

SPECIAL ARTICLE

THE ORIGIN AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ACADEMY'S  
DELLA ROBBIA INSIGNIA

By Paul W. Beaven, M.D.

SHORTLY after the Academy was organized, a discussion took place, the object of which was to find an appropriate design for an insignia which might appear on all certificates of membership, on programs, or on Academy publications. Although Academy records are completely silent about this discussion, for they have been thoroughly searched, it is obvious that a design was selected and was used as our insignia for a period of 10 years. Figure 1 is a replica of this insignia.

The story of the selection of the in-

she cannot remember this) suggested a Della Robbia type of insignia.

Dr. Grulee, at any rate, remembers that he consulted with Mr. Jasper King, the director of C. L. Richetts in Chicago. The firm later became the Scriptorium, and this is the name of the firm that now makes the present insignia. Mr. King was not only a business man, Dr. Grulee writes, but was well acquainted with artistic work of many kinds. Mr. King now has no memory or records of this commission, but Dr. Grulee says Mr. King submitted 2 or 3 examples, and it was from these that the first insignia was chosen.

The choice was made by Dr. C. A. Aldrich, according to Dr. Grulee's memory, though he thinks it may have also been submitted to Dr. John Ruhräh. The latter was an authority on pediatric history, having written a book on that subject. Dr. Aldrich and Mr. King were great friends. Dr. Borden Veeder's opinion is that Dr. Ruhräh had more to do with the choice than Dr. Aldrich.

When Dr. Henry Helmholtz became a member of the Executive Board (he was on the Board from 1932 until 1939; during his last year he was President of the Academy) he was disturbed about the Della Robbia infant that had been chosen. In a letter to me he says:

"The bambino (the original one) is a scrawny youngster, not in keeping with the 12 beautiful bambini that decorate the Infants Hospital in Florence."

As a matter of fact, Dr. Helmholtz is correct. It not only differed somewhat in nourishment, as he points out, but in other ways. The 8 Della Robbia medallions, and the other 4, probably the work of Genori, have a stellate background which sets them



FIG. 1. Original insignia of the Academy.

signia shown in Figure 1 is pieced together by information obtained by letters I have received from those who must have had a hand in its selection.

Dr. Marshall Pease writes that he has a vague recollection of the matter being brought up at a meeting of a small group of Academy members in Dr. Clifford Grulee's home. He thinks he remembers that Mrs. Grulee (though she herself says

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off. The general configuration of the face, and especially of the eye, is more appealing in the plaques that appear on the Florentine Innocenti Hospital. The arms present a supplication for help. None of these features is present in the figure to which Dr. Helmholtz objected. Also, in the Della Robbia to which he objected the feet are free, which neither ancient lore nor contemporary art nor medical practice allowed. A typical plaque by Andrea della Robbia is Figure 2.

Dr. Helmholtz acted on his opinion, al-



FIG. 2. (University Prints, Boston.)

though the change was not made until the next administration under Dr. Joseph Bilderback. He asked a cousin of his, Mr. Leo H. (for Helmholtz) Junker, who is an eminent artist, especially in the field of etching, to design a bambino more in keeping with the Italian original and still have it suggest an American infant. Mr. Junker says, in a letter, that Dr. Helmholtz suggested the type of format and general character.

Mr. Junker used as his model the only figure by Andrea della Robbia that did not have the feet swaddled. In another letter

to me Mr. Junker quotes (from where he does not say) that the medallions represented "waifs and strays of humanity cast adrift at birth, and the outstretched arms and pleading eyes seem to crave the pity of the passer-by and stir the sympathy of the beholder." I think anyone will agree that the first bambino that we used does not possess these qualities.

