

The Validation of Terracotta in Eighteenth-Century Image and Text

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The material and functional qualities of clay (or, once fired, terracotta) have traditionally aligned the medium with the preparatory stages of the sculptural process. Because clay was inexpensive and highly malleable, the material was more regularly employed in the creation of sculptural models than finished works of art. However, despite the conventional conception of clay as a strictly preparatory medium, numerous portrait busts were executed by French academic sculptors, in particular the sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon, in the period from 1770 to 1790, and these busts were considered by sculptors as well as patrons to be finished works of art rather than models. One example of an eighteenth-century portrait in terracotta is Houdon's bust of the French philosopher and critic, Denis Diderot (Figure 1). Houdon's *Diderot*, a finely-modeled and highly animated depiction of the sitter, was first realized in 1771 and was exhibited in the Paris Salon of the same year.¹ Interestingly, this moment in the late eighteenth century, when terracotta portrait busts like Houdon's *Diderot* became more prominent and patronized, coincided with a proliferation of depictions of sculptors shown in the process of modeling portrait busts. These simultaneous occurrences suggest that there emerged in the late eighteenth century a heightened appreciation for both the aesthetic value of terracotta as a sculptural material and for the technical skills of the master sculptor.

The association of clay with the preparatory stages of the sculptural process, rather than as a material for finished sculptures, is illuminated by the text of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the mid-eighteenth century German art theorist. In the *History of Ancient Art*, first published in German in 1764 and then translated into French in 1766, Winckelmann articulated his perception of the function of clay,

Modeling in clay is not the execution itself,
but only a step preparatory to it, the term

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¹ Anne L. Poulet, *Jean-Antoine Houdon—Sculptor of the Enlightenment* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2004) 141.

² Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art*, trans. from the

“execution” being understood as applying to works in gypsum, ivory, stone, marble, bronze, and other hard materials.²

However, this understanding of clay as a material exclusively reserved for preparatory models is problematized by the actual existence and proliferation of terracotta portrait busts: works conceived and executed as finished sculptures in what had been, traditionally, only a preparatory material. This is not to state that sculptors ceased to create three-dimensional sketches and models in clay, because this practice certainly did continue; however, this paper will explore the possible reasons that this material came to be deemed suitable for finished portrait busts in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Perhaps one explanation why late eighteenth-century French terracotta portrait busts were increasingly appreciated was not for the real value of their actual material, but for the association of terracotta with the *première pensée*, or the first thought of the sculptor, and the physical mark of his genius. In the article entitled ‘Modèle’ from the *Encyclopédie*, Louis de Jaucourt elucidates the function of terracotta as the sculptor's sketch for a work in another material,

Modeler en terre ou en cire; c'est, parmi les Sculpteurs, l'action de former avec de la terre ou de la cire les modèles ou esquisses des ouvrages qu'ils veulent exécuter, soit en marbre, soit en bois, ou en fonte.³

Furthermore, Claude-Henri Watelet, an author and art collector who also contributed to the *Encyclopédie*, although referring to the two-dimensional sketch of the painter in his article on ‘Esquisse,’ evokes the association of the sketch with the concept of genius,

L'Imagination, maîtresse absolue de cet ouvrage [esquisse], ne souffre qu'impatiem-

German by G. Henry Lodge (Boston: J.R. Osgood, 1872) 79. Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* was first published in Dresden in 1764.

³ Louis de Jaucourt, ‘Modèle,’ in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, eds. *Encyclopédie*, vol. 2 (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985) 910. “Modeling in clay or in wax; amongst sculptors it is the action of forming with the clay or wax models or sketches of works that they would like to execute either in marble or wood or iron.” All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

ment le plus petit ralentissement dans sa production. C'est cette rapidité d'exécution qui est le principe du feu qu'on voit briller dans les esquisses des peintres du génie; on y reconnaît l'empreinte du mouvement de leur âme.⁴

From these two *Encyclopédie* entries, the first relating to sculpture and the second to painting, it is clear that the term *esquisse* was used interchangeably in discussions of the fine arts and, thus, the implications of the two-dimensional sketch with genius was also applied to the three-dimensional sketch in the eighteenth century. Therefore, it is possible to explain the increased popularity of terracotta portrait busts in the late eighteenth century as a phenomenon due, in large part, to the association drawn between this material and the modeler's hand, as well as the increased importance and value assigned to visible signs of the hand that remained on the surface of terracotta as an inevitable result of the working process.

