Donatello’s Terracotta Louvre Madonna: A Consideration of Structure and Meaning

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

Sandra E. Russell
May 2015

© 2015 Sandra E. Russell. All Rights Reserved.
This thesis titled
Donatello’s Terracotta Louvre Madonna: A Consideration of Structure and Meaning

by

SANDRA E. RUSSELL

has been approved for
the School of Art + Design
and the College of Fine Arts by

Marilyn Bradshaw
Professor of Art History

Margaret Kennedy-Dygas
Dean, College of Fine Arts
Abstract

Donatello’s Terracotta Louvre Madonna: A Consideration of Structure and Meaning

A large relief at the Musée du Louvre, Paris (R.F. 353), is one of several examples of the Madonna and Child in terracotta now widely accepted as by Donatello (c. 1386-1466). A medium commonly used in antiquity, terracotta fell out of favor until the Quattrocento, when central Italian artists became reacquainted with it. Terracotta was cheap and versatile, and sculptors discovered that it was useful for a range of purposes, including modeling larger works, making life casts, and molding. Reliefs of the half-length image of the Madonna and Child became a particularly popular theme in terracotta, suitable for domestic use or installation in small chapels.

Donatello’s Louvre Madonna presents this theme in a variation unusual in both its form and its approach. In order to better understand the structure and the meaning of this work, I undertook to make some clay works similar to or suggestive of it. This research allowed me some insight into the way this deep relief is constructed and led me to consider the possible physical context and function of the work. Considering the material aspects of the Louvre Madonna led me to see how the compositional focus on the veil and the specificity Donatello gave it suggest that this object is central to the meaning of the relief.
Dedication

To the people who believed in me, and to the ghost of Donatello and his minions.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the late Fred V. Glover (bronze sculptor) for his twinkling humor, serious labor, and commitment to the ephemeral joy and beauty of life. He was a true artist in every sense of the word. He was my employer, my teacher and my friend. I would also like to acknowledge the care, and constancy of Marilyn Bradshaw. Without her encouragement, guidance and good example I would not know Italian Art, I would think the "Renaissance" was the name of a car. I really can't express adequately the huge benefit these persons have made to my life. I often reflect on words they have said, and would not have written this paper without the wealth of those reflections.
Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terracotta Casting</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Research Experiments: the Terracotta Bust</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Experiments: Shallow Relief</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Experiments: the Life Cast</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Mother and Child in Donatello's Louvre Madonna</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: The Veil in Donatello’s Louvre Madonna</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Conclusion: Donatello's Riddle</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1. Donatello, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1440-45, polychromed terracotta, 40 x 28 in, Musée du Louvre, Paris. .................................................................41

Figure 2. Author's watercolor sketch after the Louvre Madonna (May 2013). .................42

Figure 3. Photo (c. 1903) of the Louvre Madonna, here attributed to an anonymous fifteenth-century Italian artist. .................................................................43

Figure 4. Donatello. *Niccolò da Uzzano*, c. 1425-30, polychromed terracotta, 18 x 17.4 in, Museo del Bargello, Florence. .................................................................44

Figure 5. Circle of Giovanni di Turino, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1430, polychromed terracotta, 26.3 x 18 in, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. .........................45

Figure 6. Bust of woman made with rough clay dug from Central Ohio hillside, approximately 1 foot high.................................................................46

Figure 7. Florentine school, *Madonna and Child*, painted and gilded terracotta with wood backing, 40.4 x 24.5 x 11.1 in, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. ...47

Figure 8. Shallow relief after the Louvre Madonna.................................................................48

Figure 9. Donatello, *St. George Fighting the Dragon*, marble, c. 1415-17, 1 ft 3.3 in x 3 ft 11.3 in, originally Orsanmichele, now Museo del Bargello, Florence. ...49

Figure 10. Donatello, Louvre Madonna, photograph from side showing depth of relief. 50

Figure 11. Luca della Robbia, *Madonna del Roseto*, 1450-55, glazed terracotta, 32 x 25 in, Museo del Bargello, Florence. .................................................................51

Figure 12. Follower of Andrea del Verrocchio, *Madonna and Child*, 15th century, painted and partially gilt terracotta, 30.5 x 23 inches, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 51

Figure 13. Plasticine molded over plastic skull. .................................................................52

Figure 14. Top: Four layers of plaster-soaked bandages make a face mold. Below: After mold has dried, coat interior with additional grease........................................53

Figure 15. Wax cast from plaster mold. Top: Trimmed. Below: Beveled..............................54
Figure 16. Top: Wax cast with cloth veil and plate halo to model possible assembly of original. Below: Clay mask over brick core. The gap is plainly visible ..............................................55

Figure 17. Top: Clay cast with clay added to repair gap of second eye. Bottom left: Detail of Louvre Madonna, lightened to show location of second eye. Bottom right: Drawing of side view. .................................................................................56

Figure 18. Top: A bust placed into receptive material (sawdust, in this simulation) makes a cast at an angle. Below: Diagram illustrating a method of casting a face at an angle. Red indicates the area that is to be cast. .................................................................................57

Figure 19. Drawing that demonstrates where the background clay moves or curves to meet the raised portions of the relief.................................................................58

Figure 20. Donatello, *Borromeo Madonna*, c. 1450, terracotta, 32.9 x 20.5 in, Kimball Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas ..........................................................59

Figure 21. Jacopo della Quercia, *Madonna and Child*, polychromed wood, 70 in, Musée du Louvre, Paris ...............................................................................................60

Figure 22. Donatello, *Bardini Madonna*, polychromed terracotta, c. 1425, 35 x 25 in, Museo Bardini, Florence .......................................................................................61

Figure 23. Donatello, *San Felice Madonna*, c. 1457, polychromed terracotta, 33.7 x 26.8 in, private collection, USA ..............................................................................62

Figure 24. Donatello, *Madonna and Child* (two views), c.1446-53, bronze, 63 in, high altar, Basilica di Sant'Antonio, Padua ...........................................................................63

Figure 25. Donatello, *Faith*, c. 1429, bronze, 20.5 in, from the font, Cathedral Baptistery, Siena .............................................................................................................64

Figure 26. Donatello, *Justina*, ca. 1446-53, bronze, 60.6 in, high altar, Basilica di Sant'Antonio, Padua .................................................................................................65

Figure 27. Left: Donatello, *Judith and Holofernes*, c. 1455, bronze, 7 ft 9 in (including base), Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Right: Detail of Figure 27 ......................................................................................66

Figure 28. Giovanni di Paolo, *Madonna of Humility*, c. 1442, tempera on panel, 24.4 x 19.3, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston ..................................................................................67

Figure 29. Top left: Icarus, Daedalus, Persephone, and Artemis, Greco-Roman sardonyx cameo, formerly Medici collection, now Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. Below left: A Roman sardonyx cameo of Minerva, Julio-Claudian Period, ca. 1st century A.D,

Figure 30. Donatello, *Pazzi Madonna*, c. 1425-30, marble, 29.3 x 27.3 in, Bode-Museum, Berlin.

Figure 31. Stele of Ampahrete and Grandchild, Kerameikos cemetery, Athens, Greece.

Figure 32. Donatello, Louvre Madonna (details of Figure 1, showing here the Virgin's veil [top], cloth over her right hand [below left], and her left arm [below, right]).

Figure 33. Left: Unknown icon painter, *Ustyug Annunciation*, c. 1130-49, tempera on wood, 7 ft. 9.7 in x 5 ft 6 in, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Right: Image of Christ in the *Ustyug Annunciation*.

Figure 34. Attributed to Neri di Bicci, *Madonna and Child*, second half of the 15th century, tempera on panel, 17.7 x 14 in, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon.

Figure 35. Zanobi Strozzi, *Madonna of Humility with Musician Angels*, c. 1448-50, tempera and gilding on panel, 22 x 32 in, Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan.

Figure 36. Giovanni dal Ponte, *Madonna and Child with Angels*, 1410s, tempera and tooled gold leaf on panel, 34.5 x 22.8 in, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin.

