

This photo is available in  
the print version of *Singing Our Lives*.

Luca's cantoria (above and p. 41) more accurately represents the narrative of Psalm 150, but Donatello's (p. 42) conveys the joy of those who answer the call to worship in the final psalm. These cantoria and their exuberant figures were, and always will be, a competing pair.

*Luca della Robbia* (c. 1400-1482). CANTORIA, 1431-1438. Marble, cantoria length 17'. Removed from the Duomo and now in Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

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# Exuberant Praise

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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Luca della Robbia's "big break" came in 1431 when he received the commission from the Opera del Duomo, a committee that included artists and theologians, to carve the *cantoria*, or choir gallery, for the cathedral of Florence, S. Maria del Fiore. The gallery (see the photograph on p. 38) was to be placed over the door of the north sacristy, a room where the sacred vessels and vestments are kept, on the left as you enter the cathedral, or *duomo*. A political crisis had led to a ban on expenditures from 1428 to 1431, but the construction of the Florentine cathedral resumed with this commission. Historical documents describe Luca's *Cantoria* as an organ loft. Yet, given the small choirs and portable organs of the period, this does not exclude singers and other instrumentalists from using it as well.<sup>1</sup>

Luca carved in high relief sculpture a visual interpretation of Psalm 150, the psalm that sounds the concluding note in the Psalter by calling one and all to worship:

Praise the LORD!  
 Praise God in his sanctuary;  
     praise him in his mighty firmament!

Praise him for his mighty deeds;  
     praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound;  
     praise him with lute and harp!

Praise him with tambourine and dance;  
     praise him with strings and pipe!

Praise him with clanging cymbals;  
     praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!  
     Praise the LORD!

What better way to inspire a congregation to worship than the delightful images on Luca's *Cantoria*? When they glanced upward during the Mass, the worshippers would see the joyful praise of children.

The gallery itself is a rectangular shape that resembles a Roman sarcophagus and is supported on acanthus consoles. A series of reliefs, four along the side and one at each end of the gallery, depict children praising the Lord as they dance and play the musical instruments mentioned in the psalm. These figural panels are separated by pairs of flattened pilasters and the Latin text of the entire psalm is incised above and below them.



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*Luca della Robbia* (c. 1400-1482). *BOYS SINGING FROM A CHOIR BOOK*, from the *CANTORIA*, 1431-1438. Marble. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy. Photo: © Archive Timothy McCarthy / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Luca posed the frolicking children in groups, and each scene is a beautifully balanced and arranged composition. The most popular scene, which is often reproduced today on Christmas cards, features the singing boys (see above). They are so realistically portrayed that some can be identified as treble voices and others as bass. The joy of singing is exhibited by the power of a song to hold the attention of these (momentarily) serene boys.

Donatello, by contrast, decorated a *cantoria* with younger, more energetic boys, who usually are referred to as *putti* rather than children. Donatello, the more famous Florentine sculptor, was away in Rome at the time that Luca received the commission for a choir gallery at the Florence cather-

dral. The story goes that Donatello's contract read, "If yours (Donatello's) is as good as della Robbia's, then we'll pay you this much.... If it is better, then we'll pay you more." Donatello's *Cantoria* was to be placed over the door of the south sacristy, to the right as you enter the cathedral and directly opposite Luca's.

Just back from Rome and inspired by ideas from ancient art, Donatello based his *cantoria* on classical models, but he added some new twists and unconventional combinations. The artist already had used Psalm 150 in his design for the pulpit in the cathedral of the nearby town of Prato. There he had carved a series of panels divided by pilasters, but allowed the putti to dance and flow behind the pilasters, for an illusion of greater depth. The artist employed the same illusion with even more sophistication in the Florence *Cantoria*—now the putti perform two continuous dances in a circle and, for even more depth in the entire structure, the putti are placed behind a series of free-standing paired colonnettes (see the detail below). Donatello, knowing that his *cantoria* would be seen in competition with Luca's, wanted to show his excellence in creating realistic perspective in a relief sculpture.

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Donatello (c.1386-1466). *DANCING PUTTI*. Detail from the *CANTORIA*. 1433-39. Marble, *cantoria* length 18'8". Removed from the *Duomo* and now in *Museo dell'Opera del Duomo*, Florence, Italy. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The sculptor also displayed his knowledge of Roman architectural decoration. Above and below the dancing putti (and where Luca had chosen to place the inscription of Psalm 150), Donatello used the palmetto, the shell, the urn, and the mask. The combination of these elements and their proportions had not appeared like this before. All the surfaces are highly

ornamented and elaborate. The background to the panels and the colonnettes are encrusted with mosaic tesserae (cut pieces of colored marble) so as to reflect the light and add color to the frieze of ecstatic putti.

Both of the dueling *cantoria* were removed from the cathedral when the musical requirements for a grand-ducal wedding in the seventeenth century rendered them obsolete.<sup>2</sup> And despite the popularity of the singing boys in later years, Luca della Robbia's name is more commonly associated today with a technique of enameled terracotta (with white figures against a blue relief background) that he invented.

In the early years, Luca della Robbia won the battle of critical opinion. Leone Battista Alberti, the great Florentine architect, humanist, and writer, praised Luca alongside far better known artists Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Donatello, and Masaccio in an introductory note to *Della pittura* (*On Painting*) in 1435.<sup>3</sup> Alberti later criticized Donatello's *Cantoria*, complaining that the figures danced and twisted too much. Subsequent generations of critics, however, have ranked Donatello's work higher. They compliment his dynamism, especially in not constricting the children to neat frames like Luca della Robbia, but allowing them great freedom to feel the praise within the psalm.

Today in the Opera del Duomo Museum in Florence, which houses works that were conceived and made for the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, Giotto's Campanile, and the Baptistery of San Giovanni, these two *cantoria* once again are placed on opposite walls in the same room for comparison. Although Luca more accurately represents the narrative of Psalm 150, Donatello conveys the joy in the souls of those who hear and take to heart the call to worship in the final psalm. These *cantoria* and their exuberant figures were, and always will be, a competing pair.

## NOTES

1 Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, fifth edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall and Harry N. Abrahams, Inc., 2003), 279.

2 Ibid.

3 *Della pittura*, written in Latin in 1435 and quickly translated into the vernacular Italian in 1436, was both an instructional manual and a theoretical treatise intended, in part, to educate Florentine artists about the intellectual side of their profession.



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