Robinson to W. Egley dated 6 August 1851," in Davies, *The Life and Work of John Charles Robinson*, 62.

Robinson's approach to the acquisition and display of certain types of object at the Museum was, in retrospect, more successful than Cole's pragmatic attempts to compare good and bad design. At the time of his employment, however, his methods met increasing criticism from Cole and Redgrave and the growing presence of Italian sculpture at the Museum, aided directly by Robinson's efforts, arguably helped in souring the professional and personal relationships between these three men. However, the argument was not black and white and Cole and Redgrave's initial approach to the inclusion of sculpture at the Museum was not in direct opposition to Robinson's. To begin with, their professional relationships in general were amicable and mutually respectful and during this initial honeymoon period, in the 1850s, sculpture continued to infiltrate the collections and was justified according to each party's (very different) understanding of its place within the Museum. The complexity of the contrast between their philosophical, educational and museological approaches therefore requires careful thought. With such a broad range of 'types' of object that could legitimately be brought together to form the collections, and now with three people from very different backgrounds selecting them, it is no wonder that there were tensions at South Kensington in the 1850s: between fine and decorative art; art objects and commercial manufactures; originals and copies; Occident and Orient; and historical and contemporary practice. Misunderstandings, arguments and tensions were inevitable when it was difficult to know what to exclude from such an all-embracing collection.

Although this study highlights Robinson as the protagonist/antagonist in the augmentation of the Italian sculpture collection, this is not to suggest that there

was, from the beginning, a particular motive on Robinson's part to focus on Italian sculpture at the Museum or to turn it into a more elitist repository for the fine arts. We have already seen how Italian sculpture existed at the Museum within two very different contexts before Robinson was even involved. It is more interesting to consider how this type of object infiltrated the early collections under various guises, brought in alongside historical, Italian decorative art objects and defined under various categories, demonstrating just how well it blended with the plates, vases, furniture and other sculptural objects before it was distinguished autonomously, by Robinson, under the geographically, historically and medium specific category of "Italian sculpture." Indeed, as late as 1858, in a letter to Cole, Robinson claims to have been ignorant of the true extent of the growing Italian sculpture collection: "I was surprised myself to find how strong we were in <art> sculpture when all the specimens were put together."<sup>137</sup> The "art" sculpture, as he makes sure to rephrase it on reviewing his letter, had been dispersed comfortably throughout the rest of the collection for some time under various other categories: though one cannot be sure just how ignorant Robinson really was of this fact. It was from this moment onwards, when given a somewhat freer rein by Cole and Redgrave who were too busy organizing the International Exhibition to monitor Robinson's every move, that he began to concentrate on separating the Italian sculpture collection out from the rest. However, I argue that, although he actively focused on developing the Italian 'art' sculpture in the collection after 1858, it was not Robinson's intention to sell the decorative arts soul of Cole's "Museum of Manufactures" in exchange for the loftier ambitions of a fine arts Museum. Instead, his primary ambition, in accordance with the Museum's own, was to

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<sup>137</sup> Robinson, "Letter from J. C. Robinson to H. Cole dated 4 December 1858," Henry Cole, *Correspondence and Papers 1836 -1932*, NAL, 55.BB, Boxes 1-19.



address the division that had developed between the fine and decorative arts. Robinson just approached it in a different way, finding his inspiration in the dual nature of Italian sculpture as both fine and ornamental. Whether it happened intentionally or incidentally, the fact is that Italian ‘art’ sculpture *did* infiltrate Cole and Robinson’s decorative arts Museum and began to develop more rapidly, occupying various legitimate places within a strictly decorative arts collection. One of the more important acquisitions of the 1850s for the augmentation of what would become the Italian sculpture collection, came in the form of the Gherardini Collection of wax models that Cole and Robinson jointly sanctioned soon after the latter’s appointment.

## 1.2 The Gherardini Collection: Italian Sculpture and the Model as Design Process

The purchase, in 1854, of the “Gherardini Collection” of original models by great Italian artists, may be considered as the foundation of the sculpture series hereafter described. [...] These models were allowed to remain at Marlborough House, rather perhaps from their not being deemed appropriate additions to any other national collection, than with any definite intention of their being made the nucleus of a collection of modern sculpture.<sup>138</sup>

In December of 1853, Antonio Panizzi, the exiled, pro-Unification revolutionary from Italy and influential librarian at the British Museum, suggested to Cole that he purchase a certain “collection of M. Angelo’s models” for the museum at

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<sup>138</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, xii.

Marlborough House.<sup>139</sup> The collection consisted of around thirty original sculptural models, in wax and terracotta, by “various ancient Italian masters” [figs.15-20].<sup>140</sup> Twelve of these small-scale models were attributed to Michelangelo and the whole collection had been in the hands of the ancient Florentine Gherardini family for many years. The current Signor Gherardini’s wife had first offered the collection to the Tuscan and then the French governments, who had both declined it based on its high price.<sup>141</sup> In March of 1854, Cole met with “Mme. Gherardini [...] about her models” and a mutual decision must have been made to display them temporarily in the Museum with a view to eliciting enough interest to justify their eventual purchase.<sup>142</sup> We have seen how, in 1852, the initial criteria for the selection of the more expensive original objects had been based on excellence in design and application to utility, and their categorisation had focused on their material or industry, purposefully ignoring any systematic considerations of style or authorship.<sup>143</sup> In a striking contrast, the Gherardini collection consisted of rough, sculptural sketch models from a particular stylistic period in the history of art whose real selling point was their attribution to revered Italian Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo, Raphael, Donatello and Giambologna. In the above quotation, made some years later in 1862, Robinson considered how the Gherardini collection had been the “foundation” of the Italian sculpture collection, though clearly acknowledged this as a retrospective observation, pointing out that forming such a collection of

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<sup>139</sup> “M. Ho. Panizzi called to suggest the purchase of M. Angelo’s models,” Cole’s diary entry for 5 December 1853, Henry Cole Diaries, NAL.

<sup>140</sup> Department of Science and Art, *Second Report of the Department of Science and Art* (HC 1854-5, 1962, XVII. 215), 178.

<sup>141</sup> Eric MacLagan, “The Wax Models by Michelangelo in the Victoria and Albert Museum,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 44, no. 250 (Jan 1924): 4.

<sup>142</sup> See entry for 9 March 1854, Henry Cole Diaries, NAL.

<sup>143</sup> The latter could instead be portrayed using cheaper casts and copies.

“modern sculpture” was not his intention at the time. Thus, the Gherardini collection was an important milestone, but one that was often seen in this retrospective light, as a catalyst for the ensuing interest in Italian sculpture. However, at the time of their purchase, the models themselves were not described as ‘sculpture’ at all, despite later being referred to as such and being directly connected with well-known sculptors of the Italian Renaissance. The various interpretations of the term ‘model,’ however, had always had an active place within the teaching syllabus at the Schools of Design connected with the Museum: the ‘model’ could refer to either an example to be followed, a scaled-down copy, or part of the design process. But how easily did the Gherardini models fit within the Marlborough House collection: a collection that had undergone serious administrative changes since the purchase of the Great Exhibition collection in 1852?

### The Museum of Ornamental Art, 1853-7.

In March 1854, the Gherardini collection was exhibited at Marlborough House on a temporary (one-month) basis according to the acquisition system that had been established by the Board of Trade on the opening of the Museum:

The Board of Trade has laid down the principle that, as far as may be practicable all important objects which it is proposed to purchase shall be exhibited publicly in the Museum before they are bought. By this means a great variety of evidence will be obtained, helpful in forming a judgment as to fairness of price, peculiar

excellence of manufacture, historical importance, and similar qualities involving information which no one person can be expected to possess.<sup>144</sup>

The Gherardini collection was one of the first to be acquired according to this rather utilitarian system, which was clearly set up to safeguard the public purse from ill-researched expenditures and to gauge public interest. Before one can begin to consider the place of the Gherardini models at this moment in the Museum's history, it is necessary to briefly explore the state of the collections into which they were introduced.

Since its establishment and the initial acquisition of the objects from the Great Exhibition in 1852, the Museum had undergone various administrative changes. Firstly, it was now supervised by the government Department of Science and Art and had accordingly been renamed the "Museum of Ornamental Art" in 1853.<sup>145</sup> Secondly, the collections had been developing at an ever-increasing rate. Many new acquisitions had already been loaned free of charge, and often indefinitely, by various private donors, including Queen Victoria herself, whose collection of Sèvres porcelain (handpicked by Cole) formed one of the main attractions and, alongside purchases from the Bandinel collection, began a subsequent focus on the improvement of the Ceramics section of the Museum. In addition, purchases

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<sup>144</sup> Department of Practical Art, *First Report* (1853), 32.

<sup>145</sup> In 1853, the Board of Trade changed its Department of Practical Art to the Department of Science and Art to broaden the "systems of encouragement" for both Science and Art institutions with a view to better combining the two under one government department. Consequently, the Department now supervised both the Museum of Practical Geology at Jermyn Street and the Museum at Marlborough House – clearly designating the former as a Science institution and the latter as an Art institution: "The Museum in Jermyn Street *for Science*, and that at Marlborough House *for Art*, have proved, as they were intended to be, means of instruction of the highest value." Department of Science and Art, *First Report of the Department of Science and Art* (HC 1854, 1783, XXVIII.269), L. In addition, the Museum at Marlborough House no longer held the title of "Museum of Manufactures," but was renamed as the "Museum of Ornamental Art."

had been made within all sections of the Museum, though no large sums of money had been expended on comprehensive, and more expensive, collections such as that being sold by Madame Gherardini.

Another important change was, of course, Robinson's appointment. Unlike Cole, whose attempts at a False Principles exhibit prove otherwise, Robinson believed that only objects of excellent quality had a place at the Museum. As already discussed, in September of 1853, Robinson immediately removed Cole's False Principles exhibit and rearranged the whole collection, later admitting that:

there was, in truth, little of abiding value in the 1851 exhibition residuum, and the first efforts of the new curator were to suppress and eliminate a large proportion of it. Obviously the improvement of public taste and the enlightenment of industrial artists could not be effected by the continued exposition of the average art products of the day.<sup>146</sup>

Although this slight on Cole's early selections for the Museums was made long after their estrangement (and even after Cole's death), it is clear that, from the beginning, Robinson had very different plans for the "improvement of public taste and the enlightenment of industrial artists." The new curator would make his personal views on the proper selection and categorization of objects clear in his first official report. Taking the recent introduction of the word 'Art' into the title of the Museum as his cue, Robinson's report set out a broader, more inclusive general criterion for acquisition, remarking on the futility of imposing concrete categorisation on such a vast variety of objects that could legitimately be collected

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<sup>146</sup> Robinson "Our Public Art Museums," 951.

under the title “Ornamental Art.” This would allow many types of high-quality objects to be considered suitable for purchase that had perhaps been overlooked before, particularly those that might have previously been thought to belong exclusively to the ‘Fine Arts’ category:

As implied by its title and origin, the illustration of Art is the fundamental object of this Museum, and in particular that kind of Art which finds its material expression in objects of utility. No strict limits can be assigned to the province of Decorative Art, and it would be useless to endeavour to lay down rules or to frame definitions, with the view of distinguishing it conclusively from what is called Fine Art, on the one hand, or from mechanical industry on the other. Although in the majority of instances in practice, it is easy to assign objects to their proper classes, still there are numerous manifestations, the nature of which is intermediate, and against the placing of which under any of the before-mentioned divisions reasonable exception might be taken.<sup>147</sup>

Thus, with this more liberal interpretation of the term “Decorative Art” in mind, Robinson, and Cole (who certainly made no public complaints about Robinson’s views at this point, and instead welcomed his specialist knowledge) went in search of new objects for the Museum.

In addition to his broader interpretation of the decorative arts, Robinson also wanted to implement a more methodic system for acquisition, categorization and display that would complement, or fill in the gaps left by, the art-historical collections of the British Museum and National Gallery, later stating that “the

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<sup>147</sup> Robinson, *First Report of the Department of Science and Art* (1854), 228.

writer had from the beginning a clear and fixed intention in view: it was the logical continuance of the national gatherings, in the industrial and decorative arts categories, onwards from the point where the British Museum had ceased to represent them.”<sup>148</sup> The British Museum’s emphasis on the Antique thus left Robinson with a time frame that began with the medieval period and ended with the modern day, and, as the modern day was already well represented at Marlborough House, Robinson (and Cole) began by focusing on the acquisition of historical objects.

With all this in mind it is easier to see how, when the Gherardini collection came within Cole and Robinson’s radar, it might justifiably have gained a place at the Museum. By virtue of its attribution to great Italian masters, the collection constituted high-quality examples of works belonging to a stylistic period that Wornum had already suggested was underrepresented in Britain. The British Museum wasn’t interested in the models, nor was the National Gallery, so if the nation was to own these rare insights into the design processes of Michelangelo and Raphael, the Museum of Ornamental Art would have to foot the bill. But, if the Museum wanted to secure the models permanently, it would have to promote them as an indispensable asset that would benefit the nation before the government would consider parting with the princely sum that Madame Gherardini was asking. Taking into account that £4,470 had bought the Museum hundreds of fine objects from the Great Exhibition and that Gherardini wanted £3,000 for a small selection of rough wax and terracotta figures, some of which were merely disembodied limbs, the question of whether these models actually belonged at

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<sup>148</sup> Robinson, “Our Public Art Museums,” 954.

Marlborough House at such great public expense was not only a philosophical but also an economic one.

From the first conversations concerning the acquisition of the Gherardini collection, there were doubts amongst various authorities within the Department about its suitability within the Museum. Only days after his initial conversation with Panizzi in December 1853, Cole discussed the possible acquisition of the collection with Edward Cardwell, his friend and President of the Board of Trade, recording Cardwell's negative response in his diary: "M. Angelo nothing to do with our museum."<sup>149</sup> Despite the negative opinion of his superior, Cole soon ordered that William Dyce and John Rogers Herbert, two distinguished Royal Academicians who had previously worked within the Schools of Design, draw up a report on the Gherardini collection to be presented to William Gladstone, the Chancellor of the Exchequer.<sup>150</sup> The report, dated 10 January 1854, focused exclusively on the attribution of the objects to the various artists in question, which they believed to be, for the most part, correct. The report, however, was not altogether positive, concluding that "with respect to extrinsic evidence of the genuineness of the works we have noticed, it must be at once stated that there is none whatever. [...] Out of the thirty objects contained in the collection, it did not appear to us that more than ten or twelve were really desirable."<sup>151</sup> Still, Cole continued with the arrangements for temporary loan of the collection and the

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<sup>149</sup> See entry for 10 December 1853, Henry Cole Diaries, NAL.

<sup>150</sup> Appealing straight to Gladstone, and going over Cardwell's head, was a smart move considering that Gladstone was a well-known lover of art, as well as being in charge of the government purse strings. Many subsequent pleas for funds would be made straight to the Chancellor, whether this was proper practice or not.

<sup>151</sup> Department of Science and Art, "Extract from a Report made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the Gherardini Collection of Models, by Mr. Dyce, R.A., and Mr. Herbert, R.A." in *Second Report* (1855), 181-183.



models went on display on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March – the public could decide for themselves.

*Catalogue of a Collection of Models in Wax and Terracotta by Various Ancient Italian Masters known as the Gherardini Collection, 1854.*

To accompany the display, Cole had Robinson produce a catalogue in the form of an easily-distributable ‘penny pamphlet.’ Robinson’s catalogue for the Gherardini collection was written during this temporary loan period, prior to the purchase of the collection. Consequently, whilst the first catalogue of the Museum, describing the objects purchased from the Great Exhibition residuum (written by Cole, Redgrave et al.), explained the reasons for, and thus justified, the acquisition of objects that had already been purchased, Robinson’s *Catalogue of a Collection of Models in Wax and Terracotta, by Various Ancient Italian Masters, Known as the Gherardini Collection* (1854) promoted the models with a view to eliciting enough interest in the collection to warrant their future purchase and permanent place at the Museum. A detailed description of the collection, including attributions suggested by the current “leading artists of Florence,”<sup>152</sup> and subsequently by experts in Paris, had been put together by Madame Gherardini in preparation for the sale. A translation of this, and an extract from the report made by Dyce and Herbert, were both included in the catalogue. In addition, Robinson provided his own, relatively brief, introduction that, unlike his later scholarly catalogues, dealt solely with the proposed price of the collection, the situation

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<sup>152</sup> Department of Science and Art, *Second Report* (1855), 183.

surrounding its temporary display and a brief justification of its place within the Museum.

In his introduction, Robinson promoted the purchase of the collection on various grounds:

Supposing these models to be what they really are represented to be, they would have claims to consideration in the following points of view: - First, the models attributed to Michelangiolo and Raffaello, (the other objects being of comparatively little importance, and needing no illustration,) are thought to display much of that elevation of style and intrinsic beauty, which have immortalised the recognized works of these great men.<sup>153</sup>

Here Robinson focused on the authorship of the models and the fact that amongst them are some recognizable, in their “elevation of style and intrinsic beauty,” as the works of two of the most celebrated artists of the Italian Renaissance. Most of the promotional emphasis of the catalogue, it seems, including the various different reports on the authenticity of the models, was directed towards proving that these were original works by the great Italian masters. But why promote the name of Michelangelo when he apparently had no place at the Museum?

Despite Cardwell’s claim, the fact was that Robinson had already rearranged the collection so that the copies of the large Vatican *Loggia* cartoons by Raphael, as well as paper copies of sections of Michelangelo’s *Sistine Ceiling*, greeted the

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<sup>153</sup> Robinson, *Catalogue of a collection of models in wax and terracotta: by various ancient Italian masters, known as the Gherardini Collection, now being exhibited at the Museum of Ornamental Art, at Marlborough House, March 1854* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1854), 2.

visitor in the entrance hall: “A few other prints and drawings from celebrated decorative works of Giotto, M. Angelo, and Annibale Carracci were likewise added to render the illustration of wall decoration more complete.”<sup>154</sup> Although the entrance hall supposedly focused on the category of “Wall Decoration,” there is no denying that Robinson had actually created a room that exclusively displayed a “more complete” progression of wall decoration through the Italian Renaissance period from Giotto to Carracci. Michelangelo, Raphael and their Italian predecessors and followers weren’t just included in the collection, but copies of their decorative frescoes were part of the opening act. The distinctly Italian welcome at Marlborough House cannot have been unintentional. As Stevens and Trippi suggest in ‘An Encyclopedia of Treasures’: “As a ‘canonical’ painter whose compositions were also used in ornament, Raphael helped legitimize the applied arts, extending to them through his stardom the status of masterpiece, even when the objects in question were reproductions or studies.”<sup>155</sup> The Raphael *Loggie* copies had been the School of Design’s first substantial purchase (1837) and the Italian Renaissance had, from the Schools’ (and subsequently the Museum’s) conception, been set up as a desirable precedent for modern design and manufacture to follow. In 1835 and 1836, a Select Committee “appointed to enquire into the best means of extending a knowledge of the Arts and of the Principles of Design among the People,”<sup>156</sup> whilst considering the ways in which improvement could be made in modern British design and manufacture, had interviewed the eminent German art historian, Gustav Friedrich Waagen, who had suggested that “in former times the artists were more workmen and the

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<sup>154</sup> Robinson, *First Report of the Department of Science and Art* (1854), 226.

<sup>155</sup> Timothy Stevens and Peter Trippi, “An Encyclopedia of Treasures: The Idea of the Great Collection,” in *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, eds. Baker and Richardson, 150.

<sup>156</sup> Department of Science and Art, *First Report* (1854), i.

workmen were more artists, as in the time of Raphael, and it is very desirable to restore this happy connexion.”<sup>157</sup> Thus, the Italian period of the Revival was suggested as a desirable precedent for modern British manufacture to follow and as an example of a time when the fine and decorative arts were more comfortably allied. Raphael, Michelangelo (and, as we have seen, Ghiberti) represented the happy connexion between the fine and decorative arts found in the artist-workman, who reigned supreme in the Italian Renaissance. This alliance of the fine and decorative was the basis upon which the Schools of Design, and in consequence, the South Kensington Museum, were founded.

In addition, in the 1840s, every London museum turned its attention towards Italy, thanks to increasing scholarly interest in the art of that country, and particularly to Ruskin’s plea of 1847, printed in *The Times*, that directly encouraged the National Museums to look to Italy for their acquisitions: “Let agents be sent to all cities of Italy [...]”<sup>158</sup> Italian art objects were easy and cheap to acquire in the 1850s and being gleaned in large quantities from the blood-soaked soil of pre-Unification Italy for the National Collections of other European countries such as Germany, France and Russia. The British Museum and National Gallery focused their attention on Antique sculpture and Italian painting respectively, which would leave the way open for Robinson to purchase anything and everything else that came within his broad understanding of decorative art. Every curator and collector in Europe was shopping in Italy and the Museum of Ornamental Art had a legitimate reason to follow suit. Between the wall decoration in the entrance hall

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<sup>157</sup> Select Committee on Arts and their Connexion with Manufactures, *Report of the Select Committee on Arts and their Connexion with Manufactures together with the Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* (HC 1836, 568, IX. 1), 11.

<sup>158</sup> Ruskin, “Danger to the National Gallery,” *The Times* (7 Jan 1847): 6. In Cook and Wedderburn, VII, 406.

and Wornum's collection of Renaissance architectural relief (now on the back staircase),<sup>159</sup> the artist-workmen of the Italian Renaissance clearly had a legitimate place within the Museum, though their work was, so far, only represented in the form of copies. The chance to secure some original works in the Gherardini collection could surely not be missed.

Robinson continued his justification of the place of the Gherardini models at the Museum by considering that:

several of them are held to have a particular value, as being reminiscences of designs projected only, and never actually executed [...] or [...] of works left in an unfinished state, and from which these sketches exhibit interesting deviations, or as in the David, which is presumed to show the germ or first thought of one of the most renowned productions of the artist; whilst the anatomical studies afford actual evidence in confirmation of the peculiar mode of study which Michelangiolo is reputed to have followed.<sup>160</sup>

This was perhaps the most important justification for their position in the Museum as it interpreted the models as educational representations of the design process, connecting them with the training at the Schools of Art. In an essay on the V&A's history, entitled 'The Fall of a Great Museum,' of 1989, museum director John Pope-Hennessy stated that, at the time of the Gherardini purchase, "the models that sculptors made before undertaking their final work were thought to have more

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<sup>159</sup> Wornum, *First Report of the Department of Science and Art* (1854), 330.

<sup>160</sup> Robinson, *Gherardini Catalogue*, 2.

use for schools of design than finished sculptures.”<sup>161</sup> Sculptural sketch models, often created by the masters at the Schools themselves, were frequently used at the Schools for the purposes of drawing or modelling.<sup>162</sup> Pope-Hennessy further suggested that the Gherardini collection was justified within the collections as it offered the rare opportunity for the students, and the public, to witness the design processes of the great Italian masters. Indeed, Robinson’s catalogue considered how the models indicated the practical difficulties that these artists encountered. According to Robinson, Dyce and Herbert, the models demonstrated how the finished pieces deviated from the designs, having been adapted due to architectural, physical and material constraints: “[the model of the *David*] is highly valuable as showing what would have been the idea adopted by Buonarroti, had he been entirely free to regulate the pose of his figure, instead of being obliged to adapt it to the block of marble left in an imperfect and deteriorated state [...]”<sup>163</sup> Dyce and Herbert further suggested that Raphael, being a painter, had made practical mistakes in his designs for three-dimensional architectural decoration: “it is precisely the sort of sketch which [Raphael], as a painter, was likely to have furnished, - beautiful in its conception, comparatively slight and unequal in its execution and, as it would seem, not very well adapted to fill the niche intended to receive it.”<sup>164</sup> Such observations were excellent lessons for the students in the importance of practical considerations within the design process,

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<sup>161</sup> Pope-Hennessy, “The Fall of a Great Museum,” *The New York Review of Books* 36, no. 7 (April 27, 1989): 10.

<sup>162</sup> This practice would later become apparent in the various technical manuals on the processes of modelling that were produced by the School’s modelling master, Edouard Lanteri, at the turn of the twentieth century, which came complete with photographs of sketch models at various stages in the design and making process. See Lanteri, *Modelling: A Guide for Teachers and Students* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1902).

<sup>163</sup> Robinson, *Gherardini Catalogue*, 3.

<sup>164</sup> Department of Science and Art, “Extract from a Report made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the Gherardini Collection of Models, by Mr. Dyce, R.A., and Mr. Herbert, R.A.,” 185.

especially those concerning the subordination of sculptural decoration to architectural and material constraints, something that Raphael, as a painter, was considered to have practical difficulties with. They also considered the status of these Renaissance masters as artist-workmen of the period, and set them up as a desirable precedent to follow, or perhaps excel, in the case of Raphael's apparent sculptural attempts. Furthermore, the anatomical models attributed to Michelangelo supported the figure classes at the Schools, which emphasized the need for a good knowledge of human anatomy and, no doubt, the masters would have often referred to Michelangelo's "peculiar mode of study."<sup>165</sup> The Gherardini models were, in this sense, a legitimately educational collection worthy of their place at the Museum.

There were mixed reactions to the collection. A review in *The Spectator* in April 1854 neatly summed up the over-all reception of the models:

[The Gherardini models] are now tendered to England for 3000/., being at the average rate of some 100/. a piece. The miscellaneous John Bull will feel his breeches-pocket, grin at the models, and smile at the idea: but his opinion is not final. These are things of a kind in which the untutored eye can only see ugliness and dilapidation, while the artist will study and love them—partly for their own sake, chiefly for that of their authors.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> One can assume that the "peculiar mode of study" referred to here related to Michelangelo's practice of dissection and his interest in anatomy. An anatomical understanding of the human body would become an important aspect of the modelling syllabus at the Schools of Art in the late-nineteenth century. See, for example, Lanteri, *Modelling: A Guide for Teachers and Students* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1902).

<sup>166</sup> Anon, "Marlborough House: Models by the Italian Masters," *The Spectator* (April 1, 1854): 30.

In short, the models were far more useful and appealing to the design students than they were to the “untutored eye” of the average visitor, who might look upon them merely as a rare and ugly curiosity. Luckily, for the prospects of the Gherardini collection at the Museum, one of the more influential opinions on the matter, that of Gladstone (who was certainly no ‘John Bull’) was a positive one and, as Cole recorded in his diaries: “Mr. Gladstone came to see Gherardini models; thought well of them. If genuine, price not an object – approved of exhibition previous to purchase.”<sup>167</sup> With Gladstone’s approval, and some negotiation with Mme. Gherardini, the models were purchased in April for the reduced sum of £2,110 and their place at the Museum was justified by virtue of their preparatory state: as examples of works in progress that illuminated the design processes and practical considerations of the great Italian masters and would support the teaching practices at the School of Art. The only problem left, perhaps, was how to categorise them. How would they be integrated effectively into the rest of the Collection, which was still divided under predominantly material categories?

*A Catalogue of the Museum of Ornamental Art, 1856.*

As the number and variety of museum acquisitions increased, Robinson was beginning to have difficulty categorizing them all within the strict material classifications first imposed by Cole’s Committee. In his first report of the Museum, Robinson brought the issue of ‘proper’ classification to the attention of the Board:

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<sup>167</sup> See diary entry for 20 March 1854, Henry Cole Diaries, NAL.



Several leading principles of classification suggest themselves; and a consideration of these confirms me of the opinion, that here theoretic completeness must be often sacrificed to practical expediency, and that no one strict method can be made to combine all the requisites of a well-ordered system. In assigning objects to generic divisions, it is clear that obvious physical characteristics must have the first consideration; no other common bond or formula could, in so diversified a collection, possibly be acted upon with any hope of a practical result. In illustration of this, it seems to me that works in wood, stone, glass, metal, &c., should, as in fact they already do, form the main generic divisions of the collection, the mode of technical embodiment, in most cases, being as it were the *species*; as, for instance, cast, hammered, moulded, carved, blown, &c. Date, local origin, chemical constitution, &c. are less material, but nevertheless important, considerations; and there will be cases in which the relative prominence of one or other of these aspects may suffer change or inversion [...].”<sup>168</sup>

Whilst Robinson adhered to Cole’s original material classification for practical reasons, he suggested that some objects would be better classified by other, “less material” means and that subcategories were certainly required for this purpose. More background and contextual information needed to be given. Indeed, in his general catalogue for the Museum, which he was continually updating throughout the 1850s, the categories looked quite different from Cole’s original plan. Following the acquisition of the Gherardini collection, and the numerous purchases made at the Bernal sale (730 pieces at a cost of 8,658*l.* 13*s.* 6*d.*<sup>169</sup>) and the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1855, Robinson’s system of classification,

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<sup>168</sup> Department of Science and Art, *First Report* (1854), 230.

<sup>169</sup> Department of Science and Art, *Third Report of the Department of Science and Art* (HC 1856, 2123, XXIV.1), 68.

as described in the 1856 *Catalogue of the Museum of Ornamental Art*, had some important added divisions, including:

Division 1 - - Sculpture.

Carvings, &c. in Marble, Alabaster, Stone, Wood, Ivory, and other materials. –  
Art Bronzes. – Terracottas and Models in Wax, Plaster, &c.

Division 2 - - Painting.

Wall decorations. – Paper Hangings. – Illuminations. – Printing. – Designs. &c.

Division 3 - - Glyptic and Numismatic Art.

Cameos and Intaglios in Hard Stones and in Shell. – Medals, Seals, &c.<sup>170</sup>

Other divisions still maintained a material or industry-specific method for categorization, including: “Mosaics,” “Furniture and General Upholstery,” “Basket Work,” “Leather Work,” “Japanned or Lacquered Work,” “Glass Painting,” “Glass Manufactures,” “Enamels,” “Pottery,” “Works in Metal,” “Arms, Armour and Accoutrements,” “Watch and Clock Work,” “Jewellery,” and “Textile Fabrics.”<sup>171</sup> Looking at Robinson’s categories we can see that, for the first time, “Sculpture” was used as a legitimate classification and, interestingly, it was also the first on the list. But what kind of objects were included and excluded from this new “Sculpture” category?

There were 172 items listed under “Sculpture” (and yet more items that could be classed as ‘applied sculpture’ listed elsewhere). These were further divided by material: “Works in Marble, Alabaster, Stone” (9), “Carvings, &c. in Wood” (33), “Carvings in Ivory, Bone, &c.” (62), “Art Bronzes” (20), and “Terracottas and

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<sup>170</sup> Robinson, *Catalogue of the Museum of Ornamental Art* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1856), 7.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

Models in Wax, Plaster, &c.” (48). It is difficult to establish how Robinson interpreted the term “Sculpture” in this catalogue. Like “Art,” it was a category broad enough to be open to various interpretations, which may have been Robinson’s intention. Next to “Painting,” and “Glyptic and Numismatic Art,” it might have seemed to some that “Sculpture” had been afforded some kind of intellectual, fine arts interpretation that completely separated the objects therein from the objects of utility in, for example, the “Works in Metal” category, which was subheaded: “Wrought, Cast and Stamped works in general. – Chasing, Engraving, Etching, etc. - Instruments and Utensils – Locksmiths’ works – Goldsmiths’ works – *Damasquinerie* or inlaying. – *Niello* work.”<sup>172</sup> However, the term “Sculpture” might also be employed as a general classification for the art (or perhaps the *act*) of ‘ornamentation in three-dimensions,’ which, when split into its further material subcategories (marble wood, ivory, bronze and terracotta), covered the sculptural processes of carving, casting and modelling. The “Sculpture” section, unlike the other divisions in the catalogue, had no general introduction, affording us little insight into Robinson’s interpretation of the term. However, Robinson concluded his introduction to the “Painting” division thus: “any painting, the chief intention of which is simply to adorn a given space or position, irrespective of or rather notwithstanding its significance in an intellectual point of view, may in this sense be considered as a development of ornament, and as such would be admitted in this collection.”<sup>173</sup> To justify the place of painting in the Museum, the category “Painting” did not refer to stand-alone framed, fine art paintings *per se* (like those at the National Gallery), but rather to a two-dimensional mode of decorating architectural space – “Wall decorations. – Paper

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 49.

Hangings. – Illuminations. – Printing. – Designs. &c.” (and the copies of frescoes by Raphael and Michelangelo were included in this section). One could take a similar attitude towards “Sculpture,” especially since the objects categorized under “Sculpture” were further split into these material categories that demonstrated the different ways in which sculptural techniques could be applied to the ornamentation of architecture and objects of utility: marble, wood and ivory all dealt with carving; art bronzes dealt with casting; and terracotta, wax and plaster dealt with modelling. Interestingly, though, it seems that Robinson didn’t feel the need to make the same justification for “Sculpture” as he did for “Painting,” which might suggest that the more practical, material subcategories were meant to speak for themselves or that he didn’t want to lay down any “binding rules” for the interpretation of “Sculpture.” The concept of the artist-craftsman of the Renaissance period, however, would ensure that the philosophical extent of the words “Sculpture” and “Painting” in this period were stretched as far as possible.

Whilst the objects categorized as “Sculpture” were still mixed in terms of their geographical and historical styles, and ranged from oriental ivory combs to Italian bronze busts and decorative Flemish reliefs in marble, Robinson attempted to provide a more detailed stylistic and historical context for each item within the catalogue. The two busts by Guidi, included in Cole’s early catalogue for their excellent “bronze casting and chasing,” were described by Robinson in the following manner:

No. 167

COLOSSAL BRONZE BUST OF POPE INNOCENT X. – Height, including pedestal, 3 ft. 3in. Purchased at 90*l.* 1853.

No. 168

COLOSSAL BRONZE BUST OF POPE ALEXANDER VIII. – Height, including pedestal, 3ft. 3in. Purchased at 90*l.* 1853.

(Pietro Ottobeni of Venice), elected Pope 1689, died 1691. These busts, executed in a grand style of portrait sculpture, are contemporary Italian works of the school of Bernini.<sup>174</sup>

The entries begin with the usual ‘sales catalogue’ particulars (the busts had since been purchased). In addition, Robinson quoted the “grand style of portraiture” comment from Cole’s catalogue and removed the description of the “bronze casting and chasing” in favour of historical and stylistic context, despite not being entirely sure of exact attribution. Although the Metal Work section, where Cole had originally placed the busts, still existed, these two sculptures had instead been classified by Robinson as “Art Bronzes” under the general heading “Sculpture.” So, whilst they were still partly defined by their material, they were now generally acknowledged as “Sculpture” and grouped within a collection of (as it so happens, predominantly Italian) “art” sculptures, rather than with the enameled cups and bronze door-knockers of the “Works in Metal” section. However, they were not yet part of a chronological system of Italian Renaissance styles or classified specifically as “*Italian Sculpture.*” In this way, Robinson’s classification of the bronze busts, and his accompanying descriptions in the catalogue, seem to try to find a suitable balance between the pragmatic and the scholarly, or between Cole

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<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

and Wornum's earlier catalogues, appealing to the rhetoric of both. Robinson also appears to try to position sculpture as both "art" and "ornament," again highlighting the important status of the Italian sculptor as artist-workman.

The same was true for the Gherardini collection, which was grouped under the subcategory "Terra Cottas and Models in Wax, Plaster, &c.," a seemingly tailor-made classification for the models. Since the purchase of the Gherardini models in 1854, the collection of Italian artists' models had developed and figural or relief works attributed to artists such as Giambologna and Bandinelli had been further loaned or purchased. These now stood alongside: the terracotta statuettes by Clodion that had originally been categorized under "Pottery;" plaster casts of modern, British architectural relief (designed by Daniel Maclise R.A and loaned by Cole); and original terracotta statuettes and relief panels of the della Robbia family. Indeed, like the Gherardini models, the examples of terracotta 'della Robbia ware' that were beginning to enter into the collection in the mid-1850s would prove an important milestone for the Italian sculpture collection, emphasising the dual status of the artist-workman in the Italian Renaissance. The Soulages Collection, purchased between 1856 and 1865, brought with it a large number of Italian art objects and its catalogue would be the first to introduce "Italian Sculpture" as a definitive, descriptive classification, though one that, like the material-specific "Terracotta etc." section of the Museum, was closely related to ceramic manufacture.

### 1.3 The Soulages Collection: Italian Sculpture and Ceramics

The [Soulages] collection is singularly free from merely trivial objects of “vertu,” having been formed with the view of systematically illustrating the progress of Decorative Arts in the medieval and renaissance periods.<sup>175</sup>

When the Soulages Collection came onto the market in 1856, it was an obvious choice for the Museum of Ornamental Art. Jules Soulages (1803-57) was a collector of French and Italian medieval and renaissance art objects and a founding member of the Société Archéologique du Midi de la France; an organization set up in Toulouse to celebrate and study the art of medieval France. In the 1830s and 1840s, Soulages had travelled extensively through Italy and France and amassed a large collection of *objets d’art* including: Italian maiolica, Venetian glass, medals, bronze work, relief sculpture and furniture amongst others. These were displayed, much like the collection at Cluny in Paris, in Soulages’s hometown of Toulouse until 1856, when he put his collection up for sale with the strict instruction that it should be purchased as a whole. The circumstances surrounding the Museum’s purchase of Soulages’s collection were somewhat unorthodox and are recorded in Robinson’s *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection of 1856*:

It was felt by a number of gentlemen, interested in the progress of art in England, to be most desirable that this Collection should be acquired by the nation, especially as a Museum was already being formed at Marlborough House to which it would be a valuable acquisition. Representations were accordingly made

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<sup>175</sup> Robinson, “Mr. Webb’s Report on the Collection of Ornamental Art at Toulouse,” Letter from J. C. Robinson to H. Cole dated 23 April 1856, Henry Cole, *Correspondence and Papers 1836 - 1932*, NAL, 55.BB, Boxes 1-19.

to Government, in the hope that it might be so acquired: - the time (during the continuance of the [Crimean] war) was, however, considered unfavourable.<sup>176</sup>

The “interested gentlemen” did not want to let the opportunity to acquire the Collection slip away. As the opening quotation above suggests, Robinson (and Webb) believed that the nature of the objects in the collection were a perfect fit with the Museum at Marlborough House. It would (like the Cluny collection that Robinson much admired) provide the Museum with a ready-made, systematic display of the progress of decorative art in the medieval and renaissance periods. This point was further emphasized in the opening to the Catalogue:

Premising that [Soulages’s] object was the illustration of Art, and not the indulgence of a taste for the merely curious, his aim appears to have been to get together a complete series of decorative objects of utility, and of those minor productions of great artists, which are not usually thought to deserve the designation of “*high art*.”<sup>177</sup>

The objects in the Soulages collection were, therefore, not curios, nor were they objects of “high art.” Soulages was systematically collecting exactly the type of object that was suitable for the Museum: “decorative objects of utility” and “those minor productions of great artists” that were not classed as “high” or fine art. The collection would provide a substantial beginning to an historical display of the progress of ornament at the Museum: a display that was much desired by both Robinson and Cole.

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<sup>176</sup> Robinson, *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1856), vi.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, v.



With this in mind, the interested parties pooled their money together and managed to gather more than double the funds needed to secure the collection privately. This philanthropic purchase was, apparently, a completely disinterested one on the part of each individual: they were purchasing it for the nation with a view to displaying it at the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857 and then gradually selling it back to the Museum of Ornamental Art at cost price.<sup>178</sup> A list of the subscribers was appended to the Catalogue and, of the 73 individuals who donated, all the usual names connected with the Department, the organisers of the Manchester Exhibition, politicians and manufacturers were involved. Cole donated £300; Robinson, £100; Redgrave, £200; and their mutual friend Minton, a hefty £1,000. Even Isambard Kingdom Brunel donated £500 to the cause. They raised £24,800 in total and purchased the Collection in 1856 for £11,000. The 750 objects in the Soulages collection were immediately transferred to Marlborough House where they were displayed as a loans collection, pending purchase. Apart from a brief spell at the 1857 Manchester Exhibition, they remained within the Museum's collection and were gradually purchased over a period of many years.

### *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection, 1856.*

Robinson's *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection* was far more detailed in its scholarly descriptions than any catalogue he had put together so far. This was perhaps due to the fact that a large portion of the collection consisted of Italian maiolica pottery and Palissy ware, of which Robinson had a specialist knowledge and interest. Whilst working as Headmaster in the Potteries, Robinson had

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<sup>178</sup> Though judging by the number of manufacturers amongst the donors, although they weren't interested in ownership of the collection, they would have taken an interest in the influence that it might have on their own designers.

acquainted himself with various foreign and historic ceramic manufactures. Indeed, later in his career, in a heated argument with Cole's son via letters to *The Times*, Robinson professed to have been the driving force in the revival of maiolica pottery at the Minton factory:

In 1849, while Mr. Cole was still an *employé* of the Public Records Office, I induced Mr. Wilson to sanction the loan of some of these objects [maiolica pottery] to the school of art at Hanley, in the Staffordshire Potteries, of which since 1847 I had been master. [...] Other local friends at the same time, on my suggestion, contributed a small sum of money wherewith prizes were offered to the students of the schools at Hanley and Stoke-Upon-Trent for designs and models of objects of pottery in the style of the Italian Majolica ware. The result of this competition was encouraging, and the idea of reviving the manufacture of majolica ware was forthwith taken up by the late Mr. Herbert Minton, who was a leading patron of the Schools.<sup>179</sup>

Putting the scathing slights on Cole's authority aside, Robinson's hyperbolic assertion that his actions had caused the success of Minton majolica was built on legitimate facts. Charles Heath Wilson, who was Director of the Schools at the time and with whom Robinson had a close friendship, would certainly have sanctioned the removal of objects to Stoke-on-Trent. Whether this one incident led to the successful revival of majolica at Minton's, however, remains to be seen: it was certainly true that Minton majolica was officially introduced at the Great Exhibition of 1851, only two years later. Judging by the large sum of money offered up by Minton for the Soulages Collection, examples of Italian maiolica

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<sup>179</sup> Robinson, "Circulation of Art Objects," *The Times* (5 Jul 1887): 4.

pottery must have still been relevant to the improvement of the British ceramics industry. Minton, in particular, seems to have been looking for fresh inspiration for his designers.

At Marlborough House, the Soulages collection was displayed in its own room, separate from the rest of the Museum collections. Almost 200 highly-coloured majolica works provided a dazzling display of vivid colour that appears to have visually overwhelmed the rest of the objects in the room (see [fig.21]). In addition, the Italian maiolica and Palissy ware also dominated Robinson's catalogue. Each piece was described in as much detail as Robinson could provide and, in a general introduction to the majolica section, in his usual exaggerated style, he suggested that maiolica "is now perceived to be one of the most important categories of industrial or decorative art which the world has yet seen."<sup>180</sup> At the conclusion of this introduction, Robinson stated that "important works of several other notable Maestri will be found in this Collection, and the enamelled sculpture of the school of Luca della Robbia is represented by two fine specimens."<sup>181</sup> But, the della Robbia work was not displayed in the case with the maiolica pottery, nor was it described within the majolica section of the catalogue. Instead, and for the first time, Robinson had created a geographically, stylistically, historically and medium-specific category of "Italian Sculpture," which grouped together a mere eight objects in terracotta and marble, including these "two fine specimens" of della Robbia relief sculpture. He then linked this "Italian Sculpture" section with the maiolica, both visually in the display and in the catalogue, using the della Robbia reliefs to bridge the gap.

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<sup>180</sup> Robinson, *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection*, 1. Whilst this is exaggerated, there is evidence to suggest that Cole agreed. See discussion of Cole's attitude towards majolica in Chapter 4.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

The “Italian Sculpture” section of the catalogue opened with a descriptive introduction to della Robbia ware in general: “‘Della Robbia ware,’ as it is now familiarly termed, is sculpture in terra-cotta, generally in high relief, or in the round, covered with an enamel glaze of the same composition as that of the Majolica ware.”<sup>182</sup> Here, Robinson directly linked the maiolica pottery and the della Robbia reliefs as well as productively referring to the works as both “ware” (pottery) and “sculpture.” He therefore placed the artistic hierarchy of the della Robbia reliefs somewhere in between “sculpture” and maiolica pottery, by giving the works this dual status. Robinson continued with a brief history of the della Robbia workshop, celebrating the first works of Luca della Robbia as its most successful generation. He then went on to provide more information as to the various styles of each generation of the della Robbia family and reversed Vasari’s claim that della Robbia had invented, and kept secret, the particular stanniferous enamel applied to his sculptures, stating that “the stanniferous enamel was everywhere in Italy, during the fifteenth century, currently applied as a covering to clay in the shape of plates and vases: its application to reliefs in the same material could not therefore have remained a mystery.”<sup>183</sup> This would have been clear to any visitor who compared the vast collection of enamelled Italian maiolica “plates and vases” of similar date in the centre of the room to the della Robbia sculptures that were hung nearby on the walls.

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 131.

The catalogue entries themselves had completely moved away from the sales-catalogue style of the earlier examples and instead focused on authorship, as well as stylistic and historical information:

No. 437

CIRCULAR RELIEVO – Virgin and Child. Enamelled sculpture in terra-cotta of the “fabrique” of Della Robbia. Diam. of the relievo, 21 in. This piece is probably the work of Andrea or one of his sons, dating after 1500? The background is coloured blue, and the figures are covered with white enamel in the usual manner. The round, swollen forms of the infant Christ have no analogy with the style of drawing of Luca, in which a certain tendency to meagerness is on the contrary perceptible. The carved frame, though of ancient Italian work, is of later date than the relievo. It is apparently of Venetian origin, dating about 1550-60. **[fig.22]**

No. 438.

THE ADORATION OF THE KINGS – Relievo in Della Robbia ware. Length, 24 in; height 16 ½ in. This exquisite work, also enamelled in white, on blue background, is either from the hand of Luca, or an early work of Andrea. It was probably a compartment of the “predella” of a larger altarpiece.<sup>184</sup> **[fig.23]**

Notice the absence of price, and the fact that the capitalised titles given to these works were not, in the first instance, specific to the material but rather to the subject of the work (“The Adoration of the Kings”) or the ‘type’ of sculpture (“Circular Relievo”). The description, which looks at authorship, is of a far more connoisseurial style than those vague “grand style of portrait sculpture” comments of the earlier catalogues. Here, Robinson considered the “infant Christs” of both

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 131-2.

Luca and Andrea della Robbia, and their comparative “chubbiness,” as indicative of authorship. Robinson also admitted his uncertainty of the authorship of the second panel due to the fact (as he points out in his introduction to the Italian Sculpture section) that Luca and Andrea della Robbia often worked together. These observations were far removed from the visual analysis of the kind exercised by the early catalogues and were instead written in the manner of a connoisseur of the fine arts; comparing fine details in composition rather than in material techniques. It is true that Robinson wanted to encourage the connoisseur, believing that the teaching of the ‘science’ of connoisseurship was an important step towards the just appreciation of ornamental art.<sup>185</sup>

The rest of the “Italian Sculpture” section consisted of two Italian marble busts, a group in the round showing the “influence of Michael Angelo,”<sup>186</sup> and three works in relief, one of which (rather oddly considering the category) is described as German.<sup>187</sup> Therefore, the classification of “Italian Sculpture” was selective and a little confusing. Due to its contextualization within the over all Soulages Collection, it did not, for example, include the numerous Italian works in bronze, which had their own, material-specific category (though none of these were specifically “art” sculptures, but were certainly highly sculpted objects of utility, such as the Giuseppe de Levis *Firedogs* (c.1555, V&A [figs.24, 25]). The “Italian Sculpture” division, and Robinson’s long introduction to it in the catalogue, appears to have been created predominantly for the promotion of the della Robbia reliefs in the Soulages Collection. After three pages of informative and descriptive

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<sup>185</sup> Robinson’s ambition to encourage the collector and connoisseur is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 of this study.

<sup>186</sup> Robinson, *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection*, 128. Thus inviting comparison to the Gherardini collection.

<sup>187</sup> This piece (Museum No. 656:2-1865) is now confirmed to be of Netherlandish origin.

text relating to the two della Robbia exhibits, the introduction ends by briefly stating that “it is not necessary to anticipate any remarks on the Italian sculpture in stone, marble, &c., comprised in the Soulages Collection; the specimens are described as they occur in the catalogue.”<sup>188</sup> No real context was therefore provided for the marble works as a group, even though there were more objects in marble than there were della Robbia reliefs. However, looking at the display, it is clear that at least one of the marble reliefs mentioned (*Francesco Cinzio Benincasa*, Author Unknown, c.1478-1480 [fig.26]) was hung next to the della Robbia reliefs on one wall (see [fig.21]). An emphasis on the principles of *relief* (as had been the case in Wornum’s cast collection) and particularly the application of *colour* to relief, is key here. By juxtaposing the (modestly coloured) della Robbia reliefs and a white marble panel by “one of the greatest of the quattrocento sculptors,”<sup>189</sup> alongside the maiolica, Robinson was perhaps suggesting that the visitor compare the treatment of the *relievo* aspect of these early Italian examples; taking into account their different materials, purpose, and their polychrome surfaces.