Figure 37. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1320, tempera on panel, 33.5 x 22.4 in, Brera, Milan.

Figure 38. Donatello, Louvre Madonna (detail of Figure 1, showing the painted flowers on the veil).

Figure 39. Donatello, *Mary Magdalene* (two views), c. 1453-55, gilded wood, 6 ft 2 in, Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, Florence.
Chapter 1. Introduction

Looking at Donatello's *Virgin and Child* (Louvre Madonna) (Fig. 1) in May 2013, when it was on display at the Springtime of the Renaissance exhibition in Florence, I was immediately drawn to the brilliant colors, including the purple of the veil. It was only after looking at the image for a moment that I became aware that the veil was patterned with flowers. I felt a warmth, even though the piece itself is quite stern in profile. Being attracted to polychromed terracotta figures in general, I was happy to find a room full of them.

I tried to get as much information as I could in the short time that I was there, checking the backs of various statues to see how thick they seemed to be, and where they were hollowed out and what the clay body looked like in the unpainted or chipped areas, as my thought was to make one when I returned home. I planned to create a work in this technique. I thought it would be a joy to do.

I recall the impression that Donatello's relief made on me of being strong, unique, very colorful, very intentional and something needing more study. Having only a few minutes to record my impressions, I made a sketch of it, so that I could watercolor the basic movement of that color when I got back to the pensione (Fig 2).

As a potter and an artist, I am interested in the methods used by masters such as Donatello to achieve the balance and grace of their works. In order to better understand the structure and the meaning of the Louvre Madonna, I undertook to make some clay works similar to or suggestive of it. I entered into this project with the understanding that

---

1 "The Springtime of the Renaissance. Sculpture and the Arts in Florence, 1400–1460" was held at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, from March to August 2013, and then at the Louvre, Paris, from September 2013 to January 2014.
what I produced would serve simply as a guidepost to the processes employed by
Donatello and his peers. A terracotta sculpture built and fired in the twenty-first century,
even if modeled after a Quattrocento work, exists for a very different reason from its
original. Further, the technologies involved in the making of a new Madonna are not
those of the past. Yet by molding and firing terracotta, I did gain insight into the
techniques employed by the sculptors who rediscovered this material and made
enthusiastic use of it. Considering the material aspects of this work also led me to see
how thematically unlike many other terracotta Madonnas this one is.

**Terracotta Casting**

Donatello (1386-1466) made a number of images of the Virgin and Child, as did
his Florentine peers. These images, frequently made of fairly inexpensive materials,
became popular for domestic use. One of the most unusual of these works is a
polychromed terracotta relief which has been housed at the Musée du Louvre since
1880.² While this Madonna is now widely considered an autograph work by Donatello,
this was not always the case. According to the Florentine art broker Stefano Bardini
(1836-1922), who had bought it from the Marchese Vettori, it had been in the chapel of

---

² The work, Louvre R.F. 353, is also referred to as the Madonna of the Villa Vettori; the Courajod
Madonna; and the *Virgin and Child Against a Curtain*. Its dimensions are 40 x 28 inches. The inscription
on the Virgin's halo reads: “[a] Men Ave Maria Grati[a] Plena.”

Marc Bormand dates the relief to 1445 and links it to Padua (“Madonna and Child” in Marc Bormand and
Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, eds. *Springtime of the Renaissance: Sculpture and the Arts in Florence 1400-60*
[Florence: Mandragora, 2013], 444). Pope-Hennessey dates it 1440 (John Pope-Hennessey, *The Study and
Criticism of Italian Sculpture* [New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980], 82), and Rosenauer agrees
(Bormand, Springtime, 444).
the Vettori family villa at Tignano in Val d’Elsa, near Florence. The curator who acquired the relief for the Louvre, Louis Courajod, recognized it as the work of a master, and suggested Donatello's name among others. A frame dating from the period of its accession identifies its author only as an Italian fifteenth-century artist (Fig 3).

It was the reassessment made by John Pope-Hennessey of this and other uncertain reliefs that brought the Louvre Madonna into the body of work widely considered to be Donatello's own. Clearly, this relief possesses qualities characteristic of him, and significantly demonstrates the strategies of creating depth seen in many of his other works.

In examining the structure of the work, the recreations and experiments I performed allowed me some insight into the way this deep relief is constructed and why it looks as it does. These efforts also led me to consider the possible physical context and function of the work.

---

3 See Louis Courajod, Acquisitions du Musée de la Sculpture Moderne au Louvre en 1880 (Paris: Rapilly, 1881), 10. The likely site Courajod identified (some distance east of Tignano) was the church of San Lorenzo in Vigilano (Bormand, Springtime, 444). The Vettori family endowed an oratory dedicated to the M.V. della Speranza in that church (Luigi Santoni, ed., Raccolta di notizie storiche riguardanti le chiese dell’arci-diocesi di Firenze, Florence: Gio. Mazzoni, 1847, 346).

4 Courajod, Acquisitions du Musée, 10.

5 Bormand, Springtime, 444. John Pope-Hennessey was the first art historian to give serious attention to terracotta figures of the Madonna and Child.

6 There seems to be a lack of useful imagery documenting the Louvre Madonna. Most of the images I had access to were the same shot, from the same frontal view. These photographs could not describe the depth of the surface contours. The fact that it is a painted surface, too, prevents the camera and the eye from reliably reading the shadows and lights. The color reproductions were not similar, either: sometimes the veil read as a brownish charcoal color, and at other times pink. When seeing it, I recorded it as a light purple. Also in reproduction, much of the descriptive detail that supports the iconographical meaning of the piece is not visible. The white blossoms are described as pale yellow, pink, and are difficult to see. The inscription in the halo, and the red showing throughout the gold curtain in the background sometimes reveals a brocade pattern, and other times looks quite faint.
The Louvre Madonna is a work in terracotta, one of many now widely accepted as by Donatello. During the early fifteenth century, Tuscan sculptors rediscovered the potential of this versatile medium, which allowed them ease in modeling and recalled ancient works. A particularly active terracotta industry developed around the construction of Ghiberti’s doors for Florence Baptistery, where the material was used to make preliminary models. 7 Ideal for quickly and inexpensively modeling or casting images, terracotta became a familiar medium, and its cost and speed made it suitable for domestic works.

Terracotta lends itself to both additive and subtractive sculptural methods. Because of its pliability, terracotta takes shape from pressed molds easily. Both molds and original sculpture modeling might be combined in a single work. For instance, the portrait bust of Niccolò da Uzzano by Donatello consists of two halves of a life mask as well as additional material (Fig 4). The eyes, cast while closed, were remodeled to gaze into the distance. 8 A restoration of the Madonna and Child by the circle of Giovanni di Turino (Fig. 5) revealed that some areas, such as the face and hands, were molded, while much of the drapery was modeled. 9

---


The first step in this research project was to investigate the materials and methods of the time period. Useful sources for this information are Cennino Cennini’s *Il Libro dell’Arte* and Vasari’s *On Technique*. Still, much was left to doubt, as explanations in these books assume a prior understanding of the techniques and materials. Not knowing what sort of size or lime was used by Donatello, I was left to experiment with my “best guess,” based on the commonest or most often cited formula.

Among the challenges this project offered was approximating the fifteenth-century conditions of firing the terracotta. It is not clear whether terracotta sculptures and reliefs of this period were fired in the same brick kilns as the huge brick production in Florence going on for the Duomo and other large projects, or if they were fired in smaller workshops such as those the della Robbias constructed for their work, or if they would be sent out to a potter’s shop for firing.

