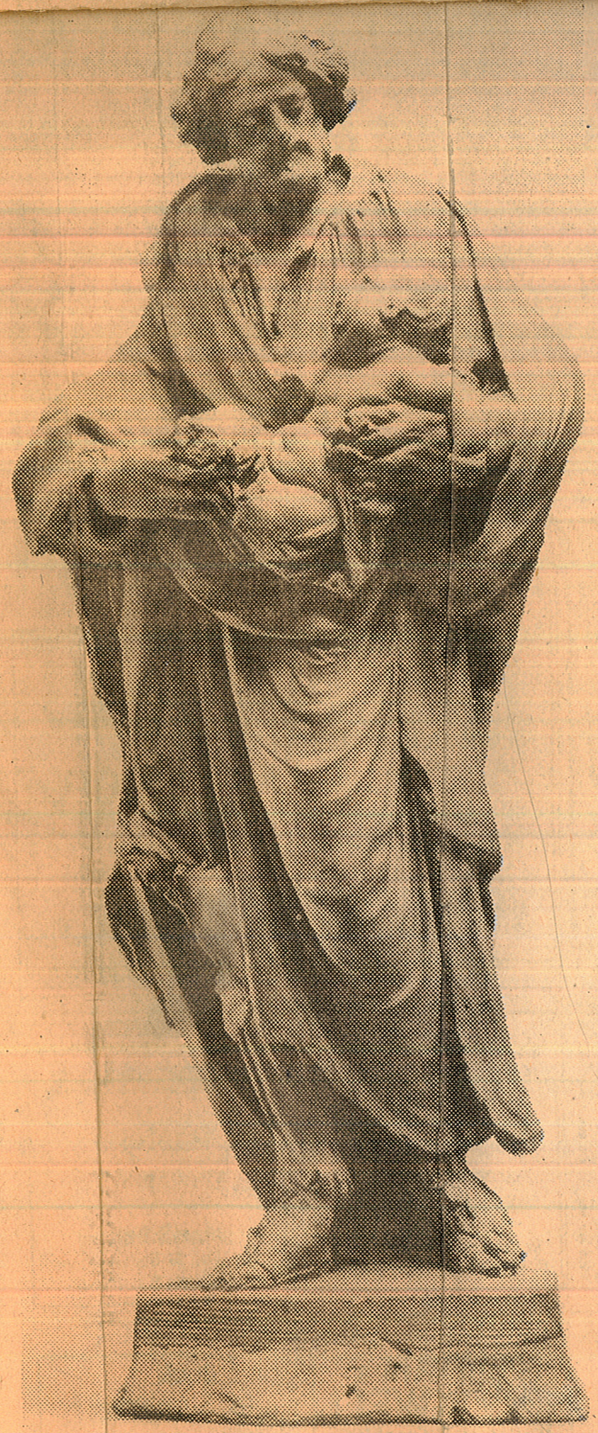

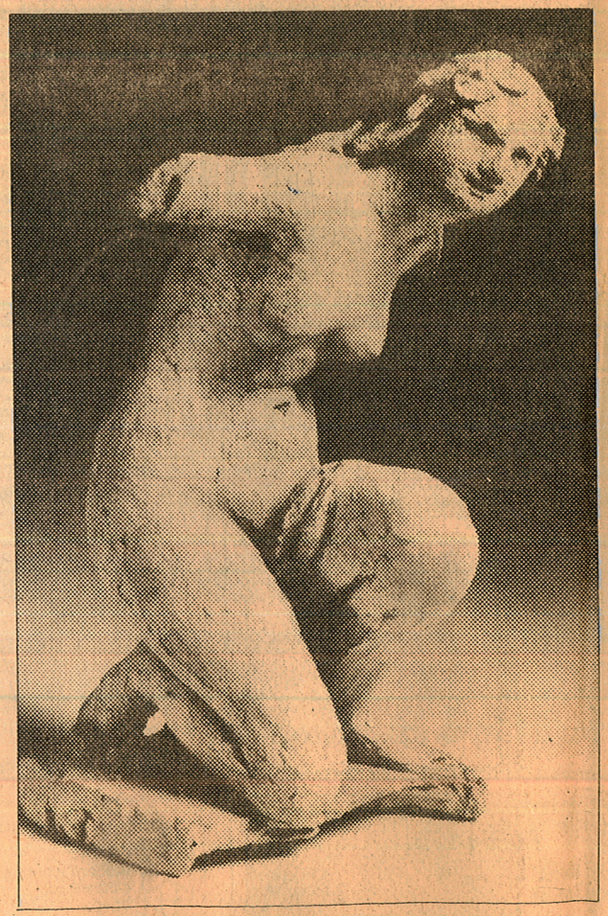

"Saint Joseph Holding the Christ Child" (1720) by Jan Baptiste Van der Haeghen, above left, and "Flora" (1863) by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux

GALLERY VIEW

JOHN RUSSELL

Terra Cottas — Chamber Music For the Eye

One of the most beautiful interior spaces in this country is the Blumenthal Patio in the Metropolitan Museum. As perfect in detail as it is in proportion, it was brought over piece by piece from Andalusia in Spain, where it was originally built by Italian workmen in the early 16th century. It makes everything and everyone look their best. At this moment and through Sept. 6 it harbors an anthology of European terra cottas from the Arthur M. Sackler collection, and I can think of few better ways to spend a spring or summer morning than in looking them over.

