

## Focus On:

### *The Wallasey Reredos*

The reredos at the Liscard Memorial Unitarian Church, Wallasey, is one of the finest extant examples of the architectural products of the Della Robbia Pottery in Birkenhead. This celebrated small Pottery was in operation from 1894 to 1906 and occupied premises just off Hamilton Square in the centre of Birkenhead.



*The reredos is the most prominent of the church furnishings occupying the wall above the 'chalice' - the flame that is the focus of worship in a Unitarian church. Edmund Rathbone (1863-1924), another member of the dynasty, was architect of the church.*

The Della Robbia Pottery was founded by artist designer and poet Harold Rathbone (1858–1929), a member of the influential Rathbone dynasty of Merseyside who through successive generations had been at the core of civic, political and mercantile life in Liverpool. Early opponents of the slave trade, they were originally Quakers, but had become Unitarians in the early 19th century. By the middle of the century their extensive shipping and business interests were linked with a tradition of philanthropy and Liberal politics. Harold Rathbone's father, Philip, at first followed the usual Rathbone path into the business world, but then developed a passion for the arts which he pursued as local politician and Alderman of Liverpool, becoming Chairman of the Arts Subcommittee responsible, among other things, for the prestigious Walker Art Gallery Exhibitions.

In this capacity Philip Rathbone got to know many of the nation's leading artists and when his son Harold showed promise as an artist he was able to guide him towards the best possible art education. Harold trained at the Slade School of Art, as a pupil of Ford Maddox Brown and in Paris. It was traditional also for student artists to visit Italy, which Harold duly did.



*Harold Rathbone painted in 1893 by William Holman Hunt. Photo ©National Museums Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery by kind permission.*

In Florence Harold was captivated by the ceramic panels and figures made by Luca Della Robbia (1399or1400–1482) and his nephew Andrea, using a process more akin to potting than to sculpture, in which figures and reliefs were modelled in soft clay, coated in impervious coloured glazes and then fired. The result was that the colours were ‘fixed’ permanently and remained as bright as they were when first applied.

Harold determined to revive this process in England and, encouraged by John Ruskin and largely financed by his own family, he founded his Della Robbia Pottery in December 1893, with the intention of making colourful panels and reliefs, in a broadly Pre-Raphaelite style, for installation in larger houses, churches and public buildings. For technical reasons manufacture proved difficult, the task not being made easier by Harold’s initial insistence on conforming to the strict rules laid down by William Morris for potting whereby local clay had to be used, with no mechanical aids. Soon Harold was forced to modify his methods, bringing in a much finer type of clay from the south of England and using moulds. He also recruited a sculptor, Carlo Manzoni, originally from Turin but who had gained experience in modelling and firing clay panels in London. There was an immediate improvement in the products.

The design is attractive and typical of its time – figures (probably representing Virtues) in a stylised woodland landscape. A long riband runs through the design unifying the panels, bearing and inscription from the Old Testament writings of the minor prophet Micah “*And what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly and to love mercy & to walk humbly with thy God?*” (Micah 6:8).

The upper panels comprise a row of four tiles depicting an oceanic sunrise (or sunset), surmounted by a moulded pair of angel’s wings. The main panels are signed by Harold Rathbone and dated 1899, but the high standard of the relief figures probably points to a collaboration on this work with Carlo Manzoni, though he rarely signed his work.



*One of the three larger panels of the reredos, the joins between the pieces clearly visible. Photo: HCT*

The five panels of the Wallasey Reredos are set into a dark oak framework and were produced a few years later in 1899, when the Pottery had become much more experienced in making larger pieces and had developed a trained workforce. Even so, each of three larger panels is composed of a number of smaller sections – these were easier to fire in the Pottery’s small kiln and were less likely to split during firing.

— *Peter Hyland*

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Peter Hyland has written widely on ceramics and is author of the recent and fully-illustrated volume *The Della Robbia Pottery Birkenhead 1894–1906* which is published by the Antique Collectors’ Club, New York, 2013. ISBN 9781851497348

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