---

10 I also used a book written in 1939, Hiscox and Sloane's *Fortunes in Formulas*, which discusses some of these centuries-old materials.
11 For instance, sizes can be made from fish gills, snouts of sheep, or hoof and hairs from particular animals, but the sources do not indicate which type to use.
12 I consulted via email with Dr. James W.P. Campbell, Fellow in Architecture and History of Art at Queens College, Cambridge. He was not sure about the exact location of the firing, but he assumed that large terracotta sculpture was likely to be fired alongside brick.
Chapter 2. Research Experiments: the Terracotta Bust

To understand better the process that Donatello may have used in making the terracotta Louvre Madonna, I tried a small experiment of making a clay bust of a woman about a foot tall, using a brick core and a new skin of terracotta. The brick core, shrunk from prior firing, did not stick to the new skin of terracotta but released completely, which was the goal. Donatello used this technique and at one time attempted to make a twenty-foot sculpture in terracotta over a brick core. Like Donatello’s would have done, the core I used helped to support the drying time and evenness of the new skin as well, as it got hot at the same time as the surface clay, so that the new skin dried at the same rate inside and out.

For the bust, I first used a commercial terracotta clay which, fired at cone 05, came out very well. In fact, it may have come out too well. The hide glue I bought after Cennini’s recommendation for coating the forms along with mixing into the original

---

13 I did not attempt the three-foot sculpture Donatello made, and that I hoped to eventually create, as the kiln I used is very small (the kiln diameter is a maximum 24 inches); also, the weight of such a figure and the delicacy of it in the raw stage makes safe transport to a kiln risky. Loading it into a top loading electric kiln would take the strength of a strong man. This introduces the question of how such a large Madonna (likely 4 x 3 feet prior to firing, and weighing more than 70 pounds) was fired, lifted, and withdrawn from the kilns.


15 The brick core would have been fired at a relatively low temperature, and could contain sawdust, or other organic material, which enabled the clays to dry more uniformly and be slightly porous and lighter in weight. Adding a terracotta skin over a brick core meant that the fired brick would again be covered with new clay either by hand or from a distinct casting that fit over the brick support. When large thin areas of clay are placed into a kiln, rubble is spread underneath it to prevent cracking of the piece. The hot air must flow all around the piece, drying and vitrifying evenly as it processes. Without this rubble or substrate material underneath, the moisture stays at the bottom while the top areas overheat, and that causes the clay to crack and sometimes to shear off in layers, separating from itself.

16 I purchased the clay, a formula called “red moist,” very plastic and good for sculpting, from Columbus Clay.

17 Cone is a measure of heat used in ceramics. At cone 05, the kiln is around 1910 degrees.
gesso layer\textsuperscript{18} went onto the piece easily enough with a brush, and it dried to a tacky state. However, it was not durable. Any bumping of it caused it to peel away from the surface after drying. It occurred to me that the clay was too pure, more refined than the clay likely to have been used in Donatello's day, and fired at a somewhat higher temperature as well.

To better approximate the sort of material Donatello might have used, I dug out some clay from a hillside near Zanesville, Ohio, an area very much involved with ceramic production at the beginning of the twentieth century. I chose to use clay that retained impurities, such as small chunks of sandstone and organic materials. I did not sift it, but instead just pressed it into a mold, and fired it at brick temperature: about 500 degrees lower than the bust, yet hot enough to transform from clay to ceramic\textsuperscript{19}. Together, the clay and the lower temperature produced a “rustic” surface that was much more porous and rough to the touch; glues and gessoes soaked in and stayed there (Fig. 6).

The surface was so rough as to require several coats of gesso in order to get a final finish paint surface. Based on my experience with this rough clay, I could easily imagine the use of wool or other fibers that were found in the bottom layers of the Florentine \textit{Madonna and Child} during its restoration at the National Gallery of Art as serving to smooth such a surface and help the gesso and paint bond better to the clay

\textsuperscript{19} The della Robbias' kiln was wood fired, so therefore not capable of the highest temperatures kilns can generate today.
Wool fibers added to the clay create a sort of mesh that bonds well to the pigment. It would make sense to use something like fleece as a matting material to bind and strengthen the layers of gesso to the form, much as clay workers use hair and straw, metal shavings, and netting to reinforce concrete castings today. Without such reinforcement on a sculptured surface painted in layers of gesso, a small ding could cause a large wound and lose much of the painted surface along with it. Of course, this produces a generic, doll-like face, as personality marks and expression that may have existed in the clay body are now coated with a smooth surface complexion.

**Research Experiments: Shallow Relief**

Continuing my investigation of Donatello's working methods, I carved the image of the Louvre Madonna in shallow relief on a panel of clay (Fig. 8). I made the relief shallow because I supposed that Donatello's use of flat or squashed (*schiacciato*) perspective might determine the depth of the surface. That is, Donatello conveyed depth with shallow carving, as in works such as *St. George Fighting the Dragon* (Fig. 9). Additionally, the illusion of less depth that photographs produce caused me to hesitate in building up forms. However, by making the relief so shallow, I failed to take into consideration both the depth and the spatial complexity of the Louvre Madonna.

The relative flatness of this result illustrates that Donatello's own construction is based on a geometric foundation that is far from the shallow surface reading that a frontal

---

20 The work is currently attributed to a 15th-century Florentine artist. In the past, it has been given to Donatello, Verrocchio, Michelozzo, and many others (Simona Cristanetti, "Hatching a theory of attribution: A fifteenth-century Madonna and Child at the National Gallery of Art," *Glass and Ceramics Conservation 2010*, editorial coordinator Hannelore Roemich. [Netherlands: International Council of Museums, 2010], 221). That it could be a work by Donatello seems unlikely to me because of its uncomplicated sweetness. It seems less emotionally substantial than works recognized as his.
view apparently provides. This is clear from a photograph of the Louvre Madonna taken from the side (Fig. 10). This view reveals even more about the forms, and explains the odd impression I first felt about the dominance of the veil on the Madonna's head dress. This photograph shows that the heads and shoulders of the mother and child are in very high relief. The headdress that seems so delicate and engaging actually is quite massive, unusual in color, and not merely a surface of shallow ripples to suggest sheer patterned cloth, but is instead textured in a realistic, particular way.

Like the experience in foundry work of hammering the hardened bronze from the plaster mold, where the dark metal emerges from the white surroundings in isolated sections, the most prominent first, so do the levels of this relief rise as if from immersion in a material. There is a sense of topography or landscape, of hills and valleys, to the surface. Unlike the della Robbia Madonnas, which are in strictly natural proportions, like the figure of an ordinary person that has just been sliced down the center to be flat on one side and then stuck to a board, this figure does not simply come forward, a half-statue (Figs. 11 and 12). Rather, it seems to emerge in stages from a space. There is a sense of turning to it, of a twisted axis, and what Donatello emphasized through exaggeration and distortion adds meaning to the work.

The structure emphasizes the Madonna's head, and particularly the veil that wraps it. The headdress of the Madonna is large in proportion to the head that it sits on, the surface of the face of the Madonna being in much lower relief than the surface of the headdress. Even more distant from that surface is the shallowness of her nose and lips. The throat area then is nearly non-existent in the side view, in a way that does not exactly
conform to the position of her chest and torso as seen from this angle. The whole work has form that cuts at angles to the picture plane, going out at the top, then in, then out at another acute angle with the Madonna's shoulder. The surface depth of this piece undulates extremely from top to bottom and side to side, but it gives a calm appearance in spite of that.

I think this figure was made by putting a few different pieces together. Beginning with the face of the Madonna and the headdress, we see a huge leap in topographical depth to the neck, which is nearly flat completely. The upper part of the figure's head is strikingly broad, round, and large.

I had assumed that this relief was one whole piece based on comparisons to a burned Donatello in Berlin.\textsuperscript{21} What remains of the scorched Madonna and Child there reveals that the drapery survived the fire, which means that it was ceramic, and not, as had been imagined, made of stucco or painted cloth or some other embellishment. Donatello may have achieved the natural look of the veil in the \textit{Louvre Madonna} by soaking clay in cloth and burning out the actual materials there, leaving only the ceramic skeleton where the cloth had been.\textsuperscript{22}


\textsuperscript{22} For the costume of the bronze Judith, Donatello burned out the coated laces and veiling on that piece. Frederick Hartt suggests that the flaw in the veil above the brow is a result of a crack in the clay slip that coated the drapery (Frederick Hartt, \textit{History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture}, 4th ed., revised by David G. Wilkins [New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994]: 292). I performed an experiment with burning out some gauze soaked in terracotta slip and it worked. However, rather than a break in the cloth, the gap in Judith’s veil seems to me more likely the fault of some flashing in the sprueing system during the burnout, a lack of tiny sprues joining the layers of cloth, or a crack in the mold during the casting. One of these failures caused an interruption in the pour. This happens often, especially going from thick to thin areas, as the thin areas freeze off and the thick areas hold the heat.
However, the varying depths of relief suggest that the Louvre Madonna was constructed in sections, and then a mold was taken from that arrangement. Terracotta was pushed into that mold and it was fired as one piece. I suspect that the original was made of wax and cloth dipped into wax. That material would lend itself to the demands of such a complex design.