The history of terracotta in the arts reveals that it has been linked with sculpted portraiture since antiquity.⁵ Perhaps the earliest reference to terracotta portrait modeling derives from the writings of Pliny the Elder (henceforth Pliny), a first-century Roman who wrote his *Natural History* circa 77 C.E. Of his three books devoted to the history of the arts, Pliny dedicates Book XXXV to *Pictura et Plastice*, or painting and modeling.⁶ After a lengthy discussion of the origins of painting, Pliny shifts his focus to clay modeling and its origins,

It was by the selfsame earth that Boutades, a potter of Sikyon, discovered, with the help

of his daughter, how to model portraits in clay. She was in love with a youth, and when he was leaving the country she traced the outline of the shadow which his face cast on the wall by lamplight. Her father filled in the outline with clay and made a model; this he dried and baked with the rest of his pottery, and we hear that it was preserved in the temple of the Nymphs, until Mummius overthrew Corinth.⁷

According to Pliny's account, the daughter's two-dimensional tracing of the shadow constitutes the model, while the father's portrait bust in clay becomes the final creation, or work of art. Importantly, Pliny's tale of the Corinthian maid and her father locates the historical invention of terracotta portraiture within the context of classical Greece and male artistic practice.

Variations of Pliny's tale of the origin of clay modeling were widely available to eighteenth-century audiences: from 1634 to 1779, *The Natural History* was published numerous times, translated from Latin to French and English.⁸ Moreover, the particular tale of the Corinthian maid and her father was frequently repeated in texts independent of the *Natural History*: André Félibien's treatise on the fine arts entitled *Des Principes de l'Architecture...*, published in 1676, and Louis de Jaucourt's 'Modèle' entry in the *Encyclopédie*, published almost a century later in 1765, included versions of Pliny's tale and both works were major texts which would have been available to artists and patrons alike.⁹ Given the prevalence of

⁴ Claude-Henri Watelet, 'Esquisse,' in Diderot and d'Alembert, eds. *Encyclopédie*, vol. 1, 1246. "The imagination, absolute master of this work (the sketch), suffers only impatiently the slightest slowing down of its production. It is the rapidity of execution which is the principle of the fire that one sees burning in the sketches of the painters of genius; one recognizes in the sketch the imprint of the movement of their spirit."

⁵ Several terracotta portrait busts dating from the first century B.C.E have survived. An excellent example is a bust of an unknown sitter that was discovered in the area surrounding Cumae in Italy in the late nineteenth century. Today in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the bust is thought to be a *bozzetto*, or model, for a work in a more permanent material, either marble or bronze. Diana E. E. Kleiner's *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992) 37-8. For a reproduction of the Cumae bust, see Kleiner, fig. 15. Although eighteenth-century sculptors would not have been familiar with this particular bust because of the late date of its discovery, at the least, sculptors would have been conscious of the fact that terracotta was used in sculpted portraiture as far back as classical antiquity.

⁶ Pliny's chapter entitled *Pictura* begins on line 15 and goes through line 149 while *Plastice* is from line 151 to 158.

⁷ *The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*, trans. K. Jex-Blake (Chicago: Argonaut, 1968) 175.

⁸ *The Natural History* was translated from Latin into English in 1634 (London) and into French in 1725 (Paris) and 1771 (London). Additionally, the French academic sculptor and acquaintance of Denis Diderot, Étienne-Maurice Falconet, translated Pliny's three chapters on art into French in 1773.

