

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Della Robbia Card Impressive

The Michael family of Carmel always presents to its friends a charming and impressive greeting card during the holiday season. This past season was no exception. I do not know whose interest and writing ability goes into the production but I do know that I have looked forward each year to being one of the recipients.

T. Michael and his family saw the successful publication of their book, "Tumors of Infancy and Childhood," Lippincott of Philadelphia. "For this achievement we are all humble, grateful and extremely thankful; so in this spirit it is befitting that we choose as our cover theme the Bambino of Andrea della Robbia, the art symbol of all bambini," writes the Doctor in the introduction to the history of this old artist family.

The history of the della Robbia family is an interesting one. The father and grandfather of Luca della Robbia were both shoemakers but Luca, as a boy, even then showing signs of greatness, was interested in art. He was sent to learn the trade of a goldsmith and studied under the best in Florence, Leonardo di Ser Giovanni. He soon became master of the trade, but longed to do greater things in the field of art – he wanted to become a sculptor. So he apprenticed himself and, working diligently, eventually achieved great success in this field. In 1446 he was able to purchase a house on the Via Gulpha, a "bottega" (part home, studio and shop) where he sold his statues and other fine works of art.

He lived there with his two nephews, Simone and Andrea, whom he adopted. Simone followed his father and grandfather and became a shoemaker, but Andrea studied with his uncle Luca and learned to be a sculptor. He learned fast and soon his work became so fine it was hard to distinguish his from his uncle's. Both della Robbias produced many precious pieces of statuary and became famous throughout Italy and the rest of Europe. They made figures of marble and later of baked clay or terra cotta. It was Luca who first discovered or rediscovered an ancient form of tin glazing and utilized this technique to make his own beautiful figures of terra cotta. This particular form of glaze had its beginnings in Persia. From there it spread to the Arabs and thence made its way to Spain where the Moors utilized it in the construction of the most beautiful palace of the Alhambra.

The Italian potters had produced glazed pottery for years, but it was Luca della Robbia who first made use of the beautiful tin glaze in his own country. He may have learned the technique from traveling Spanish potters or, on the other hand, by constant experimentation may have discovered it independently in his own studio. At any rate it soon became a popular form of art throughout Italy. Many original della Robbia works have been shown in the great galleries of the world and endless copies have been sold in art shops of Italy and other countries. They have a few favorite colors: blue, yellow, cream, green and touches of violet.

When he was twenty-eight, Andrea was commissioned to make decorations for the loggia of the Foundling Hospital in Florence. He made a series of round cream-colored plaques with beautiful blue backgrounds in which were molded relief figures of bambini wrapped in swaddling clothes. Each bambino was like the portrait of some particular child; one was serious, one wistful; one was roguish, one merry, one a little sad. Each in some way held out his tiny hands and arms asking, not for alms, but for those outside to remember the little bambini within who had neither home nor parents.

It was for their friends that the Michaels chose for their theme the happy one, the merry one with a smile, for with this Bambino they wish peace and happiness to all little children, and all good wishes to everyone for the coming year.