There are several ways Donatello could have assembled this work from varied parts. Prior to firing in the kiln, this clay panel was probably about four feet high and three feet wide, as the finished size is near 40 x 29 inches. The Madonna's length here within the frame is about two feet, so she is of a human size. It is possible that this face, or what there is of it, could have been taken from a mold of a pre-existing sculpture; a living person or, indeed, a skull; or made from an original conception.

---

23 In my experience as a bronze art foundry worker, my primary title was “wax pattern maker.” The normal thickness of a wax that later burns out of a shell and is replaced by molten bronze is about the same thickness that is desired for terracotta and other ceramic sculptures as well. If the material is too thick, then warping and pulling away occurs and the whole design can be lost in the process of rebirthing it in the new material. An ideal thickness throughout is desired, and that thickness should be about a half-inch to an inch thick. Ceramic is a bit more forgiving than bronze, but all the material there must be bone dry; with the moisture in the thick clay areas staying longer than in the thin areas, the thin needs to be kept as wet so that all dries at the same rate, all heats in the kiln as a relatively equal rate, and so on for ceramic. Large areas that lay flat must be supported with material that allows an even circulation of heat to cure and fuse correctly.

Cennini recommends using wax for this stage of the casting, because repairing mistakes and dents in wax is easy (Cennini, *Il Libro dell’Arte*, 129).

24 To keep multiple parts of the whole in order, a “key” is usually built into the pieces with negatives made by inserting a chunk of clay or something to make a positive on that edge, then when the other plaster is added, a negative is formed in such a pattern that when all of the pieces are finished and joined together they will lock into place so that the sculpture that will be enclosed there is exactly the form intended. If you forget this step, a series of holes, or ledges (a “key”), can be scored into the edge with a chisel or tool, after the first section is hardened, but any adjoining sides must also have a “key” and those new cuts have to be soaped or otherwise surfaced so that the new wet plaster sections will fit into those slots tightly, but also come apart to release the mold from the original work.

25 A terracotta clay fired at Cone 6 will shrink from 6 to 14 percent ("Clay Types, Geology, Properties and Color Chart," sites.google.com/site/meeneecat/educational-materials/clay-types-geological-origins-working-properties-gecceramics).
The sunken cheek of the Madonna, odd for an image of the Virgin, seems a significant part of this relief, and suggests another possible method of creation. The strong, severe face adds a sense of solemnity in its suggestion of fading and dying, and is in notable contrast with the bright, round face of the infant. The bone beneath the skin is so apparent in this Madonna that it seems conceivable that it was in fact molded from or based closely on a skull. In order to see what resulted from a mold placed over a skull, I used a realistic skull and smoothed clay over it (Fig. 13). In doing this, I was struck by how much Donatello emphasized the shape of the skull through arranging drapery and through color. The Virgin's skull subtly revealed in the shape of her face here is a reminder of mortality.

It does not seem as practical for the sculptor to have built a full in-the-round figure of the Madonna, and then cut it vertically in so oblique a manner, but that is another option. He could also have just done the silhouette, added the headdress, and patched the joinery as best he could. Whatever the method used, focus goes toward the massive headdress, and I think this piece in some ways exists for the sake of that veil.

**Research Experiments: the Life Cast**

To examine how the parts of the Louvre Madonna work together, I made a face mold, using plaster bandages from half of my own face, in order to focus on the prominent forehead and veil area of the Madonna (Fig. 14).\(^\text{26}\) I also hoped to better

\(^{26}\) In Donatello's time, lime was slaked by soaking lime plaster in too much water to make what we would normally mix for a mold today. Generally, you add enough plaster to water to make a milkshake consistency, and stir this rapidly. This mixture begins to heat up as it sets, so if it is warming as you are stirring it, you want to get as much of the mix onto the prepared surface of the item to cast right away. Then this thin face coat can be thickened with additional layers of this plaster before it hardens. Subsequent coatings of plaster are usually required to get a form with supportive strength.
understand how the planes of the parts fit together in such an aesthetically pleasing way when seen from the front, while the proportions were all wrong from the side.

I greased the interior of the mold with some petroleum jelly, and brushed melted wax into the cavity to achieve a half-inch depth throughout. I trimmed the resulting wax cast, but I then found that it would not lay flat on a table top, which seemed necessary to replicate the look of the facial profile on the original (Fig 15).

I then had the realization that what Donatello may have done was to bevel the backside of his face mold in order for it to assume the desired elevation. Even if he did the original in clay, he would have to bevel that area in order for to lay as it did and to then accommodate that proportionately huge veil forehead area.

The veil does not seem to be as much an imaginary depiction of drapery as it does a real cloth, behaving in a natural and uncontrived way, yet shaped by a deliberate hand. I noted in my first impressions sketch that this veil bulged from the surface of the relief in an extreme manner. The halo is angled above it and overlaps the top edge of the frame.

When I made gesso, I found that the product of the first slaking was rather hard, not easy to mix up and liquefy, but not so hard as a set plaster would be as for a mold of any strength. The second slake remains were softer, easier to dilute but still rebellious. By the time I got around to the third slaking, I let the bucket sit out a very long time, all outdoors, and I didn't really check on it. Rain fell on it, but otherwise I didn't add any water and homogenize it for about a month. Algae grew across the top of it, and was somewhat gelatinous. I was intrigued with this as alginate molds are used even today. I figured that a likely relationship with vegetable gelatins as well as hoof, and hide and fish scale glues were probably part of mold making in Donatello's day and was a natural by-product of this slaking experiment, but I did not continue experimentation in that direction. I did find that this third slake was pretty soft and nice to work with, could be added to hide glue and made into a sort of paint.

Another method to release wax from a plaster mold was to overly soak the plaster in water to seal the pours in the plaster. This keeps excessively hot wax from burning into the surface of the mold and getting stuck, which is especially important where lots of texture or detail is present in the mold. The deterioration or destruction of that plaster should be avoided, obviously, and it is important not to get any stuck into the details of the wax, for it is tough to clean out, and, if used for a bronze cast, will not properly shape the metal. Leaving bits of plaster in a wax mold would be as inexcusable and wasteful as throwing dirt on it.

This is a device that Donatello used in carving the Pazzi Madonna too, but in very shallow relief.
In an effort to understand how the forms around the head worked together, I arranged wet kitchen towels with a small plate behind them (Fig. 16). It fit: the Madonna's face was flat enough, and the bulge area big enough. The angle of the halo allowed this pitch to happen.

From the wax mask, now beveled, I made a clay cast. I discovered that, even with the beveled edge, the mold still left a gap along the profile (Fig. 17). A tension between the relatively flat planes of the face and the round curve of the forehead caused some cracking in the clay. In order to support the structure, I added more clay (Fig. 18). I believe that it was a need to balance the two sections of the head that caused Donatello to add the clay that holds the oddly placed eye (Fig. 19).

The frontal view and the side view of this relief are quite different. The front gives us all the illusion of a painting, while the side view is a construction site. Crawford mentions that the second eye can be seen from the side and faults it as a blemish.

