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Colouring the Emperor: Andrea di Sansovino's Polychrome Terracotta Relief of Galba

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Abstract. By the time of the publication of Giorgio Vasari's Vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori in 1550, glazed terracotta was decidedly out of favour. Yet when the second edition of the work appeared in 1568, Vasari had acquired Andrea Sansovino's polychrome terracotta relief of the Roman emperor Galba. Sculpted profiles of Roman emperors were popular in Florence in the second half of the fifteenth century, and marble reliefs could also be accentuated with colour, as seen in the series of reliefs by Gregorio di Lorenzo and his circle, dated to the late fifteenth- or early sixteenth century. The production of this type of portrait had dried up long before the first edition of the Vite, and Vasari's interest in the Galba appears exceptional. The writer's penchant for coloured stones is well-attested and went hand in hand with his approval of monochrome works, but, for the most part, he does not discuss the use of colour in sculpture in the Vite. This article considers Vasari's treatment of colour in sculptures of the late Florentine Quattrocento, through the lens of Sansovino's portrait.

During the latter half of the fifteenth century, relief profiles of Roman emperors and other well-known figures from Antiquity appeared in numerous contexts and various media. The fashion for these effigies was particularly important as architectural decoration in northern Italy, but also spread beyond the peninsula. Descriptions of Roman emperors in Suetonius' *Vitae duodecim Caesarum*, as well as their images on various coins and medals, had been known for generations, and painted decorations based on antique coins had appeared already in mid-fourteenth-century Verona.¹ The rulers portrayed by Suetonius provided the basis for the immensely popular series of twelve emperors, though this designation was used with considerable flexibility and did not always constitute the earliest Roman emperors. Portraits also appeared in pairs or as singles, and this seems to have been the rule rather than the exception in Florence, where they were mostly placed indoors. Patrons could convey particular messages through the substitution of one head for another, or the most recognisable profiles could be chosen to convey a general image of Antiquity. The first series of twelve relief portraits was probably made in marble by the Florentine

¹ For Altichiero's decoration in the palazzo di Cansignorio della Scala, 1364, see Bacci 2012, 22.

sculptor Desiderio da Settignano (c. 1430–1464) in the 1450s. Mino da Fiesole (1429–1484) was also an early proponent, and these effigies of emperors and other famous figures from Antiquity remained popular in Florence throughout the second half of the fifteenth century.²

Terracotta and the hierarchy of sculpture

The first relief profiles of emperors were in marble but serial production of their likenesses and those of other ancient celebrities soon followed in cheaper materials, such as terracotta, thus making the portrait heads available beyond the most elite circles.³ Antiquity was at the heart of the new-found enthusiasm for terracotta sculpture in fifteenth-century Florence, sometimes referred to as a terracotta renaissance, and figures in clay were considered the oldest form of sculpture. The potential of terracotta was explored by Lorenzo Ghiberti and Donatello in the 1410s and 1420s and soon gained popularity.⁴ Glazed terracotta was highly prized and enjoyed the patronage of the Medici. When Luca della Robbia (1399/1400–1482) perfected the technique of glazing, his innovation was not only praised for its aesthetic qualities but also for its durability. Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) commented that painting thus acquired the permanence of sculpture.⁵ Luca della Robbia's glazed terracotta had also been praised by his contemporary Antonio Averlino, known as Filarete (c. 1400–c. 1469); this was echoed by others, including Vasari (1511–1574).⁶ The argument should be understood in the broader context of the *paragone* between painting and sculpture. The relatively short lifespan of paintings was otherwise generally mentioned as an argument against the art form and for sculpture of durable materials.⁷

By the time Desiderio da Settignano carved the first profiles of emperors, Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) had already divided sculpture into three categories, based on whether the process involved the adding or removing of material or a combination of the

² This introduction is based on Bacci 2012 who includes an extensive bibliography.

³ Bacci 2012, 44–45.

⁴ Bellosi and Gentilini 1998. The literature on Quattrocento terracotta is vast. Fundamental to the discussion of a terracotta renaissance in recent decades is Bellosi 1977, 163–169. See also Giancarlo Gentilini's discussion of sources in Gentilini 1992, I, especially 24–25.

⁵ Leonardo in Farago 1992, 260–262.

⁶ Filarete 1972, 696–697 (his treatise was originally written in the 1460s). He is also included among the select few modern artists named in Leon Battista Alberti's (1404–1472) 1436 Italian version of *Della Pittura* (in the prologue dedicated to Filippo Brunelleschi), published in Creighton 1988, 80. Vasari 2006 (1550), 251; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 265–266.