⁹ The complete title of Félibien's treatise is *Des Principes de l'Architecture, de la Sculpture, de la Peinture, et des Autres Arts qui en Dépendent*. On the invention of sculpture Félibien wrote, "In respect to the profane authors who wrote on sculpture, there are those who say that it was a potter from Sycione named Dibutade who made the first sculpture, and that his daughter created portraiture by tracing the image of the shadow of her lover that a lamp cast on a wall." (Farnborough, Hants., England: Gregg Press Limited, 1966) 219-220. Likewise, in his article on 'Modèle,' Louis de Jaucourt wrote, "Nevertheless, one can not say that the method of making models in clay was ignored by the Greeks, or that they never even attempted it, because we even have the name of the first to try. It was Dibutade of Sicyone." Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, eds. *Encyclopédie*, vol. 2, 910. In addition to the textual references to Pliny's tale of the Corinthian maid, a number of painted depictions of the tale were created between 1770 and 1790, contemporaneously with the proliferation of finished terracotta portrait busts as I have noted. These two-dimensional representations were created by British as well as French painters, including: Alexander Runciman (*The Origin of Painting*, 1771); David Allan (*The Origin of Painting*, 1773); Joseph Wright of Derby (*The Corinthian Maid*, 1785); Jean-Baptiste Regnault (*Dibutade Traçant le Portrait de Son Berger*, 1785). However, whereas Pliny's tale seems to place emphasis on Boutades' invention of the sculpted portrait in terracotta, these paintings privilege the Corinthian maid and her traced or drawn image of her lover, thus underscoring the romantic theme of the tale. I have discussed this trend in painting at length in my Master's thesis and I have interpreted the frequent depiction of the Corinthian maid rather than Boutades and his creation as a manipulation of Pliny's tale in order to privilege the origin of the two-dimensional arts over that of the three-dimensional.

this tale about the origin of clay modeling, it is plausible to argue that the eighteenth-century portrait busts renewed this ancient validation of terracotta as a medium worthy of sculpted portraiture.

It is important to note the consistent, yet evolving, use of terracotta for sculpted portraiture in order to determine how the appearance and function of the eighteenth-century busts departed from those that were created earlier. The significance of Houdon's decision to leave the terracotta *Diderot* natural—neither painted nor glazed—is made clear when the portrait is compared to seventeenth-century busts made of terracotta, but intentionally disguised. In several instances, seventeenth-century portrait sculptors painted busts in order to more closely resemble expensive sculptural materials such as marble and bronze. One such painted bust is Alessandro Algardi's terracotta bust of *Pope Innocent X*, c. 1646-49, which has traces of varnish and gilding applied in layers over white paint, thereby simulating the smooth, reflective, luminous surface of polished white marble.¹⁰ By working in terracotta, Algardi was able to achieve the same details that he would have in marble, as seen, for example, in the delicate wrinkles on the sitter's face and the ornate embroidery on the clothing, but in a less time-consuming process than marble carving. While it can not be asserted that terracotta busts such as Algardi's were painted so as to deceive the viewer, these practices suggest that several sculptors were interested in emulating the surface qualities of fine materials like marble.

The 1771 terracotta version of Houdon's *Diderot* was not only the first version executed by the artist, but it also served as the template for all other versions in different materials, including marble, bronze, and plaster. Thus, like the preparatory clay model, this terracotta bust was the first thought—the *première pensée* of the sculptor—as well as the model for all other versions and, simultaneously, an independent work of art. Customarily, Houdon would initially model a portrait in clay from life in most often one, but occasionally multiple, sessions with the sitter. After this first model and the subse-

