European Terracotta Sculpture

from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections

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Sculptors have long favored terracotta, or fired clay. Inexpensive, plentiful, neutral, adaptable, clay has much to recommend it as a basic material in sculptural practice. A sculptor’s first thoughts for a new project, whatever medium chosen for the final execution, often manifest themselves in clay, which can be quickly shaped into a rough sketch. While the clay is still damp, changes that would be cumbersome or impossible in materials like wood or stone can easily be made. A clay modeler need not worry about hidden knots in wood or discolored veins in marble that can ruin carving in those media. With a few tools, such as wooden spatulas (ébauchoirs) and damp cloths, a sculptor can also create clay objects so precise and delicate as to rival carvings in finer and costlier materials.

Such properties make clay a studio staple, and others further enhance its value. While Renaissance artists often used wax for their sketches because it is easier to manipulate than clay, is cleaner, and does not dry out and crack during modeling, wax cannot be strengthened by firing and is generally too fragile or brittle to survive for long. Thus, when faced with the prospect of selling durable studio models to collectors, sculptors turned to clay. Clay can also be pressed into molds for production in editions. In the Renaissance this property was exploited by the studio of Luca della Robbia to create numerous popular religious icons that would be affordable to those with moderate incomes. Nineteenth-century sculptors revived this practice to mass produce sculpture. Finally, while the rose, yellow, or gray tones of the natural state have great appeal, clay surfaces accept various coatings. The artist can add brightly colored glazes, a slip (clay mixed with water) to soften the surface, or paint to make the object look like costly bronze or marble.

Drawing collections flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the immediacy and spontaneity of the medium, involvement with the “hand” of the artist, and proximity to the creative act became increasingly appealing to patrons. The same factors led to an interest in collecting works in terracotta. While in the seventeenth century these works were most often appreciated and collected by other artists, such as the French sculptor François Girardon, by the eighteenth century connoisseurs, including drawings expert Pierre Jean Mariette, began to line their shelves with objects of fired clay. In response to demand from such established collectors as Catherine the Great, Clodion virtually abandoned marble carving in order to specialize in highly finished terracotta statuettes (nos.19 and 20).

By the end of the eighteenth century, terracotta became less a means to an end (that is, a study for a bronze or marble sculpture) than the end itself. Despite the eighteenth-century love of refinement, craftsmanship, and costly materials, sculptures fashioned in clay became highly esteemed. Vivacious modeling appealed to Rococo tastes. The scale of terracotta works, kept small by the size of the kiln in which they must be fired and the tendency of large clay objects to crack under heat, was appropriate to the intimate rooms inhabited by the aristocrats of that period. The discovery of Etruscan terracottas in Italy added the authority of antiquity to the contemporary vogue. Above all, the contrast between the natural quality of terracotta and the sophistication of porcelain, ormolu, and other decorative arts contributed to its popularity with collectors. A similar impulse led Marie Antoinette to retreat occasionally from the splendors of Versailles to her “shepherd’s cottage,” the Petit Hameau, to refresh herself in rustic surroundings.

Such shifts in taste contributed to the way in which the finish of a sculpture was considered.
Contemporary viewers could enjoy the abbreviations of eighteenth-century sculptor Vasse (no. 17), which were personal notations in a three-dimensional shorthand, as long as such works were considered models; but his final work was expected to be, and was, polished to perfection. In the nineteenth century, artists and collectors began to prize the “unfinished” surfaces of terracotta. The rough, puckered surfaces of Carpeaux’s models (no. 28) were preserved in terracotta or plaster editions. Rodin not only accepted but exploited such surfaces in his “finished” commissions (no. 31). When seen through twentieth-century eyes, the scarred surfaces of Martini’s models (nos. 33 and 34) appear to be the final intention of the artist; and in fact, his full-scale bronze sculpture retains such crudeness. Terracottas readily appeal to contemporary sensibilities conditioned to accept the raw as well as the highly finished; we need to be reminded that acceptance of these works in earlier centuries was more problematic, less assured, than today.