⁷ The importance of the *paragone* to the sixteenth-century debate can hardly be overestimated; the most central text is Varchi 2015 (originally published in 1550, 1549 according to the Florentine calendar). Leonardo da Vinci's early contributions were instrumental to the development of the debate (on this see Farago 1992).

two. Only those who worked in the subtractive mode exclusively were described as sculptors by Alberti.⁸ These distinctions influenced later conceptions about sculpture as well as the understanding of hierarchical differences within the plastic arts. A century later, in 1547, Michelangelo declared that sculpture was produced through the removal of material and that the additive mode came closer to painting.⁹ Traditionally, the most important materials were marble and bronze, the latter being the costlier of the two. This limited the potential number of patrons, and commissions in these materials were naturally associated with prestige. Bronze was potentially also durable but could be melted in case of war, and the preference for marble even had an effect on the view of bronze.¹⁰ Terracotta was still used, however, and attitudes to the medium varied.

When Vasari published his *Vite* in 1550, glazed terracotta was so unfashionable that he found it necessary to include a passage in its defence. ‘Figures in glazed terracotta are not held in great esteem’, he observes. Vasari emphasises their usefulness and considers them particularly appropriate for exterior use. He notes that they may be placed in damp and cold conditions where paintings do not last and also mentions their affordability.¹¹ Interestingly, their ability to withstand the elements is no longer presented as a defence in the 1568 edition of the *Vite*. Vasari makes no mention of the relative popularity of glazed terracotta but instead emphasises the discontinuation of the Della Robbia workshop. Although others have tried their hand at it, he comments, no one has come close to the high standards of the Della Robbia family. He also emphasises the *novelty* of the innovation, contending that this type of sculpture was unknown to the ancients.¹² Although Vasari was in no way negative about the idea of glazed terracotta in the first edition of his *Vite*, he seems even more positively inclined to it in the second edition. Their utility is mentioned but no longer needed as justification.¹³

⁸ Alberti 1804, 108 (in *De Statua*, originally written in 1462).

⁹ In a letter to Benedetto Varchi, published in Varchi 2015, 82. Varchi asked several famous artists to express their views on the relative merits of sculpture and painting and gave a lecture on the subject in Florence in 1547. The lecture and letters were originally published in 1550 with another lecture by Varchi on one of Michelangelo’s sonnets.

¹⁰ Francesco da Sangallo is adamant that all materials, including bronze, are inferior to marble in his 1547 letter to Benedetto Varchi, published by the latter. Varchi 2015, 73.

¹¹ Vasari 2006 (1550), 248, 251.

¹² Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 267. The term *terracotta invetriata* was not new at the time; it was used to refer to glazed ceramic wares. Gentilini 1992, I, 142–143.

¹³ Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 264. A few years earlier, in his funeral oration to Michelangelo, Benedetto Varchi had also singled out Luca della Robbia and credited him with making painting permanent, Varchi 2008, 53 (page reference to the original document, published in 1564). There is no reference to Luca della Robbia in his 1550 *paragone* publication.

Colour in sculpture

While Vasari discusses numerous works in terracotta in his *Vite*, he devotes considerably less attention to the question of polychrome sculpture. Yet, he is by no means unappreciative of the use of colour in the art form.¹⁴ His interest in the colour of stones is evident from the very beginning of the *Vite*, in his chapter on the properties of various stones used in buildings and sculptures.¹⁵ Cosimo I de' Medici, to whom both editions of the *Vite* were dedicated, shared Vasari's excitement about coloured stones.¹⁶ Vasari combines his passion for polychrome qualities with the appreciation of white, flawless marble. For example, he describes how an exceptionally white type of Carrara marble is particularly well-suited to the carving of figures and was used both by the ancients and in his own day.¹⁷

Vasari also considers the colours of other materials, including, for instance, how surface treatment may change the appearance of bronze.¹⁸ At the turn of the century, the humanist Pompeius Gauricus, whose primary interest was bronze, and who had at least some practical experience, discusses colour effects in greater detail, even noting the difficulty of getting the eyes right.¹⁹ Frank Fehrenbach points out that various attitudes to colour coexisted at the time, and that there was no clear transition from polychrome to monochrome.²⁰ In fact, whiteness is relative and there is no such thing as uncoloured sculpture.²¹ Even the whitest marble is not entirely monochrome, and light, shade and a sculpture's surroundings always influence the perception of colour. Moreover, there is a difference between making use of a material's natural hues and adding pigment mixed with various types of binding to its surface. Nonetheless, more general studies of the impression of colours are by no means irrelevant. In the following, Vasari's views on colour will be considered, without taking differences between materials and techniques into account, primarily in relation to sculptures produced in what may be broadly defined as Sansovino's Tuscan milieu.

¹⁴ There is an expanding body of research on colour in Renaissance sculpture. Some recent works are Reuterswärd 2000; Geddes 2004; Collareta 2008; Fehrenbach 2011; D'Elia 2016. For the use of coloured marble, see Barry 2011, especially chapters 8–10.

¹⁵ Vasari 2006 (1550), 23–36; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 10–20.

¹⁶ For this interest, see Morrogh 1985.

