

Luca della Robbia ca. 1440–1482

Madonna Frescobaldi ca. 1445–1450

Glazed ceramic. Inv. Nr. 2180

At the beginning of the war in 1939, when the luminously glazed *Madonna Frescobaldi* relief was removed from its wooden frame, the less valuable frame was stored in the basement of the Pergamon Museum, which was perceived to be not particularly safe. The important relief, on the other hand, with its sensuous depiction of the Madonna and the slightly enraptured gaze of the child, was bedded in wood shavings, packed into storage crate KFM 5, and in 1941 brought to the Berlin-Friedrichshain flak bunker. This location, with its two-meter thick walls of steel-reinforced concrete, was considered the safest place for highly valuable art. But the bunker burned in May 1945 and any trace of the relief was lost. Only a fragment of the child's head came – unexplainedly – to Berlin-Dahlem in the American Sector. As the only remainder of the work, the little head was soon forgotten, hardly even of art historical interest.

Around the middle of the 15th century, the della Robbia family in Florence perfected the technique for vibrantly glossy glazes on sculptural ceramics. Originally developed on the island of Mallorca (today part of Spain), this technique was known as majolica. For more than 100 years, the della Robbias put their stamp on this artistic technique in central Italy. The production of these glazes was both their secret and the basis of their success. Among their masterpieces was the *Madonna Frescobaldi*.

When the art historian and curator for Italian Renaissance works in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, Vasily Rastorguev, was working in his storerooms in 2015, he happened across a fragment: a heavily damaged head of a Madonna made of glazed ceramic. As a connoisseur he knew that it belonged to the *Madonna Frescobaldi* relief, which up until 1939 had been displayed in the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum. A small slip of paper, attached in Moscow (in the period 1946–1953), contained the Russian inventory number 3C-502. Until 2015 no one in

Berlin knew that besides the child's head, there was a second fragment that survived the fire in the flak bunker.

At almost the same time, during an inventory in the storeroom of the Bode Museum, a wooden frame was discovered that until 1939 belonged to this Madonna. Many empty frames without their contents remained in Berlin after the war. Apparently in 1946, the Soviet trophy brigades saw no reason to confiscate them.

For 80 years scarcely noticed, the frame had become an empty shell. However, through its assignment to the almost completely lost relief, it has regained importance. Any presentation of the work must tell its history. This display, for the first time, seizes the chance to bring the remaining frame and the two fragments back into awareness.

Hardly any Italian Renaissance reliefs dispensed with a decorative frame. Both belonged together. The example of the *Madonna Frescobaldi* opens new and hopeful perspectives for the presentation of works that are currently divided between Moscow and Berlin.



Fig. 1 The surviving wooden frame of the Madonna Frescobaldi © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst / Antje Voigt



Fig. 2 The only fragment of the Madonna Frescobaldi remaining in Berlin, the child's head © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst / Marion Böhl



Fig. 3 The Madonna Frescobaldi in its condition before 1945 © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst / Archiv