This selection from the Sackler Collection reflects the development of these changes in the popularity and function of terracotta. The two earliest works (nos. 1 and 2) are notable for a high degree of realism. The keenly sorrowful expressions of such believable devotional images were intended to stir the emotions of the faithful. The Po river region, where the first terracotta figures in the exhibition were made, is rich in fine river clay and poor in marble quarries, which has promoted the use of the former. The seventeenth-century sculptor Alessandro Algardi, a native of that region, continued his practice of making terracotta models after moving from Bologna to Rome. His lyrical Torso of Christ (no. 5) is probably a study for a large composition, while his Saint John the Baptist (no. 6) is a same-size model for a group cast in bronze and in silver. In Rome during this period, terracotta was signed to the lower ranks of sculptural media. Algardi’s critics claimed that he was more a modeler than a carver, implying that he was deficient in the “major” media. Eventually, his work in marble silenced his detractors. Algardi’s terracotta models were prized by other sculptors, however, and his influence is felt in several Baroque works in this exhibition. The sweet expression and graceful musculature of Christ in Giuseppe Mazzuoli’s Lamentation (no. 9), for instance, owe as much to Algardi as to Gian Lorenzo Bernini. This relief is a finished work, formerly installed in the chapel of Montegufoni in Tuscany. Complexity of Baroque relief reached its peak in works like Soldani-Benzoni’s Apotheosis of Grand Master Fra Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (no. 16). While it is as highly finished as Mazzuoli’s relief, this work was intended by the master medalist as a model to be cast in bronze; but the patron left this project unfulfilled.

Baroque terracottas were often multi-figured compositions. Mazza’s David Triumphant Over Goliath (no. 14), an adroit blend of beauty and violence, is typical of Bolognese terracotta around 1700. This piece inspired a work by Giovanni Battista Foggini on the same theme, which was, in turn, the model for a porcelain edition. Terracotta sculptures were often the progenitors of eighteenth-century decorative arts, such as Doccia porcelain in Italy, Sèvres in France, and Meissen in Germany. Cornachini’s Continence of Scipio (no. 13), composed of five interlocking parts, demonstrates the increasingly elaborate nature of such groups during this period. Flemish sculptors, such as Pierre Denis Plumière (no. 12) or Jan Baptiste van der Haegen (no. 15), learned the principals of composing figural groups from Italian artists. The rounded and fleshy forms of their figures, characteristic of the painter Peter Paul Rubens, are perfectly adapted to terracotta.

French sculptors dominated the medium by the
end of the eighteenth century. Clodion's exquisite terracotta statuettes (nos. 19 and 20) captivated Rococo collectors. In his suite, Neoclassical sculptors, such as Simon Louis Boizot (no. 22) and Joseph Chinard (no. 23), perfected his smooth, sensuous surfaces. French artists also adopted the medium for the portrait bust, enlivening this formal type with the vivacity of touch possible in terracotta. Pajou, in his Bust of Corbin de Cordet de Florensac (no. 24), achieves a sense of motion and captures the sitter's alert gaze with the flicker of a modeling tool through the hair and incisions in the pupils. Such Rococo portrait conventions were revived in the nineteenth century by Carrier-Belleuse (no. 29).

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century sculptors flaunted the rugged surfaces of worked clay. The brooding power of Rodin's Titans (no. 31) is emphasized by the retention of the scumbled surfaces and blocky musculature of the figures in their adaptation to the form of a vase. Jagged, seemingly random gouges in Vallmitjana's Wounded Bullfighter (no. 30) underline the violence of the subject. The deliberate roughness of Martini's figural studies expresses barely containable energy (no. 33).

Changing attitudes toward terracotta over the six centuries represented in this exhibition are representative of similar developments throughout the visual arts. One is the shift in attitude toward the medium; it is less important to us today what materials are used by the artist than how they are manipulated. Another is our desire to see the traces of the artist's encounter with the medium—our interest in the process of creation as well as the finished product. These beautiful studies and finished works amply demonstrate the role of terracotta in the development of sculpture from the Renaissance to the twentieth century.