My feeling about the second eye and the bulge between the eyes is that the mold was cut there, and that inside curve was shaved down to a beveled edge so that it would lie down. However, the jump between the thin beveled edge area of the profile and the large crowning veil and the skull was still too great a separation from the ground even with the background clay curving upward to meet the forms. The chasm between the base

---

29 A second way of designing and attaching the head would involve making a cast at an angle, rather than cutting a finished cast at a bevel. To get a sense of how this would work, I made a mini-cast of a small bust (Fig. 20). In this approach, the background itself is not flat but angled around the head as though the head were buried in a hillside at an angle, but not fully submerged in mud. In the studio, sand, clay or other material would be the supporting substance, and, then a thin mold could be splashed over that to hold the form. Finally, the whole thing could be laid down and poured thicker for strength.

30 David Lindsay Crawford, Donatello (London: Duckworth: 1903), 185. Crawford says this work has a reputation as a "schoolpiece." He criticizes the eye visible from the side (he calls it a "needless and distracting mannerism") as well as the stiffness of the left arm. Nevertheless, he considers the relief a work of first-class importance.
level of the relief and the face could only be bridged by the additional inclusion of more "face" just there at the eye and brow bone area. In my sketch of a possible reconstruction (Fig 20), the pink area indicates that filled space.\textsuperscript{31}

The joining of flat background and high relief is evident in several areas of this work. The gold curtain pulls towards Mary's profile, changing direction from the otherwise gravitationally vertical direction it is hanging. Reading left to right across the relief, the folds become wider at the top of the infant's halo, which protrudes from the surface, too (Fig. 21). These directional folds, with an increased elevation from the surface plane, are filling gaps to allow the relief to become higher in some places, without leaving a space behind them.

This sort of compensation reinforces the idea that this design was made originally in sections. The body of the Madonna from the shoulders to the belly to the crease at the armpit on her left arm was taken could be one piece, (and due to the natural form of the breast and belly, was maybe taken from a real person); the face was another mold; the upper arm manufactured; the baby's lower body another mold; the mother's lower left arm and hand either another mold or manufacture and placed atop the baby leg area. The chair was either from a mold or was manufactured (when I say manufacture, I mean he sculpted it free hand over these other things). Perhaps the veiling, stomacher, and gold curtain were once all of real

\textsuperscript{31} Besides the eye, another visually troubling aspect of the face is that at the brow, just where the pituitary gland is, there is a lump that should have been softened down and would have been if intended to be looked at from that side.
cloth, wetted with some agent, such as glue or wax, and were arranged as a bandage or fastener to unite otherwise incompatible sections of sculpture.

The elevation of the baby from the surface is needed to balance out the headdress of the mother. The baby's head and shoulders stick out from the surface plane, but it is more a natural sort of proportion, and could have been made in a traditional manner from another baby mold. The lower body of the infant Christ in Donatello's Borromeo Madonna (Fig. 22) bears a striking similarity to the lower body of the infant in the Louvre Madonna. There is a pattern of movement diagonally with the form of the baby's head and shoulders mimicking the mother's in direction. This repetition emphasizes how alike they are, and the fact that they are both looking away from the viewer equally.

Making a cast from varied materials and in multiple parts would not be contrary to Donatello’s experimental nature. As Vasari observed, he was active in every kind of relief, "full, half, low, and the lowest," and he delighted in them all. To some extent, the physical problems with the construction would have caused adjustments to the design to be made as it was built. The method Donatello used here, combining sections of varied relief contrived to make the illusion of a unified whole when seen from the front, seems an especially challenging one, with many possible complications.

---

34 For example, the cracks visible along the center may have been a result of the weight of the heads bearing down.
Chapter 3: Mother and Child in Donatello's Louvre Madonna

It seems possible that, when the relief now in the Louvre was installed in its first location, the side that the Mother and Child gaze toward included something outside the frame that worked in concert with the relief in some way. Perhaps the relief was mounted against a window so that the two see something outdoors or in another room, perhaps another image, one that depicts the infant's fate. Throughout the relief are reminders of what is to come for him, such as the pomegranate pattern of the mother's sleeve alluding to bodily death, and the veil that is both a blanket and a winding cloth. The gaze of both figures is intent; they seem to have paused. Mary's ear is covered, so that no sound interrupts her attention on what lies before her eyes. Whatever their vision may have been, the viewers are not a part of it, but the gazes of these figures compel us to witness it solemnly and quietly, as well.

The Madonna's face is cool and smooth, like marble. It has a polished or wax-like surface, which contrasts strongly with the plastic and robust contours of the veil surrounding that face. She is different from the baby, even though they are much alike in parts. The way the eyelids on each face are formed is the same; the set of the eye, the resting nature of the hands, they are active, but they are not moving. The baby clutches but does not grip. The mother's hands support, but they do not bear weight. The pair seem to be caught up in a thought, watching something at rapt attention, but as spectators at a distance.

The angle of the baby’s hair brushed forward from the back, has a saddle sort of shape on the side of his head and that models the shape of the veil wrapping over his
mother's ears. The foreheads of both characters are the most dominant feature of each, and suggestive again of some busy intelligence. They both wear golden bands. His is the gold dusted band or stomacher with the short veiling trim, hers is the fish-scale patterned gold collar that separates her plain blue dress and naturally shaped torso from the voluminous sheer but surrounding veil. The gold on their clothing links them to the golden curtain in the back. This curtain has its hard edges in the shape of crescent scallops across the top, and those scallop shapes are again repeated in a softer version on the baby’s stomacher veiling. The halos of each are in the shape of inverted gold crescents.

This is a noble Madonna, and seated in a throne, so that she is like the traditional *Sedes sapientiae*, but seen from another angle, and at closer range. The same seriousness combined with graceful beauty is apparent in many of the enthroned Madonnas of Jacopo della Quercia (Fig. 23). Yet here, the throne is merely suggested—it occurs only as a curve and quatrefoil decoration near the bottom of the image. The ideas of death, and sleep, and vigilance seem significant to this Virgin, who is more like an oracle figure, or sybil, than a Madonna full of radiant love and nurturing spirit. The mother and son watch and wait, and I imagine them sleepless. The prescient Virgin's eyes are wide open to the pain of the truth.

If the brocade curtain were removed from behind this pair a very different shape than the type of the affectionate Madonna is apparent. There is not an overlapping of halos or body parts near the chest.\textsuperscript{35} He does not come from her heart, womb or stomach.

\textsuperscript{35} A possible reading of the curtain is as the unifying God the Father who resides on the other side of that curtain and who connects to the left arm of the mother via the shared color of gilding and pattern there. The
His legs cross her lap, but not so much that she contains him, more that she balances and supports him. The baby is turned away from the mother and there is a several-inch separation from the shoulders. The mother supports him with her hand, but each figure is in a solitary reverie, though the subject of their thoughts is likely the same. Her left arm acts as a visual bar to the viewer's entry into the scene and as an element that yokes the two figures.36

Among Donatello's works that represent the Virgin, the Louvre Madonna is unusual. The Bardini Madonna (Fig. 24) has a similar solemnity, yet that mother holds her son more closely. The Bardini Madonna gazes abstractedly into the middle distance, lost in thought; the child looks at the viewer. Also within the small group of polychromed Madonnas is the attributed San Felice Madonna: the infant here holds his hand to his face like the Louvre infant, but he looks apprehensive, rather than thoughtful (Fig. 25). The Louvre Madonna is less emotive and more reserved and separate from the viewer, and though she does not hold her son to her, their shared attention to what they see unites them. She does not seem approachable. The severe, bronze Madonna and Child from the altar at Padua is close in mood and theme to this brightly colored terracotta (Fig. 26). In many ways, the Louvre Madonna is more like Donatello's upright, powerful figures, such as Faith (Fig. 27) in Siena, and his Justina (Fig. 28) in Padua, and even his Judith in Florence (Figs 29 and 30), than it is like most contemporary images of the Madonna and Child. Each of these is bronze, and had its former incarnation as a wax pattern. This

baby is embraced by the Mother, the purple veil. Together these colors and the arrangement of them might be personified as representing the holy family.

