MITTEILUNGEN DES KUNSTHISTORISCHEN INSTITUTES IN FLORENZ

LVIII. BAND — 2016
HEFT I

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HEFT I

MITTEILUNGEN DES KUNSTHISTORISCHEN INSTITUTES IN FLORENZ

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Die Redaktion dankt den Peer Reviewers dieses Heftes für ihre Unterstützung | La redazione ringrazia i peer reviewers per la loro collaborazione a questo numero.

Graphik | Progetto grafico
RovaiWeber design, Firenze

Produktion | Produzione
Centro Di edizioni, Firenze

Die *Mitteilungen* erscheinen jährlich in drei Heften und können im Abonnement oder in Einzelheften bezogen werden durch | Le *Mitteilungen* escono con cadenza quadrimestrale e possono essere ordinate in abbonamento o singolarmente presso:
Centro Di edizioni, Lungarno Serristori 35
I-50125 Firenze, Tel. 055.2342666, Fax 055.2342667,
silvia@centrodi.it; www.centrodi.it.

Preis | Prezzo
Einzelheft | Fascicolo singolo:
€ 30 (plus Porto | più costi di spedizione)
Jahresabonnement | Abbonamento annuale:
€ 90 (Italia); € 120 (Ausland | estero)

Die Mitglieder des Vereins zur Förderung des Kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz (Max-Planck-Institut) e. V. erhalten die Zeitschrift kostenlos.
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Adresse des Vereins | Indirizzo del Verein:
c/o Sal. Oppenheim jr. & Cie. AG & Co. KGaA
z. H. Frau Cornelia Schurek
Odeonsplatz 12, D-80539 München
foerderverein.khi@gmx.de; www.associazione.de

Die alten Jahrgänge der *Mitteilungen* sind für Subskribenten online abrufbar über JSTOR (www.jstor.org).
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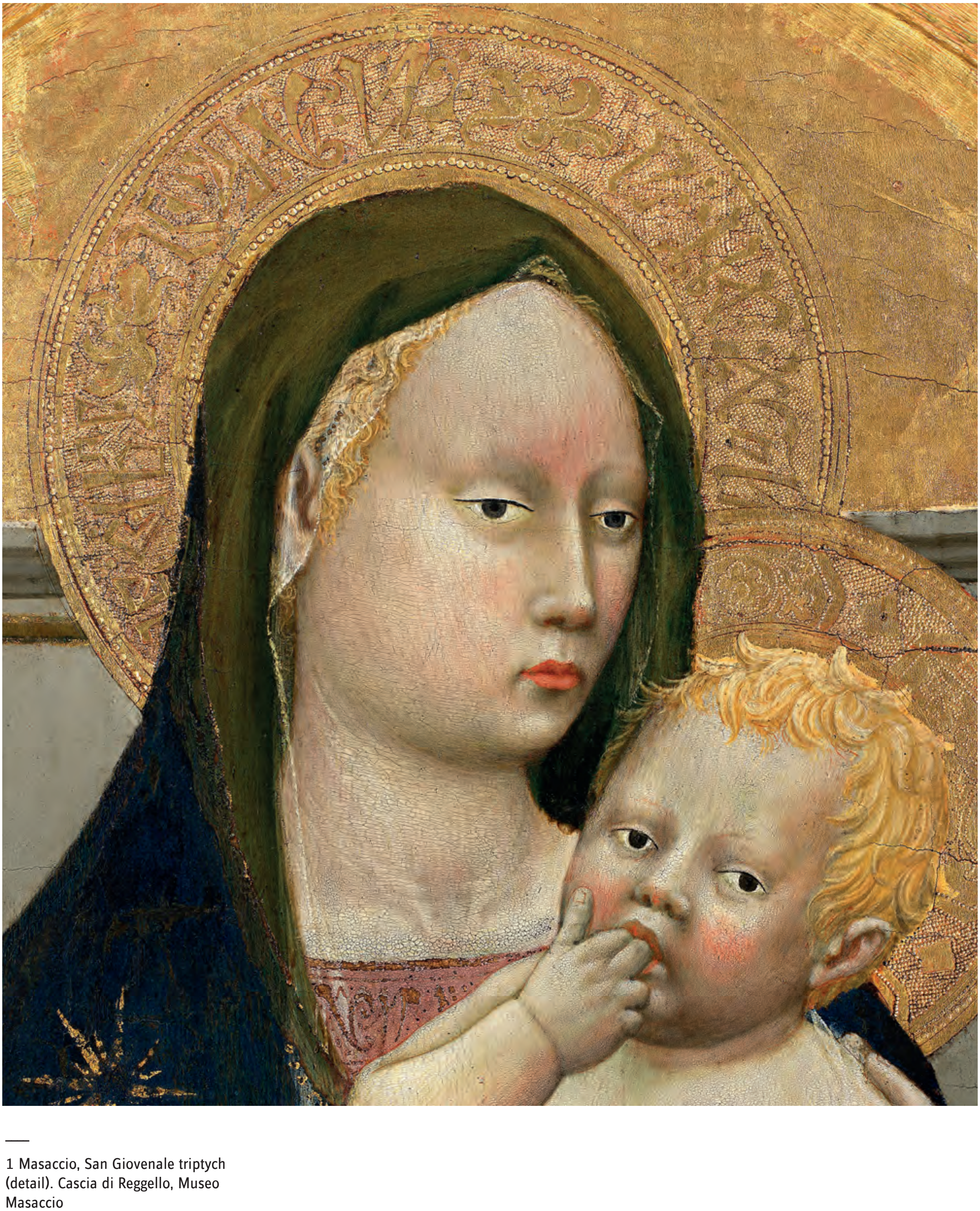