This exhibition has been selected from over one hundred examples in the Arthur M. Sackler collections. In 1981-82 a larger exhibition of these holdings circulated to The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Fogg Museum, Boston. It is a great pity that Dr. Sackler's death last May prevented him from the pleasure of seeing his objects in this and other exhibitions from his collections presented this year. We are most grateful to the Sackler Foundation for continuing with plans for this show at such a difficult time and for its generous support for this project. Dr. Lois Katz, Administrator of the Sackler Foundation, has provided invaluable advice and assistance.

Ian Wardropper
Associate Curator
European Decorative Arts and Sculpture
Checklist for the Exhibition

"Cat" refers to Charles Avery.

Dimensions are given as follows: height before width (or diameter) before length before depth.

1. Circle of Guido Mazzoni, Italian, active 1473-1518, The Man of Sorrows, 1475/1500, Polychromed terracotta bust H. 16 1/2 in. (41.9 cm) Cat. 1

2. Attributed to Andrea Ferrucci Italian, 1465-1526 Saint Jerome, c. 1480/1500 Terracotta statuette H. 22 in. (56 cm) Cat. 7

3. Jacopo del Duca Italian, c. 1520-after 1592 The Deposition of Christ, c. 1565 Terracotta relief H. 11 in. (28 cm); W. 8 1/2 in. (21.5 cm) Cat. 14

4. Circle of Germain Pilon French, 1528-1590 Dead Christ, c. 1570 Terracotta figure with remains of gesso H. 33 in. (83.8 cm) Cat. 67

5. Alessandro Algardi Italian, 1598-1654 Torso of the Resurrected Christ, c. 1650 Terracotta model with plaster repairs H. 20 1/4 in. (51.4 cm) Cat. 17

6. Alessandro Algardi Italian, 1598-1654 Saint John the Baptist, c. 1540/1550 Terracotta model H. 16 1/2 in. (41.9 cm) Cat. 18

7. Circle of Artus Quellinus the Elder Flemish, 1609-1668 Tarquin and Lucretia, c. 1650 Terracotta statuette H. 13 5/8 in. (34.6 cm) Cat. 106

8. Pietro Papaleo Italian, c. 1642-1718 Saint Luke, c. 1700 Terracotta model H. 19 1/2 in. (49.5 cm) Cat. 53

9. Giuseppe Mazzuoli Italian, 1644-1725 Lamentation, c. 1695 Terracotta relief H. 54 in. (137.2 cm); W. 51 in. (130.8 cm) Cat. 21

10. Netherlandish Hercules, c. 1700 Terracotta model H. 18 5/8 in. (46.9 cm) Cat. 110

11. Circle of Jan Claudius de Cock Flemish, 1667-1735 Crying Boy, 1675/1725 Terracotta bust H. 16 in. (40.6 cm) Cat. 111

12. Attributed to Pierre Denis Plumière Flemish, 1688-1721 Father Time Carrying Off a Dead Infant, c. 1710/1720 Terracotta model with wooden wings and repairs H. 20 7/8 in. (53 cm) Cat. 114

13. Attributed to Agostino Cornacchini Italian, 1586-1754 The Confinence of Scipio, c. 1700/1710 Terracotta on contemporary gilted wood stand H. 19 1/2 in. (49.5 cm); W. 17 1/4 in. (43.9 cm); D. 13 1/2 in. (34.3 cm) Cat. 37

14. Giuseppe Maria Mazza Italian, 1653-1741 David Triumphant over Goliath, c. 1675/1725 Terracotta statuette H. 18 3/4 in. (47.6 cm) Cat. 39

15. Jan Baptiste Van der Haegen Flemish, 1688-1740 Saint Joseph Holding the Christ Child, c. 1723 Terracotta statuette H. 19 3/4 in. (50.1 cm) Cat. 109

16. Massimiliano Soldani-Benzi Italian, 1656-1740 The Apotheosis of Grand Master Fra Antonio Manoel deVilhena, c. 1727/1729 Terracotta relief H. 23 1/2 in. (59.7 cm); W. 14 7/8 in. (37.8 cm) Cat. 34