36 She has been criticized (Crawford, Donatello, 185) as having a "stiff and wooden" arm, and I agree that it is, but those sorts of angled arms are used by Donatello, in his Judith for example. He uses the arms to segment spaces, and change your direction of looking.
could support my notion that this Madonna was at first constructed in wax, together with other materials, and was then molded as a single terracotta.\textsuperscript{37}

In its regal delicacy, this picture has a sympathy with Sienese paintings made a decade or so earlier. For example, the \textit{Madonna of Humility} by Giovanni di Paolo (Fig. 31), though it shows a virgin of a different type, conveys a similar sense of delicate intensity and richness of surface to the Louvre Madonna.

Besides the elegant Sienese Madonnas that may have served as models for this work, other influences are apparent in the Louvre Madonna as well. Many of these are ancient, and reflect, as does the renewed popularity of terracotta itself, a desire to make use of the methods and imagery of the classical world. Donatello's visit to Rome with Filippo Brunelleschi brought him directly in contact with the images and symbols of the ancient past. Further, his patrons the Medici collected antique items. Piero il Gottoso, in particular, enjoyed acquiring and contemplating small, beautiful antique objects.\textsuperscript{38}

Among these were carved precious stones. Other examples of Donatello's work, including the reliefs in the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo, indicate an interest in reproducing on a larger scale that which in the stones was small. That the profile of the Madonna, bright and sharp, is reminiscent of a cameo carving, is not coincidental. The silk and gold curtain beyond her, but not too far beyond her, suggests the background level within a carving of a precious stone, as for instance the Medici-owned cameo of \textit{Icarus, Daedalus and Pasiphae} (Fig. 32).

\textsuperscript{37} It is unlikely that this piece would have been a model for future bronze work, as the form of it is so exaggerated and large, it would not appear to represent the mother and child or the iconography found by the contrasts of the gilding versus the painted areas.

\textsuperscript{38} Martin Kemp, \textit{Behind the Picture: Art and Evidence in the Italian Renaissance} (New Haven: Yale, 1997), 149.
The relief itself is a precious, gilded thing, and while it is not small, it seems personal. The jewel-like colors and the sharpness of the line\textsuperscript{39} suggest that Donatello had gems in mind while he was designing this work. I could imagine this relief to be an enlargement of a piece of inlaid stone jewelry or following the inner carving of a shell, as in a bowl type of cameo\textsuperscript{40}. The idea of creating space through levels seems important here. It would be simple enough to make a smooth, shallow Madonna and Child with apparent depth using the \textit{schiacciato} method. Yet Donatello chose to assemble a relief that feels as if it is delving into a solid material and carving the image out of it, as cameo artists do.

Considering both the solemn profile of the Virgin, and the mournful tone of the work, tomb decoration, Greek stele in particular, seems like another possible source of imagery. The \textit{Pazzi Madonna}, too, with its very different (but equally intense) interaction between mother and child (Fig. 33), appears to have taken inspiration from certain Greek stele. Charles Avery suggests that Donatello made use of a particular stele type, that of mothers who died in childbirth, for several of his Madonna reliefs.\textsuperscript{41} An example that recalls the poignancy as well as the deep relief of the Louvre Madonna is the grave marker of Ampahrete playing with her grandchild (Fig. 34).

It could have been possible, in fact, for Donatello to make molds of Roman and Greek sculptures he encountered, and to incorporate them into his work. If he were in

\textsuperscript{39} The sharpness is due to the deep undercutting of the relief.

\textsuperscript{40} Each intense color of the relief seems to have a cognate in a precious stone. The stomacher is of a type of iron red color, with gold flecks. Such a material, goldstone, occurs when trying to replicate a gem. This “stone” is actually a glass material. The dress is painted in azurite blue, so could mimic that stone which occurs near veins of silver. The gold leaf is similar to a stone cameo in the Medici gem collection that figures a chariot, diagonally gilded to represent the curtain between night and day.

\textsuperscript{41} Charles Avery, \textit{Studies in Italian Sculpture} (London: Pindar, 2001), 68.
Rome and found a stele that he could not move or easily cover with clay or plaster, he could use the more portable and field-suitable medium of wax. He could spread warm wax, or strips of wax softened in the sun, across a damaged face that had few undercuts. When the sun went down and the wax cooled, it could be removed as one piece to act as a mold. This layer of wax, at least an inch thick to hold the shape, would be lightweight enough to carry away. Then the form of that could be backed with plaster to hold the shape, a sawdust clay mix put on the inside of the wax mold. That core could then be fired in a kiln at some convenient time. This method would provide a pretty sound replica of the piece. He could then restore or remake it, by covering that core with new clay and firing it.  

42 It is much easier to sculpt a figure large and shrink it down than it is to sculpt something tiny and try to make details that can be seen well. Wax again is easier to work in small detail than is clay. Wax can be softened and pulled or stretched to form draperies, and hair; if an area has to go from thick to thin it is much easier to duplicate that effect in wax. Consider that false teeth, crowns, elaborate stone settings, prongs in gold jewelry are first made in wax.
Chapter 4: The Veil in Donatello’s Louvre Madonna

The long, delicately painted veil unites the figures visually. It travels the background surrounding the figures, and evens out any jarring discrepancies in their elevations. It wraps over both sides of the Madonna, enfolds the baby’s arms, then ends with a border of lines in the hemmed fabric at the mother's right wrist, a section of the fabric reaching between her index finger, and second finger. The veil serves as an essential unifying element. It is given attention as a highly decorated, very particular object, folded with precision, and painted with delicate flowers all over its surface, horizontal scarlet stripes at regular intervals along its length, and pseudo-Kufic writing at its hem (Fig. 35). On the Madonna's head, it is huge, and throughout the work, it has a sheen of lacquer that other surfaces lack. It appears to be made of silk, and its naturalism seems significant.

The compositional emphasis on the veil and its surface decoration of a brilliant richness suggest to me that this work is largely about that object. The veil was one of the few relics of the Virgin, whose hagiography included bodily assumption into Heaven. The fourteenth-century Meditationes vitae Christi developed the mythology that would cause the veil to become sought after, including the idea that the Madonna wrapped her newborn child in it. According to Marian legend, the same veil that swaddled the baby became the cloth that covered the crucified Christ. A number of

---

43 Julia Bolton Holloway, Constance Wright, and June Bechtold, Equally in God’s Image: Women in the Middle Ages (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 149.
44 Gail McMurry Gibson, The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 52.
locations laid claim to sections of the veil: Chartres received its veil in 976, from Charlemagne, while Assisi received its relic in 1319.45

I think that the top of the head and maybe even including portions of the ears and back of the head might be a sort of box, holding something there in the back.46 Perhaps the relief contained, within the recess behind the Virgin's face, another, smaller relic of this veil. With clay, thicker areas must be thinned or hollowed out from the back to approximate the thickness of the ground area, so that they all dry and shrink at an even rate. The raised, rounded areas of the Louvre Madonna are hollow in the back, and allowing for a thickness of an inch, the approximate size of the cavity can be estimated. The depth of this space together with the prominence of the veil may offer a key to the function of this image.

Though lead and tin glaze experiments were common at the time,47 Donatello may have chosen to paint the Louvre Madonna because of inconstancy in glazing results, poor appearance and lack of subtlety available in that material for the look that he wanted.48 Once glazing methods used for majolica dinnerware became physically and

45 Ibid., which also notes that the veil at Assisi was bought from Tomasso Orsini, who himself purportedly obtained it from the Pasha of Damascus.
46 It follows also the outline of a skull easily enough, if a jawbone were placed at that jawbone, the rest of the skull outline could be contained in the veil. The narrow nose and lips then would be made up where no bone remained, the eyes too would be fiction.
47 It was Luca who made the first large, free-standing tin glazed sculpture, and he did it with materials previously known only to the potteries, and not many of them—the majolica technique of mineral colors baked into a white tin glaze. Popularized by the della Robbia family, whiteware, or bianco, relied upon its shape rather than its surface decoration for its recognition, and removed the figures to a realm above the earthly. Works glazed in this way were very durable and could endure poor outdoor conditions (Bruce Cole, The Renaissance Artist at Work [Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983]:131).
48 Another reason to forego glazing is more danger of breakage and costs. Kilns for brick makers were available only during the summer months and were closely regulated. Luca della Robbia brought his own kiln to Florence. He did not participate with the brick industry or the potters to any extent, but ran his own workshop.
chemically easy to control on massive figurative relief sculptures, it was simpler to reproduce large quantities of these figures just a few colors than to hand paint multiple surfaces and to produce a product that was not clownish, or uneven in the features and expressions of divine or revered personages. With glazing, the consistent design was much easier for the designer to control, to hand over the physical chore of glazing work to another hand, than to expect dozens of other artists to paint so well as to counterfeit the master.