1 Masaccio, San Giovenale triptych (detail). Cascia di Reggello, Museo Masaccio

INTRICATE LETTERS AND THE REIFICATION OF LIGHT

PROLEGOMENA ON THE PSEUDO-INSCRIBED HALOES IN GIOTTO'S *MADONNA DI SAN GIORGIO ALLA COSTA* AND MASACCIO'S SAN GIOVENALE TRIPTYCH

Vera-Simone Schulz

> *Ils sont à table*
> *Ils ne mangent pas*
> *Ils ne sont pas dans leur assiette*
> *Et leur assiette se tient toute droite*
> *Verticalement derrière leur tête.*
> (Jacques Prévert,
> *Paroles – La Cène*)

1. Introduction: Lost in Translation

Published under the lurid headline "Maometto nell'aureola [Muhammed in the halo]: Masaccio, Firenze e l'Islam", Wladimiro Settimelli's full page article for the Italian newspaper *L'Unità* on 27 June 1997 was intended to create a sensation (Fig. 2).[1] It referred to a triptych by Masaccio with the enthroned Madonna and Child surrounded by angels and saints (Fig. 3). More precisely, the article's subject was the Virgin's halo on which, reputedly, the *shahādā*, the Muslim declaration of belief "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammed is the messenger of Allah", is inscribed in Arabic letters in mirror writing. Playing with fears of Islam, Settimelli's elaboration on a Muslim 'invasion' of a circle of Christian divine light – with the name Muhammed placed next to the painted Virgin – was meant to provoke a scandal and calls to mind theories of conspiracy à la Dan Brown.

Mary's halo indeed shows a complex arrangement of letter-like elements resembling Arabic script (Fig. 1). They are interrupted by oblong rosettes which are placed at the cardinal points of the circle and hence allude to the structural layout of a cross nimbus. One large flower appears above Mary's forehead where the folds of her mantle culminate in a point. The blossoms, however, do not line up with the vertical axis of

