



Della Robbia Charger

Artist: Della Robbia Factory, Birkenhead, England, 1894-1906

Date: c. 1900

Medium: Decorative Arts, Ceramic/Glazed Earthenware

Gallery 334

The **Della Robbia Pottery** was a ceramic factory founded in 1894 in Birkenhead, England.

Founders:

The business was started by Harold Steward Rathbone and Conrad Gustave d'Huc Dressler (1856-1940). Rathbone, son of a wealthy local business man, Philip Rathbone, had been a pupil of Ford Madox Brown, who was one of the founders of the Arts and Crafts movement. In 1894, Rathbone founded a pottery on the banks of the River Mersey at Birkenhead and named it grandly Della Robbia after the Italian Renaissance sculptor family of the same name whom he so admired. The enterprise lasted just 12 years. Dressler was a sculptor, potter and also inventor of the continuous firing tunnel kiln. Giovanni Carlo Valentino Manzoni also joined the pottery in early 1894, leaving to establish his own pottery, the Minerva Art Ware Manufacturers in Hanley in July 1895. Manzoni returned to the pottery in June 1898, staying until its closure in 1906.

Products:

The pottery was established as a true Arts & Crafts pottery on the lines advocated by William Morris, using local labour and raw materials such as local red clay from Moreton, Wirral. Della Robbia pottery is often recognisable by its blue-green, yellow-brown colouring. Another

distinguishing feature is its distinctive “scraffito” decoration, the term given to the technique of carving decoration into the wet clay before firing. The pottery had lustrous lead glazes and often used patterns of interweaving plants, typical of Art Nouveau, with heraldic and Islamic motifs.

Dressler was mainly responsible for the decorative architectural panels, many of which can still be seen in the local area of Birkenhead and Liverpool, as well as in the local museums. The brightly coloured panels, inspired by the work of the Florentine sculptor Luca della Robbia and his family, did not prove to be very popular on the dark brick buildings of the period, the pottery turning to large two-handled vases, presentation wares, wall chargers and plates, as well as ceramic clock cases, tiled window boxes, numerous types of vases and similar wares, as a source of income. Dressler left the pottery in 1897 to establish his own pottery, the Medmemham Pottery, in Marlow, Buckinghamshire.



Della Robbia mark

The Della Robbia mark is usually handwritten on the base of pieces with a ship device, and often the initials of the designer and decorator, and sometimes the date. Example initials include:

- 'C' for Charles Collis
- 'C.A.W.' for Cassandia Annie Walker
- *'C.M.' for Carlo Manzoni
- 'L.W.' for Liza Wilkins
- 'R.B' for Ruth Bare

*The year the Della Robbia factory was founded, a gifted young Italian sculptor named Giovanni Carlo Manzoni had visited Birkenhead, having been invited to exhibit some of his sculpture at Dressler’s home.

Originally from Turin, Manzoni was an accomplished linguist who taught languages and anatomy. He was also a gifted sculptor and a skilled carpenter, working in mosaic,

marquetry and carving, but a potter he was probably not. However, fate brought him to England, where he founded the Granville Pottery in Hanley, Staffordshire.

Out put was crude and spasmodic, but the ware had a geometric and colourful style all its own. Production was based on trial and error and the business went out of existence after only a short time when the works was hit by a disastrous fire. Dressler had hoped Manzoni would join him at the Medmenham Pottery, but instead, hrew his hand in with Rathbone becoming his chief artistic director.

Manzoni went on to become one of Della Robbia's most innovative and vibrant designers.

Later period:

The costs of making the Della Robbia products was greater than the prices that could be charged. Even with the introduction of the professional services of a thrower and kiln man, as well as the use of commercial glazes and raw materials, the pottery could not make a commercial success of itself. In 1900 Marianne de Caluwé joined the pottery, injecting finance as well as bringing a new direction with her strong Art Nouveau influence. New exhibition venues in Scotland, even a renewed interest in the pottery's wares from 1900 through to 1904 could not help it survive, and so the pottery closed in 1906.

Della Robbia art pottery was widely sold by Liberty & Co. as well as in their own retail outlet in Liverpool.