¹⁷ Vasari 2006 (1550), 29–30; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 16.

¹⁸ Vasari 2006 (1550), 66; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 40.

¹⁹ Gauricus 1969, 231, 233 (his *De Sculptura* was originally published in 1504).

²⁰ Fehrenbach 2011, 47. Sansovino and Luca della Robbia (as well as Benedetto da Maiano) are among the very few Tuscan sculptors mentioned by Gauricus, Gauricus 1969, 251, 255, 257. In a recent article, Una Roman D'Elia argues that the practice of painting sculptures in Antiquity was known in the fifteenth century, D'Elia 2016.

²¹ See Potts 2008, 78. For the sake of simplicity *white* and *monochrome* will be used as the terms are commonly understood in the following.

Fig. 1 Andrea Sansovino, Galba. Arezzo, Casa Vasari. Photo: Combusken, Wikimedia Commons. Reproduced with the permission of the Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali e per il turismo. Polo Museale della Toscana-Museo di Casa Vasari di Arezzo ©.

The *Galba* profile

Vasari's account of the *Galba* relief (Fig. 1) itself does not include any information on colour. In his 1550 *Vita* of Sansovino, the writer refers to the work as well as the now lost pendant *Nero* as admirable terracotta heads (*teste*), taken from antique medals. He describes the location of the two reliefs above a fireplace in the house of Simone Vespucci, who, at least according to Vasari, was Sansovino's first patron.²² The work was in Florence, Vasari's relationship with the Vespucci family was close, and he certainly had the chance to see it himself.²³ In the considerably expanded second edition of Sansovino's *Vita*, Vasari, who repeats the account, adds that the *Galba* is now in his own collection in his house in Arezzo.²⁴ However, some scholars have doubted the attribution of the *Galba* in Casa Vasari.²⁵ It cannot be determined with certainty whether or not the relief now in the museum corresponds to the one mentioned in the *Vite*, but the present work was documented in Arezzo in the nineteenth century, in a context that is compatible with Vasari's owner-

²² Vasari 2006 (1550), 701. There is little reason to believe Vasari's claim that Simone Vespucci was Sansovino's first patron. Girolami observes that he may well have acquired the portraits from the artist in Florence, but rejects Vasari's account of how the Florentine discovered the young Sansovino as pure fantasy. It echoes Vasari's story of Giotto's chance discovery and was repeated in four of the writer's biographies, including that of Sansovino. Girolami 1936, 190 n. 2.

²³ For Vasari's contact with the Vespucci, see Rubin 1986, 283.

²⁴ Vasari 2006 (1550), 701; Vasari 2006 (1568), II 117.

²⁵ Salmi 1973, 483–484, n.1; Gentilini 1992, II, 455; Bellandi 1998, 377–378.

ship.²⁶ According to Vasari, the *Galba* is among Sansovino's early works, but this dating excludes the participation of the maiolica factory of Cafaggiolo, with which Sansovino most likely collaborated.²⁷ The factory had been established by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici in 1498, and stylistically the relief is closer to the *Porsenna*, datable to 1515–1520, and therefore normally dated to 1510 or later.²⁸

Francesca Maria Bacci, who dates the relief to between 1510 and 1520, remarks that it attests to the continued interest in this type of profile portrait of ancient emperors in Florence.²⁹ While Vasari's evaluation of Sansovino's stylistic development may have differed from those of more recent authors, his early dating probably also relied on the fact that the portrait type was primarily associated with the latter half of the Quattrocento in Florence as well as its presence in the collection of Sansovino's supposed first patron. If Sansovino's *Galba* really had been among his early works, it would certainly have been made before his reception into the Stonemasons and Woodworkers Guild in early 1491.³⁰ Although Sansovino's exact date of birth is not yet known, it seems likely to have occurred around 1467.³¹ Vasari gives 1461 in the first and 1460 in the second edition of the *Vite*.³² Imprecision is common in the *Vite*, but if we are to follow Vasari's chronology, the portrait could well have been produced in the late 1470s or first half of the 1480s. George Huntley, who does not question the correctness of the date of birth given by Vasari, in fact suggests a 1475–1481 dating, based on the presence of medallions of Nero and Galba on the candelabra crowning Benedetto da Maiano's (1442–1497) marble portal, executed in the 1470s, in the Sala dei Gigli in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence.³³ In this particular location it is not unreasonable to assume that the effigies were invested with symbolic value, but their integration into ornamental details also attests to the pervasiveness of emperors' profiles.³⁴ While any connection between the two sets of profiles does not appear immediately evident, the two sculptors undoubtedly knew each other well, as seen below. Conclusions about Vasari's interest or lack thereof in the polychromy of the *Galba* cannot be drawn on the basis of his silence on the matter. A closer look at his treatment of colour in some works by other Tuscan sculptors of Sansovino's day may, however, provide a context for the portrait and Vasari's thoughts on the subject. Although Sansovino also

²⁶ See Droandi 2003, 127–128, 134. Alessandro Del Vita identified the relief and explained how it could have originated in the artist's collection, Del Vita 1919, 30, n. 2. See also Del Vita 1929–1930, 148; Girolami 1936, 188–189; Goguel 1998, 126–127.