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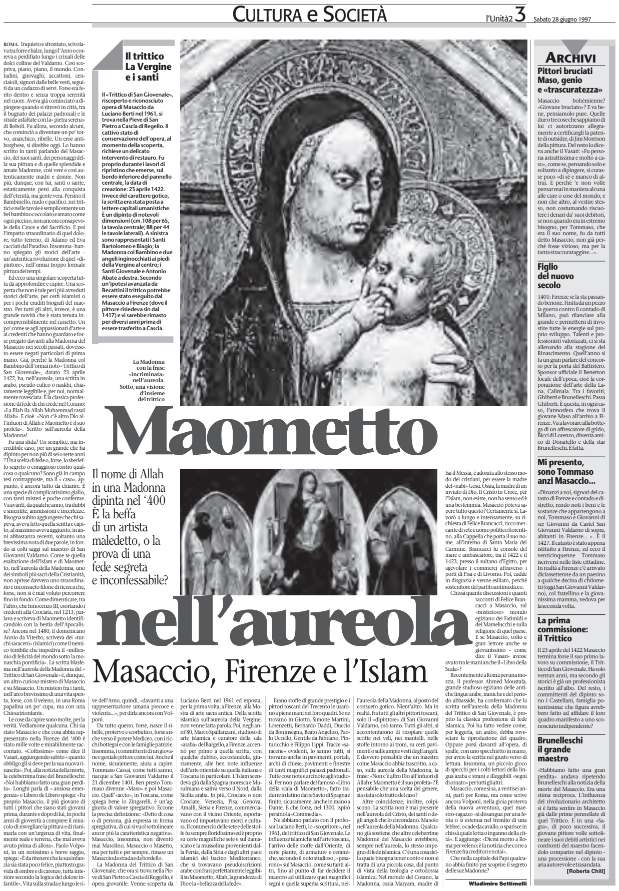
[1] Wladimiro Settimelli, "Maometto nell'aureola: Masaccio, Firenze e l'Islam", in: *L'Unità*, 27 June 1997, p. 3.



CULTURA e SOCIETÀ l'Unità2 3 Sabato 28 giugno 1997

Il trittico La Vergine e i santi

Il «Trittico di San Giovenale», riscoperto e riconosciuto opera di Masaccio da Luciano Berti nel 1961, si trova nella Pieve di San Pietro a Cascia di Regello. Il cattivo stato di conservazione dell'opera, al momento della scoperta, richiese un delicato intervento di restauro. Fu proprio durante i lavori di ripristino che emerse, sul bordo inferiore del pannello centrale, la data di creazione: 23 aprile 1422. Invece del carattere gotico, la scritta era stata posta a lettere capitali umanistiche. È un dipinto di notevoli dimensioni (cm. 108 per 65, la tavola centrale; 88 per 44 le tavole laterali). A sinistra sono rappresentati i Santi Bartolomeo e Biagio; la Madonna col Bambino e due angeli inginocchiati ai piedi della Vergine al centro; i Santi Giovenale e Antonio Abate a destra. Secondo un'ipotesi avanzata da Becattini il trittico potrebbe essere stato eseguito dal Masaccio a Firenze (dove il pittore risiedeva sin dal 1417) e vi sarebbe rimasto per diversi anni prima di essere trasferito a Cascia.

La Madonna con la frase «incriminata» nell'aureola. Sotto, una visione d'insieme del trittico

Maometto nell'aureola

Il nome di Allah in una Madonna dipinta nel '400 È la beffa di un artista maledetto, o la prova di una fede segreta e inconfessabile?

Masaccio, Firenze e l'Islam

ROMA. Inquieto e sfrontato, scivolava tra forre e balze, lungo l'Arno o correva a perdifiato lungo i crinali delle dolci colline del Valdarno. Così scopriva, piano, piano, il mondo. Contadini, girovaghi, accattoni, cenciaioli, signori dalle belle vesti, seguiti da un codazzo di servi. Forse era ferito dentro e senza troppa serenità nel cuore. Aveva già cominciato a dipingere quando si ritrovò in città, tra il bugnato dei palazzi padronali e le strade asfaltate con la« pietra serena» di Boboli. Fu allora, secondo alcuni, che cominciò a diventare un po' torvo, anarchico, ribelle. Un eroe antiborghese, si direbbe oggi. Lo hanno scritto in tanti parlando del Masaccio, dei suoi santi, dei personaggi della sua pittura e di quelle splendide e amate Madonne, così vere e così autenticamente madri e donne. Non più, dunque, con lui, santi o sante, estaticamente persi alla conquista dell'etenità, ma gente vera. Persino il Bambinello, nudo e pacifico, nei trittici e nelle tavole è semplicemente un bel bambino coccolato e amato come ogni piccino, non ancora consapevole della Croce e del Sacrificio. E poi l'impatto straordinario di quel dolore, tutto terreno, di Adamo ed Eva cacciati dal Paradiso. Insomma - hanno spiegato gli storici dell'arte - un'autentica rivoluzione di quel «dipintore», nell'ormai troppo formale pittura dei tempi.

