Modelled in high relief, they have volume and weight. The Virgin Mary has a firm grasp of her lively, active child, as he twists and reaches for the life-like lilies. The halos, a traditional visual trope, are unnecessary, for the gleaming, intact white glaze articulates the relief’s theological message of the Virgin’s purity and her child’s divinity.

Under the direction of Luca’s nephew Andrea (1455–1525), who inherited the business in 1482, the workshop perfected the construction of large-scale multi-figure reliefs for churches. The Hyde’s Virgin Mary (ca. 1480) likely came from such a setting, undoubtedly a high-relief depiction of the Adoration of the Christ Child [Figures 3 & 4]. Mary kneels in reverence toward her son, who would have lain upon a bed of hay beside her. The fate of the other figures is not known. Over the centuries, war, desecration, and even simple changes in taste frequently led to the breaking up of such religious reliefs. Mrs. Hyde bought the figure from Brummer Gallery in New York in 1936 and installed it in the niche at the bottom of the main stairs in her house, where it remained until it was removed for conservation in 2018.

Under Giovanni, the family style adopted a broader range of colors. The painterly quality of Giovanni’s sculptures is evident in The Hyde’s two Basket of Fruits [Figure 5], one exhibited here and the other in Hyde House’s Music Room. Not only is the fruit rendered so realistically as to suggest ripening, it seems to have drawn the attention of living creatures—snails, frogs, and snakes. That nature could be so deceived by art was a conceit first recorded by Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) and repeatedly revived during the Renaissance.

The taste for polychromed terracotta waned in the early sixteenth century, superseded by the sculptures of Michelangelo (1475–1564). Carved from pure white Carrara marble, they rivaled Roman sculptures, which throughout the century remained the ideal and measure of all fine art.
Conservation

The centuries-long history of The Hyde's Virgin Mary is unknown until the 1930s, when the figure came onto the New York art market. The fate of the relief depicting the Adoration of the Child was lost to history until recently. The figure has been reconstructed, as well-rounded edges suggest it was not cut out of a larger relief, but was cast as a separate, distinct piece within the overall composition. Like a puzzle, the individual pieces of the Virgin and Child were assembled after being separately cast, glued, and fired.

In 2018, the figure’s appearance was marred by bands of discolored overpainting that masked earlier repairs and inlays [Figure 6]. Even though photographs from the 1930s showed that these bands were visible at the time Mrs. Hyde acquired the piece, The Hyde’s curator determined it was time to clean the figure and blend the old repairs with the gilded white original surface. The original popularity of the della Robbia family’s terracotta was based upon their pure white impermanent glazed surfaces. A pristine, unblemished surface was paramount in conveying the contemporary belief in the Virgin Mary’s purity and sinless nature, by virtue of which she was chosen to be Christ’s mother.

An initial visual inspection by conservators at the Williamstown + Atlanta Art Conservation Center suggested that the major areas of damage would prove to be at the figure’s neck and hands [Figure 7]. There was also some damage to the halo, the Virgin’s nose, and her left cheek. It was believed that the discolored bands masked minor but visually disruptive stress cracks, caused during the original firing process, that ran across the body of the figure.

Treatment began with the cleaning of the figure using cotton swabs dampened with ethanol and deionized water. Yellowed overpaint and old spackle fills were removed with acetone. At this point, the degree of damage was revealed, and it proved to be a little more extensive—amounting to approximately 30 percent of the figure—than anticipated. But, the manner of the old repairs proved to be of considerable technical interest.

In modern times, damaged areas are filled with an inert spackle and then painted or coated to simulate the sheen of a fire-glazed surface. But not in this instance. Instead, fired ceramic fills were cast and discretely affixed in place following the same Renaissance-era process of creation—mold casting, bisque firing, glazing, and firing—as the original figure itself. Ceramic replacement fills comprised the Virgin’s hands, her left shoulder, the tips of her chin and nose, and a number of folds in her garment, including the tip of the horn covering her foot [Figures 8 & 9]. Although their color and texture were slightly different from those of the original figure, to all intents and purposes, the repairs were executed according to the della Robbias’ own production techniques.

To determine the date of these repairs, conservators analyzed the composition of the glaze using X-ray fluorescence. Samples were taken from both original areas—the Virgin’s cheek and robe—and from fills in her hands and the tail of her robe [Figure 9]. They were then bombarded with electrons, and the fluorescent X-ray emitted by each of the elements in the sample was recorded on a graph. Every element emits a unique characteristic fluorescence, the equivalent of a fingerprint, and thus can be readily identified. Conservators noted the composition of the samples were similar, each containing a high degree of lead and some tin, both common elements in traditional formulae for white glaze. Their abbreviations on the periodic table for chemical elements are Pb (lead) and Sn (tin). However, only the repairs contained Zn. Zinc was first identified by a German scientist, Andreas Sigismund Marggraf, in 1746, and its commercial availability was not widespread until the latter half of the eighteenth century. So clearly, its presence in the repairs to Virgin Mary suggests the sculpture was repaired several centuries after its creation.