²⁷ As first pointed out by Alessandro Del Vita, Del Vita 1919, 31–32.

²⁸ Only the head, now in the Palazzo Avignonese in Montepulciano, remains of the colossal terracotta of *Porsenna*, erected in 1520. See Girolami 1936, 179–191; Bartolini 1996, 164, cat. 46; Paolucci 1980, 203–204, cat. 489. That the involvement of the Cafaggiolo factory was incompatible with an early dating was first observed by Girolami (1936, 190). For Cafaggiolo, see also Vannini and Caroscio 2004.

²⁹ Bacci 2012, 44.

³⁰ See Fabriczy 1906, 96 n. 1.

³¹ See Girolami 1941, 110.

³² Vasari 2006 (1550), 701; Vasari 2006 (1568), II, 116.

³³ Huntley 1971, 8, 107.

³⁴ Bacci 2012, 51.

worked elsewhere, he was trained in Tuscany and spent his formative years in Florence, and Vasari believed that the portrait was made while he was working there.

Vasari's treatment of colour in Quattrocento Tuscan sculpture

Examples of Vasari's interest in coloured stones can be found in biographies of sculptors working in Tuscany during Sansovino's lifetime. For instance, in his biography of Antonio Rossellino (1427–1479), Vasari praises the tomb of the cardinal of Portugal in San Miniato al Monte in Florence, made in 1460–1466, just before Sansovino was born, and emphasises the contrast between the white marble curtain against an arch of dark sandstone.³⁵ In the *Vita* of Andrea del Verrocchio (c. 1435–1488), he makes the observation that the sculptor, when working on the restoration of a now lost antique *Maryas* in the Medici garden, exploited naturally occurring white lines in the red marble to accentuate the nerves visible in flayed bodies.³⁶

Vasari appears less attentive to the use of colour in a work by one of Sansovino's contemporaries. In his biography of Andrea Ferrucci (1465–1526), Vasari mentions an altarpiece, generally identified with the so-called Ferrucci Altarpiece now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, originally in the church of S. Girolamo in Fiesole (c. 1493).³⁷ The altarpiece combines white and red marble, is partly gilt and traces of paint are visible. Vasari mentions marble, but does not refer to the combination of colours. More often than not, Vasari remains silent on the chromatic qualities of marble, and, as seen here, one cannot immediately assume that sculptures are white when no information is given.

³⁵ Vasari 2006 (1550), 429–430; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 413; for the tomb, on which Antonio Rossellino collaborated with his brother Bernardo Rossellino (c. 1409–1464), see Hansmann 1993, 291–316.

³⁶ Vasari 2006 (1550), 465–466; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 484. In both versions Verrocchio is said to have used red marble for the missing limbs. It seems implausible that Vasari had porphyry in mind when he described the material of the actual torso as *pietra rossa* in the 1568 edition. He normally refers to porphyry as *porfido*, and it is highly unlikely that Verrocchio accentuated the white grains in it because he lacked the tools for this sort of work. Red marble may have been used as a substitute for porphyry, which is much harder than marble. Vasari mentions the statue on repeated occasions in the *Vite*. The sculpture restored by Verrocchio is not to be confused with the antique *Maryas* in pavonazzetto now in the Uffizi in Florence. Caglioti attributes the work on the latter to Mino da Fiesole. See Caglioti 1993/1994. For porphyry's association with blood, see Butters 1996, I, 45, 49–51.

³⁷ Vasari 2006 (1550), 695; Vasari 2006 (1568), II, 108. For the altarpiece, see Apfelstadt 1993, 807–817. The resemblance between Ferrucci's altarpiece and the Corbinelli Chapel altarpiece (c. 1491, Santo Spirito, Florence) by Andrea Sansovino is striking, although changes were later made to Sansovino's work. See Vasari 2006 (1550), 702; Vasari 2006 (1568), II, 118. In the second edition of the *Vite* Vasari refers to Sansovino's combination of bronze and marble and thus implicitly mentions the use of different colours. Vasari 2006 (1568), II, 118. For the altarpiece see Lisner 1987. For the suggestion that Sansovino trained with Andrea Ferrucci, see Paolucci 1980, 200. This seems somewhat unlikely if it is correct that the latter was only two years his senior.