Ed ecco una singolare scoperta tutta da approfondire e capire. Una scoperta che non è tale per i più avveduti storici dell'arte, per certi islamisti o per i pochi eruditi biografi del maestro. Per tutti gli altri, invece, è una grande novità che è stata tenuta incomprensibilmente nel cassetto. Un po' come se agli appassionati d'arte e ai credenti che hanno guardato e forse pregato davanti alla Madonna del Masaccio nei secoli passati, dovessero essere negati particolari di prima mano. Già, perchè la Madonna col Bambino dell'ormai noto « Trittico di San Giovenale», datato 23 aprile 1422, ha, nell'aureola, una scritta in arabo, pseudo cufico o naskhi, chiaramente leggibile e, per noi, normalmente rovesciata. È la classica professione di fede di chi crede nel Corano: «La Illah ila Allah Muhammad rasul Allah». E cioè: «Non c'è altro Dio all'infuori di Allah e Maometto è il suo profeta». Scritto sull'aureola della Madonna!

Fu una sfida? Un semplice, ma incredibile caso, per un grande che ha dipinto per non più di sei o sette anni ? Una scelta di fede o, forse, lo sberleffo segreto o coraggioso contro qualcosa o qualcuno? Sono già in campo tesi contrapposte, ma il « caso», appunto, è ancora tutto da chiarire. È una specie di complicatissimo giallo, con tanti misteri e poche conferme. Va avanti, da qualche anno, tra dubbi e smentite, ammissioni e incertezze. Bisogna subito aggiungere che chi sapeva, aveva letto quella scritta e capito, al massimo aveva aggiunto, in anni abbastanza recenti, soltanto una brevissima nota di due parole, in fondo ai colti saggi sul maestro di San Giovanni Valdarno. Come se quella esaltazione dell'Islam e di Maometto, nell'aureola della Madonna, uno dei simboli più sacri della Cristianità, non aprisse davvero uno straordinario e inconsueto filone di ricerca che, forse, non si è mai voluto percorrere fino in fondo. Come dimenticare, tra l'altro, che Innocenzo III, esortando i credenti alla Crociata, nel 1213, parlava e scriveva di Maometto identificandolo con la bestia dell'Apocalisse? Ancora nel 1480, il domenicano Annio da Viterbo, scriveva dei «turchi saraceni» (islamici) come il nemico terribile che impediva il «millennio di felicità del mondo sotto la monarchia pontificia». La scritta blasfema nell'aureola della Madonna del « Trittico di San Giovenale» è, dunque, un altro curioso mistero di Masaccio e su Masaccio. Un mistero fra i tanti, nell'arco brevissimo di una vita spenta, forse, con il veleno, in una Roma papalina un po' cupa, ma con una Chiesa trionfante.

Le cose da capire sono molte, per la verità. Vediamone qualcuna. Chi sia stato Masaccio e che cosa abbia rappresentato nella Firenze del '400 è stato mille volte e mirabilmente raccontato. «Coltissimo» come dice il Vasari, aggiungendo subito « quanto obbligo gli si deve per la sua nuova rinascita». Poi, alla notizia della morte, la celeberrima frase del Brunelleschi: «Noi habbiamo fatto una gran perdita». Longhi parla di « ansiosa emergenza» e Libero de Libero spiega: «Fu proprio Masaccio, il più giovane di tutti i pittori che siano stati giovani prima, durante e dopo di lui, in pochi anni di gioventù a compiere il miracolo di risvegliare la pittura e di rianimarla con un'urgenza di vita, finalmente reale e terrena, che mai aveva avuto prima di allora». Paolo Volponi, in un notissimo e breve saggio, spiega: «È da ritenere che la sua infanzia sia stata poco felice, piuttosto gravida di ombre e di carenze, tutta interiore secondo la logica del dolore infantile». Vita sulla strada e lungo le rive dell'Arno, quindi, «davanti a una rappresentazione umana precoce e violenta...», per dirla ancora con Volponi.

Da tutto questo, forse, nasce il ribelle, protervo e scorbutico, forse anche verso il potere Mediceo, con i ricchi bottegai e con le famiglie patrizie. Insomma, i committenti di un giovane e geniale pittore come lui. Anche il nome, sicuramente, aiuta a capire. Tommaso Cassai, come tutti sanno, nacque a San Giovanni Valdarno il 21 dicembre 1401. Ben presto Tommaso divenne «Maso» e poi Masaccio. Quell'«accio», in Toscana, come spiega bene lo Zingarelli, è un'aggiunta di valore spregiativo. Eccone la precisa definizione: «Detto di cosa o di persona, già espressa in forma spregiativa, di cui si vuol sottolineare ancor più la caratteristica negativa». Masaccio, insomma, non diventò mai Masolino, Masuccio o Masetto, ma per tutti e per sempre, rimase un Masaccio da strada e da bordello.