Just as science was used to date the repairs to a period after the discovery of zinc, so science was also used to date the original figure. Samples of the clay underwent thermoluminescence testing (TL) at a laboratory in Oxford, England. It is possible to heat a sample of fired clay and, by measuring the light emitted as trapped electrons escape from the clay’s crystalline mineral structure, determine the era in which the sample was first fired in a kiln. TL testing is used to date and authenticate ancient Chinese terracotta sculptures. The Oxford test revealed that The Hyde’s Virgin Mary was fired between 400 and 700 years ago (between 1319 and 1619), safely within the Renaissance period [Figure 11].

The Hyde Collection is grateful to the Greater Hudson Heritage Network, a partner of New York State Council on the Arts, for its generous funding of this conservation project.
James Brade Sword (1839–1915) was born in Philadelphia [Figure 1]. When he was one, his father, who was employed in the tea and silk trades, moved the family to China. Sword returned stateside at the age of eleven, and subsequently trained as an artist at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. His principal teacher was Christian Schussele (1824–1879), a figure and history painter. Sword’s portrait of Speaker of the House J.W. Jones (1791–1848) hung in Congress to this day. Between 1866 and 1870, Sword firstook painting for a career in manufacturing silver-plated wares, but by 1871 had opened a studio in New York City. Over subsequent decades, he became a respected figure in the American art world, being elected president of the Philadelphia Society of Artists in 1878 and director of the Art Club of Philadelphia in 1887.

Although the Catskill Mountains are more closely associated with the Hudson River School—Thomas Cole and Frederick Church both lived and built studios there—the picturesque wilderness along the shore of Lake George drew the movement’s artists to this region.

It is surprising, therefore, that the few Hudson River School paintings in the collection are all later donations. Not one was a bequest of the Museum’s founding couple. For whatever reason, and likely because it was the art of their parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hyde did not collect Hudson River School paintings. This work by Sword was donated to The Hyde last fall by Davesen Hanson Wood, who grew up in Glen Falls and decided to entrust the painting to her hometown museum.

Williamsstown + Atlanta Art Conservation Center conservators recommended a light treatment as, overall, the painting was considered to be in good condition. The surface was stable and intact, with no losses, or flaking layers of paint. Dust and nicotine were imbedded into the surface varnish that had discolored with age imposing a yellowish tint on the painting. Meant to saturate the colors and provide a protective coating to the paint surface, the aged varnish now diminished the painting’s effect and hid details of the work’s careful execution.

James Brade Sword’s (1839–1915) realistic rendering of a view of Lake George, painted with such precision that it is difficult to discern the individual brushstrokes, is an excellent example of a Hudson River School masterpiece. The movement is considered to be the first distinctly American school of landscape painting. It was named after the great river, whose passage through the interior wildernesses of New York state attracted artists with a somewhat Romantic sensibility. In this image, nature thrives. Mature trees and saplings rise through the foreground, directing the eye toward the center of the composition, where a proud stag stands. Fallen trees and decaying limbs convey the timeliness of the American wilderness; the worn track suggests the presence of humans and, indeed, on the lake’s horizon, passing through the narrows, is a white steamboat. That, we know from the records of Lake George Steamboat Company, is either the Minne-Ha-Ha I, a 144-foot-long, 22-foot-wide, side-wheeler steamer, commissioned in 1857, or the much smaller, propeller-driven Gunwacker (72 feet long, 20 feet wide), commissioned in 1869.

Two other versions of this view of Lake George have been identified. In one, known only from photographs, Sword made similar interventions [Figure 3]. In the other painting—a work twice the size of The Hyde’s and currently for sale on the art market—there are subtle differences in the arrangement of tree branches in these areas [Figure 4]. Young branches restrict the view of the mountain peak and a sailing intrudes into the central open vista of the lake.

Unnaturally, because of the investment of labor and materials, an artist would execute a smaller version of a composition before a larger one. The latter, because it was painted later, often has small differences. In this instance, based upon the uncharacteristic thickness of the painting around the peak, it would appear Sword altered the two smaller versions of his painting after he had executed the larger work. Perhaps he felt that on the smaller scale his original arrangement of branches hid the peak from view and closed in the center of the composition, when his intention was surely to open the vista to the luminous sky above the distant narrows.

The painting originally had a significantly larger and more imposing picture frame. What one sees now are the inner linings. Missing is a deep fluted cove that probably measured six inches on each side with acanthus leaf moldings in the four corners [Figure 5]. Just such a frame encompasses the surviving larger version. Hudson River School artists favored such bold frames. They drew attention and reflected light on to the canvas. They also helped to isolate the image from its surroundings. Victorian interiors were visually overwhelming with competing wallpaper and upholstery patterns, and paintings hung frame to frame.