Another reason glazed terracotta could not have worked for this relief is that the glaze cannot be purple, or at least a successful purple,\(^{49}\) and that the veil is purple here is significant. Purple\(^ {50}\) occurs in Marian legend, in the Infancy Gospel of James, as one of the colors of the temple veil that the young Mary was chosen by lot to weave: "the true purple and the scarlet."\(^ {51}\) In some Byzantine images of the Annunciation, Mary's dress is purple and alludes to the moment of incarnation, and the purple thread signifies both the veil of the temple and to her womb, the loom of Christ (Figs. 36 and 37)\(^ {52}\) The purple of this relief comes from madder dye, yet it is reminiscent of Tyrian purple. Though the

---

\(^{49}\) Purple in glazed whiteware is a dull dunnish-brown.  
\(^{50}\) The color between red and blue that is closer to blue is often called violet. Tyrian purple was closer to the red end of that spectrum. By the Middle Ages in Western Europe, purple was more often produced by combining azurite with a red lacquer than by using the costly dye derived from shells. (Cultorweb, "I colori dei pittori del Medioevo: Tra Blu e Rosso" http://www.cultorweb.com/medioevo/C1.html). In Constantinople, however, Tyrian dye was produced until 1453, when the Turks closed down the trade. See John Gage, Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993: 130), who observes that ultramarine, costly and purplish in hue, took the place of hard-to-obtain Tyrian dye. He also notes that the early Renaissance did not discriminate among shades of purple and related shades of blue and red in the same way that people now do (Ibid., 131).  
Imperial dye was seldom used by the fourteenth century, its color might still carry connotations of royalty to Donatello and his patrons. So would the purple mineral porphyry, familiar from Imperial monuments. In this image, only the veil is given coats of lacquer, fuchsia and red and light brown,\textsuperscript{53} as if to make its resemblance to a precious polished stone even more clear.

It is rare that an image of the Virgin with her young child includes a purple veil. More often, her veil is blue, white, or translucent, decorated with stars or narrow stripes. A fluid gold-embroidered veil unites the two figures in a panel of a \textit{Madonna and Child} attributed to Neri di Bicci (Fig. 38). In Zanobi Strozzi’s \textit{Enthroned Madonna with Musicians} (Fig. 39), the Virgin wears both a sheer and a purple veil; the purple frames her face, while the infant Christ draws the light veil across his body. The tangling of the infant within the veil, as if by accident or playfully, alludes to the seamless garment the adult Christ wore during the hours of his torment, and for which soldiers later gambled at the foot of the cross.\textsuperscript{54}

The floral pattern of the Madonna's veil is, like its color, unusual. Seldom is the Virgin depicted with flowers so much a part of her costume. In a panel dense with patterns, Giovanni dal Ponte's \textit{Madonna Enthroned} wears both a flowered veil beneath her crown and a dress dotted with golden blooms (Fig. 40). A mantle that is both purple and flowered covers the Virgin's head in Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s \textit{Madonna and Child} (Fig. 41); her veil is so light as to be scarcely visible.

\textsuperscript{53} Marc Bormand, \textit{Springtime}, 444.
\textsuperscript{54} Gibson, \textit{The Theater of Devotion}, 52.
The flowers on the veil of the Louvre Madonna form a consistent pattern, interrupted only by thin horizontal lines. The conservators at the Louvre describe these flowers as white carnations.\(^{55}\) This choice seems possible, as the carnation, or pink, is associated with Mary's tears during the Passion.\(^{56}\) Because of its clove-like scent, and because dried cloves look like nails, the pink is also linked to the Crucifixion.\(^{57}\) However, the flowers on the veil could well be violets, symbolic of Mary's sorrow, if purple, and of her purity, if white. Yet each of these is a five-petaled flower, while the pattern on the veil includes flowers of five, six, and even seven petals (Fig. 42). The ambiguity may be deliberate. If the flowers direct the viewer's mind to different aspects of Mary, his experience of her love and grief are made more complex. Because of the painted shadows on the veil,\(^{58}\) the flowers are varied in color from one to another and in different lighting conditions\(^{59}\). This, too, could have been designed to alter the meaning of the work depending on the time of day, and could allude to the dual nature of Christ,\(^{60}\) or of Mary as both virgin mother and human mourner\(^{61}\).


\(^{56}\) At the Palazzo Strozzi, these flowers appeared to be white, but were not immediately apparent to me.


\(^{58}\) Bormand, \textit{Springtime}, 444.

\(^{59}\) Donatello’s use of ambient light in the service of ambiguity is also evident in his bronze David (c. 1455). A surface so highly polished, almost mirror-like, as that figure’s is hard to get, and takes lots of sand and many man hours. The gloss of David replicates the color and the liquid form of the metal mercury, a fast and powerful substance. David’s form, shifting in the light, recalls the god Mercury, but not only Mercury. That Donatello chose this material and gave it this finish for this subject matter suggests that a deliberate ambiguity is central to the meaning of this work.

\(^{60}\) The colors of the veil have meaning for both Christ and Mary. The Frankish Benedictine monk and biblical commentator Rabanus Maurus (c.780-856) wrote: "For Christ the flower, foreshadowing his future Passion, turned purple in the white light of faith and the red light of his Passion." (Luigi Gambero. \textit{Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Thought of Medieval Latin Theologians} [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003], part 1, section 7 "Rabanus Maurus.")

\(^{61}\) Another possibility is that Donatello is bringing life, of a literal kind, to the veil, with flowers that are meant to seem real in their variety.
Pope-Hennessey imagined that this work was conceived as a "raised painting," a description likely taken from the rich decoration of the surface. The punched and gilded curtain is a cloth of honor—an element that appears in painting, rather than sculpture. Yet the effect of this relief, seen in person, is not quite that of a painting with something added. A three-dimensional work gives the viewer an object and a sense of contending with that object. Two-dimensional representation offers a sense of space. We gaze at the space and order it in our minds to recognize a familiar three-dimensional experience. We have to make up a plausible experience from what our eyes tell our minds. The two-dimensional image is framed and we can thrust ourselves into that frame, but it requires our will to accept, and to project upon it. We bring more of ourselves to a painting than to a sculpture, because the sculpture already “is,” while the painting “might be.” The sculpture is occupying a space, not describing one. Donatello is giving us both of these possibilities with the Louvre Madonna. It is both a painting, and a sculpture. It is both passive and confrontational.

Within the frame of this relief a particular kind of courtly space is created. Donatello depicted atmospheric illusionism most famously with his relief of *St. George and the Dragon*, yet many of his other works contain elements designed to bring into the phenomenal world the atmosphere of the fictive, sculpted world. His unique application of colored dots of glass on the Cantoria for the Florence Duomo was another scheme for creating an illusion of depth of an otherworldly sort, suggesting perhaps a cloud or a mist.

---

63 Therefore, a frame shapes what the artist intends the viewer to see. Moving a sculpture to another place is more dangerous than moving a painting, because the painting has edges, and stopping points that the sculpture may not; the painting has the illusion of depth, and the contrivance of that illusion can be gridded if a linear, mathematical system is used, but less easily where an atmospheric illusion of space is created.
The children do not move against a flat wall, but into a sparkling, rarefied space beyond the viewer’s grasp. The glittering posts even belong to heaven as they do not support things as we know, but instead motifs and urns from ancient times. There is a narrative here, where the dancing cavorting children are racing through life and time, protected by but heedless of a supporting framework of eternal ideas. In the Louvre Madonna, there is that sort of separation between the flesh parts of the mother and Christ Child, so shadowed and naturalistic against the flattened jewel collars and halos, the frame that separates the living flesh from the normal cloth and chair, placing them in heaven's metallic fields.