Another example of a work by a sculptor in Sansovino's circle is found in the biography of Benedetto da Maiano. The author praises the sculptor's portrait of Giotto, placed above a commemorative epitaph by Angelo Poliziano in the Duomo of Florence.³⁸ The monument to Giotto was commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici and erected in 1490. Vasari emphasises the use of marble in both the first and second edition of his *Vite*; the material is even mentioned in the biography of the painter.³⁹ Vasari eschews any reference to colour in these descriptions despite the artwork's polychromy, and, in the second edition of the *Vite*, he even omits his initial comment that the artist is shown in the act of painting. In fact, Giotto is represented with a tessera in his right hand and is about to place it in a mosaic. This choice may come across as puzzling for the artist who was credited with the revival of the noble art of painting.⁴⁰ Yet, Giotto was the author of the celebrated *Navicella* mosaic in St Peter's in Rome and a reference to this achievement could be intended.⁴¹ Vasari also mentions the *Navicella* mosaic in his biography of the painter, and, in the second edition, even refers to the specific challenges of the medium and Giotto's mastery of it.⁴² The writer defines mosaic as a form of painting, however, and celebrates it as the most durable variant of the art form.⁴³ Where Vasari had marvelled at the effect produced by the white marble against the dark sandstone in the monument by Antonio Rossellino, he shuns any reference to the contrast between the white relief and the dark background in his account of the portrait. It is hardly because Vasari had failed to notice the work's polychromy that he made no reference to its multicoloured appearance.

Vasari devotes more attention to colour in his account of Luca della Robbia's oeuvre.⁴⁴ The sculptor's experiments took place before Sansovino was born, but the Della Robbia workshop continued its production during his lifetime and is related to Sansovino's own work. Vasari describes how Luca at first sought permanence and then added colour. The sculptor's *Resurrection*, installed in 1444 in Florence cathedral and lauded as the first work in the new technique by the author, is mainly white against a blue background and therefore not entirely monochrome. In the 1568 edition, however, Vasari proceeds to discuss Luca della Robbia's subsequent achievements in the application of colour, and

³⁸ According to Vasari the two were among the artists who attended the winter meetings in the workshop of the architect and sculptor Baccio d'Agnolo, Vasari 2006 (1568), II, 280. Sansovino may have served an apprenticeship with Benedetto da Maiano; see Höfler 1992, 234.

³⁹ Vasari 2006 (1550), 149, 506; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 133, 477.

⁴⁰ On the choice, see Nagel 2008.

⁴¹ See Alexander Nagel (2008, 147 n. 15), who finds it astonishing that Alberti, for whom no other so-called modern works of art were worthy of mention, refers to the work as painted. Alberti's Latin and Italian versions differ; the former only refers to Giotto as painter and does not specifically state that the work was painted (2.42), but he is unlikely to have considered his own translation contradictory.

⁴² Vasari 2006 (1550), 143; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 124.

⁴³ Vasari 2006 (1550), 94; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 57. It should be added that Vasari refers specifically to glass mosaic.

⁴⁴ For the Della Robbia, see Gentilini 1992.

compares the effects of glazing to painting.⁴⁵ What he describes is a synthesis of the two art forms of sculpture and painting, where permanence is a crucial aspect. Nevertheless, he considers it a novel type of *sculpture*, and the artist is classified as sculptor only in both editions of the *Vite*.

There are similarities in Vasari's discussions of mosaics and glazed terracotta, and the fact that he considers glass mosaic a form of painting is therefore worthy of note. The process of firing is central both to the glass used in mosaics and to glazed terracotta. The surface of terracotta figures takes on a glass-like quality, as alluded to both by the term glaze and the Italian *invetriata*. Both art forms are associated with long-lasting painting, but only glazed terracotta appears to qualify as a synthesis of painting and sculpture. This is similar to Leonardo's ideas, but the latter privileged the art of painting, emphasising how, through Luca della Robbia's invention, the painted work on terracotta is covered and rendered permanent by a layer of glass.⁴⁶

In the 1550 edition, Vasari does not actually refer to colour, although he emphasises the usefulness of glazed terracotta in locations where paintings cannot be placed.⁴⁷ In the later biography, the author pays considerable attention to the issue. For example, he praises the play of light and shade of the ornamentation of the sculptor's monument to Benozzo Federighi (1454) in S. Trinità in Florence and characterises the vegetal motif as so true to life that it could not have been done better in oil.⁴⁸

The flat tiles surrounding the Federighi tomb belong to a series of works in which the artist clearly attempted to imitate painting.⁴⁹ When Vasari describes Luca's early works as white, their whiteness appears to have been relative, measured against the more complex chromatic qualities of painting.⁵⁰ Vasari could for instance have mentioned the sculptor's *Visitation* (Pistoia, S. Giovanni Fuorcivitas, c.1445), which, with the exception of the eyes, is white only, rather than include the not entirely monochrome *Resurrection* among the sculptor's early *white* works. Although some blue glaze is applied to the figures in the lunette, it is primarily a contrasting background against which the motif is set.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Vasari 2006 (1550), 249-250; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 264. The artist's *Ascension* lunette, also mentioned by Vasari, complemented the *Resurrection*. Luca della Robbia's early experiments with glazed terracotta must have taken place in the 1430s.