quent firing of it, Houdon created plaster molds from the original terracotta and retained both the terracotta and the first plaster mold in his studio in order to make copies, or multiples, in different materials at the request of his patrons.¹¹ By guarding possession of the terracotta and plaster versions of certain portrait busts, Houdon was able to use an original bust modeled years earlier to make replicas at later dates. This working process is highly evocative of Pliny's tale of the origin of modeled portraiture in which the clay portrait was created in order to reconcile the absence of the departing lover. Thus, the absence of Houdon's sitter from the actual production of future versions of a portrait is rectified by the presence, or existence, of the original terracotta. The original terracotta, modeled from life, was intrinsically associated with the source, the "original" original, the sitter. In the case of Houdon's bust of *Diderot*, following the original terracotta that was first modeled in 1771, at least three marble versions, two bronzes, and eight plasters of the bust were executed in Houdon's workshop during the 1770s and the 1780s.¹² Despite the multiple versions that Houdon executed to fulfill his patrons' requests, it is possible to speculate that terracotta portrait busts, whether modeled or taken from a mold, were considered the literal embodiment of the "authentic," as the material itself was inextricably linked by Houdon's patrons either to the idea of the original composition or to the unique touch of the master's hand.

The portrait busts in the collection of the Prince and Princess of Mecklenberg-Schwerin, in the Saxe-Gotha region of Germany, attest to the desirability of French terracotta portraiture at that time.¹³ The royal couple sat for their portraits during a visit to Houdon's studio while on their Grand Tour to Paris in 1782; however, their commission was not for busts in marble or bronze, but for works in terracotta.¹⁴ In addition to these portraits, the couple also purchased from Houdon ten other busts of well-known figures including *Voltaire*, *Rousseau*, *d'Alembert*, and *Gluck*, all ten made in plaster but painted the color of terracotta, and all dated 1778.¹⁵ The fact that the plas-

¹⁰ The distinctiveness of Algardi's terracotta bust is that it is thought to be the final version of the sculpture rather than a preparatory model. Bruce Boucher, in agreement with Bruno Contardi, argues that this terracotta bust is an early example of works in this medium functioning as finished art objects. Bruce Boucher, ed. *Earth and Fire: Italian Terracotta Sculptures from Donatello to Canova*, exh. cat. (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2001) 190. Another example of a terracotta bust painted to simulate the appearance of a finer material, in this case bronze, is Giovanni Battista Foggini's bust of *Cosimo III de' Medici*, circa 1687. For color reproductions of Algardi's bust of *Pope Innocent X* and Foggini's bust of *Cosimo III*, see Boucher, ed. *Earth and Fire*, cat. nos. 41 and 60 respectively.

¹¹ H. H. Arnason, *The Sculptures of Houdon* (New York: Oxford UP, 1975) 21

¹² Poulet, *Houdon* 148-50.

¹³ For color reproductions of Houdon's terracotta busts of the Princess and Prince of Mecklenberg-Schwerin, refer to *Jean-Baptiste Oudry, Jean-Antoine Houdon: Vermächtnis der Aufklärung*, exh. cat. (Schwerin: Staatliches Museum, 2000), cat. nos. 11 and 12.

¹⁴ *Jean-Baptiste Oudry, Jean-Antoine Houdon: Vermächtnis der Aufklärung*, exh. cat. 190-91. The following quotation from December 2, 1782 was taken from the journal of one Kavalier von Brandenstein, who accompanied the Prince and Princess on their trip to Paris, and is quite revealing about the manner in which Houdon's patrons visited his studio and commissioned portraits from him. The original text is in German, translated into French in the exhibition catalogue, and the translation from French to English is my own. "We passed by the house of M. Houdon, the famous sculptor, who had just recently finished the superb statue of Voltaire, for the foyer at the Comédie Française. There, Their Highnesses saw the busts of several of their acquaintances, and being struck by the resemblance, they resolved to have there portraits made as well." From Kristina Hegner's essay "Die Werke Houdons im Staatlichen Museum Schwerin," in *Jean-Baptiste Oudry, Jean-Antoine Houdon: Vermächtnis der Aufklärung*, exh. cat. (Schwerin: Staatliches Museum, 2000) 191.