The plaque submitted by Mr. Junker is Figure 3. This has been our insignia for the

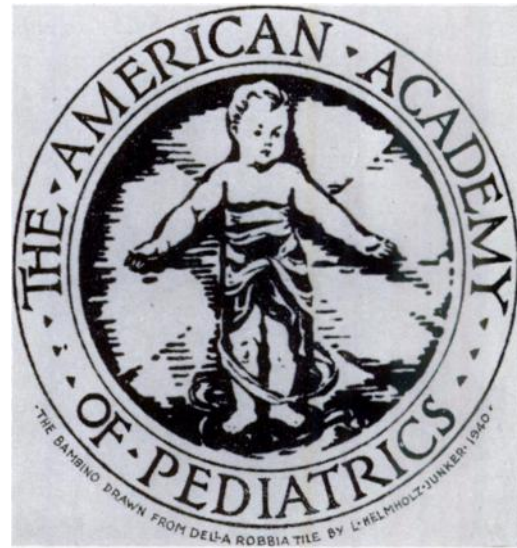


FIG. 3. Present official insignia of the Academy.

past 15 years. We owe a great debt to Mr. Junker for this artistic representation, also to Dr. Helmholtz for initiating the change.

This is the story of the adoption of the Della Robbia that we now use.

An historical background will give greater significance to this account of a choice of a Della Robbia figure on the Academy's insignia.

Florence was founded by the Romans, and its history is long and astonishing. It grew by warfare and by its outstanding culture to be the acknowledged center of refinement and enlightenment in the Middle Ages. In the Fifteenth Century it became a city state, being ruled by Cosimo de Medici, a wealthy and cultured merchant. His family ruled this city state for 2 centuries. When modern Italy was formed

in 1865, Florence was its capital for 5 years, at which time it was superseded by Rome.

Besides the family of de Medici, other citizens of Florence are immortal. A few of them are Savonarola, Machiavelli, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Dante.

Possibly not comparable to these, but definitely great cultural contributors, were the members of the Della Robbia family. The founder of this Florentine family was Luca della Robbia, who established an atelier devoted to sculpture and ceramics. An atelier is a workshop of an artist or artists not unlike our present day factory. The difference, however, was that there was no production line. Each artist worked on a creation from his own or his masters mind. The master might suggest changes in a particular work, or he might even take the unfinished work and complete it himself. Often many houses were used depending on the size of the atelier and the workmen formed a guild. It is estimated that at its height the guild controlled by the Della Robbia family had 16,000 workmen.

Luca della Robbia's chief and most talented pupil was his nephew, Andrea della Robbia. There were others of the family of Luca and Andrea that were well known, but we are not concerned with them here.

It is not known when Luca was born, but most scholars think it was about 1400. He died in 1482. Andrea della Robbia lived 91 years. He was born in 1437 and died in 1528.

The commissions executed by the Della Robbia atelier were almost exclusively religious in character, and the medallions of the Christ child in swaddling clothes appearing on the Innocenti Hospital are no exception. It is agreed that the first 8 of them were the work of Andrea della Robbia. He made no other similar plaques. They have become world famous, so that when you and I speak of a "Della Robbia" we mean the plaques representing the Christ child that are on the Foundling Hospital in Florence. That is not true with scholars of

art, however, since Luca, Andrea and others in the family and atelier produced famous objects of art now scattered all over the world, although most of them are in Italy. An example is the Madonna and Child of Luca della Robbia which is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Why should the Christ child be depicted in swaddling clothes? The origin of swaddling is not known but it certainly began in antiquity. It was a universal custom in Western Europe until approximately 200 years ago, when it was gradually abandoned. Occasional swaddling of infants was seen in Western Europe and in this country until relatively recently.

The Western European child who was typically swathed at the time the Della Robbia plaques were made was wound in cloth which not only prevented any movements of the lower but also the upper extremities. It was not the usual custom to keep infants in swaddling clothes longer than the first 3 months. The purpose was for protection, warmth, and to prevent deformities. The importance attached to the latter is illustrated by other precautions which were taken on this account, such as not allowing a child to sit up early or walk too soon, but this had nothing to do with swaddling, save that it was the first step taken to be sure a child attained correct posture.

In Eastern Europe swaddling an infant was performed for still other reasons. In Russia it was justified on the basis of safety. A child so wrapped would not be in danger of having its extremities broken. Even today in parts of Russia a child may be so completely swaddled that only the face shows. Protection of the head and ears is attained. In Poland the basis of swaddling is still different. The infant is regarded as extremely fragile. Without this protection it could not be intrusted to an older sibling. They believe in the "hardening" of children, and this restriction is the beginning of the life hardening program, of which there are other examples in their culture. Swaddling prevents the child from

putting its toes into its mouth. Feet, as the genitals, are considered a "dirty" part of the body. The mouth and hands are thought to be "clean."