⁴⁶ Leonardo in Farago 1992, 260-262.

⁴⁷ Vasari 2006 (1550), 251.

⁴⁸ Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 265.

⁴⁹ See Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 265.

⁵⁰ Vasari describes Luca's early glazed works as white in the second edition of the *Vite*. Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 264.

⁵¹ Highlighting the eyes was common, as seen also in the figures of Christ and the angels in the *Resurrection*. To some extent, gilding may have been used for the latter work. Marquand 1914, 74. This was not unusual and hardly makes Vasari's insistence on whiteness less surprising, but the writer most likely would have mentioned any extensive use of gold.

He may have seen it in this light, but he could have chosen to highlight the overall effect of the *background*, as seen in his account of Antonio Rossellino's work. As far as the application of coloured glazes is concerned, what seems to interest Vasari is the use of various colours, normally associated with painting. Yet the whiteness of the figures appears essential; even Luca's *Ascension* lunette, installed in Florence Cathedral in 1451, where the relatively naturalistically coloured landscape functions as more than a traditional contrasting background, is categorised as white by the writer.⁵² Apart from his reference to the whiteness of Luca della Robbia's earliest works, however, Vasari never specifies the colours used by the artist, as is often done in his biographies of painters.⁵³ Yet the attention paid to the effects of colour in the 1568 version of the biography is comparable to Vasari's treatment of painting. Although the activity of the Della Robbia is highly relevant to the understanding of Sansovino's portrait, the workshop made frontal images of Roman emperors and ancient heroes but did not specialise in the production of profiles.⁵⁴

Fig. 2 Gregorio di Lorenzo, Aurelius Antoninus Pius, late 1400s. Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art. Gift of Leonard C. Hanna, Jr, for the Coralie Walker Hanna Memorial Collection. Photo: Cleveland Museum of Art (CC0) ©.

The profile format of the *Galba* portrait may, however, reasonably be seen in the context of the tradition established by Desiderio da Settignano, although Desiderio himself

⁵² See Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 264. Although he makes no reference to specific colours, Vasari's focus on the painterly qualities of the ornamental motif surrounding the equally white marble monument to Benozzo Federighi may appear inconsistent to modern eyes. See also his description of the festoons of fruits and flowers on the arms of Florence, Orsanmichele. Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 265.

⁵³ See for instance his description of the frescoes in the cloister of S. Miniato al Monte in Florence in the life of Luca della Robbia's contemporary Paolo Uccello. Vasari, who notes that the frescoes were made in a combination of grisaille (*terra verde*) and colour, criticises the painter's colouring and emphasises his point by explicitly mentioning the use of blue and red. Vasari 2006 (1550), 253; 1568, I, 270.

⁵⁴ Bacci 2012, 45–46.

died a few years before Sansovino was born.⁵⁵ Vasari makes no reference to the painting of sculpture in his biography of the artist.⁵⁶ Desiderio did not, however, refrain from painting his works. He also made use of pietra serena in his production of reliefs; these would be painted in the workshop itself or by a painter who specialised in this type of work. The collaboration between Desiderio da Settignano's workshop and the painter Neri di Bicci is documented in the latter's *Ricordanze*.⁵⁷ Marble reliefs of Roman emperors with traces of paint have been ascribed to Desiderio da Settignano's student Gregorio di Lorenzo (c. 1436–c. 1504), such as the profile of Aurelius Antoninus Pius in the Cleveland Museum of Art, in which the green laurel wreath contrasts with the otherwise uncoloured marble (Fig. 2). Other similar works have been attributed to him and his circle.⁵⁸ Considering the importance of Mino da Fiesole's contribution to this type of portrait, it is worth adding that colour is equally absent in his biographies.⁵⁹ Vasari does observe, however, that Mino's best work, that is the *Tomb of Count Hugo of Tuscany* (1469–1481, Florence, Badia), was made of Carrara marble.⁶⁰ In fact, the monument is not monochrome; Mino's extensive use of porphyry along with other details of colour go unmentioned.⁶¹

Vasari appears far more attentive to chromatic effects in a passage on wax sculpture in the 1568 edition of Verrocchio's *Vita*. Vasari considers three now lost wax votive portraits of Lorenzo de' Medici made by Orsino Benintendi (1440–c. 1498) with the assistance of Verrocchio and painted using oil colours.⁶² Another example, from outside Tuscany, but included here on account of its chronological proximity and because the material used is terracotta, is found in the *Vita* of the Tuscan sculptor and architect Giuliano da Maiano (1432–1490).⁶³ In his biography, Vasari refers to the coloured (*colorite*) terracotta of the figures of the *Compianto* (1492) by the Modenese sculptor Guido Mazzoni da Modena, also known as Il Modanino or Il Paganino (c. 1450–1518), in the church of S.

