

Giannotti, Alessandra.

Sculture in terracotta. Devozione nella casa fiorentina del Rinascimento.

Bibliotheca dell'“Archivum Romanicum”. Serie I: Storia, Letteratura, Paleografia 516. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2021. Pp. 110 + 50 col. ill. ISBN 978-8-8222-6777-1 (paperback) €30.

This compact study focuses on a collection of eight Cinquecento glazed terracotta sculptures in the Villa La Pietra outside Florence, purchased at the turn of the twentieth century by Arthur Acton and his wife and partner, Hortense Mitchell. Alessandra Giannotti, associate professor of art history at the Università per stranieri in Siena, addresses with care these lovely sculptures as both independent artworks that deserve separate attention and as component parts of a larger genre that speak more broadly to various interests. Illustrated with evocative colour photographs and thoroughly annotated with footnotes that rival in length and content the actual text, this welcome addition to the growing list of art historical examinations of the practice of art making, art buying, and art collecting offers to readers a vivid glimpse into the homes of early modern viewers of devotional sculpture.

The text is partitioned into three brief chapters. The first places the octet of objects in the context of the drive by Anglo-American collectors to obtain Italian artworks during the decades immediately following the Papal Treaty of 1870 and the nation's final unification. Giannotti connects the interests of a handful of eager collectors like Herbert Horne and Charles Loeser to those of Hortense Mitchell, Chicago banking heiress, and her husband Arthur Acton, the British painter and art dealer, both of whom resided in a Renaissance villa at the foot of the hills below the town of Fiesole (that is now operated as a study abroad centre by New York University). The interests of Mitchell and Acton in both Renaissance imagery and the study of quotidian history merge in this chapter to explain their motives for buying painted ceramic figures that, they knew, would never be mistaken for monumental masterpieces of the era but which probably reflected the common interests of “middle-class” Florentines much more accurately than did the major landmarks that by then had been identified as part of the art historical canon.

The book's second chapter places the genre of glazed terracotta sculptures in their Cinquecento contexts. Giannotti first addresses the obvious issue of artistic quotations, noting how the makers of these works looked quite

closely at extant works that had been recently produced to much fanfare by Donatello, Verrocchio, Antonio Pollaiuolo, and the della Robbia family. The accompanying illustrations readily support the claim that the makers of these ceramic images played on the desire of potential buyers to possess in some way a representation of a famous artwork. Alerting readers to the importance placed by contemporary worshippers on the possession of domestic devotional images, Giannotti describes both the types of objects prized by common people of the day and the places in the home where they may have been seen. Unlike two-dimensional paintings that could be placed discretely on walls at nearly any level, the challenges of siting three-dimensional sculptures in private dwellings limited the options available to owners who wished to display them in ways that both enhanced their appearance and satisfied the functional requirements for performances of personal piety. Bedrooms and studies, we learn, were the most common locations for these sculptures, and Giannotti does a good job of helping us understand how, where, and why they would have been encountered and interpreted.

The third chapter presents in catalogue format the eight glazed terracotta sculptures in the Acton Collection of the Villa La Pietra. In addition to a recitation of dimensions, materials, and provenance, these short entries provide brief reviews of the histories of each object, or at least as much as can be gleaned from the few records that have survived. Comparative illustrations help to place them in the broader context of the genre's development during the sixteenth century.

The author does a commendable job of moving directly and efficiently through her material. Whereas the book's central text can be consumed in a single sitting, the extensive citations contain important commentaries on historiographic issues that will occupy at greater length the attention of specialists who wish to trace Giannotti's scholarly footsteps. One might argue that the first two chapters could be switched so that the context of the objects' production precedes that of their modern collectors, but the current organization does make sense in this reviewer's opinion. Less satisfying is the omission—until page 24—of the fact that the eight terracotta sculptures under consideration all emanate from the same permanent collection in the Villa La Pietra. This basic information is presented neither in the book's title, cover abstract, nor introduction, leaving the reader to wonder what and where these objects may be found for much too long. Once this detail has been established,

however, the approach, analysis, and presentation of materials create a satisfying, albeit abbreviated, view of the making, buying, and collecting of early modern popular devotional images. The author and her editors at Leo S. Olschki are to be commended for this elegant and informative contribution to the field.

GEORGE R. BENT

Washington and Lee University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39781>