With his specialist ceramic teaching background, Robinson had often dealt with the concept of the application of relief to the sculptural ornamentation of pottery. In an 1848 lecture given during his tenure at the Hanley School he suggested that:

With respect to the sculptural ornamentation of pottery [...], it occurs to me that the study of the antique with reference to the principles of *relievo* cannot be too much insisted upon. The practical difficulties which attend to the fabrication of

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<sup>188</sup> Robinson, *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection*, 131.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 132. Robinson didn’t know who to attribute the panel to, but suggested it must have been executed by a great master of the early Quattrocento.

pottery ornamented in relief, together with the ignorance of the true nature and province of bas relief, have in this manufacture frequently induced the most incredible violation of common sense.<sup>190</sup>

This emphasis on the study of quality, historic examples of relief work (though in this case, antique ‘bas-relief’) for the improvement of modern ceramic manufacture is perhaps what Robinson was trying to communicate with the ‘maiolica/sculpture’ juxtaposition in the Soulages Collection. The student of ceramics would certainly have been encouraged to examine the majolica of this room and, on further exploring the reliefs on the wall, s/he would have seen how sculptural relief ornamentation was dealt with in different materials, for different purposes and, perhaps most importantly, in both mono- and polychrome. As the third chapter of this thesis discusses, debates concerning the traditional Winckelmannian prejudice relating to the colouring of relieved forms were at an all time high in this period. In 1854, Owen Jones had published his ‘Apology for the Colouring of the Greek Court in the Crystal Palace’ and Robinson seems to have been addressing these prejudices by juxtaposing the white marble panel with coloured della Robbia reliefs and maiolica pottery; using the della Robbia works to bridge the ‘fine/decorative’ and ‘colour/colourless’ gap between them.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Robinson, *A Lecture delivered to the Students of the Government School of Design, Hanley, Staffordshire Potteries on Art Education, being an Introductory Exposition of the Studies and Ultimate Objects of the School*, by J. Charles Robinson, Master of the Hanley School, April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1848 (1848) Robinson Papers, NAL.

<sup>191</sup> Owen Jones, *An apology for the colouring of the Greek Court in the Crystal Palace* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1854). The German relief included in the Italian collection, if exhibited here as well, would have further added to the emphasis on polychromy as Robinson describes how the traces of gilding that were apparent on its surface point towards a fashion for the gilding of marble in Europe in the sixteenth century. Perhaps this was why it was included in the Italian sculpture collection?



So, the Soulages Collection brought with it the introduction of an “Italian Sculpture” division that focused on the juxtaposition of della Robbia relief sculptures in relation to a large, popular collection of maiolica pottery. At this stage in the Museum’s history, it seems that Italian sculpture was appearing under different categories in every corner of Marlborough House: della Robbia reliefs were categorized by material in the “Terra Cottas and Models in Wax, Plaster, &c.” section; under a general category of “Sculpture;” alongside the Gherardini models by Michelangelo and other Italian artists of the Revival; and next to examples of Italian maiolica pottery. Bronze busts were also grouped under “Sculpture,” and no longer within the “Metal Work” category. There was also a specific, if still confusing, category, “Italian sculpture,” grouping polychrome della Robbia reliefs and more traditional white marble reliefs. And yet still, what might be termed ‘applied sculpture’ remained scattered throughout the rest of Museum. In 1857, the removal of the entire collection to the V&A’s current site in South Kensington, and its subsequent rearrangement, would bring about the revelation in Robinson that would determine his subsequent decision to focus on augmenting the collection of Italian Sculpture at the Museum.

### The South Kensington Museum, 1857.

Outlying and more or less incongruous collections were eagerly sought for, and as soon as possible assimilated in an illogical and bewildering manner. [...] Soon, however, the legitimate art gatherings of the museum, directly under the writer’s care and purveyance, took the lead and visibly emerged from the motley medley chaos.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Robinson, “Our Public Art Museums,” 955.

In 1856, work began on a large iron and glass structure at Brompton Park, South Kensington that would become the purpose-built home to the central School of Art. It would also contain various educational collections concerned with the Arts and Natural Sciences. The School and its Museum of Ornamental Art were transferred from Marlborough House to the new buildings in early 1857 and, at the same time, the Board of Trade relinquished its government of the Department of Science and Art, handing it over to the Education Department. The South Kensington Museum, as the new establishment was known, was officially opened to the public by Queen Victoria on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1857. As Robinson's above quotation suggested, the Museum contained an even more bewildering variety of seemingly incongruous smaller museums, including: a collection of British paintings bequeathed to the nation by manufacturer-turned-collector, John Sheepshanks; a small collection of modern British sculpture contributed by the Sculptor's Institute; architectural casts relating to the design of the Houses of Parliament; an art library; a collection of raw building materials; educational models and textbooks for use in schools; animal materials (including taxidermy and animal products); a food collection that taught basic nutrition; patented inventions; and, of course, the collection of Ornamental Art from Marlborough House (see floor plan [fig.27]). The arrangement of these will be discussed in greater depth in the second chapter of this thesis. Robinson's Museum of Ornamental Art was spread across, and all but swallowed up by, this confusing space. However, as his above quotation suggests, his "art gatherings" therein would slowly begin to emerge from the "motely medley chaos."

Whilst the contents of the Museum of Ornamental Art were split between the Sheepshanks building and various compartments in the iron building, an “Art Museum” was created at the centre of the “Boilers,” and, at the centre of this, Robinson erected a newly acquired, full-size plaster cast of Michelangelo’s *David*, that had been gifted to the Museum by Queen Victoria (c1857, V&A, London [fig.28]).<sup>193</sup> The *David* could never have fitted into the rooms at Marlborough House, but the fact that the Art Museum at South Kensington had a higher ceiling meant that this copy of one of the greatest Italian sculptures of all time was installed in an imposing position at the heart of the Museum, presiding over the collection of Ornamental Art. As Levi has pointed out, in 1858, whilst Cole was away in Italy for health reasons, Robinson took the opportunity to create a themed display at the base of the *David*: a display that, in keeping with the cast that surmounted it, focused on Italian sculpture. In an 1858 letter to Cole he wrote:

Central Court – new building – I have emptied the large case standing at the foot of the Michel Angelo “David,” and filled it again with all the Medieval Sculpture in our possession – marbles and terracottas, so that the “sculpture” section is now in sequence with the little case of “Gherardini” models, and the David itself, which is now no longer such an isolated object. This new case is now one of the most attractive in the museum, and I was surprised myself to find how strong we were in <art> sculpture when all the specimens were put together. – of course I have not moved the enamelled Della Robbia ware – this seemed to have too close an affinity with the Majolica to be removed from the new rooms.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Who had in turn received it as a gift from the Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1857

<sup>194</sup> Robinson, “Letter from J. C. Robinson to H. Cole dated 4 Dec 1858,” Henry Cole, *Correspondence and Papers 1836 -1932*, NAL, 55.BB. Boxes 1-19. See also Levi, “Between Fine Art and Manufacture,” 212-13.

Though he left the della Robbia reliefs close to the maiolica to maintain the juxtaposition of sculptural ceramics, Robinson had now created a themed display of Italian Renaissance sculpture that juxtaposed the cast of the *David*, which had previously been a little “isolated,” with the Gherardini models and other Italian “art” sculptures. Robinson’s display no longer highlighted the material construction of these sculptures but instead focused on their similar historical and stylistic context and, despite Cardwell’s earlier claims, Michelangelo certainly had a dominant place within the collection. Looking at a contemporary photograph, we can see that this display included those two bronze portrait busts of the Popes bought from the Great Exhibition that had so often been re-categorised within the collection (see [fig.1]): bronze, wax, marble, and terracotta were finally united beneath a plaster giant of Italian Renaissance sculpture.<sup>195</sup> Once Robinson had established this small selection of Italian “art” sculptures, he began to promote it in his reports: “the gradual accumulation of specimens has in many cases allowed of the formation of special series. One of the most interesting of these series is that of Medieval and Renaissance sculpture in marble and terra cotta.”<sup>196</sup> In addition, just a few days after the rearrangement of the objects beneath the *David*, in December 1858 Robinson and Cole began discussing the acquisition of the Campana collection – a selection of maiolica pottery and Italian sculpture that had recently gone up for sale in Italy.<sup>197</sup>

#### 1.4 The Campana Collection of Italian Sculpture, 1861.

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<sup>195</sup> The display of the Art Museum, and the details of this photograph, are discussed at length in the second chapter of this study.

<sup>196</sup> Robinson, *Sixth Report of the Department of Science and Art* (HC 1859, 2502, XXII, Pt.II), 29.

<sup>197</sup> “A good deal is being said in London just now about the Campana collection.” Robinson, “Letter from J. C. Robinson to H. Cole dated 27 Dec 1858,” Henry Cole, *Correspondence and Papers 1836-1932*, NAL, 55.BB, Boxes 1-19.

I have begun at Campana's today, and am much disappointed with the majolica – but in the section of Italian sculpture the case is different, here are many very fine things, chiefly the marble and terracottas [...], it is a very important collection, and would be worth our making a great effort to obtain.<sup>198</sup>

In 1858, whilst Cole was recuperating in Italy, he visited the much talked about Campana collection. Cole's impression must have been a positive one as, some months later, Robinson was dispatched to Italy to investigate and provide his expert opinion on the extensive selection of maiolica pottery within the collection. The Campana collection, which had previously belonged to the Marchese Campana, director of the Monte di Pietà ("the national pawnbroking establishment of the papal government"),<sup>199</sup> had recently gone up for sale in Italy and the controversy surrounding it was causing quite a stir. Campana had been arrested and imprisoned, charged with embezzling government money to fund his private collecting habit. The Papal government had seized his vast collection and were now trying to sell it off piece-by-piece for their own pecuniary gain. Campana's agent, Ottavio Gigli, had recently amassed an extensive collection of Italian sculptures, which were also handed over to the Monte in payment of Campana's debts. Plenty of British and European agents, working both privately and for the national museums, were in Italy at this time, scouting for cheap objects whose owners had fallen victim to the conflict around Unification. For them, the Campana collection was a real hoard – in particular, the British Museum had its eye on a large selection of Antique sculptures, and it was their agent who had first

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<sup>198</sup> Robinson, "Letter from J. C. Robinson to H. Cole dated 25 April 1859," Henry Cole, *Correspondence and Papers 1836 -1932*, NAL, 55.BB, Boxes 1-19.

<sup>199</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, xiii.

indicated to the South Kensington Museum that they might be interested in the majolica section of the collection.<sup>200</sup> In 1858, Robinson's collector friend, Robert Phillips (an antique jewellery dealer), had suggested that a similar purchasing system to that used for the Soulages collection could again be employed to purchase the Campana collection for the nation.<sup>201</sup> With this possibility in mind, Robinson travelled to Italy, though his initial report on Campana's objects (quoted above) concluded that the maiolica was not worth the hype. However, Campana's collection was not a complete disappointment as Robinson had found a "very important" collection of Italian sculpture that he urged Cole to consider for the Museum.

In his 1862 catalogue of the Italian sculpture, Robinson recounted his first visit to the Campana collection:

The writer was directed by the Lords of the Committee of Council on Education to visit the Campana Museum, and to report on such portions of it as might be within the scope of the collection at South Kensington. The result of his inspection was, that, of the 124 specimens comprising the Gigli Collection, only 69 pieces were, in his opinion, to be desired; whilst of the analogous Campana

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<sup>200</sup> The British Museum agent was the archaeologist, Charles Thomas Newton, who alerted the National Gallery and South Kensington Museum to the collection of paintings and majolica he had seen at Campana's. For a discussion of the collaboration between agents, see Levi "Let Agents be Sent to all the Cities of Italy: British Public Museums and the Italian Art Market in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Renaissance*, eds. Law and Østermark-Johansen, 36-7.

<sup>201</sup> "Phillips in Cockspur is interesting himself in [the Campana collection] and has got a scheme "in petto" for bringing it to England on the footing of the "Soulages" collection [...] the project is to form an association to bring the collection, and exhibit it in connection with the Exhibition of 1861, and then to sell it by auction during or at the close of the same." Robinson, "Letter from Robinson to Cole dated 27 Dec 1858."

sections of renaissance sculpture and Majolica ware, a selection of 15 highly-important specimens were greatly to be coveted.<sup>202</sup>

Despite Robinson's interest, the purchase of the Campana sculptures would have to wait. Signor Gigli still had some authority over the sale of his portion of Campana's collection (comprising the Italian sculptures) and the Monte could not sell without his permission. Gigli had asked a ridiculous sum for the collection and, not having nearly enough funds, Robinson's negotiations fell through.

He did not, however, go home empty-handed. In Robinson's report for the year 1859, he highlighted the more important objects he had obtained in Italy for the "Art collections" (as they were now referred to):

The additions to the Art Collections have been of considerable importance. A portion of the Soulages Collection has been purchased; but it is from Italy that the principal specimens have been procured. Among them may be instanced a marble altar-piece of the fifteenth century by Andrew Feruzzi; a marble cantoria from the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence; a heraldic emblem, nearly eleven feet in diameter, of Della Robbia ware, from Florence; a chimney piece by Donatello, and other works of a similar class [...]. The acquisition of these specimens has enriched the collection to an extent perhaps unequalled in this class of objects by any other European Museum.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, xvi.

<sup>203</sup> Department of Science and Art, *Seventh Report of the Department of Science and Art* (HC 1860, 2626, XXIV, 77), 11-12.

Every one of the items listed here (see [figs.29-31]) were large-scale works representing a “similar class” of Italian sculpture on a grand scale. Without actually using the words “Italian sculpture,” Robinson pointed out here that the Museum was now unrivalled in “this class of objects.” The new acquisitions were placed in the rooms beneath the Sheepshanks gallery due to their size (and, no doubt, the need to protect them in a way that the iron building could not support). In the same report, Robinson highlighted the importance of the growing Italian sculpture section: “one important section [of the collection], alluded to in the last report as in progress, has been specially developed, namely that of sculpture of the mediæval and renaissance periods.”<sup>204</sup> He went on to describe the items in more detail, highlighting their various qualities and justifying their purchase. For example, the della Robbia *Stemma of King René of Anjou* (c.1466, V&A, London [fig.30]) was described as “probably one of the largest and finest specimens of its kind ever executed.”<sup>205</sup> As the della Robbia family already had a legitimate place in the collection, the addition of one of their greatest productions was completely justified, as were various other of their large altarpieces. The chimney-piece attributed to Donatello (*Chimney Piece*, Desiderio da Settignano, c. 1466, V&A, London [fig.31]) in “Pietra Serena” (or sandstone), would, no doubt, have been bought with the marble example of the Soulages collection in mind. In addition, four “angle piers sculptured with figures in high relief, portions of a great marble pulpit,”<sup>206</sup> were attributed to the Pisani (*The Archangel Gabriel*, Nicola Pisano, c. 1260, V&A, London [fig.32]). Thus, Robinson was slowly forming a chronological progression of Italian Renaissance sculpture from the Pisani, through to della Robbia, Donatello, Ferrucci (*Ferrucci Altarpiece*, Andrea di Piero

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<sup>204</sup> Robinson, *Seventh Report* (1860), 127.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.



Ferrucci, c.1493, V&A [fig.29]), Michelangelo and Giambologna. The common denominator between the works on display by these Italian sculptors was their connection to architecture. They included chimney-pieces, altarpieces, pulpits, stemmas, and choir galleries (just as Wornum's Renaissance casts had focused primarily on architraves, pilasters, and cartouches). Indeed, in an earlier 1857 lecture at the Museum, Robinson had already stated that "the decorative arts in immediate alliance with architecture are of the highest importance, and objects of an architectural nature in stone, marble, wood, terra cotta, bronze, &c. under the general head of sculpture, may very properly be first noticed."<sup>207</sup> It was through this alliance with architecture that Robinson would further justify the Italian sculpture collection in his catalogue.

Plans for a separate "Italian sculpture" display and a descriptive catalogue were made after the eventual purchase of the Italian sculpture in the Campana collection. In 1860, Robinson and Redgrave both travelled to Italy to re-inspect the collection, which the Papal government, desperate for money, had decided to sell without Gigli's consent. Despite the sale being rather underhand, Robinson wanted to secure the sculptures as quickly as possible, writing to Cole from Naples: "I need not remind you how very important an acquisition like this would be to our section of Mediaeval and Renaissance sculpture – No such collection is ever likely to occur again for sale."<sup>208</sup> Cole sanctioned the purchase and Robinson came home, having secured 85 pieces of sculpture from the Campana collection (at £5,836) along with forty more examples from various other sales. Robinson now had enough Italian sculpture in his collection to create a systematic, historical

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<sup>207</sup> Robinson, *On the Museum of Art*, Address (14 Dec 1857), Robinson Papers, NAL.

<sup>208</sup> Robinson, "Letter from J. C. Robinson to H. Cole from Naples dated 22 Nov 1860," Henry Cole, *Correspondence and Papers 1836-1932*, NAL, 55.BB, Boxes 1-19.

display, and an accompanying scholarly catalogue, that focused on the complete progress of sculpture in the “medieval and renaissance” period.

The display of the Italian sculpture collection took some time to put together as Robinson’s 1861 report suggested:

It will not be possible to exhibit this series [Italian Sculpture] in its entirety until the completion of the new courts which are now in progress; it is ultimately, however, intended to assemble together all the specimens in the class of sculpture, and the analogous categories of ornamental bronzes, medals, &c., and to supplement them by a limited number of plaster casts, photographs, &c., of remarkable works which are still *in situ* in the churches, museums, &c., of the continent, especially of such as are typical of the styles and characteristics of their several authors.<sup>209</sup>

Robinson’s intention was to gather together anything that could conceivably be categorized under “Italian sculpture” into the new court, forming a complete historical series of the Italian sculpture of the medieval and renaissance period, and using casts and photographs to fill in the inevitable chronological gaps. This historical display would be placed alongside a separate, temporary exhibition put together with the help of Robinson’s Fine Arts Club, a group of connoisseurs, collectors and enthusiasts, that he had founded some years earlier. The temporary *Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Mediæval, Renaissance and More Recent Periods on Loan at the South Kensington Museum* and the Italian sculpture collection combined, provided an historical alternative to the strictly modern

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<sup>209</sup> Robinson, *Eighth Report of the Science and Art Department of the Committee of Council on Education* (HC 1861, 2847, XXXII, I), 122.

display of manufacture at Cole's 1862 International Exhibition, which was to take place on the opposite side of Exhibition Road. Whether Robinson's intention was to support or rival Cole's Exhibition is unclear. Nevertheless, many of the thousands of visitors that flocked to South Kensington in 1862 to see Cole's International Exhibition, must have also visited the South Kensington Museum. Here they would have been confronted, in the two large architectural courts, with Robinson's historical and systematic display of fine objects: quite a different experience from the modern, commercial spectacle across the road. It was clear that, whilst modern manufactures still provided the focus for Cole's exhibitions, for a brief period, Italian art objects of the Revival period reigned supreme at the Museum.

It is almost certain that Robinson wanted to show off his newly acquired Italian sculpture collection, that was "richer and more complete than that of any other public museum,"<sup>210</sup> but he also did not lose sight of the importance of justifying the place of this Italian sculpture within the decorative arts context of the Museum. In fact, his justification for the predominance of Italian sculpture at South Kensington was first aired publicly, and persuasively, in the accompanying catalogue.

*Italian Sculpture of the Middle Ages and Period of the Revival of Art:  
A Descriptive Catalogue of the Works Forming the Above Section of  
the Museum, 1862.*

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<sup>210</sup> Robinson describes the collection in this way in his report of 1861. See *Eighth Report* (1861), 122.

Robinson's Italian sculpture catalogue follows a progression of Italian medieval and renaissance sculpture through the entire period, providing connoisseurial attempts at authorship, visual analysis of the several pieces, and detailed historical information on the artists, styles and provenance of each object. This was quite an accomplishment for the curator considering the paucity of information regarding the Italian sculptors of the period: he admitted that one of his main references was Vasari.<sup>211</sup> As will be discussed in further detail in the third chapter of this study, Robinson's catalogue became a reference for numerous Victorian critics with an interest in the Italian period of the Revival (of which there were many in the second half of the century) and broadened the accepted chronological boundaries of the Renaissance. An important aspect of Robinson's treatise on Italian sculpture, though, is the way in which he again introduced it as occupying a dual or "two-fold" position in the Museum; as both a "fine" and "decorative" art. In doing this, Robinson was upholding the decorative arts ethos of the Museum, as well as providing a unique, art-historical perspective on the position of Italian Renaissance sculpture within the accepted hierarchy of the arts, that had, at that time, been lost.

His introduction opened with a brief, general acknowledgement that sculpture had always occupied a prominent place in museum display: "Sculpture, since the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> [sic] century, when museums and galleries first began to be instituted on the modern system, has been always regarded as specially proper to be represented therein; and in nearly every museum of early foundation

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<sup>211</sup> "The Italian biographical writers [...] headed by the excellent and inimitable Giorgio Vasari, furnish us, it is true, with a mass of valuable matter [...]. But a methodic and long-continued study of the monuments of Italian sculpture in the country itself, aided by search for documentary evidence in local archives, will be the only means by which works adequate to the requirements of contemporary art-knowledge, and criticism, can be produced." Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, xviii.

monuments of marble and bronze form conspicuous features.”<sup>212</sup> He followed this with the observation that such museums had, until now, usually only concerned themselves with Antique sculpture, which had always “cast a shadow”<sup>213</sup> over any period of sculpture that had followed. The sculptures of the Italian Renaissance period were not deemed to be as historically important as their Antique predecessors and, subsequently, no collection of the kind now exhibited at South Kensington had existed anywhere but in Italy itself. Thus, the South Kensington Museum was the first to address this period in the canon of art history, providing an important visual reference for the art historian, critic and scholar.

Robinson went on to state that sculpture in general, particularly in its direct alliance with architecture, was also highly relevant to the decorative arts focus of the South Kensington Museum:

Sculpture, from its very nature, has always been more intimately allied to architecture than has the sister art of painting; it is, so to speak, less rigidly a *fine art*, and it has been more generally applied to the embellishment of objects of use or mere decoration; consequently, it is by no means easy to define the limits which a collection intended to illustrate the art in the abstract should occupy. Articles of furniture, for instance, are often decorated with admirable sculptures in wood, and are as truly works of fine art as statues; whilst in metal-work the goldsmith has often produced decorated utensils as truly sculptural as the grandest works in monumental bronze.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., v.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., vi.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., viii.

According to Robinson, the place of “sculpture,” in its broad abstract sense, within the traditional hierarchical structures of the fine and applied arts, was difficult to pinpoint. Instead of trying to find one place for it, however, Robinson suggested that sculpture occupied a legitimate place in both the fine and applied arts:

It will here not be irrelevant to take some further notice of the two-fold aspect under which sculpture is represented in this Museum, viz. as a “fine art,” and also, if we may so phrase it, as a decorative art or industry, in other words, of sculpture and ornamental carving. It is not more certain than unfortunate, that in our times and imaginary, but practically very decided, line of distinction has been drawn betwixt these two aspects. The idea has gradually grown up, especially in this country, that it is scarcely the business of an artist-sculptor to concern himself with anything but the human figure, and as one result of this short-sighted view, when any architectural or ornamental accessories are required, an unfortunate want of power is too often manifested; whilst, on the other hand, no ornamental sculptors, worthy of the name, are likely to arise from amongst the modellers for plasterers, the wood and stone carvers, and other skilled artisans, to whom ornamental sculpture has been virtually abandoned.<sup>215</sup>

The problem with modern ornamental sculpture, Robinson stated, was that there was too wide a gap, or too definite a line drawn, between the “artist-sculptor” (the fine art sculptor) and the “skilled artisan” (the workman). The modern “ornamental sculptor” (who required the skill of both) could not exist when such division was present. This was Robinson’s justification for the, now predominant,

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., viii – ix.

Italian sculpture collection at the Museum: the “line of distinction” between the “fine” and “decorative” aspects of sculpture (of “sculpture” as a fine art, and “ornamental carving” as a decorative art) needed to be readdressed. In complicating this hierarchical division, sculpture would no longer be split into one area for the “artist-sculptor” and one for the “skilled artisan” but could be considered as a more general abstract concept that could be applied to both, thus allowing the intermediary “ornamental sculptor” or a modern version of the Renaissance “artist-workman” to prosper. Robinson went on to highlight the importance of the Italian Renaissance artist-workman, suggesting that the revered sculptors of the period were both artists and artisans, who would never consider ornamental sculpture to be beneath them:

It never occurred to the artist of the revival to think architectural ornamentation beneath his dignity; on the contrary, the greatest sculptors have left us specimens of their genius in this branch, - Desiderio, Rossellino, Benedetto da Rovezzano, Cellini; surely, where these great artists have so gladly trod no modern craftsman need disdain to follow. The present Collection, therefore, will comprise all such works as a medieval sculptor may have been called upon to execute; and one good result, which it is hoped will ensue from it will be an elevation of the *status* of ornamental sculpture in general.<sup>216</sup>

The idea of the “elevation of the status” of the ornamental, was, of course, in keeping with the very earliest intentions of the Museum: to raise the status of ornamental art for the benefit of the British manufacturing industry. The display of Italian sculpture did, indeed, include everything that a “medieval sculptor may

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., ix – x.

have been called upon to execute.” Robinson’s report for the year 1862 indicates that the North court and its surrounding cloisters had been “arranged for the reception of specimens, chiefly of Italian art, in sculpture, pottery, glass and furniture.”<sup>217</sup> There was no line of distinction in Robinson’s display – sculpture as “fine art” and sculpture as “ornamental carving” existed side-by-side, physically and philosophically, in the della Robbia reliefs, Michelangelo models, Donatello chimney-pieces and the numerous other examples of sculpture applied to furniture, pottery and architecture.

The Museum catalogues had come a long way in their descriptions of the two bronze busts of the Popes that Cole had purchased in 1852. Their entries in Robinson’s Italian sculpture catalogue is here quoted in full to show the detailed extent that Robinson’s scholarly approach had reached, and how far removed it was from Cole’s early, pragmatic focus on the “bronze casting and chasing” of the two sculptures:

1088.

COLOSSAL bronze bust of Pope Innocent X.

1089.

SIMILAR bust of Pope Alexander VIII. Roman 17<sup>th</sup>-century sculpture; style of Bernini. Height of each bust, 3 feet 3 inches.

These important bronzes were originally ascribed to Alessandro Algardi, and they have been since attributed to Bernini. Although, as works of art, worthy of either of these sculptors, there are difficulties in the way of ascribing them with any certainty to either. The two busts appear to be by the same hand; there may,

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<sup>217</sup> Department of Science and Art, *Ninth Report of the Science and Art Department of the Committee of Council on Education* (HC 1862, 3022, XXI.321), xii.



however, have been an interval of time betwixt them, the earlier one (Pope Innocent X) being certainly the more vigorous and masterly work of the two. Innocent X. (Gian. Battista Pamfili of Rome) was elected Pope in 1644 and died in 1655; supposing the bust (No. 1088) were executed during his lifetime, it might very well have been the work of Algardi, who died in 1654, but in that case, the companion bust of Alexander VIII, (Pietro Ottoboni of Venice,) elected 1689, died 1691, could not, as these dates show, have been by Algardi; neither, if executed during the papacy of Alexander, could it have been the work of Bernini, who died in 1680. It may be, however, that both busts were executed for the latter Pope before his accession, when simply Cardinal Ottoboni; the simpler costume of the bust of Alexander VIII, in fact, somewhat favours this hypothesis. The writer is, therefore, inclined to believe that both busts were really the work of Bernini, executed during the latter years of his life, for Cardinal Ottoboni, that of Innocent X. having been executed many years after the death of that Pope.

In spite of the period of decline in which these busts were produced they are still truthful and masterly performances, admirable from a merely imitative point of view; whilst their technical excellence as bronze castings, tooled or chased up with the utmost delicacy and spirit, can scarcely be overrated; in this respect they afford, indeed, a valuable lesson to the modern worker in monumental bronze.<sup>218</sup>

Robinson's lengthy description would have appealed to many readers. Design students and the "modern worker" were still pointed, as they always had been, towards the skill of the bronze work. The connoisseur or critic would have perhaps found Robinson's discussion of attribution more interesting and formed their own opinions of the works based on Robinson's suggestions, sparking debate about the productions of the Italian Renaissance and the development of art in the

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<sup>218</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 184-5.

period.<sup>219</sup> Indeed, Robinson praised the quality of the works as “truthful and masterly performances,” despite their production in what he described as a “period of decline” in art, positioning them within an art-historical context. Robinson’s catalogue highlighted Italian sculpture, therefore, not only as a legitimate category at the South Kensington Museum that would contribute, indirectly, to the improvement of British manufactures, but also as an important catalyst for a much-needed scholarly revision of the accepted hierarchy of the arts.<sup>220</sup>

This chapter has followed, at length, a narrative of the development of the Italian sculpture collection; tracking the various points in the Museum’s history where Italian sculpture entered into the collection and exploring how it was described, classified and displayed by various authorities at these particular points in time. Soon after the 1862 exhibition, Robinson expressed an interest in further augmenting the Italian sculpture collection. However, as Davies suggested in her account of Robinson’s career, Robinson’s catalogue “marked the end of the museum authorities’ interest in further development of this side of the collection.”<sup>221</sup> Cole had had enough of Robinson’s indirect approach to the education of the manufacturing population of Britain, stating, in 1863, that “future purchases [should] be confined to objects where fine art is applied to some purpose of utility and thus works of fine art not so applied should only be admitted as exceptions, and so far as they may tend directly to improve art as

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<sup>219</sup> As it turned out, Robinson’s attribution to Bernini was, in fact, incorrect.

<sup>220</sup> One particular revisionary text that directly followed Robinson’s catalogue was Perkins’s *Tuscan Sculptors* (1864), discussed in the third chapter of this thesis.

<sup>221</sup> Davies, *Sir John Charles Robinson*.

applied to objects of utility.”<sup>222</sup> There was no room in Cole’s pragmatic approach to the improvement of British manufactures for Robinson’s more art-historical, connoisseurial and scholarly debates concerning the complication of traditional hierarchical boundaries in the Italian Renaissance. Robinson’s hiatus at the Museum and the period of collecting Italian sculpture was over, for the time being at any rate.<sup>223</sup> In 1863, he was demoted and the Italian sculpture collection was redistributed amongst the rest of the Art collections, no longer providing a focus therein.

The Italian sculpture collection thus grew, from a couple of unnamed bronze busts amongst the “Metal Work” section in 1852, to an internationally renowned and unrivalled collection showcasing the work of numerous revered sculptors of the Renaissance period. We have seen how the various places or contexts that it occupied at the Museum – as metal work, sketch model, ceramic relief and architectural ornament – were constantly changing, and how Robinson’s important 1862 catalogue opened up the various philosophical debates concerning the accepted hierarchical status of Italian renaissance sculpture to a wider audience, promoting its “two-fold” position between the fine and decorative arts. But catalogues and promotional texts were not the only means for justifying the presence of Italian sculpture at the South Kensington Museum. The manner in which Italian sculpture was arranged therein similarly expressed its “two-fold”

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<sup>222</sup> See *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>223</sup> In 1881, after Cole’s retirement in 1873, Robinson was invited back to the Museum to acquire more examples of Italian sculpture for the collections. He later recalled that “one of my most cherished wishes had long been to take up again the development of the Italian sculpture collections,” but the appointment was cancelled at the last minute due to lack of funding. See Robinson, “The Italian Sculpture Collection at South Kensington,” *The Times* (1 Oct 1883): 3. However, the following year, the Birmingham New Museum employed him to undertake a similar search for Italian examples. See Robinson, “The Italian Sculpture Collection at the Birmingham New Museum,” *Art Journal* (Dec 1885): 369-73.

position. The following chapter further explores the place of Italian sculpture at the Museum by analysing the methods for display that Robinson used to reach his varied audience and how he integrated Italian sculpture, and its “two-fold” position, into his highly calculated display scheme.

## CHAPTER II

### DISPLAY

#### Synthesizing the Fine and Decorative Arts: Robinson's 'Art Museum' at South Kensington

The artist who has stood before the marble balustrade in front of the altar recess, and has seen the works of the painter, sculptor, architect and decorator united, will never believe that it is necessary to the well-being of the sister arts to exhibit their works separately, or, in doing so, to borrow the arrangements of the auction room or marble-cutter's yard.<sup>224</sup>

But then London is not Venice; nor under the smoky skies of Manchester or Birmingham shall we perhaps ever see sculptures, arabesques, frescoes and mosaics, in their original adaptations such as give a world-wide celebrity to the cities of the South; but then we must content ourselves with gathering such things into museums, and treasuring up authentic records of them into libraries – such, in short, as those of this Department.<sup>225</sup>

The above quotations are taken from mid-nineteenth-century discussions concerning the preservation, lighting and display of art objects within public museums. The prospect of a new, comprehensive National Gallery, to be built on land at Kensington Gore using funds from the Great Exhibition, fuelled a debate

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<sup>224</sup> Charles Heath Wilson, "Some Remarks upon Lighting Picture and Sculpture Galleries," *Art Journal* (Aug 1851): 207.

<sup>225</sup> Robinson, *An Introductory Lecture on the Museum of Ornamental Art of the Department* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1854).

concerning the proper display and treatment of art objects in metropolitan museums.<sup>226</sup> Charles Heath Wilson had acted as a mentor and friend to the young Robinson when the latter was appointed as Headmaster of the Hanley School.<sup>227</sup> The two men shared many opinions on art education, particularly those held in connection with the design teaching at the Schools. When Robinson was employed as the curator of the Museum of Ornamental Art at Marlborough House, and later, when the Museum was moved to the Kensington Gore site in 1857, he arranged the objects therein in a way that brought the fine and decorative arts together as an eclectic, yet harmonious, collection. Robinson's display reflected his (and Wilson's) own attitude towards design education and the encouragement of public taste, and moved away from the Museum's earlier display schemes that had focused on the straightforward comparison of good and bad modern design. Italian sculpture, both original and casts, played a prominent role in Robinson's 1857 display scheme, forming a physical and conceptual, central focus that promoted the synthesis of the fine and decorative arts within the Museum.

As Robinson lamented, London was, indeed, "not Venice." The idea of Venice, in Robinson's terms, echoed Wilson's earlier appreciation of the synthesis of the sister arts of painting, sculpture and architecture *in situ*. Robinson believed that one of the reasons for the distinct lack of taste and appreciation for ornamental

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<sup>226</sup> See also: Select Committee appointed to Inquire into the Management of the National Gallery Report, *Proceedings and Minutes of Evidence of the Select Committee appointed to Inquire into the Management of the National Gallery; also to consider in what mode the collective Monuments of Antiquity and Fine Art possessed by the Nation may be most securely preserved, judiciously augmented, and advantageously exhibited to the public* (HC 1853, 867. XXXV. 1); Robinson, "Correspondence," *Art Journal* (Dec 1851): 312-313; Ruskin, "Danger to the National Gallery," VII, 406.

<sup>227</sup> For discussion of the relationship between Wilson and Robinson, see Davies, *The Life and Works of Sir John Charles Robinson*, 43-51.

design in Britain was the scarcity of everyday, public examples – something that the average citizen of Venice had access to in abundance. Inside the Museum, then, Robinson would attempt to address the *spirit* of Venice, combining the fine and applied arts for the ‘deprived’ British public who had not “stood before the marble balustrade in front of the altar recess, and [...] seen the works of the painter, sculptor, architect and decorator united.”

But, Robinson did not merely reconstruct or allude to existing architectural schemes and their ornamentation. Some recent analyses of Robinson’s displays at the Museum have focused on the idea that, unlike the classifications used at other major museums, Robinson’s arrangements recontextualised the objects in the Museum’s possession in a way that, whilst still relevant to their original decorative purpose, allowed taxonomic systems of display “to cohabit with a romantic historicism more in touch with the domestic tradition of art display.”<sup>228</sup>

This idea comes from Whitehead’s ‘Enjoyment for the Thousands: Sculpture as Fine and Ornamental Art at South Kensington 1852-62,’ in which he described Robinson’s arrangement within the Art Museum thus: “It is [...] a display which, by way of the intelligent manipulation of works of interior decoration, in particular the copies from Raphael, suggests an historic, harmonious and habitable interior.”<sup>229</sup>

Robinson’s “historic, harmonious and habitable interior” **[fig.1]**, framed by copies of Raphael’s *Loggia* frescoes from the Vatican and anchored by a full-size cast of Michelangelo’s *David* at the centre, was a complex visual combination of

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<sup>228</sup> Whitehead, “Enjoyment for the Thousands,” 225.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

historicism and eclecticism, foreign and domestic manufactures, fine art and ornamental design, originals and copies, historical and contemporary objects, both large and small, and made from various materials. Sculpture, painting, architecture and ornament were all represented side-by-side for comparison. All this was brought together, not in the jumbled manner of the “auction room” or the single-material state of the “marble-cutter’s yard,” but by carefully emulating and combining the private domestic interior with the public museum. Robinson used the collection to decorate the space and, subsequently, productively confused and challenged the boundaries between these public and private domains (and the arts that decorated them). Although it was built on the scale of a palatial interior, the Art Museum at South Kensington draws interesting parallels with the parlour of the average Victorian home. As Logan has suggested, the Victorian parlour was the most public, and thus the most decorated, part of the private domestic interior.<sup>230</sup> It was also the educational hub of the house, predominantly for the female inhabitants, being the room in which books were read, tutors gave lessons and debates amongst the family and their guests were played out. The Art Museum at South Kensington acted as a form of grand ‘parlour’ away from home – one in which the nation’s collection was carefully arranged to encourage inspection and discussion. In Baker’s and Richardson’s, *A Grand Design*, Conforti has addressed the domestic-style display scheme within Robinson’s Art Museum:

The overriding goal [...] seems to have been the juxtaposition of dissimilar objects for aesthetic effect [...]. Given Robinson’s expressed views on the educational value of the experience of art, these displays also served a didactic purpose, broadly conceived. When an “Art Museum” opened at South

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<sup>230</sup> See Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*. 24-5.



Kensington, separate from the other galleries in the Museum, it was installed on aesthetic principles, with objects of different origin, scale, and medium artfully juxtaposed in an attempt to evoke the atmosphere of a grand domestic environment.<sup>231</sup>

Developing ideas from Conforti and Whitehead, amongst others, concerning Robinson's domestic display schemes at South Kensington, this chapter argues that the collision of the various, seemingly dichotomous, relationships that existed within the Art Museum display (historic/contemporary, fine/applied art, foreign/domestic, original/copy, private/public, large/small) directly contributed to the harmonious synthesis of those arts represented therein and brought them into dialogue with one another. This dialogue, articulated by the careful spatial juxtaposition of objects, formed a complex web of visual interactivity through which perceived boundaries, particularly the divide between the fine and applied arts, were challenged. At the Art Museum, painting, sculpture, architecture and ornament spoke to, questioned and informed one another within a grand, palatial domestic interior. With the objects themselves engaged in an aesthetic conversation, visitors could more easily make comparisons and judgments, debating the relative place of each exhibit within the over all decorative scheme and subsequently developing an awareness of "correct taste." Despite initial appearances, then, Robinson had not deviated from the strictly educational aims of the Museum in his domestic arrangements, but was addressing public art and design education in his own, more connoisseurial fashion. If one could teach the public how to live with and love beautiful things, furnish them with the connoisseurial knowledge to make their own decisions concerning correct taste,

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<sup>231</sup> Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts," 29.

and challenge their preconceptions of the status of the decorative arts, the demand for better quality design, both public and domestic, would increase. With this in mind, the Art Museum display spoke directly to a wide variety of types of visitor: the student of design, manufacturer, collector, connoisseur, curator and consumer.

The Art Museum here refers to the central, walled compartment within the South Kensington Museum building that housed a selection of objects from the Museum of Ornamental Art's collections, a section of which is represented in a photograph from c.1857-9 [fig.1]. As we have seen, Italian sculpture, both original and reproduced, played a vital role in this display and, arguably, the most striking feature of Robinson's Art Museum was the eighteen-foot tall plaster cast of Michelangelo's *David* at its centre. Whilst the *David*, as a central focus, presided over the rest of the three-dimensional, freestanding objects in the room, those copies of Raphael's colourful frescoes and arabesques from the Vatican dictated the two-dimensional decoration and framing of the wall space. Thus, two of the most revered Italian artists – or artist-craftsmen - in history, a sculptor and a painter, provided the decorative anchor and framework for a collection of ornamental art objects and furniture from different European regions and historical periods. Looking at the photograph of Robinson's Art Museum, one might immediately label the display as a chaotic jumble of unrelated objects of different sizes: sculpture, painting, furniture, metalwork, ceramics; from Italy, Germany and England, etc. But Robinson's arrangement was not as chaotic as it initially appears.

The following study begins by contextualizing Robinson's display in the Art Museum within the history of the Museum of Ornamental Art arrangement as a whole, as well as exploring the sources of Robinson's personal, and very different, display choices. This study provides the first in-depth analysis of the stock photograph that is so often used to illustrate the state of the ornamental art collections at the early Museum.<sup>232</sup> For the first time, I also compare this photograph with other existing images of Robinson's Art Museum; an engraving made for the *Illustrated Times* in 1861 [fig.33] and another engraving from 1862 [fig.34]. The latter engravings have not been discussed in any existing scholarship as alternative visual resources and no account of the Art Museum display has used them in conjunction with the photograph to discuss the reliability of the images. Representations of the South Kensington art collections in the mid-nineteenth century are rare and, therefore, any study of the displays that relies solely on visual records is immediately limited. Consequently, I use a combination of both visual and written records to explore the place of Italian sculpture within the Art Museum display, demonstrating the importance of Italian sculpture as a prominent feature within the space.

Whilst this chapter focuses on only a small section of the art collections, and covers only a brief period of time, it is clear that these three rare images capture an important moment and space in the history of the Italian sculpture collections. They also provide a fascinating insight into the role of Italian sculpture within both the decorative arts context of the Museum displays and Robinson's synthesis of the fine and decorative arts therein. How did Italian sculpture, and particularly

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<sup>232</sup> See, for example, Whitehead, "Enjoyment for the Thousands," 226; Baker and Richardson, *A Grand Design*, 53; and Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 64.

the cast of Michelangelo's *David* that presided over the space, visually interact with, inform and challenge the English mirrors, German furniture, Minton vases and Italian wall paintings of Robinson's Art Museum, bringing them together in conversation to form a "grand domestic environment" that would speak to every visitor?

## 2.1 The Problem of Systematic Display: The Museum of Ornamental Art at Marlborough House 1852-1853.

Crude notions were prevalent that the right way to improve British manufactures was by teaching workmen, designers, and manufacturers, what was vaguely termed "ornamental design," in some direct and compendious, but heretofore unknown manner, which should dispense with the usual lengthy course of methodic education in art. And it was also conceived that, as regards the improvement of the public taste in general, a speedy revolution might be brought about by the accumulation of a mass of fine models of style of all countries and periods, and their comparison with the most hideous modern productions, exhibited side by side with them.<sup>233</sup>

The collection of the Museum of Ornamental Art had not always been displayed with the domestic interior directly in mind, although the exhibits had always been of an eclectic nature. In the above retrospective account of the South Kensington Museum from 1880, Robinson expressed his distaste for the initial arrangement of the Museum of Ornamental Art at Marlborough House. As we have seen, in the

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<sup>233</sup> Robinson, "Our National Art Collections and Provincial Art Museums," *The Nineteenth Century* 7, no. 40 (Jun 1880): 986-7.

first year of the Museum's existence, Cole and Redgrave had attempted to arrange the collections over five rooms according to the material or industry of the various objects (see floor plan, [fig.11]). Despite intentions to create a systematic display based on material categorisations, the collection was still unavoidably a "mass of fine models" arranged with practical, rather than philosophical, considerations in mind: large oriental carpets, for example, despite having no direct relationship to Italian Renaissance wall decoration, had to be displayed alongside the Raphael cartoons on the staircase for want of sufficient wall space anywhere else, and not necessarily because they were being juxtaposed for direct aesthetic comparison.<sup>234</sup> In addition, these "fine models" were arranged alongside Cole's "Chamber of Horrors," demonstrating the pragmatic attitude he took to teaching the principles of good and bad design by contrasting example.

The few Italian sculptures there were in the collection at this time, and, in particular, the two bronze Guidi busts of *Pope Alexander VIII* and *Pope Innocent X*, were also arranged according to their material, being displayed as examples of "Metalwork" in a way that focused primarily on their particular excellence in surface finish. The room in which they were displayed was described thus:

IV. Museum Room No. 19, contains –

(a) Bulky articles of *Furniture*, such as the Barbetti Cabinet, the Mediæval press by Pugin, the Terra Cotta Chimney-piece. [...]

(b) The wall space is used chiefly for *Wood carvings*, *Paperhangings*, and *Draperies*.

Specimens of wood carvings of various styles lent by Mr. Webb.

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<sup>234</sup> Department of Practical Art, *First Report* (1853), 385.

(c) The remainder of the *Metal Work* belonging to the Department, and some very valuable loans, of the *Cellini* shield by the Queen, the *Vase* and *Shield* by Vechté, lent by Messrs. Hunt and Roskill, and the bronze busts of Popes Alexander VIII and Leo. X, lent by Mr. Webb, which could not be arranged in the preceding room for want of space, and are placed here.<sup>235</sup>

Without an image of this room, it is difficult to say whether the eclectic assortment of objects was arranged in a manner that brought the different exhibits together as a cohesive aesthetic whole. There is no evidence to suggest that this was an intentionally eclectic display, or that the objects were put together in the same room with the domestic interior in mind, or for any reason other than that they were too big to be displayed anywhere else. There are certainly three definitive material groups within the room, described on the floor plan as “Furniture, Metals, Paper Hangings.” It seems likely that the material categories were displayed together and that the busts were grouped with the other metal objects including: the Cellini shield (c.1562, loaned by the Queen and now in the Royal Collections [fig.35]); a large silver vase (c.1852, Royal Collections [fig.36]) and an iron shield (c.1851, manufactured by Le Page Moutier, known as the *Italian Poets Shield*, V&A, London [fig.37]), both designed by the nineteenth-century French silversmith, Antoine Vechte. Like the catalogue that went with the display, this straightforward comparative arrangement was materials-based, grouping a selection of art objects in various metals from different stylistic and historical contexts to compare the metalworking techniques of all; in this case, the *repoussé* surface finish of the shields and vase and the *chasing* of the vase and busts. In the catalogue, Vechte was lauded as the nineteenth-century Cellini in

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<sup>235</sup> Department of Practical Art, *First Report* (1853), 386.

terms of the quality of his *repoussé* and chasing work.<sup>236</sup> Thus, these large, sculptural metal objects were arranged as examples of comparative excellence in the process of metal surface finishing. There was no further help for the visitor on the contexts of the individual artists, their place in the progress of ornamentation in metal, or their geographical and historical locations.

Before Robinson's appointment, then, the objects in the collection, all earning their place under the banner of 'Manufactures,' were grouped together by material in cases, or in free-standing groups. Cole and Redgrave sub-divided the collection into these material categories throughout the rooms but the space at Marlborough House was limiting and an attempt at an educational system of display proved difficult. Without a more comprehensive taxonomic system that took into account historical (and stylistic) visual comparison, as well as practical and material considerations, it was suggested that the Museum would be in danger of becoming a mere heterogeneous treasury or cabinet of curiosities. This would cause it to deviate completely from the actively educational public institution, the "impressive school for everyone,"<sup>237</sup> that Cole had set out to create, and instead deteriorate into what he might have deemed an "unintelligible lounge for

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<sup>236</sup> In his introduction to the Metalwork section of the catalogue, the architect, Gottfried Semper, stated: "The works of Vechte are worthy of being placed at the side of the works of Michael Angelo and Cellini." *Ibid.*, 249. Whether the mention of Michelangelo here indicates that some copy of his work was also displayed with the busts and shields is uncertain. The incorrect description of one of the busts as depicting Pope Leo X, a contemporary patron of Michelangelo, suggests that perhaps, it was wrongly attributed to Michelangelo as well. There is no other mention of Michelangelo in this context in any of the reports, nor in the catalogue and as the busts came as a pair and are very similar in execution, how this wrong attribution might have occurred is a mystery.

<sup>237</sup> "Indeed a Museum presents probably the only effectual means of educating the adult, who cannot be expected to go to school like the youth, and the necessity for teaching the grown man is quite as great as that of training the child. By proper arrangements a Museum may be made in the highest degree instructional. If it be connected with lectures, and means are taken to point out its uses and applications, it becomes elevated from being a mere unintelligible lounge for idlers into an impressive school for everyone." Cole, *First Report of the Department of Practical Art*, 30.

idlers.”<sup>238</sup> Cole’s concept of juxtaposing good and bad design, as we have seen, was also openly ridiculed. At the end of the Museum’s first year, it was clear that its arrangement needed to be properly addressed. A new curatorial role was created and Robinson was brought in to share his particular expertise.