⁵⁵ For Desiderio da Settignano, see Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny 2006.

⁵⁶ Vasari 2006 (1550), 434–437; 1568 I, 416–418.

⁵⁷ Bacci 2012, 41–43.

⁵⁸ For Gregorio di Lorenzo, see Caglioti 2008, 70–75; 86–91.

⁵⁹ Vasari 2006 (1550), 437–442; 1568, I, 419–422.

⁶⁰ Vasari 2006 (1550), 441; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 421.

⁶¹ In his introduction, Vasari mentions Carrara marble of several different colours, Vasari 2006 (1550), 29; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 15–16. The kind of description found in Mino's biography clearly entails whiteness, and porphyry was not found in Carrara. For the tomb, see Zuraw 1998. Desiderio's polychrome *Tomb of Carlo Marsuppini* (c. 1459, Florence Cathedral) is in the same tradition, following Bernardo Rossellino's *Tomb of Leonardo Bruni* (1450, Florence Cathedral). Vasari devotes considerable attention to Desiderio's carving of the Marsuppini monument. Vasari 2006 (1550), 435–436; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 417.

⁶² Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 485–486. The portraits were made after Lorenzo de' Medici survived an attempt on his life. For the use of wax effigies, see Panzanelli 2008.

⁶³ Giuliano da Maiano was the elder brother of Benedetto da Maiano. The mother house of the Olivetans was in Monte Oliveto in Tuscany. Several Tuscan artists were involved in the architecture and decorations of the church and monastery in Naples.

Anna dei Lombardi di Monteoliveto in Naples.⁶⁴ It is impossible to determine from his short comment whether or not he considered the application of pigment noteworthy as an integral part of the expressive character of the figures. Yet his remark on their extreme lifelikeness may suggest an appreciation of the combination of modelling and colour. In the case of Orsino Benintendi's wax effigies, equally lauded as extraordinarily lifelike by Vasari, this does not appear unlikely. The heads were studied from life, and hair and other details were rendered particularly well and true to life in oil paint, the author explains.⁶⁵ Vasari therefore appears to have had a positive view of the application of pigment on sculptures of terracotta and wax.⁶⁶ Like Orsino Benintendi, however, Mazzoni is not accorded a separate biography, and his status is clearly inferior to that of Luca della Robbia, who, it should not be forgotten, was a highly versatile sculptor who also worked in bronze and marble. It is perhaps worthy of note that Vasari emphasises the painting of wax effigies, an art form in its death throes, according to the writer.⁶⁷ Tentatively, it may be suggested that Vasari was unlikely to mention chromatic properties in his discussions of sculpture unless he wanted to single out a novelty or remarkable use.

Sansovino and the Della Robbia

Mazzoni's figures are not glazed, but Vasari also refers to Luca della Robbia's glazed terracotta works as objects of *terra colorite* and speaks of painted terracotta (*dipinta*).⁶⁸ It is clear from the context that he refers to the glaze and not the practice of for instance using oil colour for the skin of figures. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Vasari should refer to the *Galba* as terracotta only. For example, this is entirely in line with his description of the Della Robbia *Enthroned Madonna with Saints* now in the Duomo and formerly in the church of S. Francesco in Arezzo. According to Vasari, the altarpiece was made by Andrea della Robbia, but it appears to be the work of several hands. He refers to the *Madonna* as a terracotta without further qualification despite the polychrome glaze.⁶⁹ In Sansovino's biography, moreover, Vasari omits any reference to colouring in his account of *Saint Rocco* (c. 1528) in S. Quirico in Battifolle, near Arezzo.⁷⁰ Such inconsistencies are hardly surprising but, on the whole, Vasari shows little interest in the application of paint to sculptures. It may come as a surprise, then, that Vasari is anything but indifferent to oil

⁶⁴ Vasari 2006 (1550), 356–357; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 352. For Mazzoni, see Verdon 1978. Vasari had worked at Monteoliveto himself in 1544–1545 and must have had the chance to study the figures closely. For his decorations, see Cheney 1993.

⁶⁵ Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 486. According to Panzanelli, 'Mazzoni infused his ultrarealistic tendency with a new level of drama more closely associated with votive waxworks.' Panzanelli 2008, 26.

⁶⁶ The greater emphasis on technique in the 1568 edition of the *Vite* may also be seen in light of Vasari's collaboration with Vincenzo Borghini, who was positive to the painting of figures in some materials but advised against the colouring of marble, Carrara 2000, 246–247.

⁶⁷ Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 486.

⁶⁸ Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 264, 265.

⁶⁹ Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 266.