¹⁵ *Jean-Baptiste Oudry, Jean-Antoine Houdon: Vermächtnis der Aufklärung*, exh. cat. 170-99. For reproductions of Houdon's plaster busts today in the collection of the Staatlichen Museum in Schwerin, see *Jean-Baptiste Oudry, Jean-Antoine Houdon*, cat. no. 3 (*Gluck*), no. 5 (*d'Alembert*), no. 6 (*Voltaire*), and no. 7 (*Rousseau*).

ters were painted to deceptively resemble the natural, earthy pigment of terracotta attests to the elevated status of the material. One can deduce from these painted plasters that if the appearance of terracotta was desired, yet forged, the material must have been more costly than plaster by this time. Unlike the seventeenth-century examples in which the natural terracotta surface was disguised to give the impression of a more costly material, like Algardi's bust of *Innocent X*, the terracotta-colored plasters reveal both a heightened interest in and increased aesthetic value of the natural appearance of terracotta in the eighteenth century. Although minor German princes most likely would not have had the financial means to acquire ten busts in marble or bronze, it is important to note that the plaster busts were not painted to resemble these more expensive materials.¹⁶

The desire to create and even replicate the appearance of terracotta sculptures, as seen in the painted plasters commissioned by Houdon's German patrons, suggests that terracotta was valued for its materiality and, further, that this material was associated with the hand of the master sculptor. The increased production of and the heightened appreciation for terracotta portrait busts in the second half of the eighteenth century paralleled the growing number of portraits, executed in either paint or pastel, depicting academic sculptors in the process of actively modeling a portrait bust in terracotta. In 1782, the French painter Adélaïde Labille-Guiard created a pastel portrait entitled *Augustin Pajou with the Bust of Lemoyne* (Figure 2), a representation of the sculptor Pajou modeling the portrait of his master, the sculptor Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne.¹⁷ The immediacy of the sculptor's touch thought to be left on the surface of terracotta portrait busts is made manifest in this portrait of Pajou, shown with his sleeves rolled up, holding a modeling tool in his left hand, and working the surface of the terracotta with his right hand. However, in con-

trast to Labille-Guiard's portrait of Pajou at work, an earlier painted portrait of the sculptor François Girardon, executed by Gabriel Revel in 1683, focuses on the gentlemanly and intellectual qualities of the sculptor, rather than on the manual nature of the artist's profession.¹⁸ In Revel's portrait, Girardon is surrounded by sculpting tools and a sculpted head, but these elements act mostly as props alluding to the sculptor's work; they are not included as a means for allowing viewers to see Girardon actively involved in the process of sculpting.¹⁹ Unlike portraits of the sculptor as gentleman, portraits of the artist at work did not require the representation of fine clothing or other adornments to elevate the status of the sculptor from laborer to artistic genius.²⁰ Instead, this status was effectively established by his creative process and production, as seen in the well-known and, in the eighteenth century, easily-identifiable bust of Lemoyne.

In a painting entitled *Houdon in His Studio* (Figure 3), executed in 1803-4 by the French genre painter Louis-Léopold Boilly, the contemporary French sculptor is shown in his studio modeling the likeness in clay of the sitter seated before him.²¹ The sculptor, located in the center of the image, is absorbed in capturing the sitter's likeness, but, the viewer's attention, rather than being focused on the sitter who appears in profile, is directed toward the sculptor, his creation, and his actual working process. This painted image of the sculptor departs from earlier seventeenth- and eighteenth-century representations of sculptors, such as Revel's portrait of *François Girardon*, in that Houdon is not aggrandized or elaborately dressed; rather, he is depicted as slight of stature in working clothes and with his hands actually engaging the material.

To conclude, the relationship between Boilly's painted depiction of Houdon and Pliny's tale of the origin of clay modeling reveals that the moment when the sculptor first modeled a portrait in clay was considered one of primacy and imme-

¹⁶ In 1789, shortly before leaving Paris to return home to Virginia, Thomas Jefferson purchased seven plaster busts to display at Monticello, all painted the color of terracotta, including busts of *Franklin*, *Washington*, *Voltaire* and himself, from Houdon. Like the terracotta-colored plasters in the Schwerin Collection, Jefferson's collection of busts by Houdon again attests to the desirability of the terracotta surface in the eighteenth century. Poulet, *Houdon* 271.

