



Sketch for a Fireplace Overmantel, Francesco Antonio Franzoni

Sketch for a Fireplace Overmantel

Francesco Antonio Franzoni
Italian, Rome, about 1789
Terra-cotta
21 1/16 x 16 3/4 in.
95.SC.77

Questions for Teaching

This is a sketch for a fireplace overmantel created over 200 years ago. An overmantel is a decorative element that would be placed over a fireplace. List the different objects you can identify on this sketch. What do these objects have in common?

Notice the imagery of a prow of a ship, a suit of armor, a helmet, flags, shields, spears, axes, and arrows. There are also two putti (young children often depicted with wings), a lion, an eagle, and papal symbols such as the papal crown (a three-tired crown that is a symbol of the papacy), miter (a bishop's headdress), chalice, patriarchal cross, crosier (a staff resembling a shepherd's crook carried by bishops and abbots as a symbol of office), and keys to the office. What do you think is the subject of this terra-cotta sketch?



This sketch represents the triumphs of the Braschi family. By looking at the images and symbols on this sketch, what kind of people do you think they were?

Why do you suppose all these symbols would be included in a design for a prominent room in this family's home?

What message does this overmantel send about this family and its position in the city the family members lived in?

What would you think this object is made of? (This sketch is the first draft of a design for the final sculpture. Sketches like this are made in an inexpensive material, such as terra-cotta or clay, so that the design is easy to manipulate and change.)

What objects do you have in your home, which represent you or your family?

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Discuss with students what objects they would want to have custom-designed for their home if they had an extreme-home-makeover crew come to their house.

Background Information

Elaborately decorated with emblems and symbols of the patron's family, this terra-cotta (baked clay) relief was made as a study for a large marble frame for a mirror. This work served as a preliminary sketch for the marble overmantel in a second-floor formal reception room for the Braschi family's grand Italian palazzo (palace) in Rome. The artist, Francesco Antonio Franzoni, drew upon a Classical vocabulary for the design by incorporating putti and Roman military objects around the frame. Military trophies adorn the relief, including a suit of armor, helmet, flags, shields, spears, axes, and the prow of a ship, referring to the family's illustrious political triumphs. The many religious emblems, such as a chalice, cross, crozier (or staff of office), stole, miter (bishop's head dress), papal tiara, and keys of office were appropriate to this fireplace design because, as a member of the Braschi family, Pope Pius VI called this palace home.

The loose handling of details apparent in the plumed helmet, the lion's face, and the military shields indicate that this was a preliminary sculptural sketch known as a *bozzetto*. A nineteenth-century photograph shows the now-lost fireplace as it was eventually built, with green-and-white marble and gilt bronze emblems of the Braschi family. The necessity at the end of the eighteenth century to modernize domestic interiors belonging to distinguished Roman families explains the great number of elaborate fireplaces embellished by important sculptors in the fashionable Neoclassical style. The palazzo is now a museum.

About the Artist

Francesco Antonio Franzoni (Italian, 1734–1818)

Francesco Antonio Franzoni was one of the most important sculptors and restorers of antique sculpture in Rome in the late 1700s. Arriving in Rome from Carrara around 1765, he was soon involved in some of the most prestigious building projects in the city, including the funerary monument to Princess Maria Flaminia Odescalchi-Chigi in S. Maria del Popolo and marble works in the Palazzo Altieri. But Franzoni is best known for his work in the Museo Pio-Clementino, the Vatican museum of antiquities, for which he restored many important fragmentary antique sculptures and provided decoration and furnishings.

Close to Pope Pius VI for the majority of his career, Franzoni also worked for members of the pope's family, the Braschi. He produced a clock for the façade of Saint Peter's Basilica and decorated the family's palazzo on the piazza San Pantaleo.