The Eastern European Jews don't swaddle their babies for protection or for hardening, but for the purpose of warmth and comfort. The child is swaddled loosely to a pillow and the binding is tolerated to prevent deformities. They philosophize that the warmth of the swaddling clothes becomes a prototype of what the home means, protection and privacy. This well may have

wanted children. This was, in a way, the beginning of what is now the modern hospital, though it was not at that time meant to be a place for the sick. They meant it in the original sense, a hospitable house or home.

The idea of such a hospital for these foundlings was not accepted readily or universally, by any means, in the Christian world. In England abandoned children were placed in work houses, and in France until 1670 they were placed in private families and supported by the State. In that year



FIG. 4. (University Prints, Boston.)

been the way the infant Jesus was first clothed as described by St. Luke in the seventh verse, second chapter of his Gospel: "And she (Mary) brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger."

What is a Foundling Hospital? Up to the Fifth Century children abandoned by their parents were left in designated parts of a town to be picked up by whomever wished them. In 787 the Second Nicene Council of the Church ordered establishment of Foundling Hospitals in all large cities, which would be the haven for these un-

the founding hospital of St. Vincent de Paul was established in Paris. In this country the first such hospital was St. Vincent's Asylum of Baltimore, founded in 1856. Vincent de Paul was a French priest born in 1576, and was the founder of organized charity in France. He died in 1660 and was canonized about 75 years later.

When the Foundling Hospital was organized in Florence is not known. It is known that the present building (later enlarged and often restored) was designed by Brunelleschi in 1420. The building as photographed (in Fig. 4) does not show all the

present structure but does show the location above the arches where the Andrea della Robbia medallions are placed.

In 1444 there were 260 foundlings in the Innocenti Hospital and in 1511, 1,200 children. About 150 years later there were between 3,000 and 4,000 in the hospital, if we add those who cared for the children.

When Andrea was given the commission to make the plaques the building was 60 years old. They were set in their present position about 10 years later.

In these medallions Andrea wished to accent beauty of form and of color (the medallions are red and blue on terra cotta), and as Mr. Junker quotes, he wanted to emphasize "the outstretched arms and pleading eyes, which crave the pity of the passer-by and stir the sympathy of the beholder."

So as an artist, Andrea took liberties to create the impression he desired. As I have said, the practice was to swaddle a child for approximately 3 months. Andrea's models are not 3-month-old children but I should guess approximately 18 months. A young infant does not possess the appeal that an older one does, except perhaps to the mother or the pediatrician. Another good reason could have been that the medallions were to be viewed at some height from the onlooker, and a small baby does not lend itself as well to this type of presentation.

Again, he took liberties with the arms. Arms can be very appealing, and if they were enclosed the appeal would be lost, so Andrea did not enclose the arms but let them be posed in the beautiful manner shown in Figures 2 or 3. In all the medallions, save the one used by Mr. Junker as the type he thought most appropriate, the feet are completely swathed, as was the

custom. In this one Andrea took the liberty of partially exposing half the thigh and the legs and feet, which was not done in practice at all.

But Andrea della Robbia did succeed in what he purposed, that is, to make an appealing child. So appealing is it that the result he attained has made him almost a household word for all those who love children and the art that portrays them.

This is the story of our first insignia that had on it a "Della Robbia" figure. It tells how Dr. Helmholtz persuaded Mr. Junker to make a second insignia for the Academy that would possess the appeal of the original "Della Robbia" and also express the American ideal of a young child. We have now used Mr. Junker's creation for 15 years. To this account I have added a background which I hope will make our insignia more meaningful than it otherwise would be.\*

\* ADDENDUM: The insignia illustrated in Figure 3 was adopted as the official insignia of the American Academy of Pediatrics by the Executive Board at the annual meeting September 29, 1955. [Editor]

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