### A New System: Robinson’s Influence at Marlborough House

When Robinson entered the Museum as curator, his first task was to completely refit and reorganize new display cases and find places for a host of recently acquired objects. He spoke about the practical difficulties faced in his first report of 1854:

My first duty [...] was to undertake the superintendence of the operations connected with the refitting of the rooms; and, as little more than one month remained before the period announced for the opening to the public, to carry on the rearrangement of the collection simultaneously. The accumulation of specimens in several of the sections, especially in that of Pottery, in which alone upwards of 700 pieces, constituting the “Bandinel Collection,” were now for the first time to be arranged and exhibited, precluded any idea of attempting at once such a complete and methodic classification as was obviously desirable: time, space and various appliances were alike wanting. In default of this, it was thought best to make the effectual display of the specimens the primary consideration, but at the same time to effect, as far as possible, a certain general classification, both as to the appropriate juxtaposition of objects, and likewise as to gathering them into groups or generic divisions. This was endeavoured to be accomplished, and, in some cases, it was found practicable to carry the process somewhat further

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 225.



even; several well-characterised classes of specimens, such as enamels, Italian Majolica ware, Sèvres and Dresden porcelain, Venetian glass, &c. having been arranged in specific sub-divisions.<sup>239</sup>

It is clear that Robinson, like Cole, was limited by lack of space and time, and encountered similar difficulties in creating a methodical system of display for the collections. As we have seen, he certainly did not share Cole's attitude towards the presentation of poor quality objects for comparison, and immediately removed the False Principles exhibition. Such a direct comparison of good and bad design, which he felt only served to ruin the reputations of the manufacturers represented therein, was not welcome in Robinson's new display scheme. He wanted only objects of the highest quality to be represented and for the displays to speak for themselves as far as possible, suggesting, in his 1854 introductory lecture, that "active teaching is impracticable,"<sup>240</sup> and posing the question: "what is there to trust but the silent refining influence of the monuments of art themselves?"<sup>241</sup>

Looking at the description of the collection in his first report of 1854, it seems that, at first, Robinson had attempted to maintain some sense of Cole's material-based arrangement, yet the over-all display scheme was still dictated by the limited availability of both wall and floor space. The staircase and gallery were primarily devoted to textiles (oriental carpets hung on the walls) displayed alongside "English bronzes produced by the Art Union of London."<sup>242</sup> The corridor that had housed the False Principles exhibit was now given over to

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<sup>239</sup> Robinson, *First Report of the Department of Science and Art* (1854), 225.

<sup>240</sup> Robinson, *An Introductory Lecture on the Museum of Ornamental Art of the Department* (1854), 9. General Collection, 607.AA.0099. London, NAL.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>242</sup> Robinson, *First Report of the Department of Science and Art* (1854), 227.

metalwork, whilst a vaguely described collection of “medieval and other ancient stuffs”<sup>243</sup> was hung around the walls. The main rooms were likewise divided in a manner that left various items without comprehensive historical, material or practical context. The first room displayed textiles on the walls and goldsmiths work in a central glass case. The second contained furniture, ivory carvings, japanned ware and “other miscellaneous objects.”<sup>244</sup> The third room was the most coherent, housing the European pottery section, which had been split into categories such as Dresden, Italian Maiolica and Sèvres, and installed in brand new cases. The fourth room contained oriental pottery, enamels, glass and works in marble. The entrance hall, as discussed in the previous chapter, displayed a brief, chronological history of Italian wall decoration from Giotto to Raphael.<sup>245</sup> The various categories for display, then, included: material (glass, bronze), industry (pottery, textiles), historical period (medieval, Italian Renaissance), geographical origin (Dresden, English, oriental) and specialist area of design (wall decoration, wood carving). Where Robinson placed the Guidi busts is uncertain, though it is likely that they remained where they were in the second room, alongside the same heavy “furniture,” and perhaps came under the category of “other miscellaneous objects.”<sup>246</sup> The practicality of filling the small space in a short time for the “effectual display of the specimens” was still winning out over an arrangement that would fully describe the objects in their various contexts for the comprehensive education of the visitor. But how could the new curator overcome this problem? How could such various objects be drawn together and made to engage with one another as a whole, providing an educational

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>245</sup> Chapter 1, 90.

<sup>246</sup> Robinson’s “second room” would suggest Room 19, being the second main room entered (after number 18) marked on the plan [fig.11]. The “third room” then corresponds to the pottery display.

environment, a “silent refining influence,” rather than a confusing cabinet of curios?

## 2.2 The Paris Collections

Thither [to Paris] went the writer of this paper in the middle of the forties, and a lifelong debt of gratitude is due from him, at least, for the infinite enlightenment he there received.<sup>247</sup>

The collections that Robinson had seen in Paris, whilst training as an artist in the 1840s, had a profound effect upon his later curatorial choices at Marlborough House. At the art dealers’ shops of Monsieur Delange, Mister Evans and Monsieur Couvreur, Robinson could handle and inspect objects closely, with the very real prospect of owning them himself.<sup>248</sup> At the Louvre, unlike any British museum at that date, Robinson was able to wander through a comprehensive history of the arts, thanks to the more rigidly taxonomic, chronological arrangement of the collections.<sup>249</sup> It was here that Robinson wrote about a particularly memorable, intimate encounter with Italian Renaissance sculpture, in the form of Michelangelo’s *Slaves* (1513-15, Louvre, Paris):

I shall never forget the thrill of wonder and admiration with which I first saw these figures years ago; the more so as they came upon me with all the novelty of a discovery: they were, at that period, placed in an obscure apartment, on the

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<sup>247</sup> Robinson, “Our Public Art Museums,” 940.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>249</sup> The Louvre was arranged “chronologically and by national school.” Conforti, “The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts,” 24.

ground floor of the Louvre, open only on Sundays, inaccessible to students, unknown to the majority of visitors, and lighted from a range of side-windows, whose confused and flickering lights effectually subdued all their wonderful *finesse* of surface into monotony.<sup>250</sup>

This statement, written some years later in 1851, formed part of Robinson's contribution to the debate surrounding the proper display of art objects in the public museum. His encounter with the sculptures was described with all the admiration of an amateur connoisseur and the criticisms of a curator. As well as reflecting the broader imperialism of his moment, his "discovery" of the *Slaves* in an "obscure apartment" within the otherwise vast galleries of the Louvre, suggested an intimate, almost clandestine, encounter: one that felt as though it had taken place beyond the public zones of the museum and in some private chamber, "inaccessible" and "unknown" to the average visitor. The fact that he had happened upon some of the great works of sculpture by Michelangelo in this seemingly accidental manner clearly had a lasting effect upon him, although Robinson's tendency to wax lyrical and embellish his own successes, as we have seen, means that the reality of this type of anecdote should be approached with care. Yet, whilst he clearly admired the sculptures themselves and the novelty of his supposed encounter with them, it seems he could not help but criticize the poor lighting that did no justice to their "wonderful *finesse* of surface." Clearly, this event, embellished or not, made an impression upon Robinson, helping him to form his opinions on the proper display of art objects (sculpture in particular)

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<sup>250</sup> Robinson, "Correspondence," *Art Journal* (Dec 1851): 312.

within the public museum.<sup>251</sup> As we shall see, visitors to the Art Museum at South Kensington were perhaps able to feel that same “thrill of wonder,” on happening upon the cast of the *David*, that Robinson had felt with Michelangelo’s *Slaves* at the Louvre. But an intimate encounter with the art object could, perhaps, be better experienced away from the grand galleries of the Louvre, within the more eclectic private collections of two of the best-known Parisian collectors, Alexandre du Sommerard and Charles Sauvageot. Whilst these collections were privately owned, Sauvageot’s could be viewed by appointment, whilst du Sommerard’s was open on various days to members of the public. It was these particular collections that confused the boundaries between public and private collecting, amongst others in both France and Britain no doubt, that would truly inform Robinson’s own curatorial choices.

Charles Sauvageot (1781 - 1860) was a violinist with the Paris Opera and his private apartments at 56 Rue de Faubourg-Poissonière were filled with his extensive collection of decorative art objects. Looking at a contemporary illustration of Sauvageot’s small apartments [fig.38], it is clear that he lived and worked amongst his collection, which appears to have filled every vertical and horizontal space. The fact that Robinson was invited to Sauvageot’s apartments in the 1840s suggests that, even as an art student, he was already well connected within the Parisian art world, or that he had a letter of introduction from a mutual friend: Sauvageot only allowed recommended visitors to make an appointment. Once admitted, however, having “knocked loudly twice to show that he was a

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<sup>251</sup> His piece on Museum lighting went on to criticize the damp, mossy conditions of the sculptures within the grotto at the Boboli gardens, the poor lighting of sculpture at the Uffizi, and the inconveniently elevated positioning and dim lighting of Michelangelo’s works at St. Peter’s in Rome and the Duomo in Florence. See *Ibid.*, 312-3.

friend,”<sup>252</sup> Sauvageot’s privileged guest could inspect the many objects that adorned his private domestic interior. Everything could be easily accessed, including Sauvageot’s extensive knowledge of the objects, and the collector seems to have been more than willing to share his expertise and to allow close inspections of individual works, displaying an “exemplary complaisance.”<sup>253</sup> The painting of Sauvageot in his apartment by Arthur H. Roberts (1856, Louvre, Paris) [fig.38] shows him directly engaging with his visitor whilst apparently replacing or removing a statuette from a cabinet, perhaps for the purposes of closer examination. One can imagine that such an intimate encounter with the objects in Sauvageot’s private rooms, and the privilege felt by being deemed worthy of admittance, appealed to the young Robinson in a similar way that he had been “thrilled” by his novel encounter with the *Slaves* in the “obscure apartment” at the Louvre.<sup>254</sup> Redgrave and Cole had also had the privilege of visiting Sauvageot’s collection together and Redgrave’s impression of the display was recorded in his diary:

Here, in three little rooms, two of them hardly more than six feet square, is contained a collection that might be national; much of it is so good. Here, too, in these rooms, he lives. He received us on a Sunday, after church, in a dress much like that in some of Ostade’s pictures – a tight velvet *surtout*, with white turned-down collar, and a white lined velvet cap. The place was very picturesque, the light coming in dimly through stained-glass windows, and the objects were so crowded that I tucked in my sleeves from fear. He has five choice pieces of *Henri*

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<sup>252</sup> Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 60.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 59. Burton here quotes Alfred Darcel, “La collection de M. Charles Sauvageot,” *L’Illustration* 31 (1858): 142.

<sup>254</sup> Indeed, on his death in 1860, Sauvageot bequeathed much of his collection, comprising a large selection of medieval and Renaissance objects, to the public galleries of the Louvre. See A. Sauzay, *Catalogue du Musée Sauvageot* (Paris: Charles des Mourgues Frères, 1861).

*Deux* ware, and some remarkable pieces of Palissy. It is evident that he buys articles from real love of the beautiful, rather than as curiosities [...]. His bed was in the largest of the three rooms, with his few books; his instruments for examining and cleaning the delicate art works wanting these cares, were close at hand.<sup>255</sup>

In addition to being able to interact closely with the collection, Robinson, Redgrave and Cole would also have seen how the works functioned as decorative objects in the modern Parisian home. An 1858 description of Sauvageot's apartments in *L'Illustration*, demonstrated how striking the aesthetics of Sauvageot's décor must have been: "Everything in his apartment was calculated to achieve harmony: he followed a law of gradation which, by imperceptible nuances of colour and inconspicuous variations of form, led the viewer's attention from quite simple objects to the most delicate or brilliant marvels."<sup>256</sup> The careful juxtaposition of objects within the small rooms allowed an aesthetic dialogue to take place between the collected objects that led viewers back and forth between them, encouraging them to make comparisons, pinpoint the more valuable or significant objects, and assess the place of each object within the grand scheme of the room and its over all chromatic effect. The three Marlborough House museum authorities would surely have noticed how the decorative objects in Sauvageot's collection worked together in groups within the space, their prismatic arrangement offering up aesthetic, stylistic, geographical and historical comparisons that could not be made in the spacious, chronologically arranged galleries of the Louvre but that could, perhaps, be translated to their own decorative arts arrangements at

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<sup>255</sup> F. M. Redgrave, *Richard Redgrave, C.B., R.A.: A Memoir compiled from his Diary* (London: Cassell, 1891), 147-8.

<sup>256</sup> Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 59. Burton again quotes Darcel, "La collection de M. Charles Sauvageot," 141.

Marlborough House. A similar embrace of the unavoidable eclecticism of their own collections, far from being a mere unrelated selection of curios, could prove to be as educational as a rigid system of material categorization.

Alexandre du Sommerard's collection of medieval art objects at Cluny similarly demonstrated how an eclectic private collection of decorative art could be transformed into an educational, public resource without losing its sense of private, domestic intimacy and aesthetic merit. In 1833, du Sommerard (1779 – 1842), who worked for the Audit Office, purchased the medieval town house at Cluny (the Hôtel de Cluny) as his own private residence and filled it with his extensive collection of medieval and renaissance French art objects. Unlike Sauvageot, du Sommerard opened his home to the general public every Sunday, when he would be in attendance to share his expert knowledge of the collection, which “was said to draw crowds as big as the Louvre.”<sup>257</sup> The medieval style of the building provided the perfect backdrop for du Sommerard's collection and, within these historic walls, he constructed historicizing displays, providing a romantic view of the past for his own personal living space, as well as for his Sunday visitors. As a devout Catholic and sentimental nationalist, du Sommerard longed to return to pre-Revolutionary France. At Cluny, he could immerse himself and his visitors in an historic France that celebrated the former art wealth of the nation and provided an escape from modern life. On visiting du Sommerard's collection, Robinson, Cole and Redgrave would have encountered a series of rooms that, to varying extents, emulated (or, at least, fantasised) the domestic interiors of past ages, as this illustration from 1840 of the *François Ier* room

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<sup>257</sup> Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 59.



demonstrates [fig.39].<sup>258</sup> Looking at the image, it appears that, whilst the collection again dominated the small space, the stylistically similar objects (comprising furniture, painting, sculpture and ornament) were arranged according to their decorative or domestic function. Despite the clutter and the intimacy of the space, then, this display is not quite the same as Sauvageot's. Unlike Sauvageot's collection, at Cluny the original decorative functions of the collected medieval objects were reclaimed, integrating them with each other, the space in which they are exhibited, and the historic architecture that housed them. The objects still interact with and inform one another at Cluny in their aesthetic groupings, but du Sommerard's historicizing aesthetic relies on the juxtaposition of similar styles of furniture, artworks and ornaments that facilitates the over all "period room" effect. If Marlborough House were to embrace its eclectic arrangements in the manner of the domestic interior, then, it would benefit from both these approaches, promoting aesthetic judgment, whilst at the same time exposing the decorative utility of its exhibited objects.

Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that Cluny in particular had a significant impact on the displays at Marlborough House. As a private collection, the displays at Cluny allowed du Sommerard to escape from modern life. As a public collection, these displays not only provided the visitor with the same escapist experience, and a more intimate access to the objects than they would find at the vast treasure house of the Revolution that was the Louvre, with its opposite politics, but they also constructed an historical, visual record of the progress of the early French decorative styles that was of great educational benefit. When du

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<sup>258</sup> Francis I (1494 – 1547), was the initiator of the French Renaissance, having many links with Italian Renaissance artists such as Leonardo da Vinci.

Sommerard died in 1842, the collection, in conjunction with an extensive scholarly catalogue produced by the collector entitled, *Les Arts au Moyen-Âge* (1838–1846),<sup>259</sup> became the Musée de Cluny (now the Musée National du Moyen-Âge), an educational, public institution that would provide an alternative visitor experience to that of the Louvre. Both Robinson and Cole visited the Musée de Cluny in the 1840s, after du Sommerard's death, and it was praised in Britain for its educational merit, despite the fact that it was not treated as a decorative arts Museum in France. In 1852, Wornum included Cluny in a report for the Department of Practical Art on “the Arrangements and Character of French Art Collections and Systems of Instruction in Schools of Design in France.”<sup>260</sup> He concluded that, although Cluny was “the nearest collection to a museum of ornamental manufactures in France,”<sup>261</sup> it was not explicitly aimed at the improvement of French design practice, as the Museum of Ornamental Art hoped to be for Britain, but rather was an “historical museum.”<sup>262</sup> Its collections were treated as “archaeological” due to their historicizing arrangement: “The objects are preserved in it because they belong to a certain time, and not because they are specimens of manufacture or good taste.”<sup>263</sup> Nevertheless, as one of the only educational, public museums in Paris that focused on the decorative arts, the Musée de Cluny had always been considered as an important precedent for the Marlborough House museum to follow. What Cluny successfully highlighted was the lack of medieval and renaissance displays within both British and French

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<sup>259</sup> Alexandre du Sommerard, *Les Arts au Moyen Age: En Ce Qui Concerne Principalement le Palais Romain de Paris l'Hôtel de Cluny, Issue de ses Ruines, et les Objets d'Art de la Collection Classée dans cet Hôtel*, 5 vols (Paris: Hôtel de Cluny, 1838-46).

<sup>260</sup> Wornum, “Report on the Arrangements and Character of French Art Collections and Systems of Instruction in Schools of Design in France,” *First Report of the Department of Practical Art* (1853), Appendix VII, 348.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

museums, and the importance of this period to a more widespread public appreciation of the decorative arts. In an 1880 article from the *Nineteenth Century* entitled, ‘Our National Collections and Provincial Art Museums,’ Robinson reflected upon the influence of Cluny on the Marlborough House museum, suggesting first that:

When it was considered, for instance, what the collections of the British Museum could do in the way of directly assisting designers and manufacturers, it was found to be comparatively little, for the art collections of that Institution stopped short at the periods of classical antiquity, and the world’s activity in the field of art, for fifteen hundred years at least, was simply ignored.<sup>264</sup>

The success and popularity of Cluny, he continued, “undoubtedly gave a strong bias to public taste in this country, and the necessity for the national representation of modern, i.e., mediæval and more recent art was universally recognised.”<sup>265</sup> Du Sommerard’s romanticized medieval and renaissance displays at Cluny, despite being considered by the French as a purely archaeological collection, had privileged the decorative arts of the “modern” era, thus legitimizing them as objects of art worthy of a place within the public museum. The Museum of Ornamental Art, in its quest to raise the status of decorative art, would do well to follow du Sommerard’s lead.

### 2.3 Robinson’s Displays at Marlborough House, 1853 -1857

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<sup>264</sup> Robinson, “Our National Collections and Provincial Art Museums,” 987.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 988.

The Museum at Marlborough House had the aesthetic, historical and geographical variety of Sauvageot's collection, but the moral responsibility, like Cluny, of being an educational, popular institution, albeit with very different pedagogic motives. It was also housed in an historic building, designed by Sir. Christopher Wren in 1711, but the early-eighteenth-century interiors did not correspond directly with the Museum collection as a whole, in the way that the medieval Hôtel de Cluny had provided the perfect backdrop for its medieval collection. The modest interiors of the first floor of Marlborough House (in comparison to the grander, elaborately decorated state rooms downstairs) instead provided a relatively blank and timeless canvas for the construction of equally timeless domestic displays, not the 'period rooms' that caused the Musée de Cluny to be perceived as an archaeological collection. Having entered his curatorial role with the initial task of completely reorganizing and refitting the rooms, Robinson would make the display his own from the beginning, combining elements from Sauvageot's modern, domestic eclecticism and du Sommerard's romantic historicism, to create a coherent and educational display.

Whilst the limiting interior of Marlborough House had once posed a problem for the systematic arrangement of the collections according to Cole and Redgrave's material categorisation, there is evidence that Robinson's curatorial approach *embraced* both the eclecticism of the collections and the intimacy of the space, exhibiting different materials, styles and periods together as aesthetic groups. It might at first seem that such an approach, taken out of the context of the private, inhabited interior might turn this public display into a cabinet of curiosities with

no real educational value.<sup>266</sup> However, this apparent jumble of objects could still provide the practical education that the Museum desired if Robinson recontextualised the various decorative objects with their domestic use in mind. In each of the rooms loaned to the Museum, then, Robinson could create a decorated space, which, like Sauvageot and du Sommerard's collections, would showcase the decorative and domestic uses, as well as the aesthetic merit, of the objects on display. This would placate Cole's express desire to emphasise the practical, decorative utility of manufactured objects, as well as allowing Robinson to encourage a more connoisseurial, aesthetic appreciation of the decorative arts.

There are few visual records of Robinson's arrangements at Marlborough House, save for a series of watercolours made in 1856 [figs.21, 40-42]. From these later images, it appears that Robinson's displays did, by this time, combine the traditional structures of a museum (glass cases, for example) whilst also emulating the heterogeneous decoration of a private domestic interior. Whilst certain sub-categories of objects (Italian maiolica, Sèvres etc.) were grouped together for comparison within cases or on shelves, maintaining some sense of Cole's initial materials-based system, Robinson set up various displays within each room that juxtaposed objects of different materials and styles according to their decorative function, integrating them within the ready-made domestic interior of Marlborough House. Indeed, the original architectural features of the building itself - chimney-breasts, niches, fireplaces, windows and coloured wallpaper – were included in the display scheme. Wallpaper samples were hung in their proper place on the walls, showing how different designs could offset the objects placed

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<sup>266</sup> It is clear that Robinson did not want this to be the fate of the Museum either, as he remarked in his lecture of 1854 that he did not want to create “a merely curious exhibition,” or “another lion in the metropolis.” Robinson, *Introductory Lecture* (1854), 9.

directly in front of them (especially pictures).<sup>267</sup> Stained glass covered the existing windows to give an impression of their brilliancy *in situ*, as had been the case at Sauvageot's.<sup>268</sup> Pictures were hung from the picture rails, though perhaps more sparingly than they had been in Paris. Original chandeliers were replaced with those in the collection and textiles were draped across furniture, or hung like curtains (though carpets also remained on the walls). Furthermore, whilst there were plates and vases out of reach behind glass, others appear to have been left unprotected on furniture to give an idea of their decorative potential *in situ*, and to bring them closer to viewers and to the other, different objects in the room (the antique tables on which they were placed, for example). In one room, *Marlborough House: Fourth Room* (John Sparkes, 1856, V&A, London [fig.42]), we can see how a traditional decorative, domestic scheme, much like those that describe the Victorian parlour, was constructed by placing a temporary shelf (supported by brackets) on the chimney-breast to form a mantelpiece.<sup>269</sup> Above this was positioned a Chippendale mirror (c.1762-5, V&A, London, Museum No. 2388-1855 [fig.43]), posing as a traditional, if not rather ornate, chimney-glass. Various ornaments were arranged along the mantelpiece in height order, in harmony with the unusual shape of the mirror and protected by glass domes (as mantel ornaments would be in the home).<sup>270</sup> A coal-scuttle on the 'hearth' finished off the decorative, domestic ensemble. This chimney-breast was not just wall and shelf space within a public museum, then, but showed how the objects in the

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<sup>267</sup> “[On the staircase] considerable space has been given to papers suitable for the display of pictures, some of which were manufactured and the colours arranged especially for the purpose, pictures of different kinds being hung upon them to show the effect.” Robinson, *First Report of the Department of Science and Art* (1854), 226.

<sup>268</sup> See Redgrave's description of Sauvageot's collection above.

<sup>269</sup> The chimney-piece itself corresponds exactly to an existing one at Marlborough House but does not appear to have its own mantelpiece.

<sup>270</sup> For more on the traditional decorative scheme of the chimney-breast in the Victorian parlour, see Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, 115-21.

collection could be put together as an aesthetic group, despite their stylistic differences, to create a domestic fireplace with the potential for both beauty and use in the private home.

But where did the existing Italian sculpture collection fit into this domestic display? As we have seen in the previous chapter, Italian sculpture exhibits were, by this time, gaining ground within the collections. Two della Robbia sculptures [figs.22 , 23], brought in with the Soulages Collection in 1856, were arranged alongside the Italian maiolica pottery from the same collection. In *Marlborough House: Second Room* [fig.21], one can see these two della Robbia reliefs hanging on the back wall: juxtaposing architectural ceramic sculpture with the maiolica pottery in the central case. An aesthetic dialogue between the brightly coloured, glazed relief sculpture and the equally dazzling plates and vases is obvious here. Where Robinson placed the Guidi busts is, again, uncertain. They do not appear in any of the watercolours, suggesting that they may have been arranged in the grand entrance hall or gallery where their large scale would have fitted better with the proportions of the space (and their subject matter with the Raphael frescoes from the Vatican). Equally uncertain is the location of the Gherardini models (presumably protected in a case). They, too, are omitted from the watercolours but, as Raphael, Michelangelo and other prominent Italian Renaissance artists were supposedly represented therein, is it possible that the models were also displayed alongside the wall paintings of these two artists, perhaps next to the Guidi busts in the entrance hall, rendering Robinson's Italian entrance to the Museum more complete?

Despite the lack of evidence regarding the location of Italian sculpture within the Museum, looking at the existing images we can gather that it was the intimate, domestic-style display that formed the general focus of Robinson's arrangements. But why construct this kind of display? How, exactly, did it foster aesthetic judgment and taste? Conforti's essay on the history of V&A, a section of which focused on Robinson's fusion of romantic historicism and English antiquarianism within his later displays at South Kensington, considered the domestic-style arrangement as a reflection of Robinson's "broadly conceived" approach to art education, suggesting that "during Robinson's tenure, the educational function of the displays remained, but their interpretive direction and appearance moved from Cole's perspectives favoring training and rules, to Robinson's primary aim of fostering aesthetic judgment."<sup>271</sup> Whitehead's essay on the place of sculpture within the Museum has furthered this idea, suggesting that "objects were arranged not only in order to permit their careful examination by the connoisseur, but also to foster a taste for observing art works in domestic juxtaposition [...]."<sup>272</sup> As far as Robinson was concerned, the display could be eclectic, emulate the domestic interior and still be educational. It was the sort of harmonious, aesthetic grouping of objects and architectural features described above that Robinson believed every student, manufacturer, and consumer should be taught to appreciate, in order to improve the state of modern British design. Whitehead has also suggested that "the South Kensington interiors were not without didactic purpose – the focus of the display lay not only in the objects as single entities, but in the atmosphere they created in sets, allowing the cultivation of a specific form of aesthetic appreciation

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<sup>271</sup> Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts," 31.

<sup>272</sup> Whitehead, "Enjoyment for the Thousands," 227.



on the part of the visitor.”<sup>273</sup> Robinson’s displays therefore seem to have tried to encourage visitors to consider the objects in aesthetic (rather than material) groups, juxtaposed as an overall decorative scheme, in order to directly and actively teach the art of comparative study and, subsequently, aesthetic appreciation and good taste. Robinson wanted the Museum to turn visitors, whoever they may be, into connoisseurs, believing that a connoisseurial understanding of decorative art would improve the taste of the nation: the student, manufacturer, consumer, collector, curator and general public. In his 1854 lecture on the Museum, Robinson emphasised the importance of this type of teaching, giving his own interpretation of the educational aims of the institution and how its proper arrangement might facilitate learning:

Now the Museum of this Department has a speciality; its province is to take cognizance of the Arts decorative – of Art in its connexion with production; and its main object is active and direct teaching – to make all its collection specifically useful – to bring home and render familiar to all, the various developments of Ornamental Art, which have arisen and are still being produced, - to enhance the value of all acquisitions by means of descriptive catalogues, monographs and illustrative lectures, - in short, to render, as far as possible, the acquiring of a certain amount of useful knowledge inevitably consequent on every visit to the collection; and lastly by the judicious arrangement and juxtaposition of specimens for comparison, to facilitate the deduction of those abstract laws and principles, a proper acquaintance with which is the foundation of all true knowledge.

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 225.

Whilst Robinson acknowledged that much of the educational emphasis was still tied up in the published catalogues and lectures that supported the collection, he also wanted “to facilitate the deduction of those abstract laws and principles” that he believed were the “foundation of all true knowledge,” through the “judicious arrangement and juxtaposition of specimens for comparison.” This would make the more traditional art of connoisseurship “familiar to all,” teaching visitors not just what was good or bad design and why, but, more importantly, *how* to make the comparisons based on “those abstract laws and principles” that led to good taste. So, whilst different examples of various design or production techniques were arranged side-by-side for the more straightforward comparative study of students,<sup>274</sup> an overall sense of harmony amongst the exhibited items, borrowing the kind of domestic, aesthetic groupings Robinson had seen in Paris, quite literally “brought home” to the visitor, in this intimate, domestic setting, a more connoisseurial, aesthetic form of comparative study. Visitors were to learn how to appreciate and compare beautiful objects, and beautiful sets of objects: a skill that was not merely aimed at consumers, who might wish to recreate such tasteful displays within their own homes, but that Robinson felt was also particularly important for the manufacturer, not to mention the student of art, to appreciate: “the manufacturer should appreciate art and have a certain amount of artistic taste and not merely be interested in pecuniary gain.”<sup>275</sup> Furthering Conforti’s ideas on

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<sup>274</sup> “After having studied the motives of ornament from casts or engravings, [the student] will see these motives technically applied in different vehicles. He may observe, as a case in point, how the principles of rilievo are carried out in various classes of objects; noticing how differences of material or the exigencies of processes have induced varieties of treatment: in some cases he will see relief ornament judiciously combined with coloured decoration, or with contrasted substances, as in inlays. In flat designs he will be able to notice the juxtaposition of tone and colours, the proper treatment of surfaces in ornament, the grouping and distribution of rich decoration with simpler passages intended for contrast and repose; and thus, in an infinity of ways, gain that experience which at last will assume the appearance of intuitive power.” Robinson, *Introductory Lecture* (1854), 23.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Robinson's "broadly conceived" rationales behind the domestic arrangement of the Art Museum, Whitehead suggested that the display was more complex than a mere evocation of the "grand domestic interior," however, and that "the domestic tradition was transmuted at South Kensington"<sup>276</sup> in order to address many "forms of art appreciation."<sup>277</sup> The collector would be encouraged by the "attractive domestic-style displays."<sup>278</sup> The working classes were provided with a civilizing glimpse of the "leisure privileges"<sup>279</sup> of the wealthy, and the design student was provided with historical models that functioned both aesthetically and practically within a domestic scheme.<sup>280</sup>

The encouragement of the collector, however, was somewhat of a contentious issue. Robinson made a point of encouraging this particular class of visitor, stating the importance of "the collector: whose pursuit it is [...] clearly a national duty to countenance and encourage."<sup>281</sup> Addressing the world of collectors, that elite group of wealthy individuals who already had a stake within other metropolitan museums, might seem antithetical to the aims of such a popular state museum as that at Marlborough House. Involving private collectors, however, would in turn be beneficial for the Museum, whose collections were vastly dependent on private loans and estate sales. Robinson was frustrated by the many sanctions put in place that limited his purchases for the Museum: the public purse strings were tightened in the early years of the Museum, thanks to the conflict in the Crimea, and it had

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<sup>276</sup> Whitehead, "Enjoyment for the Thousands," 224.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 223-4.

<sup>281</sup> Robinson, *Catalogue of a Collection of Works of Decorative Art: Being a Selection from the Museum at Marlborough House, Circulated for Exhibition in Provincial Schools of Art* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1855), 3.

always been the Museum's policy to exhibit objects on loan before committing to buy them. In letters to Cole, the Board of Trade, and even directly to Gladstone, Robinson consistently appealed for more ready money for Museum acquisitions, as well as for a rise in his own private salary, which maintained not only his living costs, but his private collecting habits. The money was often not forthcoming. As Robinson's reputation grew and he was employed as an agent for various private collectors, including Matthew Uzielli, a partner in the merchant banking firm Devaux & Co. of London, he would sometimes use both their money, and his own, to purchase objects for the Museum, which he would later reimburse with government funds at cost price: a dangerous game to play for a public servant with the reputation of a government Department to preserve. But Robinson often defended his actions, taking advantage of the benefits of free trade and impressing the importance of the free movement of objects into Britain in any manner possible, as soon as they became available, by private or public means. It was down to Robinson's complete disregard for the rules that many of the subsequent Italian sculpture acquisitions were swiftly purchased for the Museum and not lost to other, foreign collections.

To broaden his social connections within the art world further, Robinson founded the Fine Arts Club in 1856, which connected 82 eminent and wealthy private collectors, connoisseurs and art enthusiasts directly with the Museum.<sup>282</sup> The club included names such as Gladstone, Ruskin, Charles Eastlake, the Director of the National Gallery, and the sculptor, Baron Carlo Marochetti. At first, Cole supported Robinson's club, and even attended as a member, clearly seeing the

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<sup>282</sup> This number quickly rose and the club had to limit its membership to 200.

benefits such connections would have for the Museum. Indeed, the club would provide the Museum with the exhibits for one of the most successful exhibitions in its early history, Robinson's *Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Mediæval and Renaissance Periods* of 1862. From this point onwards, however, the club began to move further and further away from the public forum of the museum, meeting instead at members' homes, and, some might argue, Robinson's populist sensibilities went with it, contributing to his estrangement with Cole, his demotion in 1863 and, eventually, his dismissal from the Museum in 1867.

However, Robinson's connections in the private collecting world did prove to be beneficial. His displays at the Museum, and their allusion to the private collection within the domestic interior, often provided a benchmark for the private collector that would influence fashions for collecting certain objects. For example, as Trippi and Stevens have pointed out, a taste for collecting Italian maiolica, Palissy ware and della Robbia ware became increasingly popular over the course of the nineteenth century, having previously been neglected.<sup>283</sup> This was no surprise, considering the dazzling display of these colourful ceramics, brought in with the well-publicized and highly popular Soulages collection in 1856 [fig.21].<sup>284</sup> Furthermore, following the 1862 loans exhibition, a taste for collecting medieval and Renaissance objects also took off in Britain, fuelling the appreciation for the decorative arts of these periods. As discussed in the fourth chapter of this study, both Italian maiolica-style ceramics and medieval and Renaissance ornament, particularly Italian sculpture, enjoyed a revival in the mid- to late-nineteenth century and the collections at South Kensington contributed to this. Robinson's

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<sup>283</sup> Stevens and Trippi, "An Encyclopedia of Treasures: The Idea of the Great Collection," 155.

<sup>284</sup> A collection of Italian maiolica could also be found at the British Museum, somewhat controversially in the eyes of the authorities at the Museum of Ornamental Art.

private collecting connections also meant that the Museum could have access to an exhaustive supply of objects. Indeed, it was obvious that the growing collection was soon going to overwhelm the modest space at Marlborough House and, when the plans discussed at the beginning of this chapter concerning the formation of a comprehensive National Gallery of Art fell through, the Department of Practical Art, its School and Museum, moved in to the larger Kensington Gore site, becoming part of a new institution: the South Kensington Museum.

## 2.4 Art, Science and the “Brompton Boilers.”

At first, it might have seemed that the move to the South Kensington site in 1857 threatened to upset Robinson’s intimate, domestic display schemes that had been so easily accommodated within the ready-made domestic interior at Marlborough House. The acquisition of the eighteen-foot tall cast of the *David*, amongst other large items, also threatened to disturb the intimate domestic arrangement of the ornamental art collections. The new South Kensington Museum, housed in a cavernous glass and iron structure nicknamed “The Brompton Boilers,” and described as a “huge lugubrious hospital for decayed railway carriages”<sup>285</sup> by a reviewer from the *Civil Engineer*, provided a truly varied, educational experience for visitors, incorporating a diverse range of scientific and artistic exhibits [fig.44]. Judging by his 1897 retrospective description of the early Museum, which is here provided in full, Robinson clearly saw the institution as confusing, incoherent and insufficient for the effectual display of the Museum of Ornamental Art’s collection:

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<sup>285</sup> Anon, *Civil Engineer and Architect’s Journal* 19 (1856): 187. Here taken from Burton, *Vision an Accident*, 48.

Outlying and more or less incongruous collections were eagerly sought for, and as soon as possible assimilated in an illogical and bewildering manner. The miscellaneous odds and ends of the Great Exhibition, including a curious so-called 'food collection,' illustrative of the chemistry of alimentation, some thousands of plaster casts of mediæval sculpture forming the stock of the Architectural Museum Association, together with the vast accumulation of casts got together by Barry and Pugin as models for the details of the new Houses of Parliament, are some of the acquisitions at first hoarded up under the sheet-iron roofing and skylights of the 'boilers.' To this primitive structure brick and iron galleries, courts, cloisters, and quadrangles were yearly added on without any general plan or ultimate scheme, as gifts and bequests poured in, for little or nothing was refused at South Kensington. The acceptance of the gift of the Sheepshanks collection of modern pictures and drawings, followed by other donations and bequests of a similar nature, again gave a new direction to South Kensington energies, and a rival national gallery was in effect installed side by side with the plaster casts and the food products. Other installments of modern industrial art objects were obtained by purchase from successive Paris exhibitions, and a so-called 'educational museum,' in which desks and forms, gymnastic apparatus and school books were the entertaining 'exhibits,' was invented and foisted on the establishment by some one of the numerous officious advisers who from time to time have obtained partial recognition of their crude schemes. Soon, however, the legitimate art gatherings of the museum, directly under the writer's care and purveyance, took the lead and visibly emerged from the motley medley chaos.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Robinson, "Our Public Art Museums," 955.

It was not only Robinson who believed that the South Kensington Museum was “a motley medley chaos.” In 1857, even Cole negatively described it as a “refuge for destitute collections” in an introductory address on the new institution.<sup>287</sup> In its early years, then, South Kensington must have seemed a bewildering place, full of incongruous displays of art and science that could not be brought together as a coherent whole. A sense of the connection between manufacture and art that the Museum of Ornamental Art had attempted to strengthen was surely somewhat undermined by the more obvious opposition of purely fine art exhibits (the “Sheepshanks collection of modern pictures”) at one end of the building and the machinery and food exhibits at the other [fig.27]. The Museum of Ornamental Art would certainly have to “take the lead” and “emerge” from the chaos, if the original aims of the Department, Schools and Museum were to be preserved and the divide between art and manufacture challenged. Italian sculpture would play a significant part in its emergence, as its central, and ever-increasing, “two-fold” presence in the Museum evolved to embody the fusion of the otherwise polarized fine and decorative arts.

But where was this sculpture displayed? As suggested by Robinson above, the Museum was split into several smaller museums. Redgrave took charge of the Sheepshanks collection as well as the Vernon and Turner collections of British paintings, which were displayed at South Kensington on behalf of the National Gallery.<sup>288</sup> A two-storey, brick extension was built on to the Boilers to house and protect these pictures, as the Boilers themselves could not regulate the interior

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<sup>287</sup> Cole, *Introductory Addresses on the Science and Art Department and the South Kensington Museum. No. 1, The Functions of the Science and Art Department* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1857), 20.

<sup>288</sup> These collections were bequeathed to the National Gallery by Robert Vernon in 1847 and Joseph M. W. Turner in 1856. They were returned to the National Gallery in 1876.



temperature, nor were they sufficiently fireproof or waterproof. The paintings were installed on the first floor of the new building, whilst part of the Museum of Ornamental Art was housed in four small rooms downstairs, allowing Robinson to maintain some sense of the intimate domestic space that he had achieved at Marlborough House. Indeed, in *Vision and Accident*, Burton has suggested that “the effect must have been not unlike that of Marlborough House,”<sup>289</sup> describing the collection thus: “In the first of these rooms were cases of enamels, maiolica, Flemish stoneware, porcelain and glass. Venetian mirrors, an Antwerp chimneypiece, a marble Italian fountain and a Della Robbia altarpiece were fixed on the walls, while stained glass was hung in the windows.”<sup>290</sup> Whilst it is impossible to know exactly how these rooms appeared, it is possible to speculate that Robinson would have maintained his domestic displays as far as possible, given the similar size and layout of the rooms in the Sheepshanks building to those at Marlborough House. In his letter to Cole of 1858, he had written: “Of course I have not moved the enameled Della Robbia ware, this seemed to have too close an affinity to the Majolica to be removed from the new rooms.”<sup>291</sup> One can arguably assume that a similar aesthetic arrangement to that seen in *Marlborough House: Second Room [fig.21]* had been made of the Italian maiolica and della Robbia sculpture in the lower Sheepshanks rooms (more, larger pieces of della Robbia ware had been purchased since). But the Museum of Ornamental Art was not just confined to the new, brick building – Robinson would somehow have to accommodate his display scheme within the Boilers themselves.

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<sup>289</sup> Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 53.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>291</sup> Robinson, “Letter from Robinson to Cole dated 4 December 1858,” Henry Cole, *Correspondence and Papers 1836 -1932*, NAL, 55.BB, Boxes 1-19.

The compartmentalization of the large ‘train shed’ that was the Boilers would help Robinson to maintain a sense of domestic intimacy in his display. Unlike the more open-plan nature of the Great Exhibition building, that has prompted Foucauldian readings of the Crystal Palace as a facilitator of surveillance and the “self-regulatory citizenry,” the South Kensington Museum was split into separate compartments that denied the sort of omniscient vision discussed in texts by Bennett and Duncan.<sup>292</sup> The focus, then, was on separating, and combining, various objects within more intimate spaces. These compartments physically separated the various incongruous “destitute collections” of science and art and are here described in order to provide a context for the Museum of Ornamental Art as part of the South Kensington Museum in its entirety. Sculpture, in its various different forms, was displayed throughout the entire building. The western galleries of the Boilers were filled with architectural casts from the Antique to the Modern period. The upstairs gallery on the western side was devoted to the Gothic casts of the Architectural Museum [fig.45] used in the design of the Palace of Westminster and, downstairs, the main entrance to the Museum (which was, to add to the confusion, not on the front of the building itself) led straight into a lower gallery containing Antique architectural casts.<sup>293</sup> On the opposite side (upper eastern gallery), were the Animal Products and Food Museums, supervised by the scientist Lyon Playfair. The Animal Products exhibit contained examples of how skins, feathers, fur etc. could be used in the manufacture of various commodities. The food collection, which had come from Thomas Twinings’s Economic Museum (The Museum of Domestic and Sanitary Economy), explained

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<sup>292</sup> See Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* and Duncan, *Civilising Rituals*.

<sup>293</sup> Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 49.

“the chemistry of food and the principles of a good diet”<sup>294</sup> to visitors. Below these, in the lower eastern gallery, was a collection of raw (mainly geological) materials, known as the Museum of Construction, curated by the Museum’s architect, Capt. Francis Fowke. At the north end of the upper gallery, at the entrance to the Sheepshanks gallery of pictures, was an exhibition space for modern British ‘fine art’ sculptures provided by the Sculptor’s Institute, the regular reorganisation of which was also supervised by Redgrave in conjunction with his curation of the British pictures [fig.46]. Exhibits included: a *Venus* by John Gibson loaned by Uzielli; Hiram Powers’s *Greek Slave*, loaned by Capt. I Grant; and a *Cupid* by J. Spence loaned by the M.P. William Jackson,<sup>295</sup> as well as works by John Bell, William Calder Marshall, William Behnes, E.H. Baily and J.H. Foley.<sup>296</sup> The large, central space on the ground floor of the Boilers was not left open, in the manner of the great central hall of the 1851 Exhibition, but was split into three walled compartments. The southern compartment housed the Patent Museum, which was filled with modern inventions and machinery, had its own separate exterior entrance (at the southern front of the building), and was blocked off completely from the rest of the Museum [figs.47, 49]. The larger, central compartment housed the Educational Museum mentioned by Robinson above, comprising science and art apparatus for use in schools [fig.48]. Looking at the photographs, it is clear that various sculptures, including casts of a portion of the Parthenon frieze, were displayed within this compartment as teaching aids. The final compartment, as well as the lower gallery space that surrounded it (and the four rooms beneath the Sheepshanks pictures), belonged to Robinson’s Museum of Ornamental Art [fig.1].

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>295</sup> Department of Science and Art, *Sixth Report*, 28.

<sup>296</sup> Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 52.

In a letter to Cole from 1858, Robinson drew up a floor plan of the section of the Museum of Ornamental Art housed within the Boilers [fig.50]. This plan clearly shows the variety of the categories used to display various objects within the Museum of Ornamental Art section. In a similar system to that used at the Crystal Palace at Sydenham there were courts dedicated to specific geographical locations (an “Oriental,” “English” and “Italian Court”); there were sections that still maintained Cole’s system of categorization by material or industry (“Miscellaneous Textiles,” “General Furniture”); and large cases provided a mixture of material, historical and geographical distinctions (“Modern English Pottery,” “Modern Foreign Pottery,” “Modern Metal Works &c.,” “Wedgwood ware”).<sup>297</sup> In the centre of this, however, was a court occupied by loans, large items of furniture and sculpture that, arguably, acted as a grand, central ‘showroom’ of large, impressive objects. Central to this compartment was a selection of Italian sculpture – the Gherardini collection, Guidi busts and, later, various other sculptural additions were made to the ensemble. The whole compartment, presided over by the colossal presence of Michelangelo’s *David* and Raphael’s *Loggia* copies, appears to have promoted the rest of the ornamental art collections and Italian sculpture played an obvious dominant role in this promotion. No other court within the Boilers was as large or as central as the Art Museum, or contained such impressively sized objects. The north-east corner of this court is represented in the c.1857-9 photograph [fig.1] and we can see how, once again, this space mixes up the material categories, geographies, and histories

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<sup>297</sup> These courts also filled in gaps left by Sydenham, which did not have an “Oriental” or “English” court (though it did have an “Elizabethan” and “Birmingham and Sheffield” court).

of the objects therein, giving the impression of a grand domestic environment anchored decoratively by the “two-fold” works of the Italian artist -craftsman.

The “legitimate art gatherings of the museum” that Robinson had referred to, focused on his Museum of Ornamental Art rather than the “rival national gallery” that had been constructed by Redgrave from the Sheepshanks pictures. The Museum of Ornamental Art, however, appears to have been somewhat overshadowed by the more popular, new exhibits. Indeed, Burton has pointed out that the ornamental art collections were completely omitted from a number of advertisements for the Museum found in the contemporary press,<sup>298</sup> and that it was the Sheepshanks pictures that proved to be the most popular section of the Museum. For example, an 1857 review in the *Literary Gazette* stated that “fashionable ladies and gentleman seemed somewhat at a loss what to think of the machinery, school desks, and telescopes among which they found themselves wandering helplessly on their entrance [into the museum]. They soon found their way into the gallery of pictures, which was crowded through the day.”<sup>299</sup> Again, it would seem that the popularity of the fine art galleries completely undermined the original intentions of the Museum of Ornamental Art. Robinson would need to promote his collection in order to restore the original focus of the Museum: the fusion of the fine and applied arts.

To do this, Robinson used a combination of both careful rhetoric (within his lectures and catalogues) and aesthetic connections within his visual displays to

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<sup>298</sup> Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 55.

<sup>299</sup> Anon, “South Kensington Museum,” *Literary Gazette* 2110 (27 June 1857): 616. The opposite was true at Sydenham, according to the press reception, where anything but the fine arts courts seemed to have been of interest.

promote and elevate the status of the decorative arts and their great importance to the educational missions of the Museum. His rhetoric largely reflects Conforti's description of his "broadly conceived" understanding of "art." For instance, in a lecture delivered in conjunction with the opening of the South Kensington Museum in 1857, Robinson referred to the collection as "the Museum of Art,"<sup>300</sup> separating it entirely from the "motley medley chaos" of the rest of the collection by stating that "it should first be clearly understood that the Art Museum has no connection with the various other collections grouped with it."<sup>301</sup> In just five years, the "Art Museum" had developed from the "Museum of Manufactures," to the "Museum of Ornamental Art," and now, removing the manufacturing connotations completely, Robinson cut it off from the scientific collections in the Museum, placing it firmly within the realm of, what he hoped would become, a broader understanding of the term "art."<sup>302</sup>

In the same lecture, Robinson instead attempted to raise the status of the decorative art objects within his Museum by equating them directly with the fine art holdings of other, more established national art collections at the National Gallery and British Museum: "The scope of our own Museum does, however, to a certain extent, approximate that of both these institutions [...]."<sup>303</sup> There is no mention here of the vast Crystal Palace at Sydenham, with which the South Kensington Museum, as a whole, had clearer similarities. Robinson seems to have

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<sup>300</sup> Robinson, *On the Museum of Art* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1858).

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>302</sup> Indeed, from a very early stage in his career, at an 1848 lecture delivered to his students at the Hanley School of Design, Robinson had already begun preaching the necessity for the broadening an understanding of the term 'art,' which he was "convinced cannot be treated on too wide a basis." Robinson, *A Lecture delivered to the Students of the Government School of Design, Hanley, Staffordshire Potteries on Art Education, being an Introductory Exposition of the Studies and Ultimate Objects of the School, by J. Charles Robinson, Master of the Hanley School, April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1848*, 1848. Robinson Papers, National Art Library.