That is how I see Donatello's work; this is the moment, but only one; this moment goes on and on, with different times and different bodies, but it is the same story repeating. That is, in part, the classicism of it. In Donatello's constructions, it seems to me that he did not attempt to copy or remake the buried ideal figure from ancient times, but to pick up the thread of it, and continue the discovery. He experimented with many materials, because he was after the idea. Some ideas can be expressed more easily with a photograph than with a crayon. Likewise some ideas are better in clay or stone. The idea presented here in the Louvre Madonna, is, in part, the glory of a simple, pliable material, clay, that can be perfected into beauty, just as Mary redeemed the weak Eve.\textsuperscript{64} The importance and distinction of the veil in this image reminds the viewer that Mary, in her gracious acceptance of God's will, became like a veil herself.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{65} Gibson, \textit{The Theater of Devotion}, 52.
Chapter 5: Conclusion. Donatello’s Riddle

Donatello was not one who saw the spirit as a calm and graceful resident of the body. His Madonnas shake the scruples of such an occupation, and his female figures often seem to be seeing something beyond. They possess an intelligence.

In the Louvre Madonna there is an idea of a God who sweeps down into our space. Rather than a small icon of promise, removed from us in a golden throne, his God—in reply to our quiet and small, humble pleadings—seems to bring more than a promise of grace to come from virtue. The God he envisioned needed to manifest on earth and provide some evidence of fulfillment of the promise of grace. God could not be appreciated as a tiny far away thing, as a floating eye overlooking the damage on the earth, overlooking our pain without some interruption; some miracle was needed to make it real.

What keeps coming back for me is this intention of riddle, of gift and of not giving that Donatello did that made him such a curious character, so hard to understand. We shouldn't think we can know him through the material identifiers we use today, as a marble carver, or a bronze worker, or a painter or a ceramicist. But knowing what material he did use for certain expressions might be illuminating; how did he treat that material when that was the material he had to work with, either by choice or maybe by commission?

For him, the Mary Magdalene (Fig. 43) is a flame and redresses in flesh. That is what he said, and how did he say it? With gilded wood, and tearing her down, a wasted woman, but he built her up, restored her with new flesh in how he placed the gold to
reflect the light back into the hollows and fill her out again. He did that sort of thing all the time—he took the story all the places it will go. This is what he did for the Louvre Madonna.
Figure 1. Donatello, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1440-45, polychromed terracotta, 40 x 28 in, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Figure 2. Author's watercolor sketch after the Louvre Madonna (May 2013).
Figure 3. Photo (c. 1903) of the Louvre Madonna, attributed not to a particular artist, but to the Italian School of the fifteenth century.
Figure 4. Donatello. Niccolò da Uzzano, c. 1425-30, polychromed terracotta, 18 x 17.4 in, Museo del Bargello, Florence.
Figure 5. Circle of Giovanni di Turino, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1430, polychromed terracotta, 26.3 x 18 in, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 6. Bust of woman made with rough clay dug from Central Ohio hillside, approximately 1 foot high. I painted the stripes to show the gesso layer, then the green layer of egg tempera. The neck has some horizontal stripes of brown India ink, such as occur on the leg of the Child in the terracotta from the National Gallery of Art (Figure 7). The other colors are also egg tempera paint over top of all that.
Figure 7. Florentine school, *Madonna and Child*, painted and gilded terracotta with wood backing, 40.4 x 24.5 x 11.1 in, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 8. Shallow relief after the Louvre Madonna.
Figure 9. Donatello, *St. George Fighting the Dragon*, marble, c. 1415-17, 1 ft 3.3 in x 3 ft 11.3 in, originally Orsanmichele, now Museo del Bargello, Florence.
Figure 10. Donatello, Louvre Madonna, photograph from side showing depth of relief.
Figure 11. Luca della Robbia, *Madonna del Roseto*, 1450-55, glazed terracotta, 32 x 25 in, Museo del Bargello, Florence.

Figure 12. Follower of Andrea del Verrocchio, *Madonna and Child*, 15th century, painted and partially gilt terracotta, 30.5 x 23 inches, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Figure 13. Plasticine molded over plastic skull.
Figure 14. Top: Four layers of plaster-soaked bandages make a face mold. Below: After mold has dried, coat interior with additional grease.
Figure 15. Wax cast from plaster mold. Top: Trimmed. Below: Beveled.
Figure 16. Top: Wax cast with cloth veil and plate halo to model possible assembly of original. Below: Clay mask over brick core. The gap is plainly visible.
Figure 17. Top: Clay cast with clay added to repair gap of second eye. Bottom left: Detail of Louvre Madonna, lightened to show location of second eye. Bottom right: Drawing of side view.
Figure 18. Top: A bust placed into receptive material (sawdust, in this simulation) makes a cast at an angle. Below: Diagram illustrating a method of casting a face at an angle. Red indicates the area that is to be cast.
Figure 19. Drawing that demonstrates where the background clay moves or curves to meet the raised portions of the relief.
Figure 20. Donatello, *Borromeo Madonna*, c. 1450, terracotta, 32.9 x 20.5 in, Kimball Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.
Figure 22. Donatello, *Bardini Madonna*, polychromed terracotta, c. 1425, 35 x 25 in, Museo Bardini, Florence.
Figure 23. Donatello, *San Felice Madonna*, c. 1457, polychromed terracotta, 33.7 x 26.8 in, private collection, USA.
Figure 24. Donatello, *Madonna and Child* (two views), c.1446-53, bronze, 63 in, high altar, Basilica di Sant'Antonio, Padua.
Figure 25. Donatello, *Faith*, c. 1429, bronze, 20.5 in, from the font, Cathedral Baptistery, Siena.
Figure 26. Donatello, *Justina*, ca. 1446-53, bronze, 60.6 in, high altar, Basilica di Sant'Antonio, Padua.
Figure 27. Left: Donatello, *Judith and Holofernes*, c. 1455, bronze, 7 ft 9 in (including base), Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Right: Detail of Figure 27.
Figure 28. Giovanni di Paolo, *Madonna of Humility*, c. 1442, tempera on panel, 24.4 x 19.3, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
Figure 30. Donatello, *Pazzi Madonna*, c. 1425-30, marble, 29.3 x 27.3 in, Bode-Museum, Berlin.
Figure 31. Stele of Ampahrete and Grandchild, Kerameikos cemetery, Athens, Greece.
Figure 32. Donatello, Louvre Madonna (details of Figure 1, showing here the Virgin's veil [top], cloth over her right hand [below left], and her left arm [below, right]).
Figure 33. Left: Unknown icon painter, *Ustyug Annunciation*, c. 1130-49, tempera on wood, 7 ft. 9.7 in x 5 ft 6 in, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Right: Image of Christ in the *Ustyug Annunciation*. 
Figure 34. Attributed to Neri di Bicci, *Madonna and Child*, second half of the 15th century, tempera on panel, 17.7 x 14 in, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon.
Figure 35. Zanobi Strozzi, *Madonna of Humility with Musician Angels*, c. 1448-50, tempera and gilding on panel, 22 x 32 in, Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan.
Figure 36. Giovanni dal Ponte, *Madonna and Child with Angels*, 1410s, tempera and tooled gold leaf on panel, 34.5 x 22.8 in, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin.
Figure 37. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1320, tempera on panel, 33.5 x 22.4 in, Brera, Milan.
Figure 38. Donatello, Louvre Madonna (detail of Figure 1, showing the painted flowers on the veil).
Figure 39. Donatello, *Mary Magdalene* (two views), c. 1453-55, gilded wood, 6 ft 2 in, Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, Florence.
Bibliography


Cultorweb. "I colori dei pittori del Medioevo: Tra Blu e Rosso"
http://www.cultorweb.com/medioevo/C1.html