⁷⁰ Vasari 2006 (1568), II, 122.

painting on stone supports. This was a relatively new approach at the time, introduced by Sebastiano del Piombo in the 1530s. Vasari devotes a chapter to this practice in his introduction to painting, explaining, for instance, how appropriate stones must be chosen with care. He also emphasises the durability of this type of painting.⁷¹ His advice is geared to painters and not concerned with the application of colour pigments to sculpted works. Yet his appreciation of the synthesis of the two art forms is evident in his biography of Luca della Robbia, and, in this context, it is worth considering his comments on a collaborative project between Sansovino and the Della Robbia workshop, *Madonna in Glory with Saints* (1490–1491) originally in the church of S. Agata and now in S. Chiara in Monte San Savino.⁷² Vasari may have emphasised the participation of the Della Robbia on the *Madonna* because he considered it to be of particular interest. Yet he merely states that the work was glazed and makes no reference to the use of colour. White works in the round as well as white reliefs against a mostly blue background were made even after Luca della Robbia's initial production of glazed works; one cannot therefore automatically assume that such references imply the use of colour pigments. In fact, the *Madonna* and other figures in the terracotta in S. Chiara are white but several colours are used, making the festoons of fruit appear particularly realistic. However, in the 1490s, the competent handling of glazes of the Della Robbia workshop was by no means a novelty. In the context of Sansovino's biography it is perhaps unsurprising that Vasari chose to include a comment on the sculptor's skilled modelling, rather than additional information on the glazing, not least in view of his sometimes parsimonious accounts of the use of colour in the *Vita* of Luca della Robbia.⁷³

Vasari and profiles of ancient rulers

The fact that Vasari says anything about the *Galba* at all is worthy of note. It is one of only four profiles of ancient rulers explicitly mentioned by Vasari in his *Vite*. The other three are Sansovino's lost pendant of *Nero* and Verrocchio's lost pair of cast bronzes of

⁷¹ Vasari 2006 (1550), 87–88; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 54. The technique's longevity is emphasised also by Varchi, in his *paragone* lecture, Varchi 2015, 41. Permanence is also mentioned in a contemporary document that credits Sebastiano with the invention, cited in Hirst 1981, 124.

⁷² Vasari 2006 (1550), 701; Vasari 2006 (1568), II, 117. Salmi also suggests that the young Sansovino may have been employed by the Della Robbia workshop to sculpt the ciborium for the church of S. Simeone in Montarchi. Salmi 1973, 486–487. It may be added that Vasari does not mention Sansovino's participation in the polychrome glazed terracotta frieze at Poggio a Caiano, now attributed to Bertoldi di Giovanni, Giuliano da Sangallo and Andrea Sansovino. Sansovino's participation was first suggested by Ulrich Middeldorf, Middeldorf 1934, 112–113.

⁷³ Vasari's description is supplemented with an observation on the quality of the work in the 1568 edition. Vasari 2006 (1568), II, 117. Compare Vasari 2006 (1550), 701. A coloured glaze is used for the crown of the *Madonna*. It may be added that colours are used on the figures in the above-mentioned Della Robbia *Enthroned Madonna with Saints*.

Alexander and *Darius*, although works based on the latter pair give us some idea about their appearance.⁷⁴

Verrocchio's portraits were fanciful, and Vasari makes no mention of the use of ancient coins.⁷⁵ In this they differed from Sansovino's effigies, as well as numerous others, although the difference between images based on works from Antiquity and imaginary portraits is not always equally evident.⁷⁶ Considering the scarce attention Vasari devotes to profiles of Roman emperors and other famous figures of the ancient world, it may seem all the more surprising that he emphasises a pair of terracotta images rather than works in marble. In fact, in his introduction to sculpture, Vasari asserts that terracotta and wax are as well-suited to the production of half reliefs as bronze and marble.⁷⁷ The author certainly valued Sansovino's works in various media, and his *Vita* of Luca della Robbia also demonstrates his appreciation of polychrome glazed terracotta. Yet he does not consider portraits of Roman emperors in his account of the sculptor and his workshop. Vasari's above-mentioned disdain for attempts at production of glazed terracotta by artists outside the Della Robbia workshop hardly explains his silence on the colouring of the profile. It seems more likely that he focused on Sansovino's modelling and considered the colouring subsidiary, but he would not have found the *Galba* commendable if he had regarded the glaze as unsatisfactory or inappropriate for this type of emperor portrait. The greater availability of authentic ancient portraits in Vasari's day may have contributed to his general lack of interest in Quattrocento emperor profiles, and his decision to acquire one of them appears all the more exceptional.

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⁷⁴ Caglioti 2008, 77; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 482; the reliefs are not mentioned in the 1550 edition. Forgeries of *Alexander* and *Darius* have also been identified, and the two could have been carved in marble rather than made of metal. For Verrocchio's profiles, see Caglioti 2011.

⁷⁵ Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 482.

⁷⁶ See for instance Mino da Fiesole's imaginary marble profile of *Scipio*, c. 1460–1465, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

⁷⁷ Vasari 2006 (1550), 60; Vasari 2006 (1568), I, 36.

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