<sup>303</sup> Robinson, *On the Museum of Art* (1854), 15.

been trying to distance the collections at South Kensington from Sydenham, with the aim of completing the national, visual resource that covered the entire canon of art history that had begun at the British Museum, with the Antique sculpture collection, and peaked with the Old Master paintings at the National Gallery. Robinson's museum would focus on everything else "modern" (i.e. not Antique, and thus not falling within the remit of the British Museum) that fell within his broad understanding of the decorative arts: "The substantive design of this Museum may be defined as *the illustration, by actual monuments, of all art which is materially embodied or expressed in objects of utility.*"<sup>304</sup> This would ensure that Robinson was filling in the historical and stylistic gaps left by the National Gallery and British Museum with this broad reading of 'art' – demonstrating that the objects in his collections had a place within the accepted canons of art history and that the decorative and fine arts could be considered on closer comparative terms.

This broader understanding of the notion of art, to include the decorative, was, then, translated into his visual displays. Raphael and Michelangelo, two traditionally revered artists who occupied prominent places within the traditional art historical canon, dominated the room, suggesting their own (and the Museum's own) lack of prejudice against the fine and decorative arts: "In the first place the decorative works of great painters executed in embellishment of architecture or furniture may be specified."<sup>305</sup> In the opening lines of *The Treasury of Ornamental Art*, an 1856 catalogue of the Marlborough House collection created

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 15.

with the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition in mind, Robinson had suggested that:

It should be observed that the prejudice which, in our own times, virtually assigns an inferior *status* in art to every production which, strictly speaking, is neither a picture nor a statue, not only renders it difficult to find any adequate appellation for such works, but likewise, in reality, tends to the prejudice of art itself, inasmuch as artists of genius and ambition are naturally unwilling to devote themselves to the production of works, which, whatever may be the amount of art power manifested in them, are regarded only as “objects of *virtù*” or curiosities, and held to be beneath the attention of the real connoisseur.<sup>306</sup>

Robinson wanted his displays to challenge the preconceived, traditional ideas surrounding the hierarchy of the arts that caused modern artists to be “naturally unwilling” to apply their work to objects of utility.<sup>307</sup> To do this, Robinson was determined to show that those traditionally revered “great painters” that could be found in the National Gallery, particularly the High Renaissance Italian masters, were, essentially, artist-craftsmen; that their works fell into both categories as fine and decorative art. As we have seen in the previous chapter, at the very dawn of the Museum in 1836, Waagen had suggested the Italian renaissance period as a desirable precedent for the Schools of Design to follow for this very reason: “In former times the artists were more workmen, and the workmen were more artists, as in the time of Raphael, and it is very desirable to restore this happy

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<sup>306</sup> Robinson, *The Treasury of Ornamental Art* (London: Day & Son, 1856): 1.

<sup>307</sup> Notwithstanding those artists that had helped Cole’s *alter ego*, Felix Summerly, in the creation of a series of ‘art-manufactures’ in the late 1840s.



connexion.”<sup>308</sup> In his Art Museum in 1857, Robinson pushed this idea further, using those revered artist-workmen of the Italian Renaissance to anchor his domestic display within the central Art Museum: Raphael and Michelangelo, alongside other fine artists of the canon, were recontextualised as both fine and decorative artists at South Kensington and, like the rest of the collections, their work was integrated into a decorative, domestic interior display scheme that encouraged aesthetic comparison and connoisseurial appreciation. In particular, the comparison between the fine and decorative arts, that was so important to the Museum’s ethos, was challenged in the displays by the over-arching presence of these “two-fold” artist-craftsman, who presided over and were centralized within the otherwise polarized collections.

Indeed, as previously discussed, Robinson had already arranged the Raphael copies (and paper copies of portions of Michelangelo’s Sistine ceiling) at Marlborough House with their direct, decorative relationship to architecture in mind.<sup>309</sup> Installed in the large entrance hall, the Raphael copies formed part of a display of Italian wall decoration that demonstrated the functionality of the wall

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<sup>308</sup> Select Committee on Arts and their Connexion with Manufactures, *Report of the Select Committee on Arts and their Connexion with Manufactures* (1836), 11.

<sup>309</sup> Immediately after their purchase in 1837, at the School of Design, the cartoons had initially leant against a wall for the students to study from. They were then split apart so that the vertical arabesques could be placed on rotating pillars for easier study. “In the Ante Room the valuable copies of the arabesque pillars by Raphael, from the second Loggia of the Vatican, which were previously laid together against the wall, and consequently were comparatively useless, have been placed upon revolving quadrangular pillars, executed under the instructions of Mr. Poynter, so as to afford to the students every convenience for copying which the dimensions and construction of the apartment would permit.” Council of the School of Design, *Third Report of the Council of the School of Design for the year 1843-4 (from May 1 1843 to April 30 1844)* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1844), 12.

This, of course, meant that they were not seen altogether as an entire decorative scheme. We have seen how, when the School and Museum moved to Marlborough House, the Raphael copies were displayed alongside carpets on the staircase for want of sufficient space anywhere else. It wasn’t until Robinson was appointed as curator that these copies were displayed with their full original decorative purpose in mind.

paintings within an architectural context and Raphael's status as an artist-workman of the Renaissance:

The architectural pretensions of this apartment suggested the propriety of its being made subservient to the illustration of painted wall decoration; and the Department fortunately possessing a fine series of copies of the pilasters and "Lunettes" from the *Loggie* of Raffaele, in the Vatican, of the full size of the originals, it was found that these could be conveniently arranged around the walls so as to convey some idea of their effect *in situ*: these were accompanied by a photographic view of the Vatican, showing the exterior aspect of the Loggie, by a series of coloured prints of the pilasters, &c., illustrating their disposition in the architectural scheme.<sup>310</sup>

The idea of preserving the effect of the original works *in situ*, with the aid of photographs of the originals, is an important one for our discussion on Robinson's synthesis of the fine and decorative arts within his displays. Take Raphael's frescoes out of their original architectural context and they become isolated examples of painting. Use them, according to their original purpose, as part of an architectural scheme and it is easier to see how Raphael, and those other artists of the Renaissance displayed alongside him, such as Michelangelo and Giotto (paper copies of the Arena Chapel frescoes were also displayed here), could, in addition, be described as artist-craftsmen. After the move to South Kensington, as can be seen in both the photograph and the engravings of the Art Museum [figs.33, 34], Robinson would reinstall the Raphael copies in pride of place within the central compartment of the Museum, using them to decoratively frame the rest of the

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<sup>310</sup> Robinson, *First Report of the Department of Science and Art* (1854), 227.

collections. Thus, Raphael's cartoons reclaimed their original architectural associations in their new environment within the central collections of Robinson's broadly conceived "Museum of Art."

Alongside "great painters" such as Raphael, Italian Renaissance sculpture played a similar, if not more direct, "two-fold" role in Robinson's display scheme. It did, after all, fit in perfectly with Robinson's plans to fill in the gaps left by the British Museum (which took care of Antique Sculpture) and the National Gallery (which focused on 'modern' painting). 'Modern' sculpture was the obvious place for South Kensington to start. Another advantage of focusing on 'modern' sculpture was set out in Robinson's 1857 lecture, where he suggested that "the decorative arts in immediate alliance with architecture are of the highest importance, and objects of an architectural nature in stone, marble, wood, terracotta, bronze, &c., under the general head of sculpture, may very properly be first noticed."<sup>311</sup> Indeed, whilst Raphael's extensive *Loggie* frescoes framed the two-dimensional wall space at the Art Museum, the cast of the *David* (the original, of course, having been designed by Michelangelo as part of an architectural scheme) towered over the collection in the centre of the room. The rest of the exhibited objects reflected the remainder of Robinson's above list of different sculptural materials – "wood, terracotta, bronze, &c." But, thinking back to Robinson's emulation of the types of intimate interior found within Sauvageot and du Sommerard's collections, where would these giants of art history fit into the aesthetic groupings and connoisseurial displays? How would Robinson integrate and maintain the architectural associations of an eighteen-foot sculpture made for

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<sup>311</sup> Robinson, *On the Museum of Art* (1854), 17.

a piazza and an extensive scheme of frescoes created for the Vatican into his intimate, domestic interior setting without isolating them from the other contrasting decorative exhibits?

## A Photograph of the Art Museum

The photograph of the central Art Museum appears to form part of a series recording the process of the Museum's construction produced in the 1850s by Charles Thurston Thompson, the Museum's official photographer. It seems that Robinson referred to these photographs in his 1858 letter to Cole, which stated that "Mr. Thompson's long delayed photographic illustrations of Museum have at last been got fairly under weigh [sic]. – three parts have been issued – the complete set will make a beautiful work and although so long about it Mr. Thompson has <at last> got them out in first rate style."<sup>312</sup> The arrangement within the photograph mostly conforms to the floor plan drawn up by Robinson and many of the objects therein can be definitively identified. In front of the central *David*, one can make out a small glazed case where the Gherardini collection of sculptors' models was presumably displayed [figs.1, 50]. Flanking the *David* are Guidi's now familiar busts, which had previously been arranged to elicit technical comparison with other metal objects. Now, however, in the shadow of the *David*, they became not only examples of Italian sculpture of a certain style and material, but also formed an aesthetic and decorative role within the decorative, domestic scheme created in the Art Museum. In the foreground of the photograph (left), also central within the room, is a large, brightly-coloured

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<sup>312</sup> Robinson, "Letter from Robinson to Cole dated 4 Dec 1858," Henry Cole, *Correspondence and Papers 1836-1932*, NAL, 55.BB, Boxes 1-19.

Minton majolica jardinière (1855, Potteries Museum, Stoke-on-Trent [fig.51]).<sup>313</sup> The painting on the far wall, *St John the Baptist* (16<sup>th</sup> century, V&A, London [fig.52]), is by a follower of Raphael but was attributed to the great Italian artist at the time of the photograph, cementing Raphael's two-fold position as an artist-craftsman who applied his work to isolated examples of fine art as well as fresco decoration. To the right of the picture, we can recognize two pieces from the Marlborough House watercolours: the ornate Chippendale mirror [fig.43], and a wood-carved Flemish Renaissance altarpiece [fig.40]. Above this is a Swiss Renaissance carved-limewood panel depicting *The Adoration of the Magi* by Augustin Henckel (c.1500-20, V&A, London [fig.53]). Below the Chippendale mirror is an eighteenth-century German secretary<sup>314</sup> and a medieval, brass German chandelier (c.1480-1520, V&A, London [fig.54]) hangs from the ceiling.

Although the portion of the room seen in the photograph may, at first glance, appear to contain a chaotic jumble of objects, they are, in fact, grouped together in specific historicized, aesthetic and, ultimately, educational ways. But the eclectic scheme is a complex one. Robinson organized the domestic-style display in a way that maintained his ideas about the educational emphasis of the Marlborough House rooms, the “silent refining influence” of the objects themselves that provided an aesthetic, comparative exercise for visitors (rather than a direct, authoritative display of good and bad design or the dry facts of material comparison). At the same time, of course, he had to focus on elevating the status of the decorative arts represented therein, filling in the gaps in the history of art left by the National Gallery and British Museum, and maintaining the material,

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<sup>313</sup> The jardinière was gifted to the Potteries Museum by the V&A in 1934.

<sup>314</sup> Conforti, “The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts,” 31.

geographic, stylistic, historical and practical integrity (the notion of the object *in situ*) of each object. This might seem like a tall order for any curatorial display but Robinson's careful juxtaposition of objects, their place in small groups and within the display as a whole, reflected a successful and complicated interweaving of all these apparent considerations.

As we have seen, Thompson's photograph of the Art Museum has not been discussed in any great depth. Furthermore, the objects displayed therein, and their arrangement, has only been hinted at and not fully described. Perhaps the most direct description can be found in Conforti's brief discussion of the Art Museum display, where he appears to refer directly to those objects we can see in the photograph:

An early sixteenth-century carved Flemish altarpiece from Ghent was displayed along with a contemporary Minton vase, two seventeenth-century Roman Baroque busts, mirrors, paintings, wall reliefs of various periods, and an eighteenth-century German secretary—all integrated by reproductions of the pilasters and lunettes from Raphael's Loggia at the Vatican. Standing in the center of this eclectic assemblage, surveying its abundance, was a full-scale plaster cast of Michelangelo's *David*.<sup>315</sup>

This description suggests that Conforti's main source was the photograph itself, mentioning only those works that can be distinguished within the scene. Whitehead's later essay referred directly to the photograph, but again used

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 31.

Conforti's description in its analysis.<sup>316</sup> However, whilst Thompson's photograph is often used as a visual support in this way, for ideas concerning the grand domestic environment at the Museum, little direct visual analysis of the photograph or the display itself, aside from describing what can be seen therein, exists to support and strengthen the notion of Robinson's "broadly conceived"<sup>317</sup> approach to "translated" domestic displays.<sup>318</sup> What exactly are we seeing in this photograph and how does what we see correspond to what contemporary visitors would have experienced when the Museum was open for business?

The photograph shows only a small section of the whole compartment: a glance at Robinson's floor plan reveals space for two large "loans" cases and a case for "sculpture" that may well be behind the photographer's field of vision. Furthermore, the photograph has clearly been captured outside of the Museum's normal opening hours as there is no human presence and the room is in a state of incompleteness: two ladders in the background lean against the north entrance, which appears to be closed off (whether it was opened to allow the public to move from the Art Museum into the rest of the Museum of Ornamental Art behind is uncertain but arguably likely). Additionally, two tables and a jardinière in the bottom right corner look too clustered together to be ready for display. The central vase seems rather too exposed to damage in the centre of the public gangway. Indeed, most of the photographs of the Museum within Thompson's series show

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<sup>316</sup> "A photograph of c.1859, showing the collection as redisplayed in the new Art Museum at South Kensington [...], demonstrates how the practice of evocation was maintained and expanded upon. This eclectic display, again analysed by Conforti, included an early sixteenth-century Flemish altarpiece, a Minton vase, two seventeenth-century Roman busts, mirrors, paintings, reproductions of the pilasters and lunettes from Raphael's *loggia* and a cast of Michelangelo's *David*." Whitehead, "Enjoyment for the Thousands," 226.

<sup>317</sup> Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise and Applied Arts," 31.

<sup>318</sup> Whitehead, "Enjoyment for the Thousands," 222. The photographic series of the construction of the Museum by Thompson are currently undergoing cataloguing at the Blythe House archives and the comprehensive series is being researched and drawn together.

the various compartments in a similar incomplete, uninhabited state.<sup>319</sup> One cannot, therefore, be certain that this picture is exactly what visitors would have encountered.

Whilst there is a certain amount of doubt concerning, for example, the unusual placement of the central vase (would it have been left so exposed to damage or is it purposefully placed to create a greater sense of unity between the walls and the central arrangement within the room?), it seems as though the rest of the collections have been carefully and definitively placed for public inspection. One can begin to see how the aesthetic groupings of these various objects would have led visitors' gazes from one to the next, noticing similarities and differences within stylistic groups, and comparing them within the eclectic collection as a whole. This is very much in keeping with the earlier description of Sauvageot's display, which "led the viewer's attention from quite simple objects to the most delicate or brilliant marvels."<sup>320</sup> The eye was encouraged to roam, as it had been at Marlborough House, Sauvageot's and Cluny; to take in the objects as groups, and to analyse not only their place within the domestic-style space as a whole, and to pinpoint the most significant exhibits, but also to compare them within their different historical and geographical groupings.

Comparing the photograph to a later, 1861 engraving from the *Illustrated Times* [fig.33], reveals changes, and constants, within the display and poses more questions about the domestic arrangement and the place of Italian sculpture and

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<sup>319</sup> In particular, an earlier photograph of the Art Museum seen through the doorway of the Education Museum depicts a very early stage of construction and suggests that the large *David* statue was the first piece to be assembled and placed [fig.55].

<sup>320</sup> Burton, *Vision and Accident*, 9. Burton quotes Darcel, "La collection de M. Charles Sauvageot," 141.



painting. Whilst the *David* and the Raphael frescoes, the “two-fold” heights of fine and decorative art, amongst other exhibits, remained a dominant constant for some years, this image clearly shows various changes. Many elements that may have been ignored by Thompson, or, added since, are revealed in the 1861 engraving. Whilst the central vase and chandelier have been removed, providing a more conventional museum walkway, most of the original object groupings within the room, that served to encourage aesthetic and stylistic comparison, remain. These include the Flemish altarpiece and Swiss panel group (an ensemble of wood-carved, devotional Northern Renaissance objects) and the Chippendale mirror and German secretary group (an ensemble of Northern Baroque furniture). The *St. John the Baptist* painting, originally placed rather high above eye-level in the photograph (perhaps to show its physical and stylistic proximity to the frescoes) and its surrounding objects have also been removed in favour of a more domestic, symmetrical grouping of sculptural, Baroque-style furniture: a large elaborately-framed picture/mirror surmounting a cabinet, two flanking paintings/mirrors, also with elaborate frames, and a sculpted bust. These perhaps better integrated with the rest of the Northern European Baroque furniture around the walls. Furthermore, a greater indication of symmetry upon the eastern wall of the room in general, with the section containing the Flemish altarpiece as its centerpiece, can now be seen in the furniture revealed on the far right hand side of the image. The engraving reveals that another heavily carved secretary, or cabinet, is surmounted by a second elaborate Chippendale mirror, echoing the arrangement on the other side of the Flemish altarpiece and broken up by the Raphael arabesque designs and smaller pieces of furniture. Any of those visitors sitting on the benches in the foreground would have been able to appreciate the entire

aesthetic scheme of this eastern wall, thanks to the symmetry of the carefully placed objects of various scales and materials, which may have continued into a fifth and final section just to the right of the draughtsman/engraver. This arrangement alone would have performed a variety of functions. Firstly, it provided an overall aesthetic effect, bringing grand domestic interiors to mind and demonstrating how stylistically, historically and geographically different, decorative yet functional objects could be placed together in symmetrical, aesthetic harmony. Secondly, it revealed those differences in style, design, technique, size, colouring etc. of Northern Renaissance and Baroque furniture and devotional objects in (predominantly) wood and metal and juxtaposed them for comparison. Thirdly, it placed the heavily carved, ornate, dark wood and glittering metals of the Northern examples within the confines of a selection of bright, colourful painted frescoes of the Italian High Renaissance – both Italian Renaissance painted decoration and Northern Baroque sculpted furniture were recontextualised and united *in situ* within a new, shared architectural space. More Italian examples of different styles and periods that aesthetically and stylistically complemented the Raphael frescoes, of course, could then be found in the centre of the room where the white ‘marble’ and bright colours of Southern Europe stood in aesthetic contrast to their dark, heavy Northern counterparts along the wall. Scattered amongst them were modern, British manufactures – standing shoulder-to-shoulder with these harmonious, historical styles that had influenced their production. The visual dialogue between objects old and new, their associations and comparisons, is therefore exercised in all directions – along the walls, across the walkway, and from floor to ceiling.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the 1861 engraving and the photograph is the inclusion of large glazed cases, presumably containing the “sculpture” and “loans” collections marked on Robinson’s floor plan [fig.50]. Most of these were probably added after the photograph (they take up too much space to have been merely omitted). However, on closer inspection of another of Thompson’s earlier photographs of the Educational Museum next door [fig.48], presumably taken at the same time as the Art Museum photograph, one can make out at least one large glazed case in front of the *David* in the Art Museum through the doorway. The photographer could have easily positioned himself in front of this case to take his photograph of the Art Museum, again reminding us that we are not seeing the whole picture and that the photograph does not provide us with the entire story. A second engraving from 1862 [fig.34] also reveals the overwhelming presence of glazed cases both in front of and behind the *David* that were added as the collection grew. These cases obscure our view of the central Italian sculpture collection, which is not to say that it wasn’t still present. Notice also that the entire wall behind the *David* had been removed in 1862 in order, perhaps, to integrate the central Art Museum with the rest of the Museum of Ornamental Art in the lower galleries behind, providing yet more space for new exhibits. Eventually, the collection would outgrow the Art Museum completely and Italian sculpture was moved to the newly built North Court in 1862. A rare glimpse of the elusive western wall of the Art Museum as it stood in 1862 suggests that it may have been used for displaying wall painting, incorporating Raphael’s lunettes and pilasters into the scheme on both sides. Both engravings also provide a better sense of the vast scale of the Art Museum, and the comparative scale of the exhibits. Without any human presence, Thompson’s

photograph had made the room seem so much smaller and intimate than it actually was. The engravings suggest that the *David* really did tower over everything, only matched in height by the Raphael copies. Whatever changed beneath them, however, did not stop these two Italian Renaissance giants from maintaining a physically and conceptually elevated position within the display.<sup>321</sup> The *David*'s representation of the “two-fold” nature of the Renaissance artist-craftsman remained a dominant, central theme that drew together the manufactures on the ground floor and the lofty heights of the fine arts galleries upstairs. But how did the display within Robinson's domestic, decorative scheme promote Italian sculpture's important “two-fold” status?

### Synthesising the Fine and Decorative Arts in the Art Museum: Italian Sculpture and its Role in the Display

It seems likely that the *David* was the first object to be installed within the Art Museum due to its sheer size and the need for its large-scale construction (see [fig.55]). If this was the case, one can imagine that the rest of the objects were subsequently arranged around it under its constant over-arching influence. One can also assume that the Raphael cartoons, thanks to their size and height within the room, were another early installation and that the objects that fill in the rest of the space therefore conformed to a decorative framework imposed by the works of these two Renaissance artist-workmen in particular. Far from being a blatant anomaly to his decorative display, then, Robinson arguably managed to successfully ensure that the *David* became an integral part of the decorative interior scheme, finding that its dominant, central position actually fulfilled all of

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<sup>321</sup> A connection can be made here with Sydenham, where colossal sculptural casts, such as the figures from the Temple of Abu Simbel, Egypt, towered above the other exhibits.

his educational, connoisseurial display goals. Positioned within the Art Museum, the cast of the *David* was not meant to represent an isolated reproduction of a fine artwork by a traditionally revered artist. Nor was it merely a reproduction of an architectural fragment, like so many of those lined up along the outer corridors of the South Kensington Museum. Instead, it occupied a position that embraced both of these polarities, taking on the dual aspect of both a fine and applied artwork that allowed it to open up a visual and associative dialogue with, and elevate the status of, the decorative art objects over which it presided. As discussed in the previous chapter, the idea of the dual aspect, or “two-fold,” position of Italian sculpture in the hierarchy of the arts was later expressed and justified by Robinson in his 1862 catalogue for the Italian sculpture collection: “It will here not be irrelevant to take some further notice of the two-fold aspect under which sculpture is represented in this Museum, viz. as a “fine art,” and also, if we may so phrase it, as a decorative art or industry, in other words, of sculpture and ornamental carving.”<sup>322</sup> This concept, which attempted to reconceive the Renaissance relationship between the fine and applied arts, was embodied in both the *David* and, in relation to the art of painting, the Raphael frescoes – the two most elevated, dominant presences within the room.

The manner in which Robinson promoted the cast of the *David* as a representation of this “two-fold” aspect was to emphasise its alliance with architecture: to describe it as both a sculpture by a revered artist of the traditionally accepted canon, and as part of a designed, aesthetic architectural whole that could be compared with the furniture and ornamental carvings found in the rest of the

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<sup>322</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, viii.

Museum. We have seen how, in his 1862 Italian sculpture catalogue Robinson suggested that:

Sculpture, from its very nature, has always been more intimately allied to architecture than has the sister art of painting; it is, so to speak, less rigidly a *fine art*, and it has been more generally applied to the embellishment of objects of use or mere decoration [...]. Articles of furniture, for instance, are often decorated with admirable sculptures in wood, and are as truly works of fine art as statues; whilst in metal-work the goldsmith has often produced decorated utensils as truly sculpturesque as the grandest works in monumental bronze.<sup>323</sup>

But how is this message conveyed in Robinson's visual display? In this more intimate compartment, visitors' initial impressions of the *David* might have been one of awe, first, due to its association with Michelangelo as a respected figure and also thanks to the comparative scale and whiteness of the cast – a similar feeling, perhaps, that Robinson had experienced in his “novel discovery” of Michelangelo's *Slaves* at the Louvre. As Whitehead has pointed out, it is clear from Thompson's photograph of the Art Museum that a large photograph, mounted on the plinth beneath the *David*, showed the original work *in situ* outside the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence.<sup>324</sup> A further inspection of this eye-level photograph on the part of viewers, then, visually associated the object in front of them with its original context – a context that positioned, what might otherwise be viewed as an isolated figural sculpture, within its original architectural environment. Even today, we still excuse the *David*'s strange perspective and unfinished nature as a consequence of its intended architectural placement, high

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>324</sup> Whitehead, “Enjoyment for the Thousands,” 225.

above the eye-line of viewers. Robinson would continue to provide photographic representations of monuments like the *David* in their original architectural scheme, stressing the importance of this in his catalogue of Italian sculpture of 1862, where he stated that: “it is essential to the complete understanding of such portions of monuments of the like nature, as have found their way into collections, that their relative places in the general design should be shown by drawings, photographs, engravings, casts, &c. of the complete works, or at least of similar ones, still in their original situations.”<sup>325</sup> For Robinson’s plans to maintain the integrity of the object *in situ* to work, reproductions were essential to the display.

A study of the small glazed case of Gherardini models “at the foot of” the *David* would further cement this notion of the sculpture as something ‘designed’ with material, practical and architectural associations in mind, rather than some lofty idea of a fine art figure ‘freed’ from the block of marble. Amongst the Gherardini collection, there stood a wax model (wrongly) attributed to Michelangelo and thought to be a preparatory study for the *David* [fig.16]. A label accompanying the model read:

Michel Angelo

“David” – Model in wax

Supposed to be the first sketch of the celebrated statue executed in marble, and placed at the entrance of the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, x.

<sup>326</sup> Department of Science and Art, *Return showing how far, in the different National Collections of Works of Art, objects of Historical Interest, or of Science (in the National Gallery, British Museum, Hampton Court Palace and similar Public Repositories maintained or assisted by the money votes of Parliament, as well as in Ancient, Religious or Civil Edifices or Monuments so assisted or maintained), the Rule has been observed of attaching to the Objects of Art a Brief Account thereof, including their Date, their Subject, the Name, with the Date of Birth and Death of*

Any visitor in possession of Robinson's *Gherardini Catalogue* could read further information on the architectural and practical constraints Michelangelo would have had to consider in his creation of the *David*: "[the model of the *David*] is highly valuable as showing what would have been the idea adopted by Buonarroti, had he been entirely free to regulate the pose of his figure, instead of being obliged to adapt it to the block of marble left in an imperfect and deteriorated state [...]." <sup>327</sup> Thus, Michelangelo's vast, figural sculpture is not some isolated, inaccessible work of fine art, despite initial appearances. It is described here, partly thanks to the photograph and Gherardini model, as a designed object, and an example of extraordinary skill in carving from a tricky block of marble that also had to conform to architectural considerations. With the help of various visual and textual aids grouped around the *David*, then, Robinson positioned the work of a revered sculptor as a vast exemplar of the "two-fold" nature of Italian sculpture as both a fine and applied art.

Taken out of the context of the original, though, what did the lone cast of the *David* represent at South Kensington? I would argue that Robinson re-contextualized and reinterpreted the *David* within the Art Museum, using it to form a physical, conceptual focal point for the room. The sculpture itself, and the desirable Italian period of the artist-craftsman it embodied, as well as the "two-fold" position it held between the fine and applied arts, was, quite literally, the great, awe-inspiring 'height' to which modern design could aspire and achieve.

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*the Artist, and the School to which he belonged; and in the case of objects of Science or of Historical Interest, a brief description thereof, with the view of conveying useful Information to the Public, and of sparing them the expense of a Catalogue* (HC 1857,152, XIII), 53. This label was certainly attached to the model immediately prior to the move from Marlborough House.

<sup>327</sup> Robinson, *Gherardini Catalogue*, 80.



The aesthetic interactions between other object groups within the room would always, ultimately, lead the eye back to the towering central figure, or the elevated Raphael copies that performed a similar “two-fold” position for painting.

I have already mentioned one such aesthetic interaction with regard to the Northern Baroque and Renaissance furniture of the eastern wall. The visual contrast between the dark, ornate, Northern European styles and the colourful, or bright, Italian styles is perhaps reminiscent of ideas found in Ruskin’s work “On the Nature of Gothic” from *The Stones of Venice* of 1853. There, Ruskin suggested that the contrast between earlier Northern and Southern European styles was due to the very different natural environments of the two locations:

Let us watch him [the Southerner] with reverence as he sets side by side the burning gems, and smooths with soft sculpture the jasper pillars, that are to reflect a ceaseless sunshine, and rise into a cloudless sky: but not with less reverence let us stand by him [the Northerner], when, with rough strength and hurried stroke, he smites an uncouth animation out of the rocks which he has torn from among the moss of the moorland, and heaves into the darkened air the pile of iron buttresses and rugged wall, instinct with a work of an imagination as wild and wayward as the northern sea.<sup>328</sup>

The contrast of the dark, ornate, heavily carved Northern Renaissance and Baroque styles and the smooth, bright Southern Renaissance and Baroque styles that plays out across the walkway in the Art Museum seems to echo Ruskin’s description, as well as his desire to consider the two as equals – lengthening his

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<sup>328</sup> Ruskin, *Stones of Venice II*, X, 187.

discussion of the Gothic to include subsequent historical styles. The stylistic, historical, geographical, material, and decorative comparisons one could make between the central sculpture within the Art Museum, and the decorative objects arranged around the walls were broad-ranging.

Indeed, the cast of the *David* and the original Italian sculptures that were arranged at its feet are engaged in yet another complex visual dialogue amongst themselves, providing viewers with a feast of comparative food for thought. Between the *David*, the Guidi busts, the photograph of the Piazza della Signoria and the Gherardini collection alone, one could make the obvious comparison between: materials and surface finishes; scale; original and copy; preparatory study and finished piece; and historical and stylistic differences within Italy. One could also see how figural sculpture – whether it be full figure or portrait bust – could operate aesthetically and practically within an architectural scheme. Using the pair of Guidi busts to flank the *David* created an obvious symmetry within the group. In flanking the *David* with the busts, Robinson was demonstrating how figural sculpture could operate decoratively within the “grand domestic environment,” framing architectural focal points. This aesthetic association amongst the sculptures provided the spark of interconnectivity between the exhibits needed to encourage comparative study, which would not have been so obvious if they had been separated and asymmetrically arranged in other parts of the room. This central group of Italian sculpture, which grew as time went on, was one of the many smaller ‘sets’ of objects that Robinson compiled to encourage the kind of comparative, connoisseurial deduction within visitors that he felt was so important to the elevation and appreciation of the decorative arts. As a whole group, they

could be contrasted to the Northern styles along the wall, but, within the group, they could be further compared according to whatever difference viewers were most interested in (material, style, size etc.). Here was the more comprehensive system of arrangement the Museum had been searching for, that now took into account style, material, geography, history, domestic application, and decorative utility.

One can also broaden the scope of the central Italian sculpture group to see how it interacted with, and drew upon, modern, British manufactures that had been carefully placed in association with it, connecting historical and contemporary manufacture. If we add the Minton majolica jardinière [fig.51] to our group of freestanding sculptures, more aesthetic, historical, material and stylistic dialogues can be opened up that address Italian/British, historic/contemporary, original/copy and public/private divisions. Looking at Thompson's photograph, the jardinière is the next tallest object in the central group, standing at around seven-feet tall. Although it is not obvious from the photograph, Minton's large-scale piece was an extremely bright and colourful (mainly blue, white and gold) addition to the Art Museum, especially when filled with flowers, as may have been the case at South Kensington when the Art Museum was open to the public. It was produced as an exhibition piece for Minton's highly successful contribution to the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1855. An issue of the *Illustrated London News*, dated November 1855, praised the British contributions to the Paris Exhibition, stating that:

Messrs. Minton and Co. are the most conspicuous contributors of pottery in the Paris Exhibition. No single firm has contributed so many excellent samples of its

manufactures. The collection, Englishmen will be happy to observe, includes some beautiful vases, drawn by students of the Schools of Design. [...] The collection of Palissy and Majolica ware, however, is that which appears to have created the greatest sensation among Parisian connoisseurs. The reader will remember that the main difference in these wares is that whereas the Palissy ware is coloured by a transparent glaze, Majolica ware contains the colour (opaque) in the material. The care and taste with which these manufactures have been brought by the Messrs. Minton to their present state of perfection, have been amply rewarded. Within a few days of the opening of the Exhibition all the specimens exhibited had been sold.<sup>329</sup>

The international success of modern Minton majolica was, “Englishmen would be happy to observe,” bringing British ceramic design back into serious competition within European markets. The fact that the Schools of Design had been involved, demonstrated a triumph for the Department of Science and Art; the system was beginning to work and the British ceramic industry was flourishing. Minton ceramics took on many forms - majolica, Palissy-ware, and Parian ware to name but a few – and the large jardinière in the Art Museum provided a visual link to the vast collection of Italian and Minton majolica and Palissy-ware that could be found in the Ceramics section of the Museum (behind the Art Museum in the lower galleries).

The jardinière also formed connections within the Art Museum that not only elevated its status as a modern British art-work worthy of a place alongside Michelangelo and Raphael, but that also opened up a dialogue between the Italian

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<sup>329</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 10 November 1855. Reproduced at [http://www.thepotteries.org/potworks\\_wk/124.htm](http://www.thepotteries.org/potworks_wk/124.htm) [Accessed 3 January 2014].

sculpture and Raphael copies that points towards the success of their synthesis within modern British, ceramic design. The jardinière is placed in association with these great artist-craftsmen of the Italian Renaissance – as both a work of sculpture and of painting that performs an architectural function (as a garden ornament). Alongside the Italian sculptures, one notices its unusual, elaborately sculpted Italianate shape and Bacchanalian subject, reminiscent of grand Italian Renaissance public fountains and garden sculpture (the structure is surmounted by a reduced replica of the Minton *Bacchus Vase* (c.1854, Potteries Museum, Stoke-on-Trent) [fig.56]). Minton had arguably taken inspiration from a variety of sources (the ‘paw foot’ of wood-carved furniture, and della Robbia-esque wreaths, for instance) but the unusual structure of the piece better resembles a highly sculptural Italian fountain than the more common vase-like jardinière or flower stand - bearing in mind, of course, that it would be spilling over with flowers rather than water. In particular, the three cherubs in each corner, dangling their legs over the edge of the structure, resemble those on the *Fountain of Neptune* (1567, Piazza Maggiore, Bologna) by Giambologna [fig.57], whose fountains and freestanding sculptures, like those of Michelangelo, decorated the piazzas of Florence and Bologna, as well as the famous Boboli gardens and grottoes. Incidentally, Giambologna was well represented within the Gherardini collection of models at the foot of the *David*.<sup>330</sup> Minton’s modern Italian-style productions, now so successful on the Continent, promised the visitor the prospect of a little slice of Renaissance Florence, updated for the modern Victorian garden. It also demonstrated Minton’s emphasis on Italianate design, standing in complete contrast to the dark, heavy wood of the Northern Baroque furniture.

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<sup>330</sup> Giambologna models in the Gherardini collection included; *The Rape of the Sabines* (c.1579-1580, V&A, London) [fig.18] and *Florence Triumphant over Pisa* (1565, V&A, London) [fig.19], amongst others. See Robinson, *Catalogue of the Gherardini Collection*, 1854.

In its central position within the Art Museum, and thanks to its bright colouring, the jardinière brings the equally colourful Raphael copies into a closer association with our ever-expanding aesthetic group. An aesthetic link between these bright, colourful exhibits would surely be obvious. They are the most multi-coloured objects in the room. Robinson had already expressly linked Raphael with maiolica, suggesting, in his introduction to the *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection* of 1856, that, “the universal belief that Raffaello himself had, in the outset of his career, condescended to paint plates and dishes, was the chief cause of this widespread appreciation [for Italian maiolica].”<sup>331</sup> Italian maiolica had long been referred to as “Raffaello ware,” due to the idea that Raphael himself had applied his talent as a painter to maiolica pottery. Juxtaposing the Minton majolica alongside the Raphael frescoes, therefore, was suggesting a very prestigious link between modern Minton ware and Raphael that I will further discuss in the final chapter of this study. At the same time, the jardinière pulls both aesthetic elements from the group of Italian sculpture alongside it – highly sculpted Italianate figures and motifs - and the bright colours and decorative arabesques of the Raphael paintings on the wall together to create something new for the modern British interior or garden. In addition, the idea of the garden ornament, of course, reflects back upon the Italian sculpted figures in the centre of the room, opening up a world of possibilities concerning the traditional ornamental appreciation of freestanding sculpture, particularly figural sculpture, within the decorative scheme of a grand public or private garden.

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<sup>331</sup> Robinson, *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection*, 1.

The place of Minton's majolica within the Art Museum was therefore, perhaps, almost an advertisement for the quality of design that Minton could provide for the consumer. Whilst the *David* and the Raphael copies were too large and too expensive for average visitors to house in their own homes (even though they too were reproductions), middle-class visitors would have been able to look to Minton's manufactured Italianate works for the decoration of their own homes and gardens, influenced by the revered Italian Renaissance names with which they were associated at the Museum. Minton's parian ware collection also promised that bourgeois visitors could purchase a reduced, modern version of a white, marble sculpture for display within even the smallest of parlours – those on a similar scale to the Gherardini models found at the base of the over-sized *David*. In this sense, the Art Museum promised visitors *public* ownership of the large scale, rare, historical objects, and *private* ownership of scaled-down versions, copies or modern reinterpretations. Scale is obviously an important factor in this. Whilst the colossal size of the works by Michelangelo and Raphael emphasised their elevated status, they also denied the kind of intimate interaction with objects one could enjoy in the home or in the private collection. An association with Minton, and with the Gherardini collection, wherein great Italian names were represented in a smaller, more manageable, and more accessible size, again brought the colossal works of the revered artist-craftsmen of the Italian Renaissance back down to earth, or back home, within reach of viewers: students and manufacturers could see how to incorporate their designs into modern manufactures; and consumers and collectors could see the associations between rare, colossal objects, and those that could be collected or manufactured for the home. This worked in both directions, and the accessible objects of a decorative

nature, such as the jardinière were, through their associations with the Italian sculptures, elevated in their (philosophical and physically vertical) associations with Michelangelo and Raphael.

There are perhaps an infinite number of these types of aesthetic associations stretching backwards and forwards, upwards and downwards, across the Art Museum display. The central group of Italian sculptures, however, provided a conceptual and physical focus for the collection as a whole. Arranged centrally within the Art Museum, alongside cabinets, vases and mirrors, these Italian sculptures embodied the idea of the artist-craftsman promoted in the catalogues, and the lessons that the Renaissance conception of the artist-craftsman could provide for the improvement of modern design. They challenged the perceived divide between the fine and decorative arts, elevating the latter, and even promoted the success of their influence through modern followers, such as Minton. They filled in the art historical gaps left by the National Gallery and British Museum, taking some inspiration from the dominant presence of colossal sculptural casts at Sydenham, and continued to build a bigger picture of ‘modern’ sculpture as more and more exhibits were added. Moreover, in their aesthetic associations with the rest of the collection, they helped provide visitors with that experience of the Italian Renaissance synthesis of the arts - the unity of the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture and ornament that was so important for the serious appreciation of the latter and the improvement of British design. The previous chapter considered the manner in which Italian sculpture slowly infiltrated the collection, thanks to its “two-fold” position between the fine and applied arts, and how it gradually evolved into the finest and most comprehensive



collection of Italian sculpture outside of Italy. This chapter has tracked the development of the display of the earliest Italian sculpture acquisitions within Robinson's domestic arrangements and how their "two-fold" position was integrated and promoted within the display to open up aesthetic dialogues that reflected Robinson's more connoisseurial approach to art education. Robinson's educational displays were more complex than a mere emulation of a domestic interior. They were a visual polylogue - a meeting of styles, materials, histories, geographies, sculpture, painting, architecture, ornament – that visitors could appreciate and learn from. The extent of their impact on the subsequent Victorian taste for eclectic domestic interior decoration, of the kind described in Edwards' and Hart's *Rethinking the Interior* and other texts, is unclear.<sup>332</sup> They would, however, certainly have an impact upon the reception of Italian Renaissance sculpture in mid- to late nineteenth-century Britain, as well as on subsequent artistic practice, as the second part of the thesis will demonstrate.

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<sup>332</sup> Edwards and Hart, *Rethinking the Interior*. See also Clarence Cook, *The House Beautiful: An Unabridged Reprint of the Classic Victorian Stylebook*, [New York: Scribner, 1881] (Dover Publications: New York, 1995) and Judith Neiswander, *The Cosmopolitan Interior: Liberalism and the British Home 1870-1914* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2008).

PART II

RECEPTION

CHAPTER III  
SCHOLARLY RECEPTION

Luca della Robbia: South Kensington and the Victorian Revival of a  
Florentine Sculptor

The time has come for doing justice to [Luca della Robbia]. Amongst the men of genius of the middle ages who remained without appreciation, few were so long or so completely forgotten.<sup>333</sup>

In Britain, over the course of the nineteenth century, Luca della Robbia arose from the forgotten realms of early Italian sculpture to become known as “the most popular sculptor of the fifteenth century.”<sup>334</sup> Initially ignored by Flaxman in the 1820s and “barbarized” by Ruskin in the 1840s, della Robbia’s reincarnation and rise in popularity subsequently occurred alongside the mid- to late-century re-interpretations of the fledgling term Renaissance.<sup>335</sup> These revisions, characterized by a complex re-organisation of the chronological and ideological boundaries of the Renaissance, invited back into the light those sculptors, like della Robbia, formerly in the shadow of Michelangelo and Donatello, and repositioned them within the canon of Italian art.

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<sup>333</sup> Triqueti, “Tuscan Sculptors,” 281.

<sup>334</sup> Pope-Hennessy, *Luca della Robbia* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980), 10.

<sup>335</sup> “We may, without neglecting our great purpose, (the principles of art,) pass over the intermediate names between Donatello and Michael Angelo, as having added little to the value of modern sculpture.” Flaxman, *Lectures*, 311. “There is a singular thing on the Hospital front, a series of bas-reliefs in coloured porcelain by Luca della Robbia which have, of course, the most vulgar effect conceivable, looking like the commonest signpost barbarisms.” Ruskin, “Letter from John Ruskin to his father, May 29<sup>th</sup> 1845,” in *Ruskin in Italy*, ed., Harold Shapiro, 87.

This shift in academic focus coincided with the rapid development of the Italian sculpture collection at the South Kensington Museum. The following chapter considers the contribution that the collection made to this change in Victorian scholarship - a collection formed predominantly of the work of those overlooked sculptors of the fifteenth century. I argue that the Museum's Italian sculpture collection acted as a visual catalyst for the subsequent literature that sought to redefine the term "Renaissance." The Museum's scholarly promotion of the Italian collection played a vital role and this chapter provides a much-needed examination of the detailed 1862 *Italian Sculpture* catalogue produced by Robinson. The catalogue acted as an important link between the material objects within the collection and their contextual place in contemporary scholarly literature. How did Robinson promote his sculpture collection in order that its artefacts and their forgotten creators infiltrated and enlightened Victorian scholarly debate relating to the Italian Renaissance? And to what extent did the South Kensington Museum's Italian sculpture collection and its promotional catalogue contribute to the changing Victorian scholarly reception of Italian Renaissance art?

To limit such a broad enquiry, this chapter forms a case study, tracking the chronological development of fifteenth-century Florentine sculptor, Luca della Robbia's rise to fame throughout the nineteenth century in relation to his place and promotion within the South Kensington collections. Previously ignored in the period, the work of the della Robbia family dominated the South Kensington collection in its early years. To bring della Robbia back into serious discussion, I

argue, involved not only a large presence of his work in the Museum, but a calculated ‘hybridization’ on the part of Robinson and subsequent academic promoters. This hybridization came from the fusion of Early Renaissance and Victorian ideals and constituted what Mieke Bal would refer to as “preposterous” history – a dialectic relationship between past and present concerns.<sup>336</sup> In this case, I suggest, the dialectic came from Robinson’s reinvention and promotion of della Robbia as a true *Ruskinian* - a fifteenth-century sculptor and artisan deeply entrenched in the leading artistic and artisanal ideals of the mid-nineteenth century, particularly those of Ruskinian origin. This may seem preposterous indeed considering Ruskin’s early anti-Renaissance, anti-Florentine and staunchly chromophobic tendencies, but by linking della Robbia with pro-Gothic Ruskin in this way, Robinson probed the chronological limitations of the Renaissance, describing, in Ruskinian terms, something that Ruskin himself had passed off as a “signpost barbarism.”<sup>337</sup>

To strengthen the idea that a ‘preposterous hybridisation’ of della Robbia and Ruskin had an important positive effect on della Robbia’s Victorian popularity, I frame the argument further by considering Ruskin’s personal and academic reactions to the work of his fifteenth-century ‘follower;’ demonstrating an undeniable change in Ruskin’s taste for della Robbia sculpture that warrants further investigation. Having at first expressed great dislike for the polychromatic works of the della Robbia family for their ‘barbaric’ use of colour, Ruskin

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<sup>336</sup> Bal uses a quote from T.S. Eliot to elucidate, playing on the prefixes pre- and post-: “Whoever has approved this idea of order ... will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.” Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>337</sup> Ruskin, “Letter from Ruskin to his father,” in *Ruskin in Italy*, ed., Shapiro, 87.

gradually warmed to their charm so much that he installed a highly-coloured example in his study at Brantwood. Did the promotion of della Robbia in a Ruskinian light cause the chromophobe to change his mind about the sculptor?

The chronological limitations of my enquiry rely on two quotations from Ruskin that clearly show a drastic change of opinion. When Ruskin wrote to his parents from Italy in 1845, he included the following comment relating to the exterior decoration of the Ospedale del Ceppo in Pistoia (Santi Buglioni, *Frieze*, c.1525 [fig.58]): “There is a singular thing on the Hospital front, a series of bas-reliefs in coloured porcelain by Luca della Robbia which have, of course, the most vulgar effect conceivable, looking like the commonest signpost barbarisms.”<sup>338</sup> The exterior frieze is, in fact, a third-generation della Robbia and Buglioni collaboration, not an original Luca della Robbia, but despite incorrect attribution, the sentiment remains undeniably chromophobic. He continues: “And yet, if you struggle with yourself and look into them, forgetting the colour, you find them magnificent works of the very highest merit, full of the p[u]rest sculptural <merit> feeling, and abundant in expression, grace of con[cepti]on and anatomical knowledge.”<sup>339</sup> So it seems that it was the “barbaric” or “vulgar” addition of *colour*, masking otherwise “pure sculptural feeling,” or “expression,” that Ruskin had a problem with. Whatever Ruskin defined as “pure sculptural feeling,” it certainly did not involve colour and the inclusion of the latter only served to mask the former, ruining the aesthetic of the whole.

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 87.

Surprisingly then, thirty-five years later, Ruskin purchased a highly-coloured *Adoration of the Christ-Child* by Andrea della Robbia [fig.2] through the dealer Charles Fairfax Murray, to whom he wrote: “Yes, the Luca’s here, in a corner of my study – a perpetual pride and care – quite one of the most precious things I have; but yet how the photograph flattered it in some ways [...], the darkening green of the foliage made it look so much richer.”<sup>340</sup> Although incorrect attribution is again apparent, it is clear that Ruskin’s chromophobic views had somewhat softened. Now he was not struggling to ‘forget’ the colour, but to discern it from a monochrome photograph. The place of polychromy in sculpture, and the furious nineteenth-century debate surrounding it, including Ruskin’s own stance, is therefore an important aspect to consider when exploring Ruskin’s relationship to della Robbia.

What occurred during those thirty-five years that caused Ruskin to warm to della Robbia and his coloured terracotta sculptures? The following enquiry braids three parallel chronologies in an attempt to answer this question. The first concerns the general rise in Victorian taste for della Robbia sculpture; how did scholarship of the period evolve in its reception and interpretation of della Robbia’s work? The second relates to the activity at South Kensington; when did della Robbia sculpture arrive and how was it promoted? The third relates to Ruskin’s personal reaction to della Robbia and the evolution of his own scholarly concerns; what was Ruskin involved in throughout this period and what was he subsequently writing about della Robbia? By drawing together these three chronologies and considering their relationship to one another, this chapter tracks the success of the

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<sup>340</sup> Ruskin, “Letter from John Ruskin to Charles Fairfax Murray, February 1880,” XXXVII, 311.

promotion of della Robbia at South Kensington in contributing to the sculptor's rise to fame.