Terra cottas are a special taste, and not everyone hurries to collect them. Collectors like to think that they take on the tone of their collections, and terra cotta to many people suggests something that is essentially small in scale, fragile in substance and discreet in its first impact. Other forms of sculpture are more reassuring in that regard. The collector of bronzes knows bronze is virtually indestructible. (When the Latin poet Horace spoke of his work as "more lasting than bronze," he knew just how big was the claim). The collector of marbles partakes — or so he hopes — of the classical overtones and the milk-white purity of his favorite material. The collector of sculptures in stone comes to think of himself as heft personified, so palpable is the effort involved in their making. Terra cotta by contrast is something that might come apart in one's hand.

As against that, it has had an exceptionally long and distinguished history. Terra-cotta sculptures of the highest quality have come down to us from predynastic Egypt, from ancient Crete, from the pre-Colombian period in Latin America and from ancient China (above all, the T'ang dynasty). From the Italian Renaissance right through to the French 18th and 19th centuries and on to our own day, terra cotta has had an almost uninterrupted run. (The Cubist terra cottas of Henri Laurens (1885-1954) may well be his finest work, for instance.) So it's all there, for anyone who takes the trouble to find it.

Someone who did take that trouble is Andrew Ciechanowiecki, who in the 1960's and 70's put on show after show at the Heim Gallery in London in which Italian, French and occasionally Flemish terra cottas were featured. By his own account, Dr. Sackler was passing the Heim Gallery in a taxi when some unnamed intuition made him stop, get down, go into the gallery and say "Do you have any terra cottas ?" That intuition, though imperious, was unexpected, in that Dr. Sackler is known primarily as a collector of oriental art. The great ritual bronzes of the Shang dynasty were what appealed to him, for instance. But once inside the Heim Gallery he was hooked by the spontaneity, the immediacy, the firsthand quality of terra cotta; and in short order he set out to make a comprehensive collection of European terra cottas from 1450 or thereabouts to the first years of our own century.

The present selection was made by Dr. Olga Raggio, chairman of the department of European sculpture and decorative arts at the Met, and it differs here and there from the choice that was made when the collection was shown in 1979-80 at the National Gallery in Washington. In all 75 sculptures are on view, and many of them give a new turn and twist to our notions of artists with whom we believed ourselves to be familiar. Joseph Chinard (1756-1813) is known, for instance, as a portrait sculptor who worked in France during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods. One such bust is in the show; but in his heroic "Othryades Expiring on His Shield," in the well-judged naughtiness of his "Phryne Emerging From Her Bath" and in the headlong ardor of the "Sappho and Phaon" which is here attributed to him, Chinard comes across as a man who could dare almost anything in sculpture and get away with it. We sense, in fact, that if it had not been for his ups and downs in the Revolution — during which he had the distinction of being imprisoned by both sides — he would have played a much more central role in the development of French art.

Terra cottas are necessarily fragile, and when they are several hundred years old they may well have been been damaged and repaired at one time or another. They may also have been cleaned rather too thoroughly in the interests of a chimerical freshness. The Sackler collection has its share of such cases, but it also suggests that this is a field in which a determined and resourceful collector can find things of very high quality in just a few years. The "Deposition" by Jacopo Del Duca is one example of this. Del Duca had been very close to Michelangelo — in 1564 he had been a witness to the reopening of Michelangelo's strongbox — and this relief is one to which the overused adjective "Michelangelesque" can fairly be applied.

'Among sculptural forms terra cotta is one of the most versatile, as well as the most intimate.'

The Sackler collection is strong in baroque sculptures. Nothing of its kind could be more exuberant than the "Apotheosis of Manoel de Vilhena" which was made by the Florentine sculptor Massimilio Soldani in around 1729. This was prized by Vilhena himself for its "vast and original ideas," and we should find it hard to improve upon that estimate. Here and elsewhere, a major moment in the history of art is epitomized. (An example that jumps to mind is P.-D. Plumière's "Father Time Carrying Away a Dead Infant," which has a sweep and a grandeur of expression that quite belies the notion of terra cotta as one of the diminutives of art.)

But the show can also be looked upon as a series of surprises, in which what had no right to work turns out to work remarkably well. Who would ever have thought, for example, that something by Mieczyslaw Leon Zawiejski (1856-1933), a Polish sculptor who lived both in Florence and in New York, could hang in great company? But his "La Vedetta" ("The Look-Out") looks very well as part of an exceptionally resourceful late 19th-century group. It shows a pretty young woman with her face looking through a page of newsprint, and only a year or two ago it would have ranked as, at best, "amusing."

So it turns out that among sculptural forms terra cotta is one of the most versatile, as well as one of the most intimate. There are things that it cannot do, but more than any other form of sculpture it excels when making chamber music for the eye. What we see in the Sackler exhibition suggests, moreover, that for more than four centuries it worked splendidly as an index to what imaginative people were thinking and feeling. Let's hope that it never goes out of style. ■