17. Louis Claude Vasse French, 1716-1772 Mourning Woman and Putto, c. 1750/1760 Terracotta sketch-model H. 7 15/16 in. (20.2 cm) Cat. 73

18. Claude Michel, called Clodion French, 1738-1814 Satyr Terracotta H. 15 3/8 in. (39.2 cm); W. 5 in. (12.7 cm) D. 7 1/2 in. (19 cm) Not in Cat. Collection Jill Sackler
19. and 20. Claude Michel, called Clodion
French, 1738-1814
Vestal Bearing Wreaths on a Platter and Vestal Holding Sacred Vessels, c. 1765/1770
Terracotta statuettes
Cat. 81. H. 16 1/2 in. (41.9 cm);
Cat. 82. H. 16 3/4 in. (42.6 cm)

21. Joseph Nollekens
English, 1737-1823
Paetus and Arria, c. 1770
Terracotta sketch-model
H. 7 3/8 in. (18.7 cm)
Cat. 115

22. Simon Louis Boizot
French, 1743 - 1809
Bust of a High Priest, c. 1774
Terracotta bust
H. 6 3/4 in. (17.1 cm)
Cat. 84

23. Joseph Chinard
French, 1756-1813
Phryne Emerging from Her Bath, c. 1787
Terracotta statue
H. 28 1/8 in. (71.4 cm)
Cat. 87

24. Augustin Pajou
French, 1730-1809
Bust of Corbin de Cordet de Florensac, c. 1792/1794
Terracotta bust
H. 21 1/4 in. (54 cm)
Cat. 80

25. Joseph Chinard
French, 1756-1813
Sappho and Phaon, c. 1800/1810
Terracotta sketch-model
H. 6 1/4 in. (15.8 cm)
Cat. 90

26. Italian (Florentine)
Sketch-Model for a Wall Monument with a Figure of Charity, c. 1850
Terracotta model
H. 13 5/8 in. (34.6 cm); W. 8 3/4 in. (22.2 cm)
Cat. 54

27. Italian (Florentine)
Sketch-Model for a Wall Monument with a Male Portrait Bust, c. 1850
Terracotta model
H. 13 5/16 in. (33.8 cm); W. 7 7/8 in. (20 cm)
Cat. 55

28. Jean Baptiste Carpeaux
French, 1827-1875
Flora Kneeling, c. 1863
Terracotta model
H. 8 1/2 in. (21.6 cm)
Cat. 96

29. Albert Ernest Carrier-Belleuse
French, 1824-1887
Colombe (Dove), c. 1870
Terracotta bust
H. 25 5/8 in. (65.1 cm)
Cat. 98

30. Venancio Vallmitjana
Spanish, 1830-1919
Wounded Bullfighter, c. 1875/1880
Terracotta model
L. 14 in. (35.5 cm)
Cat. 117

31. Auguste Rodin
French, 1840-1917
Vase of Titans, c. 1880
Cast terracotta vase
H. 15 3/4 in. (40 cm)
Cat. 99

32. Mieczyslaw Leon Zaswiejski
Polish, 1856-1933
The Lookout: The Peoples’ Gazette, 1884
Terracotta relief
H. 10 1/2 in. (26.7 cm); W. 9 3/16 in. (23.3 cm)
Cat. 66

33. Arturo Martini
Italian, 1889-1947
Horse-Tamer, c. 1900/1925
Terra-cruda (unfired clay) figure
H. 9 3/16 in. (23.4 cm)
Cat. 64

34. Arturo Martini
Italian, 1889-1947
Girl Kneeling and Dressing Her Hair, c. 1900/1925
Terra-cruda (unfired clay) figure
H. 10 1/8 in. (25.7 cm)
Cat. 60

35. Albert Ernest Carrier-Belleuse
French, 1824-1887
Venus and Cupid, c. 1870/1875
Terracotta
H. 15 3/4 in. (40 cm); D. 6 in. (15.2 cm);
W. 7 1/2 in. (19 cm)
Not in cat.
Collection Jill Sackler