### 3.1 Before South Kensington

We may, without neglecting our great purpose, (the principles of art,) pass over the intermediate names between Donatello and Michael Angelo, as having added little to the value of modern sculpture.<sup>341</sup>

In his tenth and final lecture for the Royal Academy, "Modern Art," Flaxman made the above comment, passing over the Italian sculptors of the early fifteenth century.<sup>342</sup> It is important to recognize two omissions made by Flaxman in relation to my enquiry: the first and most obvious is the admittedly deliberate omission of names such as della Quercia, della Robbia, Desiderio, and Verrocchio; the second is the use of the term "modern sculpture" – which here refers to what would later be classed as the Renaissance period. Instead of 'Renaissance,' Flaxman used the term "restoration of art" to describe the period, beginning with the Pisani, leaping to Donatello, Ghiberti and finally focusing on Michelangelo.<sup>343</sup> In Flaxman's final lecture, it is clear that those "intermediate names" mentioned above, including Luca della Robbia, were written out of existence. Indeed, there is scarcely any mention of the della Robbia family in British scholarship of the early nineteenth century at all and his work was only accessible *in situ* to the more affluent Grand Tourists. In the 1840s, however,

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<sup>341</sup> Flaxman, *Lectures*, 311.

<sup>342</sup> According to the anonymous author who provides a brief memoir of Flaxman's life at the beginning of the published Lectures of 1829, Flaxman had written this lecture but had not managed to deliver it before his death in 1826. See Flaxman, *Lectures*, xxv.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 326. Flaxman also briefly refers to Cellini and Bernini, but only in relation to the "debasement" of art after Michelangelo. *Ibid.*, 321-2.



travel on the Continent became easier and somewhat cheaper, Murray's handbooks for travellers in Italy became popular literature for the tourist,<sup>344</sup> and Sir. Francis Palgrave reviewed Vasari's *Lives* (1840), suggesting that "errors, inaccuracies, mistakes, and false judgments, are the continual subjects of fault-finding with the 'Vite degli Artefici.' Yet in all investigations of art, the work must form the substratum of our enquiries."<sup>345</sup> This new access to Italy and a revision of traditional texts, cultivated a desire to know more about the various Italian artists of the fifteenth century mentioned in Vasari, whose work could be seen in abundance throughout Italy.

It was at this time, too, that Ruskin was gaining first-hand experience of fifteenth-century Italian sculpture whilst on visits to Italy with his parents in the 1830s and early 1840s. Having published his first major work, the first volume of *Modern Painters*, in 1843, he felt the need to return to Italy, unchaperoned, in order to focus on collecting information for further writing.<sup>346</sup> It was on this trip that he wrote his first negative critique of coloured della Robbia sculpture, in the letter to his parents mentioned above. Following this critique of 1845, Ruskin publicly reiterated his dislike for the della Robbia aesthetic in the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846) as part of a discussion on polychromy in fifteenth-century Italy: "I have never seen colour on any solid forms, that did not, to my mind, neutralize all other power; the porcelains of Luca della Robbia are painful

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<sup>344</sup> As well as alternative guides such as Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* [1846] (London: Penguin, 1998). These pointed out monuments, buildings and artworks of interest along the traveller's route.

<sup>345</sup> Francis Turner Palgrave, "The Fine Arts in Florence," *Essays on Art* (London, 1866), 403.

<sup>346</sup> See, Alessandro Vescovi, Luisa Villa, and Paul Vita, eds., *The Victorians and Italy: Literature, Travel, Politics and Art* (Monza, Italy: Polimetrica, 2009), 215.

examples.”<sup>347</sup> But how does della Robbia fit into the ideas expressed in Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*? In what context is the ‘pain’ that he felt towards the colour of della Robbia sculpture? *Modern Painters* was, of course, his treatise on truth, and, in particular, truth to Nature in art. It is necessary to consider some of the relevant ideas expressed in his writing in order to gain a fuller understanding of his early dislike for della Robbia sculpture and how it might later be overcome.

The above reference to Luca della Robbia in *Modern Painters* formed part of Ruskin’s discussion on the separation of colour and form in art, described in great detail in terms of painting in *Modern Painters I* and sculpture in *Modern Painters II*. In nature, as it should be in art, Ruskin argued, colour is a secondary quality that is trumped by form. In his discussion, “On the Relative Importance of Truths: Thirdly – that Truths of Colour are the Least Important of All Truths,” he highlighted the position of colour as a “secondary quality” of nature, as opposed to the “primary quality” of form.<sup>348</sup> To firmly establish his ideas in traditional philosophy, Ruskin quoted John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1690, in which the philosopher classed primary qualities as such because they are inherent within the natural body, whereas secondary qualities are those sensible qualities of bodies that rely on the interpretation of a third party.<sup>349</sup> With Locke as his starting point, Ruskin suggested that because form is an inherent quality of a natural body, in art it must come before any consideration of colour, which exists only through the retinal reception and mental interpretation of the viewer and can vary depending on circumstance, remaining ever open to misinterpretation. He concluded that in art: “He, therefore, who has

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<sup>347</sup> Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, IV, 300.

<sup>348</sup> Ruskin, *Modern Painters I*, III, 158.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

neglected a truth of form for a truth of colour has neglected a greater truth for a lesser one.”<sup>350</sup> Although this comment was directed at painting, it seems apt to apply it to Ruskin’s subsequent opinion of della Robbia sculpture. The “pure sculptural feeling” and “grace of expression” that Ruskin saw beyond the della Robbia colours was clearly one of form, a greater truth than that of the veil of inappropriate colour that he struggled to see through.

So, for Ruskin, colour corrupts form. Form, he suggested, is achieved through *chiaroscuro* effects – the purity of which is tainted by colour. This is why he considered “the truest grandeur of sculpture [...] to be in the white form; something of this feeling may be owing to the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of obtaining truly noble colour upon it, but if we could colour the Elgin marbles with the flesh tint of Giorgione, I had rather not have it done.”<sup>351</sup> The use of the word ‘noble’ here suggests a connection to the Winckelmann tradition.<sup>352</sup> The “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” of the three-dimensional white form is impossible to realize in ignoble, loud colour, even, as Ruskin suggested, if that colour were applied by the great colourist, Giorgione. In his first volume of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin had already stated that, if an artist should wish to use colour truthfully in his work, “a certain abandonment of form is necessary; sometimes by reducing it to the shapeless glitter of the gem, as often Tintoret and Bassano; sometimes by loss of outline and blending of parts, as

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>351</sup> Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, IV, 301.

<sup>352</sup> Winckelmann states that “Since white is the colour that reflects the most rays of light, and thus is most easily perceived, a beautiful body will be all the more beautiful the whiter it is.” Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity* [1764] here taken from Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 94.

Turner; sometimes by flatness of mass, as often Giorgione and Titian.”<sup>353</sup> Of course, three-dimensional sculpture can never abandon form. Colour can therefore only ever be of a secondary and ignoble nature when applied to the third dimension, hence the reason for Ruskin’s preference for white sculpture, with its *chiaroscuro* purity of light effect. Ruskin’s chromophobic reaction to the della Robbia frieze seems, therefore, to have been firmly established in his discussions relating to the truth of colour in *Modern Painters*.

The next mention of della Robbia’s name in Ruskin’s work occurred in the *Seven Lamps of Architecture* of 1849. This selection of lectures reflected the writer’s pro-Gothic tendencies, which reached their height some years later in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3), the third volume of which, from 1853, introduced the term ‘Renaissance’ in a predominantly negative light. The Renaissance, or “The Fall,” as Ruskin described it, entered British scholarship as the destruction of the Gothic. As described in the first chapter of this study, Ruskin’s Renaissance was a period of moral decline: decadent, pagan and striving to achieve beyond Nature in its artistic endeavors. But Ruskin did distinguish between different periods of his Renaissance: the Early Renaissance, being the first degradation of the purer, Christian Gothic; the Roman Renaissance, being the height of the revival of Classical ideals; and the Grottesque Renaissance, being the ultimate degradation of all. It seems that early fifteenth-century sculpture formed the favourable shift between the Early and Roman Renaissance - at first managing to maintain the Christian spirit of the Gothic, and even Ruskin’s praise, although sculpture of this period would soon succumb to the lure of Antiquity. Despite perhaps being

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<sup>353</sup> Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*, IV, 301.

positioned in this more favourable period of Renaissance sculpture, della Robbia was still chastised by Ruskin for his use of colour. It is in the precursory essays to *Stones, The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, that Ruskin referred to “the Robbia family” directly, and negatively, for their “regrettable,” “useless and ill arranged colours.”<sup>354</sup>

At this time, during the early 1850s, the display of della Robbia casts in the Renaissance Court at the Crystal Palace, Sydenham, was being manipulated to reflect the more conventional post-Winckelmann taste for the white form, echoing Ruskin’s own. In 1855, the *Quarterly Review* confirmed this:

the art peculiar to Luca della Robbia – the figures moulded in terra-cotta, with coloured glazings – though there are specimens here in form, there are none in colour. It is strange that in all the mistaken zeal seen around for applying colour to objects where it is at best superfluous, it should have been omitted in those where it is a principal characteristic.<sup>355</sup>

The anonymous author, who seemed surprisingly keen to see the della Robbia pieces in their original coloured state, was perhaps referring to the “mistaken zeal” of Owen Jones’s controversial Greek Court which included the Elgin Marbles in fully imagined colour. Unlike Jones, Matthew Digby Wyatt, the designer of the Renaissance Court, had sought to strip the della Robbia sculptures of their original polychrome aesthetic or included those works by della Robbia rendered originally

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<sup>354</sup> Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, VIII, 84.

<sup>355</sup> Anon, “ART. I.--1. The Assyrian Court, Crystal Palace,” *Quarterly Review* 96, no.192 (Mar 1855): 331.

in marble [figs.59, 60].<sup>356</sup> Indeed, there seems to have been a definite separation at the Crystal Palace between della Robbia the Renaissance sculptor, and della Robbia the ceramicist. Whilst his works were drained of their vibrant colours in the Renaissance Court, a polychrome work attributed incorrectly to him took centre-stage in the Ceramic Court, judging by the following 1858 review by the *National Magazine*:

One of the most magnificent specimens we have seen of [Luca della Robbia's] work is a figure placed in the centre of the Court, representing a negro-boy, squatted sideways upon the floor, leaning upon one hand, the other one raised with an action as if addressing the spectator. This is full of spirit, and displays, moreover, extraordinary feeling for colour.<sup>357</sup>

Despite the again incorrect attribution it is interesting to see how della Robbia was celebrated for his use of colour amongst the maiolica of the Crystal Palace Ceramic Court, but that this celebration was not acceptable for his position as an Italian sculptor in the Renaissance Court. That said, his choice of materials and polychromy posed a dilemma for any curator. Della Robbia worked in marble, bronze, and polychrome terracotta. His marble reliefs for the *Cantoria* of the Duomo in Florence (c.1431, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence [fig.61]) ranked alongside the similar project by Donatello, and his bronze doors of the North Sacristy (c.1442, Duomo, Florence [fig.62]) placed him alongside Ghiberti.

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<sup>356</sup> The cast of the *Cantoria* reliefs can still be seen in this photograph from c.1924 in Henry James Buckland, *Crystal Palace* (London: Photocrom Co., 1924) [fig.59] and the cast of the Pistoia hospital frieze can be seen in this illustration from 1858 in Samuel Phillips, *Guide to the Crystal Palace and its Parks and Gardens*, ed., F. K. J. Shenton (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1858) [fig.60].

<sup>357</sup> F.G.S., "The Ceramic Court at the Crystal Palace," *National Magazine* 5, no. 26 (Dec 1858): 117.

But it seems that his more popular, numerous and recognizable terracottas were positioned at the Crystal Palace in some intermediate void. As fine art sculptures, in the Renaissance Court, their enamelled glaze seems to have degraded della Robbia's talent as a sculptor so extensively that they were stripped off for a more post-Winckelmann, white aesthetic.<sup>358</sup> As painted ceramics, in pride of place within the Ceramic Court, they promoted the great sculptural heights to which the coloured majolica aesthetic could be applied, creating an overall dichotomous message concerning the gap between fine art sculpture and decorative sculpture that della Robbia fell into by colouring terracotta forms.

Indeed, the first della Robbia pieces collected by Robinson for the Museum whilst it was still at Marlborough House were the two reliefs within the Soulages Collection of 1856 [figs.22, 23]. As we have seen, in the accompanying catalogue Robinson introduced the collection as “[...] decorative objects of utility, and of those minor productions of great artists, which are not usually thought to deserve the designation of ‘high art.’”<sup>359</sup> Maiolica had grown in popularity in the preceding years due, Robinson suggested, to its alternative name, “Rafaelle Ware,” and, in the section of the catalogue notably entitled ‘Italian *Sculpture*,’ Robinson provided a brief introduction to the history of the della Robbia family and used the following terms to introduce their work: “‘Della Robbia *Ware*,’ as it is now familiarly termed, is *sculpture* in terra-cotta, generally in high relief, or in the round, covered with an enamel glaze of the same composition as that of the

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<sup>358</sup> Even more artificial considering that the act of merely stripping the colour would render the original terracottas not white but red-brown.

<sup>359</sup> Robinson, *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection*, iii. He continues “The very finest specimens were, it is true, purchased with avidity for their original purpose as objects of room decoration; they were not, however, at that period, generally deemed worthy of the same kind of regard, which was paid to pictures, statues, engravings or objects of pure antiquity.” *Ibid.*, iv.

Majolica ware.”<sup>360</sup> This instantly confused the position of della Robbia works as both sculpture and pottery or “ware.” Furthermore, Robinson’s discussion of the place of polychromy was a practical, not aesthetic, one. He stated that there had been little research on the della Robbia family since Vasari, and that it was difficult to attribute works to specific family members due to there being an over all “family style.”<sup>361</sup> Robinson’s discussion of colour in the *Soulages Catalogue* was, therefore, one of attribution. He noted that it was not until the later generations that a technique for flesh tones was invented, deducing that those works in which the flesh tint was provided by the terracotta could be attributed to Luca della Robbia for this reason. Both of the works in the Soulages Collection were small-scale reliefs and seemed appropriately placed within a ceramics collection intended originally for a private domestic interior. Both placed white figures on a flat, blue background, an aesthetic that actually further confused the position of della Robbia as sculptor or ceramicist. Firstly, it maintained a visual association with Wedgwood pottery that featured sculpted reliefs designed by Flaxman, not to mention the blue and white china of East Asia and Delft. Secondly, the white forms of the figures are preserved, in relief, and maintain a marble-like appearance despite appearing in a ceramic context.

It is clear, then, that Robinson sought to promote della Robbia within the collection as a sculptor who applied his talent to ceramics. At this moment in the nineteenth century, however, any ‘uncensored’ terracotta works of della Robbia

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 129. (My emphasis)

<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 129. We have seen the consistently inaccurate attempts to attribute various works to certain members of the della Robbia family. The idea of a “family style” cannot be the only explanation for this and perhaps misattribution has more to do with changing Victorian aesthetic tastes, or lack of knowledge relating to the family, than with the style of the della Robbia pieces themselves.



and his followers were destined to be consigned to the ceramics galleries of Britain. Surely, to promote della Robbia as a sculptor of the same great era as Donatello and Michelangelo would involve a real defence of the polychromatic element of his work - no easy task in light of the strong, general preference for the white form, supported and amplified by Ruskin, the leading art writer of the day. But it will become clear, as we move into the era of della Robbia's Victorian revival, that, for the sake of the growing collection and his own academic standing, Robinson used Ruskinian language and ideas to promote della Robbia as, first and foremost, a sculptor whose aim was to study Nature in all its forms *and* colours. There was a noticeable silence from Ruskin throughout this period regarding the sculptor, but when this silence was broken, a more positive and relaxed attitude towards the colour of della Robbia sculpture can be perceived.

### 3.2 Robinson's Catalogue and the della Robbia Collection at South Kensington (1862)

The encircling wreath and portions of the ornamental bracket [...] are enamelled with the most vivid and brilliant colours, proper to the fruit and foliage represented.<sup>362</sup>

In 1862, Robinson published his detailed catalogue of Italian sculpture. The Museum had recently benefitted from 85 Italian works from the Gigli-Campana collection, the controversial and anticipated acquisition of which has already been discussed in this thesis. Although della Robbia sculpture had been steadily

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<sup>362</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 63.

trickling into South Kensington since the Soulages acquisition, the Gigli-Campana acquisition brought an unprecedented wealth of della Robbia sculpture to the already comprehensive Italian sculpture collection. The collection in its entirety was consistently praised for its comprehensive nature, intellectual display and accompanying catalogue, as this anonymous reviewer in the *London Review* suggested: “We believe it to be a fact [...] that no such collection of Italian, Mediæval and Renaissance sculpture is to be found out of Italy itself; and probably even in Italy this phase of the national art would seldom be met with in so orderly and systematic a shape.”<sup>363</sup> Out of nearly three hundred specimens within the entire Italian collection, 49 were examples of della Robbia sculpture. The della Robbia family equally dominated the catalogue with a six-page introduction to their work, as well as the detailed visual analysis provided in each catalogue entry. Only Michelangelo was privileged with a similar, albeit shorter (three-page), introduction.<sup>364</sup> Robinson’s account of the della Robbia, along with the catalogue entries, was therefore the first piece of ‘extensive’ art-historical writing on della Robbia in Britain.<sup>365</sup> The presence of della Robbia sculpture at South Kensington was, therefore, undeniably dominant by 1862 and the question of how to categorise and promote the forty-seven *coloured* terracottas must have crossed Robinson’s mind.<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Anon, “Italian Sculpture at the South Kensington Museum,” *London Review and Weekly Journal of Politics, Literature, Art and Society* 5, no.109 (Aug 1862): 104.

<sup>364</sup> Other major sculptors have shorter (often one-page) ‘notes’ attached to the end of their catalogued works.

<sup>365</sup> It is necessary to mention that there was greater interest in the della Robbia family in France, perhaps due to the della Robbia family entering into French history in Girolamo della Robbia’s (1488-1566) work for the court of Francis I. One particularly important study, Henry Barbet de Jouy’s, *Les Della Robbia: Sculpteurs en terre émailée. Étude sur leurs travaux, suivie d’un catalogue de leur oeuvre, fait en Italie en 1853*, from 1855, had catalogued those works of della Robbia that the writer had found on his travels to Italy and is specifically referred to in Robinson’s catalogue.

<sup>366</sup> Of the forty-nine, two pieces were not in colour.

As discussed in the previous chapters, one of the aims of the Italian collection was to continue the artistic chronology started by the Classical sculptures at the British Museum. Robinson was keen to challenge the divide between fine art sculpture and the sculptural applied arts within the Museum, which, he suggested, could best be achieved through study of the various “two-fold” productions of “mediæval sculptors,” concluding that “the present Collection, therefore, will comprise all such works as a mediæval sculptor may have been called upon to execute; and one good result, which it is hoped will ensue from it, will be an elevation of the *status* of ornamental sculpture in general.”<sup>367</sup>

Della Robbia’s “two-fold” status between the two made him the perfect focus for such an endeavor. In order to promote the whole collection, therefore, Robinson raised della Robbia’s status, not someone to be ‘passed over,’ considered ‘barbarous,’ or consigned only to the Ceramics Galleries, but an artist-craftsman and sculptor worthy of dominating a collection boasting some of the great names of fifteenth-century Italian sculpture. To achieve this, he reinterpreted the relevant contemporary scholarship and contextualised his della Robbia terracotta collection within it, promoting Luca della Robbia as a sculptor who made a conscious choice to colour his work that could be understood and accepted by a post-Winckelmann, mid-Victorian audience.<sup>368</sup> What Robinson provided in his catalogue, therefore, was a more scholarly and relevant way for della Robbia to be studied that did not

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<sup>367</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, ix-x.

<sup>368</sup> Robinson’s positioning of Luca as the head of a *bottega* helps with his categorization as a sculptor. Robinson considered Luca’s work not under the categories of sculpture and ceramics, but under the category of bespoke and manufactured products of the *bottega*. The works of ‘high art’ were of better design and attended to by the master, whereas the numerous smaller works and copies, carried out in part by assistants, were for ‘casual sale,’ likening Luca’s method of work to that of the industrious and enterprising modern sculptor who collaborated with manufacturers such as Minton and Doulton. See *Ibid.*, 49-50.

rely solely on the anecdotal inaccuracies of Vasari, but instead used Ruskinian language to bring the sculptor, and the study of his work, into the nineteenth century. Not only had Robinson acquired a rich collection of original della Robbia examples that could now be studied in Britain, but through his own visual analysis loaded with Ruskinian sentiment in his catalogue, he contextualized these examples of sculpture as exponents of the leading British, Ruskinian artistic ideals of the day.

Ruskin was, of course, one of the most influential scholars of the era and Robinson, whose various intellectual catalogues displayed serious academic aspirations, must have been well aware of Ruskin's early works. In addition to this, Ruskin had given an inaugural lecture at the South Kensington Museum in January of 1858, soon after the Museum opened its doors to the public at its new (and current) site. This date also coincides with Robinson's first trips to Italy in search of objects for the Museum, a move backed by Ruskin's 1847 plea discussed in the first chapter of this study.<sup>369</sup> It is necessary to consider this lecture in some detail in order to suggest Ruskin's immediate influence over Robinson's subsequent scholarly promotion of the della Robbia in the 1862 catalogue. Ruskin's South Kensington lecture, entitled "The Deteriorative Power of Conventional Art over Nations," aimed at the students of the South Kensington Schools, echoed many of the ideas found in *The Stones of Venice* regarding the degradation of art in the absence of 'truth to Nature.' Ruskin considered that

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<sup>369</sup> "Let agents be sent to all cities of Italy [...]" Ruskin, "Danger to the National Gallery," VII, 406.

the period in which any given people reach their highest power in art is precisely that in which they appear to sign the warrant of their own ruin; and that, from the moment in which a perfect statue appears in Florence, a perfect picture in Venice, or a perfect fresco in Rome, from that hour forward, probity, industry, and courage seem to be exiled from their walls, and they perish in a sculpturesque paralysis, or a many-coloured corruption.<sup>370</sup>

The words “sculpturesque paralysis” and “many coloured corruption” cannot be ignored here, being Ruskin’s estimation of bad sculpture and painting linked geographically and therefore historically to the Italian Renaissance period discussed in *Stones*. He gave a direct warning to the directors of the Museum regarding this: “I am sure that Mr. Redgrave and Mr. Cole do not at all include results of this kind in their conception of the ultimate objects of the institution which owes so much to their strenuous and well-directed exertions.”<sup>371</sup> The fact that Robinson was not mentioned here seems odd considering his already obvious contribution to the Museum and perhaps it inspired him to make sure that his next published catalogue would be more noticed in academic, and particularly Ruskinian, circles, demonstrating that the collection was clearly not deviating from Ruskinian principles. Indeed, Robinson subsequently drew on some of the key ideas in Ruskin’s lecture in his promotion of the works in the Italian sculpture collection. He was also careful not to use the term ‘Renaissance,’ with its Ruskinian connotations, but instead chose “Revival of Art” to describe the historical period under which the objects in the collection were grouped.

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<sup>370</sup> Ruskin, “The Deteriorative Power of Conventional Art over Nations,” XVI, 264.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, XVI, 265.

The key point that Ruskin made in his lecture, and his advice to the students of the schools so that they may avoid the degradation of morals found in the ‘perfection’ of art, was that “art, devoted humbly and self-forgetfully to the clear statement and record of the facts of the universe, is always helpful and beneficent to mankind, full of comfort, strength, and salvation.”<sup>372</sup> A “record of the facts,” of course, referred to the ever-present importance of truth to Nature in Ruskin’s artistic ideals at this time. As soon as art detached itself from Nature and began to mathematically alter its complex variation in pursuit of perfection, a degradation of morals ensued, as well as a sculptural paralysis or many-coloured corruption. In a move that seems to have furthered his discussion of the favourable move from the Early to Roman Renaissance periods in *Stones*, Ruskin praised the fifteenth-century Florentine school, being the period preceding and culminating in the work of Michelangelo, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci, as an example of a school where truth to Nature was explored. The school achieved this, Ruskin suggested, through its honest attempts to portray natural human emotion and expression through gesture and facial features.<sup>373</sup>

When Robinson introduced della Robbia in the catalogue, not only did he position him as a great artist of this moment in Florentine history,<sup>374</sup> but he delayed the discussion of what Ruskin might term “useless and ill arranged colours.”<sup>375</sup> Robinson began with della Robbia’s first documented marble sculpture commission, the *Cantoria* [fig.61], an incorrectly attributed, partial sketch of

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid., XVI, 268.

<sup>373</sup> “...this Florentine or leading Italian school proposed to itself human expression for its aim in natural truth; it strove to do that as well as it could – did it as well as can be done – and all its greatness is rooted in that single and honest effort.”<sup>373</sup> Ibid., XVI, 270.

<sup>374</sup> “It is clear, from the important commissions he obtained, that he was considered in his own day an artist of the highest standing...” Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 47.

<sup>375</sup> Ruskin, VIII, 84.

which existed in the Museum collection. In his description of the *Cantoria*, Robinson denounced Vasari and used modern, Ruskinian language to describe the work, echoing the idea of Florentine truth to expression found in the 1858 lecture:

posterity has unanimously reversed Vasari's verdict on this inimitable work, in respect to its excellence as compared with the similar frieze by Donatello; beautiful, indeed, as is the latter monument, it is destitute of that charm of life-like expression, truthful rendering of Nature, and general elevation of conception, which in Luca's frieze appeal to the hearts and understandings of every beholder.<sup>376</sup>

The Ruskinian sentiment in Robinson's description is unavoidable: "life-like expression," "truthful rendering of Nature," and "elevation of conception," certainly sound like phrases that would appeal to the 'heart and understanding' of Ruskin. In fact, Robinson began the catalogue by considering that all of those sculptors of the early-fifteenth century represented in the collection took no influence from the Classical but instead were inspired directly by Nature: "External nature, religious feeling, human character and expression, these were alike in the school, and, in far greater measure than the antique, the inspiring motives, of the sculptors of the Revival."<sup>377</sup>

Another important feature of Ruskin's truth to Nature, delivered in his lecture at South Kensington and utilized in Robinson's catalogue, was that the lower orders

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<sup>376</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 47. Vasari had preferred Donatello's *Cantoria*, for its rougher appearance rendering it easier to see from a distance. The South Kensington Museum would later possess (and still display) full plaster casts of *both* versions, though the cast of Luca's version was purchased first.

<sup>377</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, vi.

of nature should not be ignored in favour of the idealization of higher forms. For Ruskin, the beauty of nature did not reach its apex in the human form but was equally found in the design of a leaf. These lower orders of nature should be treated with as much truth to their natural form as the human figure, in order that the whole exhibits a unity in “the close association of the beauty of lower nature in animals and flowers with the beauty of higher nature in human form.”<sup>378</sup> Ruskin continued this discussion, using sculptural examples, by remarking that “you never get this in Greek work. Greek statues are always isolated; blank fields of stone, or depths of shadow, relieving the form of the statue, as the world of lower nature which they despised retired in darkness from their hearts.”<sup>379</sup> The negative terms used here to describe the Greek statue’s apparently unfavourable dismissal of the lower orders of nature - ‘isolated,’ ‘blank,’ ‘depths of shadow,’ and ‘darkness’ - have a sense of the colourless *chiaroscuro* light effects that Ruskin had considered so important in sculpture.

So it is interesting to notice how Robinson appears to have capitalized upon Ruskin’s preference for the truthful rendering of the lower orders of nature, and applied it to the use of colour in della Robbia sculpture. Where lofty Greek sculpture apparently banished the lower orders of nature in its blank, isolated forms, della Robbia sculpture celebrated them in fully-imagined, bright colour. The first coloured terracotta sculpture addressed in the catalogue, afforded the most detailed description, is Luca della Robbia’s *Stemma of King René of Anjou* [fig.30]. This imposing, eleven-foot wide, circular medallion depicts the Anjou coat of arms surrounded by a border of foliage particular to the style of the della

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<sup>378</sup> Ruskin, “The Deteriorative Power of Conventional Art over Nations,” XVI, 280.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, XVI, 280.



Robbia family. Robinson's description of the border emphasized the treatment of the lower orders of nature, and their Ruskinian truth to natural fact, and should here be quoted in full:

The rich clusters of mingled leaves and fruit are grouped together with exquisite taste, whilst the spirit and beauty of the modelling, the truth to Nature, and the variety of the tints of the enamel colours, which imitate the exact tone of the green leaves and the rich fruit of each shrub, are, considering the difficult nature of the process and the limited scale of pigments at the disposal of the artist, truly surprising, and fully justify the simple yet emphatic eulogium of Vasari, expressed in reference to the similar borders at Or San Michele, "that they appeared to be rather natural fruit and leaves than imitations in enamelled terracotta."<sup>380</sup>

Again, there is no escaping the Ruskinian language used here. Not only did the term 'truth to Nature,' appear explicitly, but it was achieved, in part, using colour. What Robinson seems to have implied here, is that colour assisted in the variation of the naturalistic 'mingling' forms of the fruits and leaves, and that della Robbia had succeeded in obtaining a truthful polychromatic rendering of these. Far from grand, Greek sculpture "retiring in darkness," "blank" and "isolated," della Robbia's humble foliage was the naturalistically vibrant, highly-coloured focus of an otherwise mathematically stylized roundel.

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<sup>380</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 55. The word 'exquisite,' used in conjunction with della Robbia work here, would later become a popular choice of adjective for the Aesthete, Walter Pater. He does, in fact, use it in *The Renaissance* to describe Luca's low relief: "[Luca] became desirous to realize the spirit and manner of that sculpture, in a humbler material, to unite its science, its exquisite and expressive system of low relief, to the homely art of pottery." Pater, *The Renaissance*, 45.

The Ruskinian sentiment found in Robinson's description of the *Stemma*, was furthered in an emphasis on the "rich clusters," "grouped together with exquisite taste." As well as the forms and colours of the leaves themselves, the way they are grouped together, so variously, without any stylized pattern is also very Ruskinian and Robinson drew attention to this. The only sense of pattern or repetitive element is in the (truthful) suggestion of separate bundles placed in a circle and tied with a white band. This further suggested that della Robbia had indeed tied together bundles of leaves to copy directly from nature. These were not imagined leaves, then, they suggested documented, particular leaves gathered by the sculptor for study and observation. Ruskin would have delighted at this idea and it is important here to consider a relevant passage relating to the natural arrangement of leaves in his 'truth of vegetation' from the first volume of *Modern Painters*:

the forms of the leaves, though in themselves similar, give rise to a thousand strange and differing forms in the group; and the shadows of some, passing over the others, still farther disguise and confuse the mass, until the eye can distinguish nothing but a graceful and flexible disorder of innumerable forms, with here and there a perfect leaf on the extremity, or a symmetrical association of one or two, just enough to mark the specific character and to give unity and grace, but never enough to repeat in one group what was done in another.<sup>381</sup>

This description of natural leaves fits well with Robinson's description of della Robbia's effect. The use of a "variety of tints" adds to this effect in a way that perhaps the "isolated," "blank" forms of white marble sculpture could not quite achieve with such vibrant variety and truth to Nature.

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<sup>381</sup> Ruskin, *Modern Painters I*, III, 588-9.

An emphasis on a ‘particularised’ truth to Nature, the notion that the della Robbia aesthetic documented the facts of nature without generalising them, is again apparent in Robinson’s description of the figures in Andrea della Robbia’s *Adoration of the Magi* (c.1500, V&A) [fig.63]: “We may conclude, from the variety and individualized character of nearly all the personages on the left of the composition, that they must have been executed from the life, and it is very probable that they are portraits of contemporary friends of the donor or of the artist.”<sup>382</sup> This echoes a similar idea in Ruskin’s lecture when speaking of the figural sculptures on the façade of Chartres Cathedral: “They are all portraits – unknown, most of them, I believe – but palpably and unmistakably portraits, if not taken from the actual person for whom the statue stands, at all events studied from some living person.”<sup>383</sup> Example drawings of these figures from Chartres, commissioned by Ruskin, were exhibited thereafter in the South Kensington Museum so it is not unlikely that Robinson deliberately alluded to this particular Ruskinian preference in the catalogue. Indeed, in Andrea della Robbia’s *Adoration*, it seems that colour again aids in the “variety and individualized character” of the portraits and the lower orders of nature, forming a striking and deliberate contrast with the white forms of the divine figures on the right. In this contrast, Andrea della Robbia certainly seems to have achieved the “close association of the beauty of lower nature in animals and flowers with the beauty of higher nature in human form”<sup>384</sup> that Ruskin praised in the Chartres figures.

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<sup>382</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 65. Another example of Robinson’s allusion to individualized portraits relates to Luca’s *Labours of the Months* (c.1450-6) whose figures, Robinson suggested, each exhibit “a different individual character,” and “may be taken as life-like portraits of the sturdy Tuscan peasants of the day.” *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>383</sup> Ruskin, “The Deteriorative Power of Conventional Art over Nations,” XVI, 280.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, XVI, 280.

Robinson focused his attention on those early pieces by Luca and Andrea della Robbia that were highly esteemed in their previous collections. It is in these long descriptions that he exercised his Ruskinian ‘truth to Nature’ tone of voice, leaving the later pieces, of the “period of decline of the della Robbia *bottega*,”<sup>385</sup> with very little descriptive analysis. It is as if he was following a Ruskinian model of decline, from Luca della Robbia as the great sculptor whose work showed a real truth to Nature, to Andrea, whose earliest work showed his master’s influence but eventually succumbed to the “many coloured corruptions” of the subsequent generations who were inspired by their predecessors, rather than the natural world around them. Robinson’s method of attribution, based on the naturalistic and subtler application of colour and manipulation of form followed this decline. This cleverly allowed for contrasting opinions to be formed of the della Robbia works without staining Luca della Robbia’s status as the great master sculptor. If the colour was too much or unnatural, or the forms too stylized, Robinson consigned it to the later, declining generations of the family.

If Robinson delayed his discussion of Luca della Robbia’s coloured terracottas until after he had introduced those early works rendered in marble and bronze, his chronology of the della Robbia works in the collection equally began in white. The first catalogue entry is that of a “sketch in stucco” of one of the panels of della Robbia’s marble *Cantoria*, followed by the only other example of monochrome work in the collection, an unglazed terracotta relief.<sup>386</sup> Robinson then proceeded to address the sculptor’s terracotta reliefs as a “new art – that of

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<sup>385</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 71.

<sup>386</sup> Incidentally, both were later found to be copies ‘in the style’ of the della Robbia and not Luca originals.

enamelled sculpture.”<sup>387</sup> It is here that Robinson eased the reader into the idea that della Robbia maintained his status as ‘sculptor’ despite his change in material and his application of colour. He did this by considering that first application of colour as the uncontroversial, white imitation of marble. As an enterprising artist, Robinson suggested, della Robbia’s first intention “was, obviously, to give an appearance of polished marble to his works in terra-cotta” in order that he could produce them cheaply and more efficiently than if he worked in marble itself.<sup>388</sup> According to Robinson, della Robbia was a sculptor, experimenting with his materials for practical reasons and being gradually and naturally led towards an application of colour.

Robinson continued his discussion of colour in a footnote to the introduction in which he stated:

Generally speaking, the use of two enamel colours only, viz. blue and white, was the earliest mode; but the introduction of other tints in accessories and details, at first very sparingly applied, very soon followed, and afterwards (by Luca himself) a full system of chromatic decoration was introduced. The specimens in which portions, especially the heads, hands, &c. are left free from the glaze, are usually, but not exclusively, of the later period of the school. This method arose from the limited number of the enamel pigments not admitting of such crude and vivid colours as were desired in the period of the decline of art.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 47.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 48. A contemporary reader may again make the connection here with the collaborations made between sculptors and manufacturers of their own era, particularly the Parianware copies of John Bell’s famous marble works produced and sold more cheaply by Minton.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 50. (footnote)

From white, to blue and white, to “sparingly applied” colour, Robinson gently eased the reader towards an acceptance of the polychrome development of della Robbia’s terracottas, admitting that “crude and vivid colour” was a product of the later period of the “decline of art,” but that it had nothing to do with Luca della Robbia, who only used his colours, as we have seen, to aid in the portrayal of natural truth.<sup>390</sup> The more crude and unnatural the colour, the further away it was positioned from the master sculptor, so it was acceptable that “unfavourable opinions,” due to incorrect attribution, had been previously formed of it. This idea that *some* colour in sculpture might be acceptable as long as it was not excessive, entered into Ruskin’s vocabulary some years later. In 1865, writing about the reaction of a group of girls on hearing Charles Hallé at the piano, Ruskin stated that “only La Robbia himself (nor even he unless with tenderer use of colour than is usual in his work) could have rendered some image of that listening.”<sup>391</sup>

In this comment, which pointed towards the *Cantoria* in its allusion to music, it is noticeable that Ruskin was not writing off colour completely. As he seems to have been referring to the expressions and gestures found in the listening figures of the marble *Cantoria*, he could easily have requested that there be a complete absence of colour – that della Robbia’s ‘truth to expression’ could speak for itself in marble - but instead he chose the word “tenderer.” Something was changing. Ruskin was gently beginning to speak of della Robbia sculpture in colour. But what did the rest of the Victorian world think about Luca della Robbia? Had

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<sup>390</sup> This chronology of colour comes predominantly from Henry Barbet de Jouy, *Les Della Robbia: Sculpteurs en terre émailée. Étude sur leurs travaux, suivie d’un catalogue de leur oeuvre, fait en Italie en 1853* (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1855).

<sup>391</sup> Ruskin, IXX, 79.

Robinson's collection and catalogue managed to propel the sculptor, and his newfound Ruskinian tendencies, into serious scholarly discussion?

### 3.3 After South Kensington: Perkins, Pater and Poetry

Mr. Robinson's excellent catalogue, with its painstaking descriptions, good arrangement, and valuable notices of the several sculptors and their works and styles, will serve not only as an indispensable handbook to the present collection, but as a general guide to the history of the glyptic art of Italy in the periods of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance.<sup>392</sup>

Reviews of the Italian sculpture collection and of Robinson's catalogue were full of praise. Even before the complete collection was made available to the public in 1861, its imminent arrival was "much talked about"<sup>393</sup> and the della Robbia examples were gaining particular attention, as this anonymous 1860 review from the *Saturday Review* suggested: "We know no place where the della Robbia ware can be so well studied as at South Kensington. The Museum already possessed some excellent specimens, and these new purchases are a most worthy addition."<sup>394</sup> From contemporary reviews, it seems that the display of the full collection took a tantalisingly long time to complete. Long before the Italian sculpture collection was opened to the public, the hype surrounding it was being cultivated by the Museum, no doubt predominantly, at the hands of Robinson, as

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<sup>392</sup> Anon, "Robinson's Italian Sculpture," *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 14, no.356 (Aug 1862): 231.

<sup>393</sup> Anon, "The Acquisitions from the Campana Collection for the South Kensington Museum," *Athenaeum* 1748 (Apr 1861): 562.

<sup>394</sup> Anon, "Additions to the South Kensington Museum," *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 10, no. 254 (Sep 1860): 305. This review pays particular attention to the *Stemma*, acquired and installed prior to the Gigli-Campana collection: "...this work ought to give an inspiration to the Staffordshire potteries, and to open a new era among us of external polychromatic decoration." *Ibid.*, 305.

the same reviewer from the *Saturday Review* pointed out: “It is tantalizing to buy and read the catalogue of such works of art as these, and not to be able to see them.”<sup>395</sup> The eventual completion of the collection, its display, and the publication of its full catalogue in 1862 were therefore eagerly anticipated, and presumably, considering the presence of the equally anticipated International Exhibition across the road, and the *Special Exhibition of Loans* next door, the collection was brought to the attention of a large number of people.

Robinson’s catalogue was also gaining much attention and praise, and, more importantly, subsequent reviewers were picking up on his ‘truth to Nature’ emphasis:

He is, we think, quite right in saying that the antique had little influence upon the Italian sculpture of the fifteenth century [...]. The only possible supplanter of the antique, as a model for the sculptor’s study, must be nature, regarded with a genuine endeavor to elicit, in some new or yet unexhausted direction, the powers of emotion and suggestion which nature possesses.<sup>396</sup>

One of the more extensive and detailed reviews of 1863 was by the sculptor, Baron Henri de Triqueti. It was not only extremely complimentary of Robinson’s catalogue as a scholarly document, but afforded della Robbia special mention and described his work in terms of Robinson’s borrowed Ruskinian truth to Nature: “Florence itself offers an instance of a man whose reputation has never been

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<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 305. It is not clear which catalogues the author is here referring to. Certainly, it seems, Robinson’s full catalogue was not published until 1862 but it is likely that he was writing the entries for those objects already in the collection before this date, and possibly releasing these early for promotional purposes.

<sup>396</sup> Anon, “Italian Sculpture at the South Kensington Museum,” *London Review and Weekly Journal of Politics, Literature, Art and Society* 5, no.109 (Aug 1862): 104.



adequate to his remarkable merits [...]. Fertile, varied, composing admirably, and seizing expression with astonishing fidelity, he is a “naturalist” of the highest order.”<sup>397</sup> The terms used here to describe Luca echo those that Robinson appropriated from Ruskin: ‘truthful expression,’ ‘varied,’ and ‘naturalistic’ are all variations of terms emphasized by Robinson, though Triqueti used the term “fidelity” instead of “truth,” and seems to have referred largely to the sculptor himself rather than directly to his works.<sup>398</sup> Triqueti also remarked that “at present one never encounters [della Robbia’s] name”<sup>399</sup> by which he seems to have been suggesting that della Robbia’s works, and the sculptor himself, needed further scholarly investigation and that both had been wrongly neglected. Indeed, he set up Robinson’s catalogue as an important scholarly document, considering that “the *nomenclature* of a catalogue [...] deserves serious attention from serious minds.”<sup>400</sup> Robinson’s catalogue was not merely an inventory of the works on show with brief background information for the average museum visitor. It included detailed visual analysis; contextualization of the works within various historical periods, including the contemporary; personal opinion; and, as we have seen, a Ruskinian theme running throughout. The nomenclature was careful, calculated, and contemporary in its Ruskinian bent: as we shall see, concepts such as ‘truth to Nature,’ ‘truth to expression’ and the category ‘Italian Revival’ were to continue to appear in subsequent serious scholarship relating to the period.

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<sup>397</sup> De Triqueti, “The Italians Sculpture at the South Kensington Museum,” *Fine Arts Quarterly Review*, 1 (May 1863): 104. Triqueti’s own work also displayed a strong Quattrocento, even della Robbia-esque, influence.

<sup>398</sup> The use of the word ‘fertile’ to describe della Robbia work was new here and, though most likely referring to the sheer volume of work produced by the della Robbia *bottega*, still harks of nature and the capacity for mud, baked or otherwise, to produce vegetation.

<sup>399</sup> De Triqueti, “The Italian Sculpture at the South Kensington Museum,” 105.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

Triqueti expressed the importance of the catalogue for ‘serious’ scholarship when he stated:

The catalogue of the Italian sculpture at South Kensington, a collection that has sprung into existence as if by enchantment under our very eyes, is a work of considerable importance. Its merit far exceeds the generality of such publications, and it bears the outward evidence of its superiority even in its typographic execution, which is of the best order.<sup>401</sup>

Therefore, according to Triqueti, who maintained a prominent, although contested artistic and scholarly influence in Britain at this time, Robinson’s collection and catalogue formed an academic point of departure from which further investigation into sculpture of the period represented at South Kensington could emerge and evolve.

A year later, in 1864, such an investigation came to fruition in the form of American art critic, Charles Callahan Perkins’s, two volume work *Tuscan Sculptors*.<sup>402</sup> In *Tuscan Sculptors*, Perkins intellectualized his revised version of the canon of Italian sculpture, including those names passed over by Flaxman in the early century that were now promoted in the collection at South Kensington. It appears that Perkins was highly influenced by Robinson and the South

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 100. Perhaps the superiority in typographic execution refers in part to Robinson’s use of the formal, historical (particularly Renaissance) ‘long s,’ and decorated letters pertaining to illuminated manuscripts. The aesthetic appearance of text itself would also preoccupy Pater, who insisted that his first edition of *Renaissance* be printed on corrugated paper. See Østermark-Johansen, “Relieving the Limitations of Sculpture and Text: Walter Pater’s della Robbia Essay,” 37.

<sup>402</sup> Perkins was living in Britain at this time and would go on to produce *Italian Sculptors: being a History of Sculpture in Northern, Southern and Eastern Italy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1868) which included those sculptors outside of Tuscany.

Kensington collection, as he begins with a note on the first page of his Preface stating that:

The admirable collection of Italian sculpture at the South Kensington Museum, for which the public is chiefly indebted to J. C. Robinson, Esq., whose persevering energy, knowledge, and sagacity in selecting valuable works of art can hardly be overrated, makes it possible for a student to learn more about it in England than anywhere else out of Italy.<sup>403</sup>

Many of the engravings accompanying the book, executed by Perkins himself, were of works in the collection and their inclusion suggests that he spent a considerable time at the Museum, investigating those objects “sagaciously” selected by Robinson. Robinson’s catalogue was also mentioned as one of the few valuable accounts of Italian sculpture of the period in existence, and we can therefore presume that Perkins, despite having explored Italy for himself, was influenced by Robinson’s work.<sup>404</sup>

*Tuscan Sculptors*, like Robinson’s catalogue, avoided the explicit use of the word ‘Renaissance’ in its title and subtitles and continued instead with the same careful nomenclature as Robinson by referring to the period under discussion as the

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<sup>403</sup> Perkins, *Tuscan Sculptors*, 1, vii. Perkins would later use much of the South Kensington ethos in helping with the establishment of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston where an equally comprehensive Italian sculpture collection was created. See Marietta Cambareri, “Italian Renaissance Sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: The Early Years,” in *Sculpture and the Museum*, ed. Marshall, 95-112.

<sup>404</sup> “A few others may be mentioned, such as Burckhardt’s Cicerone, and Mr. Robinson’s illustrated catalogue of the Kensington Museum, in both of which valuable notices are to be found, but neither of which pretends to give anything like a fully-developed account of Sculpture in Italy.” Ibid., viii.

“Revival.”<sup>405</sup> Perkins’s categorization of the various chronological periods of the Revival followed a pattern of decline similar to that of Ruskin’s Renaissance. However, Perkins’s system is a far less straightforward progression and seems to bring together hierarchical structures from Ruskin, Vasari and, most interestingly, the German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. It seems that Perkins was forced to complicate his canon due to the now more numerous selection of names that needed to be added. New groupings were required in order to place these previously overlooked sculptors effectively into context with the more popular sculptors. The book somewhat follows Ruskin’s idea of latter fifteenth-century decline found in *Stones*, upholding early fifteenth-century Tuscan sculpture as the peak of “truth and character.”<sup>406</sup> Unlike Ruskin, but similar to Vasari, Perkins considered Michelangelo as the artistic ‘peak’ and an (almost) anomalous genius of his time, devoting a whole section of *Tuscan Sculptors* to the work of the sculptor.<sup>407</sup> After Michelangelo, names such as Cellini, Bandinelli and Giambologna (all represented at South Kensington) were all considered “greatly inferior to those who raised their art so high under the great Cosimo and Lorenzo

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<sup>405</sup> See section title, *Ibid.*, xlix. Perkins often refers to ‘Early Renaissance’ and ‘Renaissance’ styles throughout but it does not enter into the vocabulary of his titular categories relating to his conceived canon. The word ‘Renaissance,’ though not yet linked to a particular geographic region or time period, had been introduced into Britain through architecture by Pugin in the 1840s (see Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing*, 10-11). It was not a completely unknown word at this point but would not have been the default word to use when promoting Italian art of the fifteenth century. Ruskin had introduced and solidified it as a derogatory term, and Sydenham had a “Renaissance Court” that displayed a ‘style’ of work spanning various European countries and time periods providing a confused idea as to what the word actually described (there was a separate “Italian Court” for the great names such as Michelangelo and Raphael that were later associated with the Renaissance). It may therefore have been thought to taint any discussion of fifteenth-century Italian art with some negative feeling, and was certainly a more loaded term than “Italian Revival” which was a far more specific and ‘safer’ term to use.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>407</sup> “...we must remember that [Michelangelo] was in every respect a gigantic exception to the sculptors of his time, and while we admire his splendid genius, must also admit that he too was an artist of the latter days, who had his share in bringing about the downfall of art.” *Ibid.*, 241.

the Magnificent.”<sup>408</sup> Equally, the latter sculptors of the fifteenth century, or “Tares among the Wheat”<sup>409</sup> as they were categorized, “could not revive the spirit of Christian art which steadily declined during the last half of the fifteenth century.”<sup>410</sup> They “had eaten the forbidden fruit, and thus gained a knowledge which made them prefer skill to the higher qualities of feeling and composition [...]”<sup>411</sup> This estimation of the decline of sculpture throughout the fifteenth century, saturated with Christian sentiment and biblical language, echoed Ruskin’s descriptions of the move away from humble Christian ‘truth’ that hastened the decline of the Renaissance period.