¹⁷ The terracotta *Lemoyne* was actually modeled by Pajou in 1759 and exists in several versions today, both with and without drapery in the antique style.

¹⁸ For a reproduction of Gabriel Revel's portrait of *François Girardon*, refer to *Les Peintres du Roi: 1648-1793*, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2000) cat. no. 13.

¹⁹ It is difficult to discern whether Girardon is actually modeling the portrait, or if he is merely pointing to the tools of his trade. Regardless, it serves in this portrait not as an original creation that could be identified as a work from Girardon's hand, but rather as a reference to the classical tradition of sculpture and, in turn, ultimately to elevate the sculptor's status as an academic artist. A comparable portrait of a sculptor is Hyacinthe Rigaud's portrait of *Desjardins* from 1692. In this portrait, the sculptor is also dressed in fine clothing with a lace collar. His left hand is placed on top of a colossal

head which appears to also be terracotta. Although *Desjardins* is situated in some sort of interior space, a view of antique and/or classicizing ruins can be seen behind him. The ruins as well as the scroll placed off to his right all allude to the sculptor's classical training. For further information on the tradition of academic artist portraiture, see *Les Peintres du Roi* catalogue.

²⁰ The social status of sculptors really began to be called into question in the sixteenth century with the increased discussions of the *paragone*, the debate over the supremacy of painting and sculpture. According to Leonardo da Vinci, painting was indeed superior to sculpture because painting was more cerebral, mathematical, and scientific, whereas sculpture, according to him, was more physical and, therefore, easier to achieve.

²¹ Boilly actually executed two versions of his painting entitled *Houdon in his Studio*. Aside from the painting from 1803-4, today in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, he painted another version circa 1803 (Musée d'Art Thomas Henry, Cherbourg) in which Houdon appears exactly as he does in the 1803-4 portrait, but rather than modeling a portrait in clay, he is depicted modeling a full-length nude from an actual sitter before him. The other figures in the studio are also different; instead of Houdon's wife and daughters who are depicted in the Paris version, there is a group of young men, presumably students, surrounding him, sketching while he models in the Cherbourg version. Houdon's sitter in the Paris painting has been identified as the mathematician and astronomer Pierre-Simon Laplace. Poulet, *Houdon*, 342.

diacy because it was from this first model that all subsequent versions or casts of the portrait bust were realized. Like Boutades, who filled in the traced outline of his daughter's lover with clay to create the mythic first sculpted portrait, Boilly's Houdon is also in the process of modeling a portrait of his sitter, who appears in profile to the viewer. Moreover, Houdon is unequivocally the focal point of the painting and, accordingly, he is situated not in an obscure potter's workshop, but, rather, in a studio fit for an accomplished academic sculptor: he is seen in the Louvre—the seat of the Académie and, by this time, the national art museum in France—a site that reflects his important status as contemporary creator and inheritor of tradition. The impressive array of finished por-

trait busts that line the shelves of the studio, many of which appear to be works in terracotta, alludes to Houdon's proficiency in modeling as well as his custom of keeping his terracotta models, his "original" originals, for future versions. Thus, this representation of Houdon modeling a terracotta portrait from life, when considered in relation to the ancient tale of origins and the finished terracotta portrait busts themselves, speaks directly to the eighteenth-century validation of terracotta as a sculptural material.

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Figure 1. Jean-Antoine Houdon, *Denis Diderot*, 1771, terracotta, 52cm x 26.9cm x 22cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/ Art Resource, NY.



Figure 2. Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, *Augustin Pajou Sculpting the Bust of Lemoyne*, 1782, pastel, 71cm x 58cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 3. Louis-Léopold Boilly, *Houdon in his Studio*, 1803-4, oil on canvas, dimensions unspecified, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.