



Bust of Saint John the Baptist as a Child

Date

late 15th to early 16th century

Primary Maker

Andrea della Robbia

Medium

terracotta and glaze

Description

These approximately life-size busts of Christ and John the Baptist are mirror images of one another, except for minor differences of costume and coloration. Created as a pair, they were displayed in a private chapel of wealthy Tuscan home to serve as inspiration for personal

devotions and moral instruction. In his treatise on the family, the Dominican Cardinal Giovanni Dominici (died 1419) recommended that young mothers adorn their houses with pictures and statues of the young Jesus and the Baptist as models for the children. Christ's virtues were infinite, whereas the Baptist (who was also the patron saint of Florence) was considered exemplar of self-control and humility. The notion of creating a portrait likeness of a saint evolved out of the tradition of medieval reliquaries, in which the bust served as the container for a relic. The 15th century Florentine vogue for bust portraits of Christ and the Baptist as young children was initiated by the talented marble sculptor, Desiderio da Settignano (1428-1464). Although they are clearly indebted to Desiderio's innovative imagery, in physical appearance and material the two busts more closely resemble the work of Andrea della Robbia (1435-1525), who inherited a flourishing sculptural workshop from his uncle Luca (1400-1482). Luca introduced the technique for applying various colors of glazes to pottery figures, but it was Andrea who popularized polychrome glazed terracotta as a vehicle for mass-produced religious sculpture. The two busts may be commercial products of Andrea's late workshop, but it is also possible that they were produced by another Florentine shop that had its productions glazed by the Della Robbia.

Dimensions

Overall: 8 × 15 3/4 × 50 in. (20.3 × 40 × 127 cm)