The first volume of *Tuscan Sculptors*, being the more extensive, concentrated on those early fifteenth-century sculptors now well represented in Robinson’s collection and catalogue. Verrocchio, Mino da Fiesole, Desiderio, Rossellino and, of course, the della Robbia, amongst others, are given their academic place alongside the Pisani, Donatello, Ghiberti and even Michelangelo, just as they were placed alongside these names within the walls of South Kensington. They form the main focus of the work, and their chronological proximity allows for the interesting and intellectual categorization system that Perkins proposed to describe this short but fruitful period of the canon. Perkins seemed to want to establish these sculptors firmly in the scholarship of the day to bring them to the attention of a wider scholarly audience. This, now far denser, selection of early fifteenth-century sculptors was therefore split into three categories that appear to follow a

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<sup>408</sup> Perkins, *Tuscan Sculptors*, 2, 109.

<sup>409</sup> Perkins, *Tuscan Sculptors*, 1, xii.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 238-9.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

similar hierarchical format found in Hegel's *Aesthetics*.<sup>412</sup> In Perkins, Niccola Pisano and his workshop form the first "Architectural Sculptors." Andrea Pisano and followers, Orcagna, Giovanni Balduccio and the Sienese School form the "Allegorical Sculptors." The "Pictorial Sculptors," are then comprised of Ghiberti, Donatello, Verrocchio, the della Robbia and others. The underlying hierarchical development pertaining to Hegel's *Aesthetics*, beginning with the most primitive "symbolic stage" that Hegel relates to architecture; followed by the "classical stage," constituting sculpture; and ending with the "romantic stage" of painting, music and poetry, warrants further investigation.<sup>413</sup> Through these developmental stages, Hegel considered the growing success at which each art managed to articulate an abstract concept, or "Absolute Idea," moving further away, in a progression from architecture, to sculpture, to painting, music and poetry, from the material, sensual world into the realm of the abstract. Perkins, without explicitly referring to Hegel's *Aesthetics*, tracked an arguably simplified and less nuanced Hegelian model of progression of fifteenth-century sculpture, from those early "architectural" sculptures, to self-contained "allegorical" works, to the more illusory "pictorial" sculptures, particularly reliefs, abundant in the latter period. Perkins did not go far to describe his choice of categorization but the three terms used; architectural, allegorical, and pictorial, seem arguably to coincide with Hegel's three chronological stages of art within the confines of sculpture, showing a development that culminates in the more 'illusory' or abstract qualities of pictorial sculpture that Perkins described as a "cheating of the senses."<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friederich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

<sup>413</sup> See Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*.

<sup>414</sup> The only brief explanation given for the word pictorial occurs in a discussion of Donatello: "...they are far less pictorial – i.e. they aim at no cheating of the senses..." Perkins, *Tuscan Sculptors*, 1, 155.

It is the latter category, the illusory “Pictorial Sculptors,” including Donatello, Ghiberti and the della Robbia, that, for the purposes of this study, warrant the most attention. Indeed, of those “Pictorial Sculptors” exhibited at South Kensington, the vast majority were represented by their reliefs with only a few examples in the round. This link cannot be ignored, perhaps going some way to explaining the category “pictorial,” and it may seem obvious to consider whether della Robbia colour, predominantly applied to relief sculpture, could be excused in such a pictorial categorization. Perkins did not investigate this in depth, however, nor did he go into detail on the pictorial nature of relief sculpture in general. Instead he echoed Robinson in his discussion of colour as an aid to attribution, considering that the earliest, more subtly coloured works of Luca and Andrea della Robbia were preferable to those later brightly-coloured pieces which “little by little degraded the originally pure marble-like surface to the level of wax-work.”<sup>415</sup> “One can do nothing more than broadly assign the simplest in colour and feeling to the earliest period of the school, when Luca and Andrea della Robbia worked together, and those in which colour is unsparingly used to the latest.”<sup>416</sup> This almost seems to have been an admission that, when considering attribution of della Robbia works, “one can do nothing more” than rely on a post-Winckelmann taste for colour (or lack thereof). Perkins, like Robinson, otherwise trod carefully around the polychromy of della Robbia’s work, but provided a very Ruskinian, or perhaps Robinsonian, description of the Pistoia hospital frieze that Ruskin had pronounced barbaric for its colour in 1845. First considering the “unsparing use of colour”, as producing “a brilliant, if not a perfectly tasteful

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<sup>415</sup> Perkins, *Tuscan Sculptors*, 1, 196.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

effect,” (a far more gentle expression of distaste than Ruskin’s “barbaric” and “vulgar”) he remarked on the “careful observation of common nature,” and, like Robinson, focused on the Ruskinian particularized ‘truth to Nature’ of the sickly figures: “the artist evidently studied the effects of illness upon some of the sufferers who lay in the hospital [...] and then reproduced in his work what he had seen, without attempting to idealise.”<sup>417</sup> Unlike Robinson, Perkins did not include colour in this description of the particularization of nature. Whether or not Ruskin would have himself come to a similar conclusion in 1845 (after struggling to see through the colour) is unclear – a particularized truth to expression might have constituted that “pure sculptural feeling” that he had described. Nevertheless, this idea of the della Robbia family as ‘naturalists’ and faithful students of particularized and experienced nature was taking hold, as was the acceptance of ‘sparing,’ or ‘tenderer’ colour and the attribution of the ‘unsparing’ to later generations.<sup>418</sup> The hospital frieze was now attributed to a later, though still not late enough, della Robbia generation – admitting its failures with regard to colour would not stain the reputation of the fifteenth-century master sculptor, Luca della Robbia.

But what of the pictorial nature of della Robbia work? Perkins did not fully explain his use of the word in context but it was through this new descriptive term that the next stage of della Robbia’s Victorian development emerged. A reviewer of *Tuscan Sculptors* noted that, in the period discussed by Perkins, a “gradual

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>418</sup> Both Perkins and Robinson attribute the Hospital frieze to Andrea’s later period. A subsequent review of *Tuscan Sculptors* explicitly linked the work of Robinson and Perkins: “Let us hope that [Robinson’s *Italian Sculpture*], and Mr. Perkins’s more extended work, may lead our sculptors to the study of their Tuscan predecessors both here and in Italy.” Anon, “Art. VIII.-1. Tuscan Sculptors, their Lives, Works and Times,” 552.



improvement in studying natural form is perceptible [...] but the leading wish is to express Christian sentiment in a way which, compared with the Greek, might be called pictorial rather than plastic.”<sup>419</sup> It seems that della Robbia, and his “pictorial” contemporaries, had once again been used to bridge a gap, here between the Hegelian conception of the place of plastic Greek ‘sculpture’ and that of the more inward-looking, Christian painting. In fact, Perkins pushed della Robbia even further away from the plastic when describing the *Cantoria*, by likening the sculpture to poetry, the height of Hegel’s artistic hierarchy, and also consistent with the word ‘poetic’ which was often used to describe ideal sculpture in the nineteenth century. The reviewer also considered a little of Ruskin’s ‘truth to expression’ as the abstract source of this poetry: “the expression in each chorister’s face is so true to the nature of his voice, that we can hear the shrill treble, the rich contralto, the luscious tenor, and the sonorous bass of their quartette, and as we listen to their ‘ditties of no tone’ feel with the poet, [...] that ‘heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter.’”<sup>420</sup> This direct, although tacit reference to Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ (1820), in which the poet considers the urn’s success over poetry at portraying “unheard melodies,” suggests a small triumph of the visual arts over the abstract, unheard of in the Hegelian tradition.<sup>421</sup> Thanks to Robinson and Perkins, then, not only was della Robbia now being described as a sculptor in the context of Ruskinian truth to Nature, but, particularly through his truth to expression, he could also be related to German philosophy and even the growing popularity of Keats’s Romantic

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<sup>419</sup> Anon, “The Tuscan School of Sculpture,” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 19, no.484 (Feb 1865): 147.

<sup>420</sup> Perkins, *Tuscan Sculptors*, 1, 193.

<sup>421</sup> As well as Lessing (see Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* [1766] trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962))

poetry.<sup>422</sup> Triqueti's wish for more serious scholarly interest in these artists had, therefore, been granted and he expressed his support for continuing study in a review of *Tuscan Sculptors*: "Mr. Perkins has fortunately reopened a mine which had never been thoroughly explored; and the present moment, when the want is coming to be felt, is especially favourable for his researches, and ensures the welcome which his book deserves."<sup>423</sup> The fifteenth-century sculptors of Italy would, from this moment onwards, no longer be able to escape the German philosophy that separated them from their Victorian interpreters. This was to become particularly apparent in one of the more substantial and important Victorian works on the Italian Revival - Walter Pater's *Renaissance*, published in full in 1873. In Pater's hands, della Robbia's nineteenth-century awakening would take an essentially contemporary, aesthetic and poetic direction.

It was at this time, during the late 1860s, that Pater's work was slowly moving towards a study of this Italian Revival period, translating all that he brought from German philosophy and literature into an investigation of the 'poetry' of Italian sculpture. This long investigation culminated in his famous work, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Pater's *Renaissance*, a defiant celebration of that word, and of those artists of the early fifteenth century, would challenge Ruskin directly, bringing him back into the discussion of fifteenth-century sculpture and allowing him to revisit Luca della Robbia in light of the sculptor's

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<sup>422</sup> Keats's popularity had been steadily growing since the 1840s (after publication of his collected works (1840) and first biography (1848) he was still not widely included in anthologies of British poetry until the late 1850s – see G. M. Matthews, ed., *John Keats: The Critical Heritage* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1971). His poetic subjects are well represented by the Pre-Raphaelites at this time including William Holman Hunt's *The Eve of St Agnes* (1847-57, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool), John Everett Millais's painting of the same name (1863, Royal Collection) and Hunt's *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1868, Laing Gallery, Newcastle).

<sup>423</sup> Triqueti, "Tuscan Sculptors," 274.

new-found positive, physical and scholarly presence in Victorian Britain.<sup>424</sup> Della Robbia had an important part to play in Pater's *Renaissance*, being the title protagonist in his discussion of fifteenth-century sculpture, showing just how far the sculptor had come in terms of his Victorian popularity since Flaxman. By further intellectualizing ideas found in Perkins, Pater used Luca della Robbia's name as a starting point to redefine the word 'colour,' broadening its meaning to discuss the colourless forms of marble sculpture.

Pater's chapter entitled 'Luca della Robbia' began with the following description of fifteenth-century sculpture, which he felt possessed "that profound expressiveness, that intimate impress of an indwelling soul, which is the peculiar fascination of the art of Italy in that century."<sup>425</sup> His estimation of fifteenth-century sculpture, and particularly of Luca's work, was steeped in this idea of "expressiveness" or the "impress of an indwelling soul;" an idea that seems a more secular, relational and even erotic combination of Ruskin's notion of Christian truth to expression and the Hegelian connotations of Perkins's "pictorial." The focus of Pater's 'Luca della Robbia' chapter was a discussion of the method in which this abstract expression was achieved in sculpture, despite its material limitations. Pater described the early fifteenth-century sculptors, those represented at South Kensington and in Perkins's *Tuscan Sculptors*, as forming one of three sculptural periods that achieved this expression of the indwelling soul: the other two being the moment of the Greek sculptors and of Michelangelo. Those intermediate sculptors of the early-fifteenth century found expression, he

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<sup>424</sup> For more on Pater and Ruskin see particularly Clegg and Tucker, *Ruskin and Tuscany*, Law and Østermark-Johansen, *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance* and Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing*.

<sup>425</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance*, 41.

suggested, by a “system of low relief” that blurred the boundaries of material form and softened the contrast between light and shadow, lessening the plasticity of the forms and producing a more ‘painterly’ expressive effect.<sup>426</sup> Can the predominance of early fifteenth-century reliefs at South Kensington, and Perkins’s own focus on relief sculpture, be considered as a possible influence for Pater’s emphasis on relief? Certainly, the work of Robinson and Perkins combined, and the presence of the collection in London, formed a formidable starting point for Pater’s investigation of early fifteenth-century sculpture. At this time, Pater was not quite as well travelled in Italy as Ruskin, Robinson and Perkins and did not make his first journey there until 1865. His first direct impression of early fifteenth-century sculpture could arguably have been made within the walls of the South Kensington Museum, by that very collection dominated by coloured della Robbia reliefs.

Colour, for Pater, was analogous to expression or painterliness, and although he was not fond of pigmentation applied to sculpted forms, he redefined the word ‘colour’ in its broadest sense in order to apply it to sculpture:

The use of colour in sculpture is but an unskillful contrivance to effect, by borrowing from another art, what the noble sculpture effects by strictly appropriate means. To get not colour, but the equivalent of colour; to secure the expression and the play of life;[...] – this is the problem which the three great styles in sculpture have solved in three different ways.<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 42.

This is what the early fifteenth-century sculptors achieved by a system of low relief, by ‘colouring’ their works with a painterly attitude to form. To colour sculpture was to breathe life into it, not by pigmentation, but by painterly manipulation of form, allowing sculpture to overcome its traditional Hegelian limitations. But there were proper, and improper ways of achieving this. Michelangelo had said that “the more nearly painting attains to relieve the better it is, and the more nearly relieve attains to painting the worse it is.”<sup>428</sup> Perkins had quoted this in his chapter on the ‘Pictorial Sculptors’ and Pater subsequently used it to consider the way in which sculpture could be painterly without being painted. So why use Luca della Robbia as a starting point to discuss a colourless expression of colour, when della Robbia himself explicitly coloured his works?

In ‘Relieving the Limitations of Sculpture and Text,’ Østermark-Johansen pointed out that Pater mentioned the sculptor only very briefly and made no specific allusion to any of his works.<sup>429</sup> Like Perkins, Pater’s chapter titles, although names of artists, reflect a conceptual theme, rather than a descriptive category. Luca della Robbia, whose name was by this time synonymous with coloured sculpture, particularly with anyone who cared to explore the galleries at South Kensington, was the perfect point of departure for Pater’s discussion of ‘colour’ in sculpture:

Through his meditations on colour in sculpture and the low relief, the art form halfway between sculpture and painting, Pater connects his views on sculpture as a tactile, white and sensuous art form in the early Winckelmann essay with his

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<sup>428</sup> Quoted in Perkins, *Tuscan Sculptors*, 1, 127.

<sup>429</sup> Østermark-Johansen, “Relieving the limitations of sculpture and text,” 27.

concern with colour and music in the late essay on Giorgione. In fact, I would like to suggest that in the development of Pater's aesthetic appreciation of the arts, della Robbia is a stepping stone from Pater's early focus on the tactility of antique sculpture in the round towards a much more painterly and atmospheric ideal.<sup>430</sup>

I would agree on this point with Østermark-Johansen, who focused on the use of the word 'relief,' and would further emphasise the importance of the redefined term 'colour,' as well as 'relief,' in relation to the "two-and-a-half dimensional form" that exists between three-dimensional plasticity and the two-dimensional painterly technique.<sup>431</sup> Through his redefinition of the term 'colour,' Pater had further developed Perkins's notion of the 'pictorial,' with della Robbia as the literally 'coloured' starting point.

Pater's description of della Robbia was a poetic fiction. Nothing that he described was grounded in historical fact. He did not mention any specific works, and the only apparent non-Victorian source is the equally anecdotal and untrustworthy Vasari. Pater did not include footnotes in his text, unlike Ruskin, Robinson and Perkins, whose texts are littered with revisions and references. Instead, he wove quotations and translations from Vasari into his own prose, without mentioning the author's name, merely referring to him as "[della Robbia's] biographer."<sup>432</sup> Pater did, however, like Robinson and others, emphasise the sculptor's 'naturalist' tendencies, when he stated that "Luca loved the forms of various fruits, and wrought them into all sorts of marvellous frames and garlands, giving them their

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>432</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance*, 46.

natural colours, only subdued a little, a little paler than nature.”<sup>433</sup> This description is a fanciful, ‘contemporary’ one, describing della Robbia as if Pater himself had known the sculptor and his character and it allows the reader to conjure up a della Robbia piece in the here and now.<sup>434</sup> Pater reinterpreted the sculptor’s aesthetic as the epitome of that which elicits sensory interaction on the part of the viewer – a concept vital to his discussion of ‘colour’ in colourless sculpture. Pater’s descriptions of della Robbia’s work, far from relating to a moral Ruskinian ‘truth to Nature’ pertaining to Christian religious reverence that had previously been discussed, strayed into the morally ‘irresponsible’ realm of Aestheticism in their evocative sensuous descriptions, for example when he described

pieces of pale blue and white earthenware [as resembling...] fragments of the milky sky itself, fallen into the cool streets, and breaking into the darkened churches. And no work is less imitable: like Tuscan wine it loses its savour when moved from its birthplace, from the crumbling walls where it was first placed.<sup>435</sup>

This poetic description conjures up not only a fictitious, visual image, but along with the word “cool” pertaining to sensation on the skin (touch), “savour” to taste and scent, and even “milky” pertaining to either taste, scent, touch or sight (for how exactly is the sky milky?), Pater evoked the reader’s senses. Indeed, we have seen how Perkins and Ruskin had similarly praised the imagined sensation of the “unheard melodies” of the *Cantoria*. Sensation, leading to viewer interaction, therefore, is key in expressing that ‘indwelling soul’ – which needs human

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>434</sup> The idea that della Robbia’s colours were paler than nature is particularly emphasized using sensuous language – with “subdued,” “little,” “little,” “paler,” we can be in hardly any doubt as to the paleness of the colour.

<sup>435</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance*, 41.

interaction to free it from its material limits. It is precisely as a ‘secondary quality’ of nature, as Ruskin had described it, relying on viewer interaction, that colour is celebrated in Pater’s work. In his discussion of della Robbia’s work, therefore, Pater spoke rarely of actual material objects but, instead, he emphasized the human interactions they elicit. This caused him to consider della Robbia’s move from marble sculpture to terracotta in terms of a dissemination of the aesthetic that allows for more widespread viewer interaction: “[della Robbia] became desirous to realize the spirit and manner of that sculpture, in a humbler material, to unite its science, its exquisite and expressive system of low relief, to the homely art of pottery, to introduce those high qualities into common things, to adorn and cultivate daily household life.”<sup>436</sup> Inspired – “became desirous” - by easily distributable pottery, he suggested that della Robbia was soon led to the application of colour, which, in the darkened churches, cool streets, and monotony of daily life, provided a sensual, vibrant experience for the everyday viewer. Della Robbia, a sculptor leading a life of “labour and frugality, with no adventure and no excitement except what belongs to the trial of new artistic processes”<sup>437</sup> found a way to distribute his brilliant, sensuous aesthetic amongst Florentine households, squares and darkened churches for all to delight in. Colour, now, whether actual or in its broader sense, far from masking ‘pure sculptural feeling’ or ‘expression,’ was *vital* for the expression of Pater’s abstract ‘indwelling soul,’ which was freed by the sensuous response of the viewer.

### 3.4 Ruskin Revisited

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<sup>436</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., 43.



Having taken up the Slade Professorship in 1869,<sup>438</sup> Ruskin had revisited Italy in the early 1870s, feeling it was his duty in his new role, and as a budding social reformer, to revise his work on the art of Florence in light of his new motives and of all the new scholarship that had since been produced.<sup>439</sup> His work became noticeably more attuned to sculpture at this time and, in his Slade Lectures delivered at Oxford in 1870, he concentrated specifically on Tuscan sculpture (that of Perkins's period),<sup>440</sup> as well as Greek sculpture, which Pater would later turn his attention to. As part of these lectures, Ruskin gave a revised description of the Pistoia hospital frieze. This time he did not chastise the colour, but instead, like Perkins, focused on the truth to Nature of the sickly figures:

if you ever have the chance to go to Pistoja, look at La Robbia's coloured porcelain bas-reliefs of the seven works of Mercy on the front of the hospital there; and not especially the faces of the two sick men – one at the point of death, and the other in the first peace and long-drawn breathing of health after fever – and you will know what Dante meant by the preceding line, “Morti li morti, e i vivi paren vivi.”<sup>441</sup>

Here, Ruskin seems to have focused not on ‘vulgar’ or ‘barbaric’ colour, but instead, on some poetic element of the truth to Nature of the frieze that caused him to compare it to a line from Dante without even a mention of colour.

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<sup>438</sup> A position for which Robinson himself had applied. His application letter can be found in the Robinson Papers, National Art Library.

<sup>439</sup> See Clegg and Tucker, *Ruskin and Tuscany*, 64.

<sup>440</sup> Including a whole section on bas-relief.

<sup>441</sup> “Dead, the dead; The living seem'd alive [...].” Ruskin, *Aratra Pentilici*, XX, 286 (footnote).

It was also at this time that both Pater and Ruskin were at Oxford, and both were writing about Botticelli, Michelangelo and Tuscan Sculpture. Being in such close proximity and working on the same subjects, they must have studied each other's works in progress in some detail.<sup>442</sup> Following Perkins's *Tuscan Sculptors* and Pater's *Renaissance*, then, Ruskin's attitude towards Luca della Robbia changed dramatically. No longer did he chastise the sculptor for his 'unsparing,' 'vulgar,' or 'barbarous' use of colour, but instead focused on all those positive Ruskinian qualities that had evolved from Robinson, through Perkins, and the poetic flavor attributed to colour and viewer interaction found in Pater. In 'Mornings in Florence,' of 1875 he wrote: "Never pass near the market without looking at [Luca della Robbia's roundel above the chapel door]; and glance from the vegetable underneath to Luca's leaves and lilies, that you may see how honestly he was trying to make his clay like the garden stuff."<sup>443</sup> The emphasis in Ruskin's narrative was clearly on the truth to Nature of the flowers and foliage and, again, there was no mention of colour getting in the way at all.

Ruskin's newfound taste for della Robbia culminated in his purchase of Andrea della Robbia's *Adoration of the Virgin* in 1880, a work that epitomizes the family's coloured aesthetic: white figures on a blue background, surrounded by a border of colourful foliage. Even though Murray had suggested that the piece was

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<sup>442</sup> For the links between Ruskin and Pater see particularly Bullen, "Pater and Ruskin on Michelangelo: Two Contrasting Views," in *Walter Pater: An Imaginative Sense of Fact*, ed., Philip Dodd (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1981); Giovanni Cianci and Peter Nicholls, *Ruskin and Modernism*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); and Hoch "The Art of Alessandro Botticelli," 55-85. Hoch considers Ruskin's interest in Pater's essays for *Renaissance*, including a quote from Ruskin himself from a letter to his private secretary which states: "...can you find or lend me that paper on Sandro, which I was so pleased with, in some magazine last year, by an Oxford man – you told me who, so must know." Ruskin, "Letter from John Ruskin to the Rev. Richard St John Tyrwhitt dated 19 September 1872," in Hoch, "The Art of Alessandro Botticelli," 68.

<sup>443</sup> Ruskin, *Mornings in Florence*, XXIII, 342. Ruskin's mention of lilies suggests a more religious reading of the della Robbia foliage.

by Andrea, Ruskin believed it to be an original Luca. In *Ruskin and Tuscany* (1993), Jeanne Clegg and Paul Tucker have highlighted the commitment Ruskin made to securing his own della Robbia relief to “adorn and cultivate” his own “daily household life.” The art dealer, Charles Fairfax Murray had suggested a della Robbia piece to Ruskin in 1877 that Ruskin had passed over in favour of a Botticelli; “a decision he later much regretted.”<sup>444</sup> In December of 1879, Murray had written to Ruskin suggesting an alternative piece, including a photograph, to which, on Christmas Day, Ruskin hastily replied: “My second business is to beg you to secure the Luca of which you sent me a photo.”<sup>445</sup> Ruskin acquired the sculpture for 5000 francs, not including Murray’s ten-percent commission. By the end of February 1880, he had received it at Brantwood, remarking to Murray, as we have seen, that it was “one of the most precious things” he owned but “the photograph flattered it in some ways [...], the darkening green of the foliage made it look so much richer.”<sup>446</sup> Finally speaking directly of della Robbia colour again, Ruskin was disappointed that the monochrome photograph made the foliage look “richer” in colour, or perhaps greener, than it actually was. Embracing della Robbia colour, then, Ruskin eventually installed the della Robbia relief in pride of place above the fireplace in his study [fig.8], where it would have had an imposing presence. Seated in his chair by the window, as he was often pictured [fig.64], he would have been able to write with the bright, Tuscan colours of nature found in Andrea della Robbia’s relief to his right, and the natural landscape of Coniston Water to his left - his work bridging the gap between the two, just as

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<sup>444</sup> Clegg and Tucker, *Ruskin and Tuscany*, 115.

<sup>445</sup> Ruskin, “Letter from John Ruskin to Charles Fairfax Murray dated 25<sup>th</sup> December 1879,” XXXVII, 311.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, XXXVII, 311.

Ruskin himself, through his work, formed the bridge between the fifteenth-century Luca della Robbia and his Victorian reincarnation.

The poetic fiction of Luca della Robbia, as we have seen, with his Victorian links to Ruskinian truth to Nature; Perkins's Tuscan sculpture; Hegel's *Aesthetics*; Keats's Romantic poetry; the poetic Paterian redefinition of 'colour' and 'relief' and so on, provide a cosmopolitan construction of the sculptor. In his lecture series, *The Art of England*, of the 1880s, written one might imagine, in front of Andrea's *Adoration* at Brantwood, Ruskin also considered della Robbia's cosmopolitan position, though one more in keeping with his own preference for the various artistic qualities of different nations and historical periods, as set out in his lecture, 'The Classic Schools of Painting,' of 1883:

All jesting apart, - I think you may safely take Luca della Robbia with his scholars for an exponent of their unity to all nations. Luca is brightly Tuscan, with the dignity of a Greek; he has English simplicity, French grace, Italian devotion, - and is, I think, delightful to the truest lovers of art in all nations, and of all ranks.<sup>447</sup>

This final estimation of della Robbia, considered as part of a discussion on the painting of various nations, was worlds apart from Ruskin's original 1845 criticisms and ends with an echo of Robinson's idea that the sculptor's work "appeals to the hearts and understanding of every beholder."<sup>448</sup> In the same lecture, Ruskin also paired della Robbia with Botticelli as "central between

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<sup>447</sup> Ruskin, *The Art of England*, XXXIII, 338.

<sup>448</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 47.

Classic and Gothic”<sup>449</sup> for sculpture and painting respectively - two artists who had been included as chapter titles in Pater’s *Renaissance*. In her 2005 essay entitled, ‘The Art of Alessandro Botticelli through the Eyes of Victorian Aesthetes,’<sup>450</sup> Adrian Hoch tracked Ruskin’s developing interest in Botticelli, an artist whose rise to fame in the nineteenth century coincided with della Robbia’s, culminating in Pater’s essay, ‘Sandro Botticelli,’ in the *Renaissance*. So, it is interesting, considering his anti-Renaissance, anti-Classical and chromophobic background, that it was these two particular Tuscan artists explored in Pater that Ruskin now concentrated on, in the 1880s, in his revised ‘canon’ of Italian art.<sup>451</sup>

Della Robbia’s place in the Victorian canon of Italian art was now an extremely privileged one, as a forerunner for all that was celebrated in fifteenth-century Florentine sculpture; truth to Nature, truth to expression and religious sentiment, mastery of the pictorial, and therefore an important landmark in the developmental shift from the Gothic to the Renaissance. His pictorial tendencies, choice of polychromatic decoration, and experimentation with materials positioned him half way between sculpture and painting, and the fine and applied arts, opening up a significant arena for debate regarding the relationships between the various arts - debates that raged on into the twentieth century. But it was his poetic reinvention as a humble student of nature, inspired only by his religious, and then sensuous, reverence for nature and his artistic and democratic motives to

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<sup>449</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>450</sup> Hoch, “The Art of Alessandro Botticelli,” 55-85.

<sup>451</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 47. Ruskin continues his discussion of Luca in the form of an anecdote relating to a child who came with her mother to visit him at Brantwood, who, on seeing the della Robbia in his study, “though there were many pretty and glittering things about the room which might have caught her eye or her fancy, the first thing, nevertheless, my little lady does, is to totter quietly up to the Infant Christ, and kiss it.” Ruskin, *The Art of England*, XXXIII, 338. Why include this anecdote but for the direct physical interaction the sculpture provoked? – an idea also explored in Pater’s chapters on Botticelli and della Robbia.

distribute his work amongst the people, that revived him as a Ruskin-like figure of the fifteenth-century.

A poetic vision of della Robbia was to remain and develop over the rest of the century. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow included the sculptor in his poem *Kéramos* (1878), alluding again to the connection between the *Cantoria* and Keats “These choristers with lips of stone,/ Whose music is not heard, but seen.”<sup>452</sup> Fanciful and colourful narratives relating to della Robbia’s *bottega* also sprang up, as in M. E. Carr’s article in *Temple Bar*, ‘Beyond the Walls of Siena,’ of 1898: “the master and pupils in their quaint dresses; the sunlight streaming through the open windows; the glazes and colours strewn about; the fruit and leaves which Luca has just bought from the Mercato to weave into a border; the irregular strip of blue sky between the tall house; the glint of light on the coppersmith’s wares opposite.”<sup>453</sup> It was not until 1883 that della Robbia’s name appeared in the title of a published book, in Leader Scott’s *Luca della Robbia: with Other Italian Sculptors*.<sup>454</sup> Scott’s regular mention of the collection at South Kensington is also noticeable, as is her emphasis on the importance of the *Stemma* to della Robbia’s *oeuvre* – a work held in high esteem at the Museum.<sup>455</sup> Clearly, the collection was still acting as a visual point of reference for British research into this much-celebrated artist, and its examples were still considered some of the best around.

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<sup>452</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Kéramos,” [1878] in *Kéramos and other poems* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2006).

<sup>453</sup> M. E. Carr, “Beyond the Walls of Siena,” *Temple Bar*, with which is incorporated Bentley’s *Miscellany* 114 (May 1898): 127.

<sup>454</sup> Leader Scott, *Luca della Robbia: with other Italian Sculptors* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1883). Leader Scott was the pseudonym for Lucy Baxter (1837-1902), daughter of the poet, William Barnes. She moved to Florence in 1867 where she formed a friendship and collaboration with Sir. John Temple Leader.

<sup>455</sup> “In the South Kensington Museum there are fifty examples of the works of the Della Robbia family. One important specimen, a Medallion bearing the arms of King René of Anjou, is eleven feet in diameter. A set of twelve circular medallions [...] typical of the months, executed in monochrome are also of much interest.” Scott, *Luca della Robbia*, 43.

Indeed, the Museum, now devoid of Robinson, had recently furthered its della Robbia collection, acquiring a full cast of the *Cantoria* which today maintains an imposing presence in the Cast Courts. In 1890, the Museum would also go on to commission a cast of the Pistoia Hospital frieze, in fully rendered colour, completely unlike the earlier versions displayed at Sydenham [fig.135]. The 1880s also saw an explosion of biographies attempting to pull the sculptor and his work together in a more coherent and comprehensive form. All of these biographies, like Scott's, alluded, either directly or implicitly, to those qualities bestowed upon della Robbia and his work that had evolved from Robinson's initial Ruskinian promotion of the sculptor. For example, in an 1886 article devoted to the sculptor, Cosmo Monkhouse considered that his "love of nature and his sense of art were his only guides".<sup>456</sup>

It is hard to over-estimate the impact that Robinson's catalogue had on the scholarship that led to della Robbia's reinvention. Fuelled by his desire to be recognized as a scholar, Robinson's academic investigation of the della Robbia works in his collection led him to emphasise their Ruskinian truth to Nature, a concept still at the forefront of artistic criticism. His catalogue was well received and provided a more contemporary point of departure for a scholarly discussion of della Robbia sculpture. This groundwork, which was furthered and intellectualized by Perkins and Pater, evolved and mutated, finding its way back to Ruskin in a new positive and poetic form. Throughout his revival, the Victorian Luca della Robbia, in his various intermediary or hybrid positions, opened up new channels for debate in the most pressing of contemporary art historical concerns. I

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<sup>456</sup> Cosmo Monkhouse, "Luca della Robbia," *Portfolio* 17 (Jan 1886): 176.

do not wish to suggest that Robinson and his collection were the sole influencing factors in della Robbia's rise to fame, or in changing Ruskin's mind about the sculptor. But what they provided was a spark, a visual catalyst, accompanied by a promoting scholarly energy, which caused a chain reaction that propelled della Robbia and his fifteenth-century counterparts to fame, significantly contributing to the nineteenth-century conception of the Renaissance period of art.



## CHAPTER IV

### ARTISTIC RECEPTION

#### Infra dig? Polychrome Ceramic Sculpture in the Late Nineteenth Century

Sculpture, from its very nature, has always been more intimately allied to architecture than has the sister art of painting; it is, so to speak, less rigidly a *fine art*, and it has been more generally applied to the embellishment of objects of use or mere decoration.<sup>457</sup>

[Robinson's] illustrated catalogue [...] forms not only an excellent handbook to the sculptural portion of the Museum, but also a most useful book of reference. Let us hope that this book, and Mr. Perkins's more extended work, may lead our sculptors to the study of their Tuscan predecessors both here and in Italy.<sup>458</sup>

As we have seen, Robinson's 1862 catalogue of the Italian sculpture collection at the South Kensington Museum promoted the need for a wider understanding of 'sculpture' in the abstract.<sup>459</sup> Sculpture, and its alliance with architecture in particular, he suggested, crossed and therefore challenged a "line of distinction"<sup>460</sup> that had grown up between the fine and decorative arts. It was only through the blurring of this hierarchical line that the status of the decorative arts could be elevated and, subsequently, the quality of British manufacture improved. A

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<sup>457</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, viii.

<sup>458</sup> Anon, "ART. VIII. -1. Tuscan Sculptors: their Lives, Works and Times," 552.

<sup>459</sup> "[...] it is by no means easy to define the limits which a collection intended to illustrate the art in the abstract should occupy." Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, viii.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

broader understanding of sculpture and its dual application to both fine and decorative ends, had the potential to perform a key role in nineteenth-century British design reform.

Robinson's extensive efforts to collect and promote Italian sculpture at the Museum (particularly architectural relief) demonstrated that the Italian Renaissance represented a desirable precedent to follow. In his catalogue, Robinson stressed that sculptors of the period did not believe architectural ornamentation or decorative work to be *infra dig.*, or 'beneath their dignity':

It never occurred to the artist of the revival to think architectural ornamentation beneath his dignity; on the contrary, the greatest sculptors have left us specimens of their genius in this branch, - Desiderio, Rossellino, Benedetto da Rovezzano, Cellini; surely, where these great artists have so gladly trod no modern craftsman need disdain to follow.<sup>461</sup>

Thus, the Museum's Italian sculpture collection and its accompanying catalogue would provide physical examples and promote historical ideals for the "modern craftsman" to follow – particularly those young design students at the associated government Schools of Art. Robinson's collection and catalogue, along with a host of subsequent texts that revised the canon of Italian Renaissance sculpture, brought the previously neglected sculptural works and ideals of fifteenth-century

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<sup>461</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, ix – x. It is uncertain as to why Robinson chose these four sculptors to articulate his point. They were all amongst the sculptors passed over by Flaxman in his *Lectures on Sculpture* of the 1820s. Benedetto da Rovezzano, whilst perhaps the least familiar to a modern audience, was more familiar to the mid-nineteenth-century British public. Da Rovezzano moved to England in 1524, having been commissioned to design a tomb for Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, whose subsequent fall from grace meant the seizure of the tomb by Henry VIII before its completion. The early nineteenth century saw renewed interest in da Rovezzano's tomb as the seized sarcophagus was used for Lord Nelson's burial at St. Paul's Cathedral in 1806.

Italy – the sculptors passed over by Flaxman in his 1820s lectures - to the attention of late nineteenth-century Britain. It was hoped, as the *Edinburgh Review* suggested above, that this would then “lead our sculptors to the study of their Tuscan predecessors both here and in Italy.” Indeed, subsequent Victorian sculptors would reinterpret Italian Renaissance sculpture, forming a synthesis of fifteenth-century Italian and nineteenth-century British styles and techniques that fuelled important artistic movements such as the Arts and Crafts Movement and the New Sculpture. The following chapter considers the extent to which the Italian sculpture collection and its promotion in Robinson’s catalogue resonated within late-nineteenth-century artistic practice.

### The Victorian Renaissance

A 1978 exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and Manchester City Art Gallery entitled *Victorian High Renaissance* considered the Italian Renaissance-inspired work of George Frederic Watts, Frederic Lord Leighton, Albert Moore and Alfred Gilbert as “aimed not at realism or anecdote, but at the grace and perfection of antiquity, combined with the sumptuous colour and monumental style of the High Renaissance.”<sup>462</sup> The organisers of the exhibition suggested that “these four artists deliberately turned their backs on the mundane late Victorian world of cities, factories and slums, and sought inspiration in the timeless world of Greek myths.”<sup>463</sup> *Victorian High Renaissance* positioned these artists as following in the footsteps of Raphael, Michelangelo and Cellini in the ‘renascence’ of Antiquity. The exhibition set its chronological parameters

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<sup>462</sup> Allen Staley et. al., *Victorian High Renaissance G.F. Watts, Lord Leighton, Albert Moore, Sir Alfred Gilbert. An exhibition organised by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Manchester City Art Gallery, 1st Sept.-15 Oct. 1978*, hand list (Manchester, Manchester City Art Gallery, 1978), 1.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

between mid-century Pre-Raphaelitism (which focused on Gothic and Early Renaissance influences) and “the founding of the New English Art Club in 1886 and [...] the overwhelming attraction of Paris to the younger painters associated with it.”<sup>464</sup> The following chapter explores a far more anachronistic reading of the Victorian artistic response to the Italian Renaissance. I challenge this neat chronological progression, from Gothic and Early Renaissance-inspired Pre-Raphaelitism to the ‘Olympians’ of the Victorian High Renaissance, by considering the sculptural and artisanal works of their lesser-known contemporaries. Sculptural interpretations of the early Italian Renaissance period stretched well beyond 1886, embraced both the fine and decorative arts, and infiltrated various artistic movements of the period. Whilst critics of the day, such as Robinson, Pater, Ruskin and John Addington Symonds, probed and complicated the chronological and cultural boundaries of the Italian Renaissance, so too did their artistic and artisanal contemporaries. In exploring this, I bring to light various artists (or artist-workmen) and artistic projects formerly in the shadow of Leighton, Watts, Moore, Gilbert and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and reposition them within the canon of the Victorian Renaissance. Indeed, as we shall see, these champions of the period were often directly involved with, and supported the work of, the following case studies.

In complicating the canon of the Victorian Renaissance and blurring the “line of distinction” between the fine and decorative arts of the period, I demonstrate that the Victorian response to the Italian Renaissance was inextricably bound up with the idea of modern artistic practice and industrial progress. This is especially true

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<sup>464</sup>Allen Staley et. al, *Victorian High Renaissance : George Frederick Watts, 1817-1904; Frederic Leighton, 1830-96; Albert Moore, 1841-93; Alfred Gilbert, 1854-1934*, exh. cat. (London: Lund Humphries, 1978),11.

in relation to the late-nineteenth-century artistic responses to early Renaissance (as opposed to High Renaissance) sculptors, whose architectural relief works could be found in abundance at the South Kensington Museum, and who had been reintroduced back into the canon by critics such as Robinson, Perkins and Pater. The influence of these Italian sculptors can be keenly felt in the late-nineteenth-century crossovers between art and industry that the South Kensington Museum sought to encourage. I argue that, rather than completely turning their backs on the modern world, the following case studies integrated a South Kensington understanding of early Italian Renaissance sculpture, the idea that architectural and decorative sculpture was not *infra dig.*, into the “late Victorian world of cities, factories and slums.”<sup>465</sup> Whilst there was still sentimentality for the past in much of their work, their interpretations of the past suggested engagement with the problems of the modern and these artists transmuted and updated Renaissance ideals with the modern landscape in mind, not in spite of it.

### Polychrome Ceramic Sculpture

Late-nineteenth-century ceramic sculpture, and the application of coloured glazes to relief, is a particularly interesting, though unexplored, area to begin such an investigation. As discussed in the introduction to the thesis, until the recent *Sculpture Victorious* exhibition at the Yale Center for British Art, highly-coloured ceramic sculpture of the late-nineteenth century has rarely been taken seriously by sculptural or ceramic historians. Whilst white Parianware has enjoyed a limited

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<sup>465</sup> Diana Maltz’s *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) offers an interesting, inclusive take on Aestheticism of the late-nineteenth century and its connection with social reform.

revival in scholarship,<sup>466</sup> large-scale, often figurative (though generally limited to representations of animals) polychrome ceramic sculpture has been overlooked. However, ceramic relief, and the versatile ways in which it could be applied to architecture and manufacture, was a vital part of the Victorian sculptural response to the Italian Renaissance. As the following chapter suggests, ceramic relief truly challenged that “line of distinction” between the fine and decorative arts described by Robinson. Here was a material that was cheaper than marble or bronze and could therefore be used in great quantity for public and private commissions, but that could also carry the immediate signature of the artist upon it in its free, modelled forms and, perhaps, even, in its painted surface. Practically, its glazed surface resisted and brightened the smog-coated façades of London streets and the dust and grime of the domestic interior. Artistically, it possessed the capacity for a versatile combination of relieved form and colour that neither marble, bronze nor canvas could contend with.

In the late-nineteenth century, ceramic sculpture became increasingly popular as a decorative and artistic medium. French artists such as Jules Dalou and Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse, who were highly respected and maintained prominent positions as masters within the government Schools of Art in Britain during this period, were already employing the material successfully in their own sculpture and decorative work on the Continent.<sup>467</sup> Architects began casing the exteriors and interiors of their buildings in terracotta tiles and relief.<sup>468</sup> Furthermore, the

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<sup>466</sup> See, for example, Dennis Barker, *Parian Ware* and Robert Copeland, *Parian: Copeland's Statuary Porcelain*.

<sup>467</sup> Although, they did so without the applied colour. However, the red-brown tones of terracotta certainly provided a different aesthetic to white marble or bronze. See John M. Hunisak, *The Sculptor Jules Dalou* (New York: Garland, 1977).

<sup>468</sup> For more on architectural terracotta, see Stratton, *The Terracotta Revival*.

historical, Italian Renaissance precedent for polychrome terracotta relief could be found in abundance at South Kensington in those popular, bright, Tuscan sculptures by the della Robbia family (as well as the vast collection of Italian maiolica and polychrome relief works by Donatello and Ghiberti). As we have seen, della Robbia relief was a prominent feature of the Museum's sculpture collection and became increasingly popular amongst critics, artists and private collectors, providing accents of Tuscan colour to the private dwellings of Ruskin [fig.8], Pater, Watts [fig.9] and Hunt [fig.10], to name but a few. However, the advantage of ceramic relief sculpture was that it did not need to be limited to the private homes of the wealthy elite or the public Museum. Victorian ceramic sculpture could be easily and cheaply disseminated throughout the country via public commissions and smaller, affordable pottery works – transforming the aesthetic of contemporary British architecture and interior design. Perhaps those “fragments of the milky sky itself,” as Pater described the della Robbia aesthetic, “fallen into the cool streets, and breaking into the darkened churches,”<sup>469</sup> could brighten even the darkest corners of London and other industrial cities in Britain for the benefit of the greater population. It was no wonder that various artists, architects and manufacturers in Britain began experimenting with the medium in the late-nineteenth century, and, as this study argues, that ‘art pottery’ and the ‘studio pottery’ that became so successful in the early-twentieth century, were born in this era.

The terms ‘art’ and ‘studio’ pottery are relatively ill-defined, as is their difficult relationship to sculpture and ‘the sculptural.’ Art pottery generally refers to any

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<sup>469</sup> Pater, *Renaissance*, 46.

ceramic ware that is not produced for practical domestic use. An important example to consider is the Minton *Peacock* (1873-80, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool [fig.65]), which I argue is both legitimately a sculpture *and* an example of art pottery. Indeed, reproductions of the *Peacock* currently serve a purpose in two different display contexts at two very different modern museums: first, as an artistic centerpiece for the jardinières, plates and vases of the Mintonware gallery at the Potteries Museum, Stoke-on-Trent [fig.66] and, second, as a work of art alongside Pre-Raphaelite paintings and New Sculpture at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool [fig.67].<sup>470</sup> In the context of the Potteries Museum, the *Peacock* showcases the great quality, scale and intricate detail to which Minton's local Pottery could aspire. At the Walker, it is exhibited in the "High Victorian Art" room where it can be aesthetically and visually linked to the brightly coloured paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites and the works of the New Sculptors that surround it, with less emphasis on its production and more on its Aesthetic subject matter and connection to other art of the period (the peacock being a recognisable symbol of Aestheticism).<sup>471</sup> The caption provided alongside the *Peacock* at the Walker suggests that it "demonstrates Victorian style, ingenuity and great technical

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<sup>470</sup> The Minton *Peacock* has recently found a further context within the *Sculpture Victorious* Exhibition at the Yale Center for British Art organized by Jason Edwards, Michael Hatt and Martina Droth (11 September - November 2014) where it is placed alongside sculpture of the period. These include other ceramics works such as parian ware, sculpture in metal such as the Outram Shield and figural sculptures such as Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave* (1844, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven) and Harry Bates's *Pandora* (1891, Tate, London). There is also a copy amongst the Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum shipwreck collection in Warnambool, Australia, thanks to the recovery of the work from the sea after a ship taking it to the Sydney Exhibition of 1879 was wrecked off the Australian coast.

<sup>471</sup> Other sculptures exhibited in the same room as "High Victorian Art" include, at present, a bronze reduction of Leighton's *Athlete Wrestling with a Python* (c.1877, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool) and a bronze reduction of Watts's *Physical Energy* (c.1904, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).



achievement and it is very special as one of very few Minton peacocks still known to exist.”<sup>472</sup>

However, unlike the *Peacock*, which, though designed for Minton by French sculptor Paul Comolera, was created within the factory, ‘studio’ pottery suggests the hand-crafted, hand-painted, individual creations of one artist, or a group of artists, within a private studio. The Martin Brothers’ London pottery studio ran from 1873 to 1923 and is considered to have formed one of the earliest studio potteries, in which all work was carried through to completion by one or two artists [fig.68]. The brothers were from a sculptural background and had all studied modelling at the Lambeth School of Art (where many more recognizable names in late Victorian sculpture would take the same elementary classes, including George Frampton and Frederick William Pomeroy). The Martin Brothers produced a combination of turned wares with detailed, heavy modelling and are perhaps best known for their highly-sculpted vessels in the shape of anthropomorphic birds such as *Jar* by Robert Wallace Martin (1891, V&A, London) [fig.69]. Whilst these wares were described as objects of utility (tankards, vases etc.), their decoration was too ornate to allow them to perform their useful purpose very efficiently. As we shall see, the earliest studio potteries and their outputs arguably overlapped with sculptural practice, maintained a sculptural emphasis on modelling and sacrificed utility for aesthetics. From Minton’s *Peacock*, through architectural relief sculpture, to the Martin Brothers’ studio, therefore, the late-Victorian period embraced ceramic sculpture in both the applied and fine arts, industry and the studio, and the “line of distinction” between

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<sup>472</sup> <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/collections/paintings/19c/peacock.aspx> [Accessed 6 October 2014].

the two became ever more undefined. Furthermore, the South Kensington concept, promoted by Robinson, of the “two-fold” position of Luca della Robbia as a sculptor in ceramics - a sculptor-potter - permeated the ceramic sculptural production of the late-nineteenth century.

The following two case studies explore a more direct Victorian interpretation of della Robbia-esque relief sculpture. This exploration begins closest to home, with the ceramic decoration of the South Kensington Museum itself and Minton’s interpretation of polychrome ceramic relief on an architectural, industrial scale. I consider Minton’s *Ceramic Staircase* within the Museum: a project that transmuted, modernized and reflected the spirit of the Italian sculpture collection and applied it to the walls of the building that housed it. The fact that a Museum building housing a famously comprehensive Italian Sculpture collection (and a vast collection of maiolica pottery) evolved slowly into that of a neo-Renaissance palace, cased in terracotta on the outside and ‘della Robbia ware’ on the inside, needs further exploration: as do the experiments and collaborations therein that synthesised the industrious nature, artistic style and philosophical ideals of both fifteenth-century Italy and late nineteenth-century Britain. Some of the greatest artists of the period – including the ‘Victorian High Renaissance’ champions, Leighton and Watts and the ‘Michelangelo’ of the Victorian era, sculptor Alfred Stevens<sup>473</sup> - were called upon to contribute to the decoration of the Museum alongside anonymous students at the School of Art (both men and women) and

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<sup>473</sup> Stevens was often discussed in relationship to his close study of Michelangelo. See, for example, Selwin Brinton, “Alfred Stevens at Dorchester House,” *Architecture, a magazine of architecture and the applied arts and crafts* 5, no.24 (April 1927); Beattie, *Alfred Stevens, 1817-75* (London: V&A, 1975); K. R. Towndrow, *Alfred Stevens: A Biography with New Material* (London: 1939).

industrial manufacturers. The spirit of Italian Renaissance ‘humility,’ ‘collaboration’ and ‘invention’ described by Robinson, Ruskin, Perkins and Pater can be found on the walls of the Museum. Whilst “turning their backs,” to look to Italian precedents, therefore, these artists, craftsmen and manufacturers were also contributing to South Kensington’s efforts to incorporate the spirit of the Italian Renaissance into the fabric of the modern metropolis.

In an exploration of the popularity of ceramic polychrome sculpture outside of London, the second case study considers the success of the Della Robbia Pottery Company at Birkenhead (1894-1906) and the work produced therein by the sculptor, Conrad Dressler. If the Ceramic Staircase represents a Victorian industrial response to polychrome ceramic relief, the Della Robbia Pottery moved closer towards the idea of the Martin Brothers’ ‘studio’ pottery, forming a bridge between industrial production and the individual artist whilst contributing to various artistic movements of the period. The small-scale Pottery that employed and apprenticed artists to create one off ‘art pottery’ works to adorn both public and private buildings was intimately connected to the tenets of the Arts and Crafts Movement and Ruskin’s Guild system that became widespread through the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The Birkenhead pottery was a successful manifestation of what the South Kensington Museum first set out to achieve – the use of historical precedent to create a modern manufacture that challenged the “line of distinction” between art and industry. I argue that its domestic and architectural productions have a legitimate place within serious discussion of Victorian art, sculpture and ceramic history that reflects a desire to translate the

innovations, materials and decorative imperatives of the past into the spirit of modern art and design within the modern home and city.

#### 4.1 The Ceramic Staircase: Invention, Innovation and Industry

The life of Luca, a life of labour and frugality, with no adventure and no excitement except what belongs to the trial of new artistic processes, the struggles with new artistic difficulties, the solution of purely artistic problems, fills the first seventy years of the fifteenth century. After producing many works in marble for the *Duomo* and the *Campanile* of Florence, which place him among the foremost masters of the sculpture of his age, he became desirous to realize the spirit and manner of that sculpture, in a humbler material, to unite its science, its exquisite and expressive system of low relief, to the homely art of pottery, to introduce those high qualities into common things, to adorn and cultivate daily household life.<sup>474</sup>

Pater's poetic description of Luca della Robbia suggested a humble, inventive and industrious artist-workman whose only "adventure" or "excitement" was to experiment with materials and techniques in order to find the "solution to purely artistic problems" and "adorn and cultivate daily household life." This widely accepted reinvention of Luca della Robbia, derived in part from Robinson and Perkins, was, as we have seen, particularly important to the Museum's own ethos, where similar desires to bring beauty and "high qualities" to "common things" and to unite the artist and the workman abounded.<sup>475</sup> Della Robbia sculpture was,

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<sup>474</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance*, 45.

<sup>475</sup> In his 1864 work, *Tuscan Sculptors*, Perkins had also made similar allusions to Luca della Robbia's inventive nature: "Ten years earlier [Luca] had made his first works in Robbia ware,

therefore, a key feature of the Italian sculpture collection. It formed a bridge between the fine and decorative arts, between art and industry, by combining the “humbler material” of pottery with the “high qualities” of Quattrocento relief sculpture. But a modern investigation of ‘della Robbia ware’ at the South Kensington Museum should not be confined to the historic Italian sculptures displayed within the collection. The bright, colourful aesthetic of Quattrocento della Robbia relief also resonates within, “adorns” and “cultivates” the late nineteenth-century interior decoration of the building itself.

The *Ceramic Staircase* at the Museum, built between 1865 and 1871 [figs.7, 70-71], is an interesting study for the exploration of the Victorian artistic responses to della Robbia at the Museum. The Staircase is often briefly passed over in historical discussions of Minton’s achievements, Victorian architectural decoration, and the history of the Museum building.<sup>476</sup> The reasons for this are unclear, though the fact that it was never completed, that the processes used in its construction were not carried further than the Museum, and that it was not initially well received, might all have had an impact on the lasting notion that an exploration of its extravagant style, material and colour was somehow *infra dig.* to the art historian. I explore the Staircase in more detail, to suggest why it deserves serious thought and what exactly it was trying to achieve in the context of the South Kensington Museum ethos.

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after long study and repeated experiment directed towards the discovery of some method of covering clay with an opaque, hard, stanniferous enamel, which would not crack, and in which he could multiply his works much more rapidly and far more remuneratively than in marble or bronze.” Perkins, *Tuscan Sculptors*, 1, 195.

<sup>476</sup> The most comprehensive discussion of the Staircase can be found in Physick, *The Victoria and Albert Museum*.

The Staircase is a novel architectural feature of the Museum, being encased in a combination of Minton ‘della Robbia ware,’ mosaic and majolica.<sup>477</sup> In his 2014 survey, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, Peter Hyland tells us that “Della Robbia Ware’ was not a new term in the nineteenth century, but had been “used for centuries to describe sculptures and bas reliefs modelled in clay, fired, and then decorated with coloured enamels.”<sup>478</sup> Thus, the term ‘della Robbia ware’ generally described polychrome relief forms in ceramic, as opposed to the flat painted surfaces of majolica pottery. It is also used in connection with architectural decoration, rather than the embellishment of pots and other household objects. Essentially, a reference to ‘della Robbia’ in the description of a particular type of ware denotes the *combination* of the art of Italian maiolica painting, relief sculpture and architectural decoration. Minton’s Staircase demonstrated a modern exploration of the ways in which these sister arts could be combined to create an innovative form of architectural decoration for the Victorian age.

In this sense, the Staircase project as a whole could be considered as a response to the inventive, innovative and industrious spirit seen within the Quattrocento artist by his nineteenth-century chroniclers. Indeed, no nineteenth-century description of Luca della Robbia as an artist-workman was complete without a mention of his abilities as both a fine sculptor *and* as an inventor, innovator and manufacturer. Robinson had directly referred to della Robbia as an inventor, and to his work as a “marvel of industrial skill,” in his 1862 catalogue:

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<sup>477</sup> When referring to Minton in the following study, I refer to the Stoke-on-Trent pottery as a whole rather than to Herbert Minton himself. Herbert Minton died in 1858 and his nephew, Colin Minton Campbell, took over the company and was in charge throughout the construction of the Staircase.

<sup>478</sup> Peter Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery* (Woodbridge: The Antique Collectors’ Club, 2014), 27.

[Luca] was undoubtedly the original founder or inventor of what may, in a certain sense, be termed a new art – that of enamelled sculpture; in other words, he first put into practice the method of applying a vitrified enamel glaze, similar to that of the Majolica ware, to works in relief on a large scale. [...] This, however, involved an infinity of conflicting technical difficulties, impossible to be here described in detail; and to have reconciled and overcome them so perfectly as Luca speedily did, will ever remain a marvel of industrial skill.<sup>479</sup>

In addition, Pater, whose ‘Luca della Robbia’ essay focuses more on poetic, artistic phrases such as “profound expressiveness” and the “intimate impress of an indwelling soul,”<sup>480</sup> describes the artist using words that conjure the idea of scientific methods and problem solving, such as “labour,” “science,” “trials,” “struggles” and “solutions.” Della Robbia and his work thus embodied a combination of the arts and sciences – his sculptural practice was a “marvel of industrial skill.” Victorian writers celebrated the fact that della Robbia had borrowed techniques from both Italian maiolica ware and Quattrocento sculpture to create a new fusion of these two arts in the search for an architectural ‘hybrid’ that could bring the sister arts together in harmony to “adorn and cultivate daily household life.”

The decorative scheme of the Staircase was, in this manner, a nineteenth-century ‘industrial’ response to della Robbia sculpture, observed through the lens of contemporary scholarship. Like della Robbia himself, those involved in the design and construction of the Staircase attempted to synthesise various forms of art in

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<sup>479</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 49.

<sup>480</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance*, 52.

the creation of a modern hybrid of the sister arts of painting, sculpture and architecture. They too focused on ceramic innovation, invention and a mutual desire to find ceramic solutions to decorative, architectural problems.

### The Artistic and Practical Potential of Ceramic Decoration

Work on the staircase began in 1865. The Museum's lead designer at this time was Godfrey Sykes, who had been influenced by the Michelangelesque style of Stevens, with whom he had worked at the Sheffield School of Art in the 1850s. Sykes's death, in the early part of 1866, meant that his assistant on the project, Francis (Frank) Wollaston Moody, took over the design of the space, assisted by his students at the central School of Art.<sup>481</sup>

The crafting of the staircase in ceramic was supported by Cole, who supervised the commission, and by Colin Minton Campbell, who provided materials from the Minton factory in Stoke-on-Trent. There are various reasons that ceramic might have been chosen. Firstly, the staircase facilitated direct access to the vast and popular Ceramics galleries on the second floor, which were also decorated in a similar style [fig.72].<sup>482</sup> This juxtaposed the modern, architectural ceramic decoration with the popular Italian maiolica, Palissy, Delft and della Robbia ware exhibits, allowing for direct visual comparison of the historic examples and provided an excellent advertisement for Minton's modern interpretation. Furthermore, the industrial Potteries, that had long supported and benefitted from the National Schools of Art, were one of the first British industries that showed a marked improvement in their international reputation, as we have seen. By 1865,

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<sup>481</sup> Physick, *The Victoria and Albert Museum*, 126.

<sup>482</sup> Now the Silver Galleries.



Minton majolica in particular was already enjoying success for its high quality design and novel aesthetic. The company was well known for creating large exhibition pieces on the scale of the Ceramic Staircase, such as the majolica fountain for the 1862 International Exhibition, which not only commanded an imposing visual presence at thirty-seven feet tall, but was also experimentally scented with Rimmel perfume [fig.73] providing an overwhelming sensory experience.<sup>483</sup>

There is also evidence that Cole himself was keen to use ceramics in both the exterior and interior design of the building. As Michael Stratton has suggested:

Inspired by earlier visits on the part of his associates and by his own studies of English terracotta, Cole spent much of 1858 scrutinising Romanesque and Renaissance architecture in Italy. After working his way through the cities in the lower valley of the Po, and Turin and Genoa, he went to Rome where he noted of one building: “The pilasters were of red brick but the Corinthian capital not cut, but moulded before baked. I hope I shall adopt this system in Kensington rather eschewing the use of stone, except where stone would be decidedly best.”<sup>484</sup>

If Cole wanted his decoration to be moulded rather than carved, ceramics were the obvious choice. Equally, Stratton suggests, the decision to use ceramics “arose out of Cole and Redgrave’s passion for della Robbia ware and their concern for hygiene. Cole ranked majolica, a forerunner of architectural faïence, as a symbol

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<sup>483</sup> Col. Tal P. Shaffner, *The Illustrated Record of the International Exhibition of the Industrial Arts and Manufactures, and the Fine Arts of All Nations, in 1862* (London: The London Printing and Publishing Co. Ltd., 1862), 17. It was later exhibited at Sydenham.

<sup>484</sup> Alan Summerly Cole and Henrietta Cole, eds., *Fifty Years of Public Work of Sir Henry Cole, K.C.B.*, 1 (London: Bell & Sons, 1884), 332, quoted in Stratton, *The Terracotta Revival*, 54.

of progress that equaled photography and the electric telegraph.”<sup>485</sup> A ceramic staircase was, therefore, chosen for its combination of both aesthetic and practical advantages. Not only could the forms be moulded and painted in the popular colours of Minton majolica, but, once glazed they formed a hygienic ‘wipe-clean’ surface, ideal for a space that would see a high level of public foot traffic and hand wear. Indeed, Cole’s estimation of majolica as a symbol of progress was a legitimate one. The Victorian era saw a surge in the use of ceramics for the purposes of sanitation, thanks to innovative manufacturers such as Doulton, Minton, Wedgwood, Blashfield and Twyford. Ceramic toilets, baths, crockery, drainpipes and tiles were among the new household and public facilities that revolutionised sanitation at a time when cholera had claimed the lives of 29,000 Londoners between 1832 and 1866.<sup>486</sup> Using ceramics to “adorn and cultivate daily household life” was not only advantageous to the spiritual wellbeing of the public, but was also important for their physical health. It is no wonder, then, that the ever-pragmatic Cole wanted to advertise the decorative potential of such a hygienic yet tastefully artistic material.

With this in mind, the Ceramic Staircase showcased a collection of della Robbia-esque ceramic experiments that remain exclusive to this small, but important, architectural space at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The decoration of the staircase can be split into two specific areas of innovation in both art and industry that echo the kind of ceramic, artistic hybrids created by Luca della Robbia in his innovative work. These include Minton’s modern invention of ‘fictile

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<sup>485</sup> F. H. W. Sheppard, *Survey of London* 38 (1975), 145. Cole had compared majolica, photography and the electric telegraph as symbols of progress in an article, “Prospects of the International Exhibition in 1862,” *Cornhill Magazine* 4, no.19 (July 1861): 96.

<sup>486</sup> See Munroe Blair, *Ceramic Water Closets* (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications Ltd, 2000), 11-12.

vitrification' (a mixture of fresco, ceramic painting and mosaic) and the more directly della Robbia-inspired application of colour to relief sculpture. After the uproar that had occurred in the previous decade in relation to Jones's colouring of the Greek Court at the Crystal Palace, this latter application of polychromy to architectural relief sculpture was a bold move for the Museum to make. But with the physical evidence for Italian polychrome sculpture displayed and promoted in the gallery next to the Staircase (rather than the conjecture that surrounded Jones's coloured Parthenon frieze), the designers had proven, historical precedent and popular taste on their side. As we shall see, the della Robbia relief work on the staircase was muted in colour to fit in with Robinson's description of the earlier, more popular polychrome aesthetic of the Quattrocento family. With these innovative technical and stylistic efforts in mind, the Ceramic Staircase can be seen as a *collection* of ceramic experiments in painting, sculpture and architectural decoration that, like the original works of the della Robbia family, brought the sister arts and industry closer together and celebrated the "two-fold" status of the Italian Renaissance-inspired artist-workman.

### Fictile Vitrification

Minton's patented process of 'fictile vitrification' was a novel, ceramic solution to a decorative problem that had occupied the greatest minds of Italian Renaissance art: how to produce permanent painted decoration for architectural purposes. Whilst fresco was the preferred method for the Italians (as indicated in the Museum's large scale copies of Raphael's *Loggia* frescoes amongst others) such a vehicle for painted decoration would not have been as practical in the wetter climate and smoggier atmosphere of Victorian London. Minton's ceramic solution

was a far more suitable one for the modern British landscape. Furthermore, it echoed Luca della Robbia's own efforts to produce durable painted architectural works in ceramic, as chronicled in Vasari and emphasized in Robinson. In his 1862 catalogue of the Italian Sculpture collection, Robinson, quoting Vasari, stated that

“Luca sought to invent a method of painting figures and historical representations on flat surfaces of terra-cotta, which, being executed in vitrified enamels, would secure them an endless duration.” [...] We have here [in Vasari] a record of the fact of Luca having, simultaneously with his enamelled terra-cotta sculptures, also practiced *painting* in the same vehicle on the flat; or, in other words, the art of Majolica painting.<sup>487</sup>

This reference to Vasari forms the opening lines of Robinson's description of Luca della Robbia's *The Labours of the Months* (c.1450, V&A, London, Museum Numbers: 7632-1861 – 7643-1861 [**fig.74**]): twelve curved, ceramic medallions with a blue, white and yellow painted design. In his description of the works, Robinson suggested that della Robbia ware was not limited to polychrome reliefs but also included ceramic painting on the flat for architectural purposes. He continued: “Vasari further tells us that one of the principal works of Luca was the decoration in enamelled terra-cotta, of a writing cabinet for Piero di Cosimo Medici, the ceiling of which was coved (*mezzo tondo*), and, together with the pavement, was entirely in glazed terra-cotta, so perfectly put together that it appeared to be but one piece.”<sup>488</sup> Similarly, the complete encasement of an

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<sup>487</sup> Vasari, *Lives*, 70 quoted in Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 59 -60.

<sup>488</sup> Robinson, *Italian Sculpture*, 62.

architectural space (with an equally curved barrel vault and domed ceilings) in glazed ceramics was attempted for the Staircase at the Museum. Moody and Minton's more ambitious design, incorporating both detailed fresco paintings and relief sculpture, would almost completely encase the Ceramic Staircase, including mosaic designs for the floor. However, producing a flat painted decoration (especially for a curved surface) was no easy task in a ceramic material where the exact outcome of the size, shape and integrity of the painted design could not be accurately predicted before firing. Any attempt at a more detailed painting, or more extravagant colours, on an architectural scale might become severely warped in the kiln. With great ambitions to overcome such difficulties and create large, durable fresco paintings, Minton's architectural experiments in painted ceramic decoration led to the invention of the fictile vitrification process.

The Minton process of fictile vitrification appears to have been not only inspired by a combination of the Italian arts of fresco and maiolica painting, but also by the techniques used in mosaic [figs.75, 76]. Indeed, elsewhere within the Museum, the Minton factory in collaboration with the School of Art (and using designs by artists such as Leighton and Watts) were already experimenting with the application of the company's own patented vitrified ceramic tesserae, rather than glass, to the more traditional art of mosaic pictures – attempting to create a recognizably English, Minton ceramic method for the art.<sup>489</sup> Fictile vitrification took the idea of ceramic mosaics one step further towards two-dimensional fresco

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<sup>489</sup> The Henry Cole Memorial on the first floor landing of the staircase is an example of this technique and was added to the staircase in 1868 after Cole's retirement in 1863 [fig.77]. In addition, 16 of the 35 "Kensington Valhalla" portraits that formed an historical canon of decorative artists in the Museum's South Court were also created in Minton tesserae.

painting. At the 1871 International Exhibition, specimens of fictile vitrification from the Minton staircase were displayed and described as follows:

In this process, also called Permanent Fresco or Fictile Vitrification, the material for painting on consists of a number of small hexagon pieces in stone-ware, highly vitrified, and joined together in plaques of convenient size by a vitreous cement. This ground is painted on in the new opaque enamel colours, prepared to stand a very high heat, to secure the permanency of painting in any climate. Curved surfaces can be easily managed. The inventor, Mr. C. M. Campbell, is now casing the ceiling of the staircase of the South Kensington Museum after designs of Mr. Moody. Two specimens of this novel work are shown, executed by Mr. Thomas Allen. A permanent surface hitherto used for fresco work has consisted of wide plaques of pottery, but the warping of these in the furnace has presented obstacles which this invention is adapted to overcome; the shrinkage of each pellet being small, the general proportions are preserved. The process still remains to be tried, applied to a large surface.<sup>490</sup>

Whilst the process itself appears to have been a technical success, the Ceramic Staircase is the only instance of this technique in use for architectural design, suggesting that, “applied to a large surface,” it was not popular, and thus, not commercially viable. One of the limitations of fictile vitrification, of course, was its three-dimensionality: the painting had to be limited to the size of a kiln, whether it be flat or curved to fit within a domed ceiling. A more traditional method of constructing mosaics from pre-fired tesserae no doubt proved far more

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<sup>490</sup> Arthur Beckwith, *International Exhibition, London, 1871: Pottery: Observations on the Materials and Manufacture of Terra-cotta, Stone-ware, Fire-brick, Porcelain, Earthenware, Brick, Majolica and Encaustic Tiles, with remarks on the products exhibited* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1872), 22.

practical. It was also not well received, although reviewers found fault with the designs rather than the process. A reviewer for the *Athenaeum* was particularly offended by the permanent frescoes, commenting on the absurdity of their orientation on the diagonal, in keeping with the slope of the staircase:

a good many vases, tazzae or arabesques [...] are represented, not horizontally, as the steps which accompany them are, and at right angles to the upright stems of the arabesques of which they form parts, but – the reader will hardly believe us – these elements are placed on a sloping line, that of the general slope of the staircase. The effect is very odd indeed.<sup>491</sup>

Although Minton's fictile vitrification process did not take off as hoped, this small glimpse into the ceramic innovations of late-nineteenth-century Britain, combining ideas borrowed from the Italian Renaissance, make the Ceramic Staircase an important space for understanding the Museum's role in the development of nineteenth-century ceramic manufacture. Thanks to the extensive ceramic projects at South Kensington, the Minton Art Pottery Studio was created alongside the Museum at Kensington Gore. This 'art pottery' studio, the first of its kind, remained open until 1875 when it was destroyed by a catastrophic fire. In 1872, *The Times* described it as "worthy of notice as the only place in London devoted to the manufacture of high class pottery."<sup>492</sup> Under the supervision of painter and etcher, W.J. Coleman, the studio directly employed both seasoned potters from the Stoke factory and students from the School of Art in the decoration of ceramic tiles for the Ceramic Staircase, Ceramics Galleries,

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<sup>491</sup> Anon, "Modern Ceramics at the South Kensington Museum," *The Athenaeum* no. 2337 (Aug 1872): 184.

<sup>492</sup> Anon, *The Times* (Feb 1872), quoted in Atterbury and Batkin, *The Dictionary of Minton*, 30.

Refreshment Rooms and for private sale. Furthermore, the *Art Journal* of 1871 suggested that “a kiln, so arranged as to consume its own smoke, will be constructed and it is hoped that, with its facilities, eminent artists, ladies especially, may be induced to paint upon porcelain and majolica.”<sup>493</sup> Minton’s experiments at South Kensington were, therefore, not only of an artistic and technical nature but were also, to some extent, environmentally and socially forward-thinking.

### The Ceramic Staircase: Subject Matter and Style

The experiments in subject matter and style on the Ceramic Staircase are just as important as those industrial experiments explored in its construction. The emphasis on bringing together art and industry is, at first glance, most obvious in the subject matter chosen for the decoration. John Physick’s succinct account of the decorative scheme describes the subject matter as follows:

The four side panels of the first flight represent Literature, Music and Art. The coved ceiling has a painting showing the Pursuit of Art by Man. [...]

There are two domes on the landing, one of them with Ceres, Mercury and Vulcan, representing respectively Agriculture, Commerce and Manufactures, grouped round a terrestrial globe; in the spandrels are figures representing Surveying, Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. The other dome shows Apollo and Minerva and Poetry, Music and Art, grouped round a celestial globe. The figures in the spandrels are Spectrum Analysis, Geometry, Chemistry and Astronomy [fig.78].

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<sup>493</sup> Anon, *Art Journal* (Dec 1871) quoted in Atterbury and Batkin, *The Dictionary of Minton*, 30.



The coved ceiling of the second flight contains an allegorical group of Wisdom seated on a throne, with Ignorance, Superstition, and Apathy, overthrown by Science and Truth.<sup>494</sup>

Physick also described the third flight, which was left unfinished but includes portraits of Phidias, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Archimedes, Bacon, Galileo and Newton.<sup>495</sup> As a finishing touch, the letters ‘S’ and ‘A’ (for ‘Science’ and ‘Art’) can be found juxtaposed or intertwined throughout the scheme [fig.79].<sup>496</sup> There is no denying the message that the Staircase was meant to get across to those that passed through it: the importance of the combination of science and art in the improvement of modern manufacture and design. Thus, the subject matter of the Staircase reflected the message of the Museum’s collection, which drew together art and science exhibits and, ultimately, voiced its educational aims.

Whilst the subject is clear, the style is more difficult to pin down. For example, the vitrified paintings, with their muscular and often nude allegorical figures occupying the roundels and spandrels, are a combination of a more classical, High Renaissance and a painterly Baroque style, no doubt with the intention of bringing to mind the fresco work of Michelangelo and Raphael, as well as the extravagant interior decoration of other world-class Continental Museums such as the Uffizi [fig.80] and the Louvre [fig.81]. It is possible that a particular starting point for the overall design of the staircase was Raphael’s *Loggie* of the Vatican [fig.82], especially since copies of Raphael’s arabesques and lunettes from the *Loggie* constituted the first purchases by the Schools in the 1840s and, for almost thirty

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<sup>494</sup> Physick, *The Victoria and Albert Museum*, 126-7.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

years, had been important teaching aids within the School of Art's syllabus. The overall decoration of the similarly Romanesque *Loggia* space is divided into variously sized and well-defined sections and decorative panels, bordered by a more modest gold trim and filled with arabesque decoration. Raphael's design, however, is very different to that of the Staircase, and the latter employs more diagonal frieze decoration with a greater emphasis on gold borders and relief work. It seems as though the Ceramic Staircase therefore combines the extravagant, glittering Baroque fresco and relief of the Louvre within the more confined, disciplined Renaissance style of panelling found in the *Loggia*, in a search for a new, hybrid English style.

Whilst the Ceramic Staircase may have initially been in part inspired by Raphael's *Loggia* fresco decoration, the idea of translating Raphaelesque paintings into ceramic had its own historic precedent in the Italian maiolica ware displayed within the collection. Since the formation of the Schools of Design, Raphael had been cited as one of the great artist-workmen of the Renaissance period, who, as we have seen, applied his artistic talents to architectural frescoes and maiolica pottery: "The universal belief that Raffaello himself had, in the outset of his career, condescended to paint plates and dishes, was the chief cause of this widespread appreciation [for maiolica]."<sup>497</sup> Indeed, the Minton factory itself produced various wares that alluded to the connection between Renaissance painting and maiolica, often directly using motifs from Renaissance paintings in its majolica ware. For example, a majolica dish, shown at the International Exhibition of 1862, bears a painting of a Roman soldier after Mantegna (*Dish*, Minton & Co., 1862,

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<sup>497</sup> Robinson, *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection*, 1.

V&A, London: Museum Number: 8112-1863 [fig.83]).<sup>498</sup> But the Ceramic Staircase differs fundamentally from Raphael's *Loggia* in that it also incorporates della Robbia-inspired polychrome sculpture into the overall design, hybridizing sculpture and painting within one decorative scheme and one versatile material. Raphael, with his revered "two-fold" position as a fine art painter with connections to ceramic painting, and della Robbia's popular polychrome sculpture were here represented as two artists of the Renaissance whose work was translatable in Minton ceramics.

### Della Robbia Ware: Introducing Polychrome Relief Sculpture

The most obvious example of della Robbia-inspired relief sculpture on the Staircase comes in the form of a visual quotation of a della Robbia foliage border, a motif that the Minton factory could have extracted directly from the Italian sculpture collection [figs.30, 76]. As well as using motifs from Renaissance paintings in the majolica work, Minton used this borrowed della Robbia motif in many of its ceramic roundels and medallions, quoting the work of its Quattrocento predecessor [fig.84]. Whilst Minton's foliage border is perhaps a little fuller and more contained within its architectural frame, it certainly echoes the bright but naturalistic greens, yellow and browns of the della Robbia originals.<sup>499</sup>

Aside from this obvious allusion to a recognizable della Robbia-esque foliage border, the relieved figures of the Staircase are, without exception, white. It is important to note that the style of the high relief sculpture, the atlante and caryatid

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<sup>498</sup> Mentioned in Hugh Wakefield, *Victorian Pottery* (London: Barrie Jenkins, 1962), 83.

<sup>499</sup> Examples of Minton's 'della Robbia' ware are cited in Atterbury and Batkin, *The Dictionary of Minton*, 70.

figures beneath the balustrade, for example, is more Michelangelesque High Renaissance, verging on Baroque, than della Robbia-esque. For example, their Antique Bacchanalian subject matter and stocky musculature are reminiscent of Michelangelo's *Day and Night* (c.1524-33, Medici Chapel, San Lorenzo, Florence), rather than the draped Biblical subjects and lower relief of della Robbia's work.<sup>500</sup> Foliage is rendered in various different ways. The garlands below the balustrade and the arabesques are more traditionally stylized (after Raphael's examples) and contrast to the naturalistic depiction of corn in various panels, which better follow Robinson's idea of della Robbia 'truth to Nature' [figs.79, 85]. But it is the manner in which polychromy is applied to ceramic architectural relief that the Staircase sculptures best follow the della Robbia precedent. As discussed in the previous chapter, in his catalogue of Italian sculpture, Robinson 'gently' introduced the idea of polychrome relief sculpture to readers, beginning with Luca della Robbia's marble works, then his all-white terracotta imitations of marble works, followed by "the use of two enamel colours only, viz. blue and white," which "was the earliest mode; but the introduction of other tints in accessories and details, at first very sparingly applied, very soon followed, and afterwards (by Luca himself) a full system of chromatic decoration was introduced."<sup>501</sup> Looking at the Staircase with this comment in mind, it is apparent that there exists a similarly gradual polychromatic development from monochrome relief to a "full system of chromatic decoration" on the ceiling. If one follows the decorative scheme of the staircase from floor to ceiling (a

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<sup>500</sup> A copy of which could be found at Sydenham.

<sup>501</sup> Robinson, *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection*, 50 (footnote). Robinson's description is repeated in an 1864 article for the *Gentleman's Magazine*: "The colours [of Luca della Robbia's earlier works] are simply blue and white. In his after-work we find green, maroon and yellow, but still rather sparingly employed compared to the white and blue." Anon, "Art Applied to Industry.- III," *Gentleman's Magazine* 1 (May 1864): 564.

direction in which visitors may well concentrate their attention whilst climbing or descending a staircase), the high relief sculpture below the balustrade is gradually mixed with the flat surface paintings as they move further up the wall, allowing sculpture and painting to merge as part of the same versatile ceramic material. A more muted polychromatic design is utilized in conjunction with the high relief below the balustrade, echoing those earlier della Robbia productions described by Robinson, such as the *Adoration of the Magi* [fig.23], in which only the background is coloured in a cool shade of blue. Rather than a cool shade of blue, however, Minton has used the more earthy, Oriental tones of celadon or jade green that were popular at the time in Mintonware and Wedgwood Jasperware [figs.86, 87]. This use of predominantly white or monochrome relief was a departure from Minton's usual majolica aesthetic, in which figural supports and decorations were often realized in flesh tones and bright colours [figs. 88, 89]. It suggested a closer relationship with the earliest della Robbia originals found at the Museum, or indeed, with an imitation of marble, and formed a real contrast between the modestly coloured relief sculptures and the extravagantly coloured frescos on the ceiling, balancing the polychromy of the over all architectural design.

Furthermore, viewing (and touching) distance appears to be an important factor in the over all polychromatic composition of the Staircase design: the closer the viewer could get to the design for tactile inspection, not only did the sculptures project invitingly further from the wall, but their combination of colour and relief was more muted and balanced. Every monochrome relief sculpture (save for the della Robbia foliage borders within the roundels) was within reach of the visitor.

By contrast, the ceiling paintings, out of reach both physically and conceptually, were realized in sumptuous colours, providing a visual sensation, rather than a tactile one. From a practical point of view, perhaps we can again bring the concept of hygiene into this. The surfaces most likely to be touched or dirtied, those that invitingly projected out of the wall towards the visitor at waist height, were not only non-porous but also a clinical, cold shade of white that would emphatically reveal any dirt, thus highlighting its absence.

In the second chapter of this study, I discussed how Raphael's frescos and Michelangelo's *David* were displayed together for many years as the physical and conceptual, painted and sculptural, 'heights' of Robinson's Art Museum at South Kensington. Minton's Staircase demonstrated that, through cheap and hygienic ceramic decoration, permanent frescoes in the manner of the great artist-craftsman Raphael, and polychrome ceramic relief after della Robbia, could be combined to form a new, innovative type of decoration. The combination of painting and sculpture within an architectural space was justified through its allusions to the work of della Robbia, whose aim, it was suggested, had been to apply his talent as a sculptor and painter to "the humble art of pottery." Displayed alongside the originals in the Museum, Minton's similar ceramic hybridization of sculpture and painting promised a modern, versatile platform for architectural ornament that could colourfully (and hygienically) decorate the public spaces of the modern city.

With its ambitious exploration of the ceramic material in the solution of decorative problems, the Ceramic Staircase demonstrates Minton's and the Museum's 'industrial' interpretation of the Italian Renaissance artist-workman. It

showed what modern industrial Potteries could create in collaboration with the modern artist-workmen connected with the Schools, and how art and industry could be combined to make something new for British manufacture, using Renaissance precedents found in the collections for support. Of the few published reviews at the time of its construction, the majority were not, however, positive. *The Athenaeum* went as far as to describe the decoration as “monstrously rude and common in style.”<sup>502</sup> It was even more disliked in the early twentieth century. In 1912, it was boarded up by Museum director, Sir Cecil Harcourt-Smith, in response to “the Board’s view that the decoration [...] of a Museum should be as unobtrusive as possible, and should in no way overpower the effect of the objects exhibited.”<sup>503</sup> The Staircase was restored to its original state in 1995-6 as part of the project to restore the Silver Galleries (formerly the Ceramics Galleries) and now forms an important part of the Museum’s collections – showcasing industrial, technical, artistic, stylistic, ceramic, sculptural and even social experimentation that actively sought to improve further the reputation of the British pottery industry.

Although such ambitious processes as fictile vitrification were not carried through to other public buildings, the Renaissance spirit of experimentation in materials, colour and styles was taken much further. Whilst Stratton cited the Albertopolis (comprising the South Kensington Museum, Royal Albert Hall and Natural History Museum area) as being one of the inspirations for a *Terracotta Revival* in British architecture, the della Robbia polychrome aesthetic was embraced more

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<sup>502</sup> Anon, “Modern Ceramics at the South Kensington Museum,” 184.

<sup>503</sup> See Physick, *The Victoria and Albert Museum*, 254.

directly at the Della Robbia Pottery of Birkenhead in 1894.<sup>504</sup> This independent pottery specialized in brightly-coloured, della Robbia architectural wares and the sculptors who worked therein, with their modern take on the della Robbia originals, truly embodied the humble, industrial and essentially modern spirit of his work, disseminating their colourful wares throughout the “cool streets and darkened churches” of other British industrial cities.

## 4.2 The Della Robbia Pottery, Birkenhead

From the household within to the street without, beginning with tiling various in theme and colour for our own window box gardens or jardinières for balconies, to fountains and sundials in our public gardens, or designed panels to let in to overmantels, and friezes for public and private buildings, the sign of the trade or possibly the historic record of noble deed emblazoned forth in faïence ware – some of these are the opportunities for brightening up with accents of glistening colour the gloomy and smoky surroundings amid which we pass our uncomplaining and lethargic days.<sup>505</sup>

If the Ceramic Staircase at South Kensington is an example of Minton’ and the Museum’s more ‘industrial’ scale of the della Robbia aesthetic, then the Della Robbia Pottery at Birkenhead (active between 1894 and 1906) represented the middle-ground between the ‘studio’ pottery and mass industry. It was built upon the principles set out by William Morris in support of the Arts and Crafts movement and Ruskin’s Guild system. The Della Robbia Pottery was an

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<sup>504</sup> Stratton, *The Terracotta Revival*, 52-65.

<sup>505</sup> Harold Rathbone, “The Industrial Aims of the Della Robbia Pottery Ltd.,” *The Sphinx* 3 (1895): 143, quoted in Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 65.



independent pottery of the late-nineteenth century that attempted to reintroduce the individuality of the artist-craftsman into the pottery industry, employing a small team of artists in the production of both ‘art pottery’ and domestic wares. The Arts and Crafts movement was exemplified by a surge of similar small potteries being established across the country, from the Linthorpe Pottery in Middlesborough (founded in 1879 and inspired by Christopher Dresser) to the Aller Vale Pottery at Kingskerswell in Devon (founded in 1881).<sup>506</sup> What makes the Della Robbia Pottery particularly relevant to this study, however, and what gives it its name, is that it specialised in the creation of architectural relief decoration that reflected the della Robbia polychrome aesthetic and, as the above quotation suggests, attempted to disseminate the bright, colourful works of the sculptors and ceramicists under its employ throughout the country. I argue that the Della Robbia Pottery contributed to various late-nineteenth-century artistic movements including Arts and Crafts (and later, Art Nouveau), Aestheticism and late Pre-Raphaelitism. Furthermore, the lead sculptor at the pottery, Conrad Dressler, whose work is rarely discussed in the historiography of Victorian sculpture, fits the eclectic profile of a New Sculptor, with purist Arts and Crafts and Pre-Raphaelite sympathies and a nuanced Aesthetic understanding of polychromy. The Della Robbia Pottery demonstrated how, when you take one painter in the Pre-Raphaelite style and one sculptor from the South Kensington Schools, both with connections to Ruskin, Morris, Watts and various Pre-Raphaelite artists and both with a combined interest in colour, beauty and design reform, the result is an art production that defies categorisation in a variety of ways. The following section considers the ways in which Della Robbia Pottery

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<sup>506</sup> Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 41.

fits into the various movements of the late nineteenth century, its complex position between painting, sculpture and pottery drawing them together rather than separating them out.

### Early Influences: Harold Rathbone and Conrad Dressler

The Della Robbia Pottery was founded in 1894 by the artist, Harold Rathbone (1858 – 1929), and sculptor, Conrad Dressler (1856 – 1940). The Rathbone family were well-established Liverpool merchants who actively involved themselves in radical Liberal politics and social reform. Harold's father, Philip Rathbone, was involved in providing arts and cultural education within Liverpool: he was a member of the 'Free Public Library, Museum, Gallery of Arts and Education Committee,' the Treasurer and Chairman of the 'Arts and Exhibitions Sub-Committee of the Liverpool Corporation,' and of the Hanging Committee for the Walker Art Gallery Exhibitions, amongst other responsibilities. He was also an avid art collector, founding the Liverpool Arts Club in 1878, and a friend of fellow social (and design) reformers Ruskin and Morris. Growing up in a family with such an active, social and liberal attitude towards the arts, it is no wonder that Rathbone chose to pursue a career as an artist.

Rathbone attended the Heatherley's School of Fine Art in London in 1875, a private school that boasted a number of high-profile alumni connected with the Aesthetic movement and Pre-Raphaelitism (including Gilbert, Leighton, John Everett Millais, Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti). Heatherley's also appealed to Rathbone's own sympathies as it admitted both women and men "on equal footing," a stance that Rathbone would later take as an employer at the

Della Robbia Pottery.<sup>507</sup> On leaving Heatherley's, he attended the Slade School, where he was taught by the French sculptor, Alphonse Legros, followed by a two-year period in Paris at the Académie Julian, where he studied under the painter William Adolphe Bourguereau.<sup>508</sup>

Hyland's *The Della Robbia Pottery* explains that, during his studies, in 1878, a twenty-year old Rathbone accompanied his parents on a trip to Italy, "kindling his life-long love of Italian art."<sup>509</sup> Following this trip, Rathbone settled in London and appears to have made regular visits to the Italian Sculpture collection at the South Kensington Museum. In 1880, a twenty-two year old Rathbone stumbled upon the then thirteen-year old art student, Frank Brangwyn (who would later work for Morris & Co.), sketching at the Museum and immediately set him to work copying the early Italian reliefs: "With a broad pencil [Brangwyn] drew for months on very smooth white paper, copying reliefs of Donatello and doing whatever Mr. Rathbone wished."<sup>510</sup> This suggests that Rathbone regularly visited the Italian Sculpture collection where he advised Brangwyn "for months," and where, of course, he would have seen the large collection of della Robbia sculpture for himself.

Furthermore, the Rathbone family were close friends with Ruskin, who may also have encouraged Rathbone's interest in Italian art. Rathbone visited Ruskin's Coniston home on many occasions and, perhaps, was introduced to the critic's

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<sup>507</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>510</sup> Walter Shaw-Sparrow, *Frank Brangwyn and his Work* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1910), 10, quoted in *Della Robbia Pottery Birkenhead 1894 -1906: An Interim Report/ [Williamson Art Gallery and Museum]* (Birkenhead: Metropolitan Borough of Wirral, Department of Leisure Services, 1980), 6. Brangwyn was later employed by Morris & Co.

new della Robbia relief above the fireplace in his study in the early 1880s. Just how much of an influence Ruskin had on Rathbone is unclear, but the latter certainly knew how to use his various contacts in the art world to his best advantage – he had also met many of the Pre-Raphaelite artists who exhibited at the Walker through his father’s association with the Hanging Committee. In 1882, Rathbone petitioned the Pre-Raphaelite and Arts and Crafts practitioner, Ford Madox Brown, to take him on as a student, as Rossetti had done many years before him. Brown agreed, for a fee of £200, and the pair became close, no doubt sharing similar social ideals, artistic acquaintances and interests. Brown even painted a portrait of Rathbone as ‘John of Gaunt’ in the *Trial of Wycliffe* mural for Manchester Town Hall (1873-93, Manchester Town Hall [fig.90]), a project Brown worked on throughout Rathbone’s tuition.<sup>511</sup> Brown died in 1893 and Rathbone, who had unsuccessfully attempted to establish himself as a painter in the Pre-Raphaelite style, founded the Della Robbia Pottery in December of the same year.

The idea to set up an art pottery must have come from Conrad Dressler, the sculptor and co-founder of the Della Robbia Pottery, whom Rathbone had met during his period of study under Brown. Dressler had been taught by sculptors Dalou, Edouard Lanteri and J. Edgar Boehm at the government School of Art in South Kensington “where he gained a first prize for composition and ‘the antique.’”<sup>512</sup> One can assume that, whilst studying at the School, he made use of the attached South Kensington Museum, paying particular attention to sculpture in

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<sup>511</sup> *Della Robbia Pottery Birkenhead 1894 -1906: An Interim Report*, 7. For more on the work of Ford Madox Brown see particularly: Julian Treuherz, *Ford Madox Brown: Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer* (London: Philip Wilson, 2011) and Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>512</sup> Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 166.

support of his modelling classes. Judging by Lanteri's later teaching aids on modelling, *Modelling: A Guide for Teachers and Students* (1902), Dressler's modelling master used Italian examples in his classes, including sections of the cast of Michelangelo's *David* and other works found in the South Kensington Museum.<sup>513</sup> On completing his studies, Dressler gained a reputation as a portrait sculptor and took a "looser, more expressive approach" than that of Boehm, showing a greater emphasis on the clay modelling process that Dalou and Lanteri both preached.<sup>514</sup> Perhaps, if Dressler had continued in this type of production, he would have been better remembered as contributor to the New Sculpture movement. But, as Beattie's brief account of Dressler's career suggests, an encounter with Ruskin in the early 1880s seems to have changed his career trajectory.<sup>515</sup>

In 1883, Ruskin visited Dressler's Chelsea studio and invited the sculptor to Brantwood so that he could sit for a portrait bust. In May 1884, whilst Dressler was engaged in modelling Ruskin's portrait (1888 (cast in bronze), National Portrait Gallery, London [**fig.91**]), the pair became very close, as Dressler himself recalls:

His friendliness went so far as to drop all convention. He asked to call me by my Christian name and treated me more like a son than even a friend. [...] He invited me to [breakfast] with him in his library and this I continued to do until the end of

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<sup>513</sup> For example, see Edouard Lanteri, *Modelling: A Guide for Teachers and Students* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1902), 9.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>515</sup> Beattie, *The New Sculpture*, 241.

my visit. What delightful conversations we had there. What treasures he showed me.<sup>516</sup>

Indeed, one can imagine that Andrea della Robbia's *Virgin and Child*, presiding over these breakfasts in the library, must have come under discussion. It was at this time, in the early 1880s, that Ruskin had been waxing lyrical about della Robbia in his lecture series, *The Art of England*: "I think you may safely take Luca della Robbia with his scholars for an exponent of their unity to all nations. Luca is brightly Tuscan, with the dignity of a Greek; he has English simplicity, French grace, Italian devotion, - and is, I think, delightful to the truest lovers of art in all nations, and of all ranks."<sup>517</sup> Furthermore, as he sat for his portrait in the coach house, Ruskin continued in "telling [Dressler] of the great works which he knew in Italy and of the spirit which animated them, often deploring the change in the spirit of modern times."<sup>518</sup> Following his encounter with Ruskin, Dressler's direction as a sculptor changed – from a portrait sculptor who boasted a variety of high-profile sitters to a decorative sculptor in polychrome ceramic relief. He became obsessed with the social and moral issues surrounding art and industry, sympathising with the Arts and Crafts movement and writing a paper entitled, 'The Curse of Machinery,' which he delivered in London and Liverpool between 1890 and 1895. During this transitional period in his career, he met the similarly minded Rathbone, a move that may have been initiated by Ruskin himself.

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<sup>516</sup> Conrad Dressler, "Letter from C. Dressler to M.H. Spielmann dated 18 June 1890," quoted in James Dearden, *The Portraits of John Ruskin* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 150.

<sup>517</sup> Ruskin, *The Art of England*, XXXIII, 338.

<sup>518</sup> Dressler, "Letter from C. Dressler to M.H. Spielmann dated 18 June 1890."

Whilst Ruskin's attitudes towards art and industry, and maybe even his newfound love for polychrome della Robbia reliefs, appear to have rubbed off on Dressler during his time at Brantwood, Hyland suggests that the sculptor's particular interest in ceramics may have arisen from a friendship with William de Morgan. De Morgan's vibrant ceramic tiles, made for Morris & Co., were exhibited at the New Gallery, London as part of the first 'Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society' exhibition of 1884. No doubt Dressler's education under Lanteri and Dalou, and the growing popularity for terracotta in the relief decoration of modern British architecture – such as the façade of the South Kensington Museum [fig.92], the Victoria Law Courts, Birmingham [fig.93] and the Constitutional Club, Northumberland Avenue, London [fig.94] - also fuelled his interest in the ceramic material. A combination of these factors ultimately led Dressler to an interest in polychrome ceramic relief, which he began experimenting with in the early 1890s. Indeed, before the Della Robbia Pottery was established in December of 1893, Dressler had already exhibited what was referred to as 'della Robbia ware' sculpture at the Walker Art Gallery's Autumn Exhibition of the same year. Amongst the eight examples of sculpture in polychrome terracotta by Dressler were: *Boy and Lanthorn* (1883, Williamson Art Gallery, Birkenhead [fig.95]) and a work listed as *St John - after Donatello*, which may have resembled Donatello's polychrome *St. John the Baptist* at the Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice (1438, I Frari, Venice [fig.96]).<sup>519</sup> *Boy and Lanthorn* was later repeated in monochrome as part of the exterior decoration of 14 – 16 Hans Road, Knightsbridge, a private townhouse designed in 1891 by Charles Voysey for Liberal MP, Archibald Grove [fig.97]. Dressler's prior interest in polychrome

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<sup>519</sup> "Conrad Gustave d'Huc Dressler," *Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851-1951*, University of Glasgow History of Art and HATII, online database 2011 [http://sculpture.gla.ac.uk/view/person.php?id=msib2\\_1203107640](http://sculpture.gla.ac.uk/view/person.php?id=msib2_1203107640) [Accessed 24 Jul 2014].

relief suggests that it was he who initiated the idea of forming an architectural art pottery specializing in the ‘della Robbia’ aesthetic, and Rathbone who suggested the Birkenhead location; both men wanting to create an Arts and Crafts venture that reflected their shared pro-Morris and Ruskinian stance. The choice of Birkenhead – rather than the more commonly rural locations of Arts and Crafts ventures (such as Mary Seton Watts’s Compton Pottery and Morris’s Red House in Bexleyheath) - seems to have been a strategic one. Rathbone still had many connections in his home town and his aims for the pottery to “[brighten] up with accents of glistening colour the gloomy and smoky surroundings amid which we pass our uncomplaining and lethargic days,”<sup>520</sup> could perhaps better be exercised directly from the heart of industrial Merseyside, rather than in the bucolic home counties. This sets the Della Robbia Pottery apart from those Arts and Crafts practitioners who “turned their backs” on the city. Rathbone didn’t want to escape the city, he wanted to improve it.

### A Fashionable Aesthetic

As a business, the Della Robbia Pottery would have to be able to survive financially. Its productions would therefore need to offer consumers something new, individual and attractive: there was plenty of majolica pottery being churned out by factories such as Minton and it was still in high demand. The attachment of the Pottery to the della Robbia name must have been a way of distinguishing the hand-modelled, hand-painted ‘art pottery’ from Minton’s mass-manufactured, often printed majolica. It also pointed towards the Pottery’s focus: architectural polychrome relief. As Chapter 3 discussed, the architectural works of the della

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<sup>520</sup> Rathbone, “The Industrial Aims of the Della Robbia Pottery Ltd.,” 143.



Robbia family became increasingly popular in the late nineteenth century after many examples had been purchased, displayed and promoted in the South Kensington Museum. This popularity seemed to reach a pinnacle in the 1880s and 1890s when various artists and critics acquired original della Robbia reliefs for their own private homes. In addition, exhibitions devoted to the artist were held at major Museums (including an 1891 exhibition at the British Museum) and biographies such as Leader Scott's 1883 *Luca della Robbia with other Italian Sculptors* were published, as we have seen.<sup>521</sup> Hunt, who knew Rathbone well enough in the year leading up to the establishment of the Della Robbia Pottery to paint his portrait (*Harold Rathbone*, 1893, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool [fig.98]), owned a della Robbia panel (similar to *Madonna in a Lily Bower*, Luca della Robbia, date unknown, Palais Liechtenstein [figs.10 & 99]) that was "not so fine as Professor Ruskin's at Brantwood, but not unlike it in design."<sup>522</sup> In addition, George and Mary Watts, whom Dressler often visited at their home in Compton, Surrey, were given a large della Robbia roundel in 1897 that was installed in the garden. A portrait painting of 1897 by Louis Dechars shows Watts, appearing rather like an Italian Renaissance cardinal in his red robes (signifying his honorary doctorate at Oxford), seated in front of the della Robbia roundel, which has been integrated into an outdoor setting and mounted in a square frame with a modern Arts Nouveau-style Celtic pattern (*George Frederic Watts, after a photograph by George Andrews*, 1897, National Portrait Gallery, London [fig.9]).<sup>523</sup> Both Holman Hunt and Watts had a large part to play in the support of the Della Robbia Pottery, being the only two artists on the company's

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<sup>521</sup> See Scott, *Luca della Robbia*.

<sup>522</sup> Anon, *Pall Mall Gazette* (12 April 1886) quoted in Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 30.

<sup>523</sup> The frame may have been designed by Mary Seton Watts herself.

management council.<sup>524</sup> These two men, whose homes and gardens would themselves be brightened by original della Robbia wares, both supported the Arts and Crafts principles of Rathbone's pottery and clearly embraced the polychrome aesthetic in their own domestic environments. Mary Watts had also been a great influence on Dressler, showing a similar development in her own artistic career from portrait painter to ceramic artist. In 1894, soon after Dressler and Rathbone had visited the Watts family to discuss the formation of their Birkenhead pottery, Mary Watts began designing the Watts Mortuary Chapel, Compton [fig.100] and teaching the art of modelling and ceramics to local residents, who assisted her in the building and decoration of the chapel between 1895 and 1904. Mary Watts is another example of an accomplished artist and ceramicist who has since resided in the shadow of her husband's fame and who, in one of the few modern publications dedicated to her, is quite rightly described as the "unsung heroine of the Art Nouveau."<sup>525</sup>

Whilst the founders and supporters of the Della Robbia Pottery had been exposed to original della Robbia ware through both private acquisition and the South Kensington collection, Merseyside was introduced to original della Robbia sculpture via an 1894 exhibition at the Walker Art Gallery. To coincide with the opening of the pottery at Birkenhead and to formally introduce the della Robbia aesthetic to Merseyside, the Walker Art Gallery's spring exhibition of 1894 focused on the display of brightly-coloured, historic pottery. This was surely no coincidence, but rather a promotional tool facilitated by Rathbone's father in his

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<sup>524</sup> Also on the council were: Rathbone's father, Philip; Liverpool barrister and salt merchant, Herman John Falk; coal merchant, John Lea; and architect, Edmund Ware. Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 36.

<sup>525</sup> Veronica Franklin Gould, *Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938): Unsung Heroine of the Art Nouveau* (London: Lund Humphries, 1998).

capacity as chairman of the Liverpool Arts and Exhibition Sub-Committee. The committee requested a loan from the South Kensington Museum of a number of original della Robbia reliefs and Italian maiolica pieces for the exhibition.<sup>526</sup> The Museum obliged and, thus, parts of Robinson's della Robbia collection found their way to Liverpool where they were used to promote and inspire Rathbone and Dressler's new venture. Numerous examples of the work produced at the Pottery were then displayed at the Walker's annual autumn exhibition some months later, alongside the works of leading New Sculptors such as Frampton, Edward Onslow Ford, Pomeroy, Thomas Brock and Hamo Thornycroft (whose *Mower* (c.1882-94), Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool [fig.101]) was included in the same exhibition). The Walker would thereafter regularly display Della Robbia Pottery architectural works at its autumn exhibitions (25 works by Rathbone and Dressler alone in 1895), associating its productions with the works of the leading artists of the age. Indeed, two panels by Dressler appearing in the 1895 exhibition, *The Sower* (c.1895, Birkenhead Central Library [fig.102]) and *The Reaper* (c.1895, Birkenhead Central Library [fig.103]), seem to reflect the rural, realist subject matter of Thornycroft's *Mower* exhibited in the previous year – a subject matter that Dressler would continue to focus on in his later works.

Despite their presence alongside the works of these leading New Sculptors in their own time, the ceramic productions of the Della Robbia Pottery sculptors have not maintained this equal and parallel position. Perhaps this was due to their inherent function as decorative objects belonging to an industrial workshop – once exhibited, they were then removed and sold privately, unlike Thornycroft's

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<sup>526</sup> Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 33.

*Mower*, which remains in the Walker collection to this day. Indeed, at the modern Walker, the only sculpture by Dressler that *is* included alongside his New Sculpture contemporaries is a life-size bronze figure of *Lupercalia* from 1907 (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool) [fig.104] rather than his more prolific ceramic productions, which are either still *in situ*, or reside within the special collection of Della Robbia Pottery at the Williamson Art Gallery, Birkenhead.

### Colour and Relief: The Della Robbia Pottery Wares, Arts and Crafts and the Aesthetic Movement

The focus of the Della Robbia Pottery was architectural bas-relief, though it also applied the polychrome relief aesthetic to ordinary domestic items, much to the admiration of Leighton, who stated in a letter to Rathbone that

I have learned with great satisfaction that you do not confine yourself to the production of pieces destined wholly for decoration, but have grasped the vital principle that the chief object of a manufacture of this kind must be, if it is to thrive, the application of artistic qualities to objects of ordinary domestic use. It was this principle which gave to the work of the Greeks in Ancient days, and to that of other European nations in the Middle Ages, that distinction and beauty which are our envy and admiration to this day.<sup>527</sup>

The domestic wares – vases, teapots and plates - were the bread-and-butter of the business. Whilst Leighton praised their inclusion, the reality was that many were not ideally suited to everyday use due to the lead content in some of the glazes

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<sup>527</sup> Frederic Lord Leighton, "Letter from F. Leighton to H. Rathbone," quoted in Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 41.

and were thus rendered decorative rather than useful.<sup>528</sup> It was, however, a focus on polychrome architectural wares – as well as the vibrant choice of colours - that set the Della Robbia Pottery apart from similar ventures across the country. Following the principles of the Arts and Crafts Guild system, the Pottery employed a workshop of artists and apprentices that consisted of both male and female ceramicists and painters (women were predominantly employed as ‘colourists’ who hand-painted the designs onto the wares) [fig.105]. The work was split between domestic wares and architectural relief, with Dressler heading the Architectural Department. The young artists were encouraged to invent their own designs but major works were designed and supervised by Rathbone, Dressler or Carlo Manzoni (1855 – 1910) [fig.106], an Italian born sculptor whom Rathbone and Dressler befriended in London and invited to join them in Birkenhead in 1893. Examples of Manzoni’s work for the Pottery include a relief panel of a *Green Man* (1898-1904, Birkenhead Central Library [fig.107]) and a figurine of *Mary Magdalen* (c.1899, Manchester City Galleries, Manchester, [fig.108]).<sup>529</sup>

The Pottery followed Morris’s Arts and Crafts ‘manifesto,’ set out in his lecture on *The Lesser Arts* (published in 1882), paying particular attention to the following principle:

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<sup>528</sup> Hyland suggests that “it is doubtful whether any advice in this respect was ever issued to buyers.” Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 49.

<sup>529</sup> When Dressler left the pottery in 1896, Manzoni took charge of the Architectural Department and a picture of him in the Pottery studio, c.1898-1900, surrounded by the works of Dressler and others, shows him working on a large-size sculpture of Mary Magdalen, which was later reduced as a figurine for the Pottery. See *Ibid.*, 195.

As to the surface decoration on pottery, it is clear it must never be printed; [...] it would take more than an hour to go even very briefly into the matter of painting in pottery; but one rule we have for a guide, and whatever we do if we abide by it, we are quite sure to go wrong if we reject it: and it is common to all the lesser arts. Think of your material. Don't paint anything on pottery save what can be painted only onto pottery; if you do it is clear that however good a draughtsman you may be, you do not care about that special art.<sup>530</sup>

Colouring pottery, even on a flat surface, was indeed a skill that required more than a basic knowledge of painting and draughtsmanship. Two of the Pottery's female colourists, Gertrude Russell and Alice Louise Jones

both remembered being taught to visualise the end result of the anonymous grey chemicals they applied as glazes and the pale blue-green which Rathbone insisted they use is found on most pieces. The decorators chose their glazes from the limited number supplied to them and this slight restriction in colour afforded a harmony which unites the production as a whole.<sup>531</sup>

Whilst painters of the day were free to explore colour more immediately, thanks to ready-mixed, portable paints and a near infinite combination of hues, pottery colourists were more limited in their choices and had to 'guess' at the overall outcome, which could easily be ruined in the firing process. As the above quotation suggests, however, a limited palette allowed for a recognisable aesthetic that was repeated throughout the works, similar to the instantly recognisable sculpture of the della Robbia family.

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<sup>530</sup> William Morris, *The Lesser Arts of Life* (a Lecture given at Birmingham 23 January 1882, published in *Lectures on Art* (London: Macmillan, 1882), 174.

<sup>531</sup> *Della Robbia Pottery Interim Report*, 24.

Indeed, like della Robbia relief sculpture itself, where the palette is limited to a collection of vibrant greens, blues, yellows, browns and white glazes, the Della Robbia Pottery used similar colours, rarely employing reds or black (as the della Robbia family had demonstrated, red could be achieved by exposing the terracotta beneath). Almost every work contained Rathbone's trademark "blue-green," or turquoise, colour that made it recognisable [fig.109]. This assured that the colour palette used by the Pottery brought to mind a variety of different aesthetics popular at the time. Firstly, it was reminiscent of its Quattrocento predecessors and maiolica pottery [figs.110, 111]. Secondly, it incorporated aspects of the blue-and-white designs of early della Robbia sculpture, whilst also reflecting the work of Wedgwood [figs.112, 114]. Blue and white were key colours for pottery within the Aesthetic Movement, thanks to the import of blue and white porcelain from China and Japan.<sup>532</sup> In contrast to these wares, however, Della Robbia Pottery only used blue and white in relief, after the lighter blue colours of their Quattrocento predecessor – a European blue-and-white alternative to the more popular Oriental wares. Thirdly, it incorporated other colours associated with the Aesthetic movement – for example, the iridescent shades of blue, green and yellow of the peacock feather [fig.113], the white figures of Antique marble, and greens reminiscent of Oriental jade or celadon. The effect of this limited, yet aesthetically significant, colour palette was that it positioned the wares alongside a variety of popular historic precedents whilst maintaining the equally popular 'modern' aesthetics of the day. Its eclectic range of aesthetic sources – Italian maiolica (which of course relates to its own Middle-Eastern precedent)

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<sup>532</sup> For more on china and Aestheticism see particularly, Anne Anderson, "Fearful Consequences ... of Living up to One's Teapot: Men, Women and 'Cultchah' in the English Aesthetic Movement," in Edwards and Hart, *Rethinking the Interior*, 111-30.

Wedgwood, Minton, della Robbia, and even celadon or blue and white china of the Orient – reflected the decorative spirit of the Aesthetic movement itself: a movement that, like Robinson, prized the eclectic, yet careful, juxtapositioning of different colours and styles within the decorative whole.

Whilst most of the works produced by the Pottery included the “blue-green” trademark somewhere in the design, the colour and composition of the architectural wares more closely followed the della Robbia precedent than the domestic wares. This perhaps allowed for a closer visual association between the original Quattrocento works and the Pottery’s productions, boosting the legitimacy of the modern wares as an art form that could, like the work of its Renaissance predecessor, tastefully decorate modern buildings. Early architectural works at the Pottery included white figures (sometimes with yellow or brown hair and blue eyes) placed on a bright blue background, though not often with the characteristic della Robbia foliage border. This lack of foliage border paralleled the aesthetic with Flaxman’s Wedgwood designs of the previous century that had demonstrated such a successful combination of sculptor and potter. Indeed, Pater’s own original della Robbia reliefs, which he displayed in his rooms at Brasenose College, Oxford alongside a Wedgwood vase, were most likely in blue and white, forming part of a thoughtfully composed, blue, white and yellow Aesthetic interior. As an anonymous visitor to Pater’s rooms at Brasenose College recalled: “When you entered [Pater’s] rooms, draped in a delicate harmony of blue and yellow, filled with beautiful engravings and books, and with here and there a piece of della Robbia [sic] work of Florence, you seemed to have shut behind you



the door of the outer world.”<sup>533</sup> One of the many examples at the Della Robbia Pottery of the employment of white relief work on a blue background can be seen in a memorial portrait of William Morris made at the Pottery (1897, Williamson Art Gallery, Birkenhead [fig.114]).

In general, the relief of the Della Robbia Pottery wares is far lower than della Robbia’s own, closer to the extreme bas-relief, or *schacciato*, of Donatello (or Wedgwood) that Pater had found so ‘colourful.’ In the highly coloured works, this allowed for a more ‘painterly’ effect that confused the balance between colour and relief, and between sculpture and painting. In many of the works, the relieved edges where one colour meets another are less defined than the higher relief of the della Robbia originals. For example, a design by Ellen Mary Rope (a London-based sculptor who supplied various designs for the Pottery between 1895 and 1906),<sup>534</sup> entitled *Guardian Angel* (c.1895, Williamson Art Gallery, Birkenhead [fig.115]), is, like the portrait of Morris, rendered predominantly in a della Robbia-esque blue and white. However, the low relief and ‘shading’ effect produced by accents of blue-green and yellow in the relieved striations of the drapery gives a more painterly effect to the over all composition, confusing the limitations of the relieved surface and the colour. Where exactly does the actual three-dimensionality of the relief and the painted illusion of three-dimensionality begin and end? Equally, in Dressler’s *The Sower* and *The Reaper*, ‘colour,’ in its broader Paterian sense, is achieved through a combination of polychromy, depth

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<sup>533</sup> Anon, “A Note on Walter Pater. By one who knew him,” *The Bookman* 6 (September 1894): 173-5, quoted in Østermark-Johansen, “Relieving the Limitations of Sculpture and Text.” 31. Pater’s della Robbia panels at Brasenose may have been the same as those described in his home as “blue and white:” “In the Pater home were two lovely della Robbia plaques, blue and white, approx. 9” in diameter.” William Sharp, “Some Personal Reminiscences of Walter Pater,” *Atlantic Monthly* 74 (December 1894): 801 -14, quoted in *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>534</sup> Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 207.

of relief and surface texture. Unlike Rope's addition of pigmented 'shading' to create the illusion of more depth in the very low relief, Dressler's combination of high and low relief and grainy surface textures darkens or lightens the colours, which are otherwise applied in well-defined sections (blue for the drapery, white for skin, grey-brown for earth etc.). For example, it is the grainy, uneven texture of the relief that gives a darker, variable colour to the ploughed earth in *The Sower*, not merely the application of the pigment itself. Painting on ceramics was therefore not just concerned with juxtaposing the right colours, but about enhancing those colours using different levels of relief and surface texture. With a limited colour palette, other means of 'colouring' the works had to be found in the modelling. The two-dimensional illusory skills of the painter and the three-dimensional relief skills of the sculptor were therefore combined, reflecting that Paterian idea, quoted in Østermark-Johansen, of the "two-and-a-half dimensional" form between sculpture and painting, discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>535</sup>

Furthermore, this productive confusion between relief and colour, explored in Pater's description of early Florentine relief, makes for a very sensuous effect – one that invites the viewers to touch the relieved surface and, in doing so, to touch colour. Of course, the domestic nature of the Della Robbia Pottery wares allowed for this kind of tactile interaction and enhanced the sensuous effect: the sensation of touching the cool surfaces of the smooth, glazed relief echoes the cool whites and pale blues and greens being touched, whereas the rough, textured surfaces of *The Sower*, or the rough, unglazed surface of exposed terracotta, reflect the earthy 'feeling' of the browns, reds and yellows. Colour is therefore more than an optical

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<sup>535</sup> Østermark-Johansen, "Relieving the Limitations of Sculpture and Text," 27.

sensation or illusion in these works. It serves to enhance the tactility of the sculptural medium and the ceramic material. The combination of colour and texture, the visual and the tactile, within objects that could be handled in the privacy of one's own home (or, in the case of *The Sower* and the *The Reaper*, in the local library) promised a particular kind of intimacy with the artwork: the kind of intimacy and sensorial viewer interaction that Pater had praised in the Quattrocento originals.

### A Pre-Raphaelite Parallel

Rathbone's background in Pre-Raphaelite painting also had a lasting influence on the polychromy of the Della Robbia Pottery. Indeed, one could go so far as to consider the productions of the Della Robbia Pottery as a sculptural contributor to the late Pre-Raphaelite movement. Rathbone was so well connected to the Pre-Raphaelite circle in his early years that it is hard to imagine him not being inspired directly by their work. In particular, the Pre-Raphaelite technique of priming the canvas with white paint before applying colour to enhance the effect is similar to the bisque (biscuit) firing of majolica pottery, which dries and lightens the surface before application of the coloured glaze. Maiolica pottery is also dipped into a thin white slip to produce a brighter colour effect. At the Della Robbia Pottery, Rathbone also dipped his pre-fired clay into a white slip and left it to dry before bisque firing (sometimes a *sgraffito* design was etched into the white slip to reveal the red clay beneath [fig.116]). This gave the colourists, like the Pre-Raphaelite painters, a white surface to work on and produced more brilliant colours.

Furthermore, various other contemporary sculptors and painters – many of whom can be considered as part of the late Pre-Raphaelite movement - were also experimenting in polychrome low-relief in plaster or gesso, blurring the boundary between sculpture and painting and demonstrating a clear interest in della Robbia sculptural precedent and the tension between colour and relief. Such artists include George Frampton, whose *Music* (1894, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford [fig.117]) in painted plaster employs a similar composition in the arrangement of the trumpeters to that of della Robbia's *Cantoria* [fig.118]. The painter, Robert Anning Bell, who collaborated with Frampton on various architectural projects including the 1890 altarpiece at St. Clare's Church, Sefton Park, Liverpool [fig.119], also experimented in painting on white plaster relief (see *Mother and Children*, 1897, Location Unknown [fig.120]). Between 1894 and 1898, Bell taught painting at the School of Architecture and Applied Art in Liverpool and, during this time, made various designs for the Della Robbia Pottery company.<sup>536</sup> Alice Eden's 2012 article in the *Burlington Magazine*, "Robert Anning Bell in Liverpool, 1895-99" suggested that "Bell wrote that in the 1890s, rather than Paris, London or Boston, 'Liverpool was the real hub of the universe,' where many aspects of the decorative arts were rejuvenated."<sup>537</sup> Bell not only produced works in polychrome relief, but may also have borrowed the composition of della Robbia's *The Visitation* (c.1445, San Giovanni Fuoricivitas, Pistoia [fig.121]) in his painting of the same subject, *The Meeting of the Virgin and St. Elizabeth* (1910, Manchester City Art Gallery, Manchester [fig.122]). A plaster cast of the della Robbia sculpture had been accessible in the cast courts of the South

<sup>536</sup> See Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 147. Bell's designs are now untraceable but included "a figure of 'Ariadne,' [...] a 'Kissing' panel and a 'Sunset' panel, [...] and a 'Mother and Child' panel." *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>537</sup> Alice Eden, "Robert Anning Bell in Liverpool, 1895-99: the Arts and Crafts Movement and the Creation of Civic Culture," *Burlington Magazine* 154 (2012): 345.

Kensington Museum since 1883. One of the leading late Pre-Raphaelites, Burne-Jones, also employed *sgraffito* and painting on plaster in his work, such as *Perseus and the Graiae*, (1875-8, National Museum Cardiff [fig.123]).<sup>538</sup> Indeed, Burne-Jones's *Days of Creation* series of the late 1870s (the original oil designs for which are now at the Fogg Museum, Harvard [fig.124]) were translated into Della Robbia Pottery ware. Examples can be found at Llandaff Cathedral, Cardiff, the Potteries Museum, Stoke-on-Trent; and the Williamson Art Gallery, Birkenhead [fig.125]. The typically linear effect of Burne-Jones's drapery (and his complex, yet limited and harmonious, combination of colours) lends itself perfectly to the low relief and limited colour palette of the Pottery.<sup>539</sup> Looking at the ceramic panels, wherein the colours appear to incorporate the entire spectrum between yellow and blue, the painterly application of the colour, contrasted with the linear relief, almost gives the impression that the relief design has been carved out of the colour, rather than the other way around. It is both actual relief and the illusion of relief achieved through different gradations of blues, greens and yellows that provide the three-dimensionality. The composition certainly allows for such a harmonic relationship between the relief and the colour that one almost forgets the complete separation of these processes during construction. The *Days of Creation* panels are, therefore, an excellent example of the crossover between sculpture and painting. Like the Rope reliefs, it is difficult to determine where sculpting ends and painting begins.

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<sup>538</sup> For wider scholarship on Burne-Jones's work see, for example, Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008), 234-53; Arcot, *William Morris and Burne-Jones*; Anja Silke Gerritzen, "Edward Burne-Jones as Sculptor: His Gesso Pieces," *The British Art Journal* 6, no. 2 (Autumn 2005): 71-75; and David Peters Corbett, *Edward Burne-Jones* (London: Tate, 2004).

<sup>539</sup> The paintings were also translated into stained glass. See discussion of Burne-Jones' stained glass in Caroline Arcot, "Fractured Figures: the Sculptural Logic of Burne-Jones's Stained Glass," in Getsy, *Sculpture and the Pursuit of a Modern Ideal in Britain*, 39-62 and *William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacings* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008), 205-223.

## Dressler and the New Sculpture

Finally, I wish to consider why Dressler's architectural sculpture has not received the attention it deserves in its relationship to the New Sculpture movement. Dressler was educated at the National Art Training Schools, worked in a variety of materials according to neo-Florentine influence, exhibited at the Walker and had a particular interest in architectural ornamentation. He was, perhaps, a little too late to be acknowledged by the critic, Edmund Gosse, whose 1894 retrospective that gave the New Sculpture movement its name, occurred as Dressler was forming the Della Robbia Pottery. Dressler's larger, more public commissions would come some years later. There are no comprehensive biographies of the sculptor. Read's *Victorian Sculpture* only mentions Dressler in relation to his work on the exterior of St. George's Hall, Liverpool<sup>540</sup> whilst Beattie's *The New Sculpture* similarly glosses over his more prolific ceramic productions.<sup>541</sup> Yet, Dressler's colourful career as a 'sculptor-potter' is important in the comprehensive understanding of sculpture production in the late nineteenth century. Dressler is not well documented in his own time though it is clear that he was known within the art world: he had produced many high-profile bronze portrait busts, including Ruskin [fig.91] and Morris (1892, Art Worker's Guild, Queen's Square, London [fig.126]). His best-known works outside of the Della Robbia Pottery company are two carved relief panels on the exterior of St. George's Hall, Liverpool from c.1901, mentioned in Read and Beattie; *Liverpool Imports Cattle and Wool for Food and Clothing* and *Liverpool by its Imports Supplies the Country with Food and Corn* [figs.127, 128]. These works – which

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<sup>540</sup> Read, *Victorian Sculpture*, 331.

<sup>541</sup> Beattie, *The New Sculpture*, 241-2.

again reflect his interest in the more Realist subjects of pastoral labourers - formed part of the *National Prosperity* series of six panels depicting various Merseyside trades, executed by sculptors Thomas Stirling Lee, C. J. Allen alongside Dressler.<sup>542</sup>

Dressler's move from portrait sculpture to "the humble art of pottery" reflects the similar transition of the reinvented Luca della Robbia himself. Perhaps, in the same way that della Robbia had been neglected in the canon of Renaissance sculpture for turning his attentions to a more humble material, so too has Dressler been lost in the sculptural canon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: his ceramic works were neither definitively fine art sculpture nor studio pottery and thus his work has slipped between the interstices of sculptural and ceramic history. One reason for his omission in sculptural history must be that many of his larger sculptural works, made for outdoor, public spaces in ceramics, were destroyed in WWII. His largest commission was that of a 1900 fountain in 'della Robbia ware' that became the centerpiece of Newsham Park in Liverpool [fig.129]. The fountain, featuring large, winged hippocampi above a textured rockery or coral reef, was impressive enough to be featured on Liverpool postcards - now the only remaining records of the structure. From the postcards it is hard to tell whether the fountain is coloured at all but it appears to be predominantly white and the idea of 'colour' is instead given by the juxtaposition of contrasting textures: the grainy texture of the rockery beneath contrasts to the slick-looking scales of the sea-horses. Hyland states that the fountain was

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<sup>542</sup> See, Matthew Clough, *C. J. Allen 1862-1956: Sculptor and Teacher* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2005).

extensively damaged in WWII and “had gone by 1950.”<sup>543</sup> Similarly, a fountain designed by Dressler at the Pottery for the Savoy Hotel in London was destroyed during the war and surviving monochrome photographs give little away as to the extent of its polychromy (1889, Savoy Hotel, London (destroyed) [fig.130]). The fact that none of it was preserved (or even recorded) is perhaps a further indication of the low status afforded to Dressler and his polychrome, sculptural pottery in the mid-twentieth century.

In her brief description of Dressler’s work, Beattie suggested that “though much concerned with sculpture’s decorative possibilities and versatility, [Dressler] remained committed, like Benjamin Creswick, to a somewhat coarse realism which impeded his identification with the aims of Gilbert, Frampton, etc.”<sup>544</sup> She considered that Dressler and Creswick stood “on the periphery of the New Sculpture, [their] allegiance to Ruskinian realism constantly at odds with the aesthetic values represented by the works of Bates or Gilbert.”<sup>545</sup> The Sheffield artist, Benjamin Creswick, whose relief work in terracotta (see, for example, *Frieze*, 1887, Cutler’s Hall, Warwick Lane, London [fig.131]) is little known, was, like Dressler, highly influenced by Ruskin after a similar visit with the critic at Brantwood. But what does Beattie mean by ‘coarse’ or ‘Ruskinian’ realism? Is the word ‘coarse’ here being used in the similarly negative way in which Ruskin referred to the Pistoia hospital frieze as ‘barbaric’?<sup>546</sup> Sculptural realism and a ‘truth to Nature’ approach were important aspects of the New Sculpture

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<sup>543</sup> Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 115.

<sup>544</sup> Beattie, *The New Sculpture*, 242.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>546</sup> Indeed, Beattie continued her discussion of Dressler by borrowing the word “barbarous” from a contemporary description of Dressler’s work in *The Artist*, wherein the author, Fred Miller, suggested that Dressler “likes the barbarous in fact.”



movement and I would argue that there was room for ‘coarse realism’ amongst its experimental practitioners. The concept of realism, particularly in the works of Edward Onslow Ford and Hamo Thornycroft, two of the key figures of the New Sculpture movement according to Beattie, have since been discussed at length by Getsy in *Body Doubles* and “The Problem of Realism in Hamo Thornycroft’s 1885 Royal Academy Lecture.”<sup>547</sup> Perhaps it is the use of colour as “an unskillful contrivance to effect by borrowing from another art what nobler sculpture effects by strictly appropriate means,”<sup>548</sup> as Pater put it, as well as a focus on comparatively modern, realist subjects of labour that contribute to Beattie’s understanding of ‘coarseness.’ Nevertheless, an interesting crossover occurs here between Ruskin and Beattie’s mention of ‘barbarism’ and ‘coarseness’ that brings the work of Dressler and della Robbia (and Creswick) closer together. Indeed, surprisingly close visual and decorative parallels can be drawn between the Pistoia hospital frieze that Ruskin had attributed to della Robbia and described as ‘barbaric’ in 1845 and one of Dressler’s major commissions of the late century.

### Dressler, Medmenham and the Sunlight Chambers, Dublin

In 1896, Dressler left the Della Robbia Pottery after a prolonged argument with Rathbone and Manzoni. Dressler was a difficult character whose purist Arts and Crafts views on sourcing local materials (now so fashionable in the early twenty-first century) and emphasis on architectural sculpture over domestic wares were

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<sup>547</sup> Getsy, “Hard Realism: The Thanatic Corporeality of Edward Onslow Ford’s *Shelley Memorial*,” in *Body Doubles*, 119-143 and “The Problem of Realism in Hamo Thornycroft’s 1885 Royal Academy Lecture,” in *The Sixty-Ninth Volume of the Walpole Society* (London: Maney Publishing, 2007): 211- 225.

<sup>548</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance*, 42.

no longer financially or commercially practical.<sup>549</sup> Furthermore, he felt that he was unable to express himself as a sculptor as freely as he would have liked under Rathbone's production method at the Pottery. In March of 1896, he moved to Medmenham in Buckinghamshire, where he opened his own pottery, producing solely architectural works in the della Robbia style. In a trade catalogue, Dressler's Medmenham Pottery is described in the following manner:

The Medmenham Pottery was founded with the object of producing architectural pottery and tiles possessing individuality in design and execution. We have felt that in order to reach this aim we must place ourselves in conditions approximating those of the old potteries whose ware delighted and inspired us.<sup>550</sup>

It was clear from the aesthetic of Dressler's pottery that the 'old potteries' described related to the della Robbia family, though perhaps the association with the Birkenhead pottery would have been too close to mention the name directly. Dressler's pottery did not last long – indeed, it appears that Rathbone's outsourcing of materials and inclusion of domestic wares *was* necessary to sustain an otherwise architectural workshop and Dressler's purist ideology was just not financially viable.

One particularly high-profile commission that Dressler received at Medmenham was from Liverpool industrialist, Lord Lever, who employed Dressler in the 1901 exterior decoration of the Sunlight Soap offices in Parliament Street, Dublin [figs.132, 133]. It seems odd that Lever would not commission the Birkenhead

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<sup>549</sup> Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 176.

<sup>550</sup> Anon, *Medmenham Trade Catalogue* (undated), quoted in Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 173.

pottery to carry out the designs, being a more local business, but this perhaps suggests that the productions of the Architectural Department at the Pottery were considered to be of Dressler's creation, and that he took its reputation with him to Medmenham. Dressler's choice of decoration for the Sunlight Soap offices takes us back full circle to the Pistoia hospital frieze that Ruskin had expressed his dislike for in 1845, demonstrating just how far the polychrome reputation of the della Robbia had come since that time. Indeed, as we have seen, between 1880 and 1890, the South Kensington Museum purchased various polychrome casts of the Pistoia hospital frieze from the *École des Beaux Arts* [fig.135], which are still displayed in the Casts Courts today. Dressler's frieze for the Sunlight Soap offices is strikingly similar to the over all design of the original frieze in Pistoia, utilizing the same colour palette, depth of relief and composition [figs.133, 134]. The frieze depicts various colourful scenes on a deep blue background, punctuated by figures within relief columns decorated with blue and white arabesques. Dressler even includes della Robbia-esque roundels between the arches of the windows, echoing the design of those in Pistoia. Furthermore, as the original Pistoia frieze reflects the theme of health, relating to the hospital it decorates, so too does Dressler's frieze reflect the theme of washing and industry to denote its relationship to Sunlight Soap and Lever.<sup>551</sup> The sanitary connotations attached to ceramic decoration are again particularly pertinent here. The Dublin frieze was far more truthful to the della Robbia originals than the more painterly productions at the Della Robbia Pottery and reflect Dressler's more purist following of the della Robbia aesthetic. Not only is the work carried out in high relief with clear references to the Pistoia original, but the painterly effect made by mixing low

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<sup>551</sup> An interesting account of the soap industry and its relationship to Victorian domestic life and visual imagery can be found in Anne McLintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (London: Routledge, 1995).

relief and colour is no longer apparent. Instead, the colours are obviously separated, providing a more striking aesthetic when viewed at a distance from the ground. Indeed, one might argue that this less painterly attitude to colour enhances the impression of orderliness and cleanliness that was so important to both the institutions that the Pistoia frieze and Dressler's frieze adorned.

One of the few contemporary accounts of Dressler's work in *The Artist* was published during this commission and set Dressler up as a "sculptor-potter."<sup>552</sup> In the year following this account, Dressler proclaimed his occupation on the national census as a 'sculptor-potter,' rather than his previous title of 'sculptor.'<sup>553</sup> The author, Fred Miller, noted the della Robbia influence of Dressler's work at Medmenham and the similar difficulties that had to be overcome by the sculptor-potter to produce work of the same standard as that achieved by the original della Robbia family (although he did not make the connection with Pistoia). Suggesting that the Dublin frieze "has an opportunity of showing what the Medmenham Pottery is capable of," he described it as follows:

The frieze will be 150 feet long, and the section I have seen [...] is more than promising. The colouring is rightly very simple and consists of blue, green, brown and yellow on a rich white opaque glaze, as in the old Robbia ware. It is fired to a very high temperature, and, the body itself being excessively hard, we have a form of decoration that enhances the architecture, and is at the same time in no danger of deteriorating over time.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>552</sup> Fred Miller, "A Sculptor-Potter: Mr. Conrad Dressler," *The Artist* 26 (Jan 1900): 169.

<sup>553</sup> 'Conrad Gustave d'Huc Dressler', *Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851-1951* [Accessed 02 Aug 2014]

<sup>554</sup> Miller, "A Sculptor Potter," 176.

Here, finally, we have an example of the direct influence of Luca della Robbia's method employed upon nineteenth-century architecture for a British manufacturer. According to Hyland, the scarcity of such della Robbia-esque architectural decoration was down to the architects, "who on the whole preferred to use the tougher, unglazed or salt-glazed terracotta mouldings produced by such firms as Doulton, J. C. Edwards and Burmantofts."<sup>555</sup> I agree that this method would have proved cheaper for the public building project, which is perhaps why one finds most Della Robbia Pottery ware employed architecturally on the exterior and interiors of private houses and public institutions within Birkenhead itself.

Dressler's work has been neglected for a variety of reasons, but none perhaps so pertinent as the scarcity of large, public works and the intermediate nature of his status as a sculptor-potter. Indeed, large public works tend to be passed over in favour of ideal figures or smaller sculptures in discussions of the New Sculpture movement: key works such as the *Albert Memorial* (1872, Kensington Gardens, London [fig.136]) can only ever be viewed *in situ*.<sup>556</sup> Dressler is perhaps the true della Robbia of his era, turning his attention to "the humble art of pottery" to promote his ideas on art and sculpture and his experiments with polychromy through an easily distributable material. His ceramic work for the Della Robbia Pottery, along with the works of Rope, Rathbone and Manzoni, were exhibited alongside the New Sculptors and Pre-Raphaelites at the Walker but both originals and copies were sold for the decoration of private and public buildings. This further challenged the "line of distinction" between art and industry that Robinson promoted in his Italian sculpture collection many years previous but that, as in the

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<sup>555</sup> Hyland, *The Della Robbia Pottery*, 173.

<sup>556</sup> Although the recent *Sculpture Victorious* exhibition has sought to address and overcome this problem.

case of della Robbia, has meant subsequent disregard for Dressler. The Della Robbia Pottery, and Dressler in particular, were perhaps the most direct reflection of the della Robbia family's impact on Victorian sculptural and ceramic production. However, whilst the romantic idea of reviving architectural ceramic sculpture and the Renaissance workshop in the modern cityscape might have been justified in theory by the renewed interest in della Robbia, in practice the financial demands of the modern world were not compatible with the ideals and ambitions of the Pottery. Production was slow and prices had to remain high to reflect the craftsmanship involved. At the turn of the twentieth century, this was not a realistic position for a successful business to be in and the Pottery was forced to close in 1906.

In conclusion, this chapter has considered two case studies exploring the artistic interpretation of the della Robbia family and their new-found fame in the late nineteenth century. The fact that these case studies have not yet come under serious scrutiny by modern art historians suggests that they have fallen under the radar of sculptural and ceramic history. Personal taste may, once again, be to blame. Until very recently, it has been difficult to look at Minton majolica or Della Robbia Pottery and take it seriously enough to compare it to the more widely discussed, aesthetically and formally quieter productions of the New Sculptors or the early twentieth-century studio pottery of Bernard Leach, for example. We may prefer, as Ruskin did in 1845, to see through the colours to the forms beneath or to focus on the alternative productions by the same artists or industries that better suit our idea of taste: the white Parian ware figurines of Minton or Dressler's panels on St. George's Hall, for example. The colouring of

relief is still an issue of taste, over 100 years after it was initially addressed by the Victorians. But I argue that this ‘colour-blindness’ is unhelpful to Victorian sculpture studies, amongst other specialist areas. The serious study of the multi-coloured productions of late-nineteenth century sculptor-potters and artist-workers, has the capacity to inform a wide variety of specialist areas. Its Arts and Crafts context contributes to our understanding of nineteenth-century design reform (and its relation to industrial and social reform) and its resonance in twentieth-century Art Nouveau and beyond. Its hybridization of the sister arts of painting, sculpture and architecture challenges our ideas of the late Victorian definition of the term ‘sculpture,’ and its materials and functions, blurring the “line of distinction” between the fine and applied arts. It reintroduces early women artists and artisans such as Mary Seton Watts and Ellen Mary Rope, whose work is overshadowed by both their male contemporaries and female sculptors and ceramicists of the early-twentieth century such as Barbara Hepworth and Clarice Cliff. Furthermore, its links to contemporary Victorian scholarship and historic examples enhances our knowledge of the artistic, scholarly and cultural reception of the Italian Renaissance in the nineteenth century and beyond. There is much to be learned from the ceramic artists in the shadow of the ‘great masters’ of the period. Perhaps, we can learn from the efforts of Robinson, Perkins and Pater, who broadened their historical canon of the Renaissance to include previously neglected sculptors – such as Luca della Robbia - who did not fit into the traditionally accepted aesthetic. We too should broaden our own canon of the Victorian era to include the ‘della Robbias’ and forgotten names and works of the age, such as Dressler, as well as considering the extent to which the idea of

ceramic 'sculpture' can be applied to the industrial production of the age through companies such as Minton and the Della Robbia Pottery.



## CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the categorisation and reception of Italian sculpture at the early South Kensington Museum and the interstitial position that it occupied between the fine and decorative arts therein and beyond. The research makes an original contribution to Victorian sculpture studies, ceramics studies and interdisciplinary Renaissance and museum studies, by considering these fields from the perspective of the Museum's Italian sculpture collection and its nineteenth-century reception. In highlighting the South Kensington Museum as a significant space for the contextualisation of Italian Renaissance sculpture in the mid-Victorian period, I have explored contemporary attitudes towards the medium and, in doing so, have brought to light both textual and sculptural sources of the nineteenth century that have since been overlooked.

My research demonstrates that the Italian sculpture collection made a significant early contribution to the development of the V&A Museum and, in turn, the early Museum made an equally significant contribution to the Victorian reception of the Italian Renaissance. Italian sculpture's "two-fold" character, as both a fine and decorative art, made it the perfect choice for a Museum whose primary intention was the elevation, and subsequent improvement, of the applied arts. The great Italian masters, whose works were so revered in the Victorian period, were highlighted at the Museum for their dual status as "artist-craftsmen," which was therein promoted as a desirable precedent for the modern student at the National Art Training Schools to follow.

My research began with an extensive investigation of the archival material that allowed me to track the development of the Italian sculpture collection, and to explore how it was described and categorized at particularly important stages in the Museum's early history. Indeed, I have highlighted that Italian sculpture occupied several conceptual places within the Museum. It infiltrated the decorative arts collections under a variety of guises: namely, as excellent examples of metal working, sketch models or designs, ceramic relief comparable to Italian maiolica pottery and architectural ornament, with a constant, overarching emphasis on its dual position between the fine and the decorative. Furthermore, original texts produced by the Museum, most notably, Robinson's 1862 *Italian Sculpture* catalogue, highlighted sculpture's legitimate place therein, opening up serious scholarly debates concerning the accepted hierarchical status of Italian Renaissance sculpture to a wider, scholarly audience. My research into the acquisition of the Italian sculpture collection thus examined the nuanced Victorian understanding of the medium within the Museum's design reform context. The thesis therefore contributes to existing research concerned with the histories of the Museum and design reform in the nineteenth century, from the perspective of Italian sculpture, and, *vice-versa*, approaching Victorian Renaissance studies from a nineteenth-century museological, sculptural and design reform perspective, drawing these fields into closer association.

Italian sculpture's "two-fold" nature was also highlighted as part of its place within Robinson's pseudo-domestic display schemes at the Museum. My investigation has extended the research on the pseudo-domestic arrangements at

South Kensington, discussed in Whitehead and Conforti,<sup>557</sup> to more explicitly examine the role of Italian sculpture therein. For the first time, I have made detailed and critical analyses of the displays using photographs and previously neglected engravings for comparison. Aesthetic associations made between Italian sculptures and the objects with which they were juxtaposed at the Museum by Robinson, signalled a departure from Cole's more pragmatic approach to contrasting good and bad design. Robinson's displays served to promote the dual status of Italian Renaissance sculpture within the context of an eclectic assortment of decorative objects at the Museum, drawing the different arts together as a harmonic whole. The central group of Italian sculptures in Robinson's "Art Museum," for example, provided a conceptual and physical focus for the collection arranged around it – highlighting the centrality of the Renaissance "artist-craftsman" that the Museum wanted to promote as the "height" to which modern manufacture should aspire. Furthermore, the close juxtaposition of della Robbia sculpture and Italian maiolica provided a distinctive visual and material connection between the fine and decorative arts of the Renaissance period. In turn, the proximity of revered Italian sculpture and painting with modern, British manufactures, such as the Minton *Jardinière*, elevated the status of the latter by visual association, demonstrating the already successful realization of the Museum's influence on modern design. In focusing on the place of Italian sculpture within these displays, I have also explored the Victorian attitude towards the medium itself through the changing contexts in which it was arranged. The images of the display within Robinson's "Art Museum," whilst showing regular changes as exhibits were added or removed, remained constant over a number of

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<sup>557</sup> Whitehead, "Enjoyment for the Thousands," and Conforti, "The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts."

years in their privileging of the central figure of *David* and the Raphael copies, providing a consistent sense of reverence for the productions of these Renaissance “artist-craftsmen.”

The thesis has also explored the invention of Luca della Robbia in the nineteenth century, using the Quattrocento sculptor as a case study to investigate the contribution made by South Kensington to Victorian scholarship on the Renaissance. I have highlighted the collection and Robinson’s catalogues as significant contributors to the subsequent scholarship on the period, focusing on the increasingly popular revisions of della Robbia in later landmark texts by Pater, Perkins and Ruskin. Robinson’s catalogues, being descriptive early prototypes of the scholarly exhibition catalogue, repositioned the forgotten sculptors of the Quattrocento back into serious scholarship and into a, now broader, historical canon of Renaissance masters. As a further case study, I have focused on the development of Ruskin’s changing views towards della Robbia sculpture in the period, which began with a description of them as “signpost barbarisms” in 1845 and ended with his purchase of Andrea della Robbia’s *Adoration of the Christ-child* for the study at Brantwood in 1880. I have considered how Robinson’s catalogues described della Robbia in modern, Ruskinian terms that were carried through into subsequent serious discussions of the sculptor, which then found their way back to Ruskin himself. The present study therefore contributes original research to existing scholarship concerning the reception of the Renaissance in the nineteenth century, viewing it from the perspective of sculpture studies in the Victorian era. As mentioned in the introduction, whilst this area of study has often privileged literary sources such as texts by Vernon Lee, Pater, Ruskin and

Symonds, the Italian sculpture collection at South Kensington cannot be ignored as a tangible, sculptural resource that allowed scholars to experience the work of the great masters in London. Nor should Robinson's accompanying catalogues be considered as mere inventories of the collections. The abundance of the works of the della Robbia family in the South Kensington Museum, and Robinson's fervent promotion of them using the predominating, contemporary rhetoric of the day, have been argued here as a particular catalyst for the sculptor's rise to fame in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, it was not only in scholarship of the period that della Robbia enjoyed a reinvention. My research has also considered the nineteenth-century sculptural and artistic responses to the work of the Quattrocento sculptor, opening up questions concerning our modern neglect of the "della Robbias" of the Victorian age. I have demonstrated how ceramic sculpture of Victorian Britain challenges our traditional view of nineteenth-century sculpture through its material, subject matter, decorative application, polychromy and industrial methods of manufacture. From architectural projects such as the *Ceramic Staircase* at the South Kensington Museum, to the polychrome architectural reliefs of Dressler and Rope at the Della Robbia Pottery and beyond, ceramic sculpture was widely recognized as a legitimate art of the period. To date, Victorian ceramic sculpture has been considered *infra dig.* to sculpture historians and has rarely been taken seriously by the leading commentators on the period. As discussed in the introduction, it is not until we reach early-twentieth-century studio pottery that ceramic production is discussed in relation to the art of sculpture. For the first time, my research has considered British sculpture of the late-nineteenth century

from the perspective of ceramics, highlighting its significant contribution to Victorian sculpture studies, and beyond. In particular, the thesis has examined Minton's *Ceramic Staircase* at the South Kensington Museum and its intimate connection to the ceramic, della Robbia relief sculpture that could be found in abundance within the Museum itself. I have also focused on the late-nineteenth-century architectural relief work of Dressler at the Della Robbia Pottery, Birkenhead and his neglected position as the New Sculpture's "della Robbia" of the Victorian era.

The late-eighteenth-century relationship between Wedgwood and Flaxman, as well as Victorian sculptor John Bell's designs for parian ware, are both relatively well-known examples of the collaboration between sculptor and ceramic manufacturer. However, the two case studies are rarely brought into relation, and the later majolica sculptures or projects, such as the *Ceramic Staircase*, produced by Minton and Doulton have been overlooked. These include fountains, architectural relief projects and figurative sculpture that can significantly contribute to our modern discussions of public sculpture in the Victorian period, as well as our understanding of the relationship between sculpture and manufacture within industrial Britain. To extend the study I have made of Minton's response to della Robbia relief, further research on the 'industrial' ceramic reception of Quattrocento sculpture would return these later sculptures to centre stage. These ceramic projects can be positioned amidst their "fine art" contemporaries and within Victorian discussions of the relationship between sculpture, industry and design reform, whilst also addressing the subject of Anglo-French cultural competition.

Furthermore, the research could be extended to deal with the large number of sculptors working outside of the Potteries who employed ceramics in their work. This type of ceramic sculpture offers a novel perspective for approaching the slightly more substantial research into Victorian relief, an area highlighted by Penelope Curtis' and Martina Droth's 2004 *Depth of Field* exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute. In addition, whilst Victorian attitudes towards polychromy have been often discussed, thanks to exhibitions such as *The Colour of Sculpture 1840-1910* (1996-7) and the conference, *Polychromy and its Environments* (2012), at the Henry Moore Institute, there have been few investigations that deal directly with the relationship between relief and colour in ceramics. As the thesis has argued, polychromy in Victorian ceramic sculpture was justified thanks to the widespread popularity of original Italian maiolica pottery and della Robbia ware, a vast collection of which endures at the V&A Museum. The ceramic approaches to the combination of colour and relief that my research has highlighted in the work of Dressler, could be furthered to include other ceramic sculptors of the period such as Ellen Mary Rope, Carlo Manzoni, Mary Seton Watts, George Frampton and W. S. Frith, amongst others. My work on Dressler has focused on the plastic and illusory capacity of painted and 'painterly' ceramic works of the late-nineteenth century in the contexts of the Arts and Crafts movement, Aestheticism, late Pre-Raphaelitism and the New Sculpture. In so doing, the project demonstrates how viewing sculpture from a ceramic perspective further blurs the rigid typological histories of these movements, challenging traditional artistic divisions and hierarchies between sculpture, architecture, painting and the decorative arts. Future research in this area would highlight the close relationship

between sculpture and ceramics in the nineteenth century, offering a major revisionary account of sculpture of the period, and drawing sculpture and ceramics studies closer together.

The thesis has therefore made an original contribution to the field of Victorian sculpture studies, ceramics studies, histories of the South Kensington Museum and the Victorian reception of the Italian Renaissance. Furthermore, as mentioned in conclusion to the final chapter, the serious study of the multi-coloured productions of late-nineteenth century ceramic sculptors has the capacity to inform a wide variety of specialist areas. Its hybridization of sculpture, painting, architecture and the decorative arts, like the South Kensington collections themselves, challenges our ideas of the late Victorian understanding of ‘sculpture’ as a generic category and makes us question the traditional materials and functions with which it is associated. Robinson, Perkins, Ruskin and Pater broadened their historical canon of the Renaissance to include previously neglected sculptors, such as della Robbia, who did not fit into the traditionally accepted aesthetic. Our own modern canon of Victorian sculptors should follow their lead, revising the forgotten names and “della Robbias” of the nineteenth century, whom, as the Italian collection at South Kensington can attest to, can enlighten and broaden our own modern perception of their art.



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