La Madonna del Trittico di San Giovenale, che ora si trova nella Pieve di San Pietro a Cascia di Reggello, è opera giovanile. Venne scoperta da Luciano Berti nel 1961 ed esposta, per la prima volta, a Firenze, alla Mostra di arte sacra antica. Della scritta islamica sull'aureola della Vergine, non venne fatta parola. Poi, negli anni'80, Marco Spallanzani, studioso di arte islamica e curatore della sala «araba» del Bargello, a Firenze, accennò per primo a quella scritta, con qualche dubbio, accostandola, giustamente, alle ben note influenze dell'arte orientale su quella italiana e Toscana in particolare. L'Islam scendeva giù dalla Spagna moresca e Musulmana e saliva verso il Nord, dalla Sicilia araba. In più, Crociate o non Crociate, Venezia, Pisa, Genova, Amalfi, Siena e Firenze, commerciavano con il vicino Oriente, esportavano ed importavano merci e cultura. Il commercio delle sete e delle stoffe fu sempre floridissimo ed è proprio su certe magnifiche sete e sul damascato e la mussolina provenienti dalla Persia, dalla Siria e dagli altri paesi islamici del bacino Mediterraneo, che si trovavano pseudoiscrizioni arabe con frasi perfettamente leggibili su Maometto, Allah, la grandezza di Dio e la « bellezza della fede».

Erano stoffe di grande prestigio e i pittori toscani del Trecento le usarono a piene mani nei loro quadri. Se ne trovano in Giotto, Simone Martini, Lorenzetti, Bernardo Daddi, Duccio da Boninsegna, Beato Angelico, Paolo Uccello, Gentile da Fabriano, Pinturicchio e Filippo Lippi. Tracce «saracene» evidenti, lo sanno tutti, si trovano anche in pavimenti, portali, archi di chiese, pavimenti e finestre di tanti magnifici palazzi padronali. Tutte cose note e arcinote agli studiosi. Per non parlare del famoso «Libro della scala di Maometto», fatto tradurre in latino dal re Savio di Spagna e finito, sicuramente, anche in mano a Dante. E che forse, nel 1300, ispirò persino la «Commedia».

Ne abbiamo parlato con il professor Luciano Berti, lo «scopritore», nel 1961, del trittico di San Giovenale. Le influenze islamiche sull'arte toscana, l'arrivo delle stoffe dall'Oriente, di certe piante, di armature e ceramiche, secondo il noto studioso , «pesarono» sul Masaccio, come su tanti altri, fino al punto di far decidere il maestro ad utilizzare quei magnifici segni e quella superba scrittura, nell'aureola della Madonna, al posto del consueto gotico. Nient'altro. Ma in realtà, fra tutti gli altri pittori toscani, solo il «dipintore» di San Giovanni Valdarno, osò tanto. Tutti gli altri, si accontentarono di ricopiare quelle scritte nei veli, nei mantelli, nelle stoffe intorno ai troni, su certi pavimenti o sulle ampie vesti degli angeli. È davvero pensabile che un maestro come Masaccio abbia trascritto, a caso, sulla aureola della Madonna, la frase: «Non c'è altro Dio all'infuori di Allah e Maometto è il suo profeta»? È pensabile che una scelta del genere, sia stata solo frutto del caso?

Altre coincidenze, inoltre, colpiscono. La scritta non è mai presente nell'aureola del Cristo, dei santi o degli angeli che lo circondano. Ma solo nell'aureola della Madonna . Qualcuno già sostiene che altre celeberrime Madonne del Masaccio avrebbero, sempre nell'aureola, lo stesso impegno di fede islamica. C'è una cosa della quale bisogna tener conto e non si tratta di una piccola cosa, dal punto di vista della teologia e ortodossia islamica. Nel mondo del Corano, la Madonna, ossia Maryam, madre di Isa il Messia, è adorata allo stesso modo dei cristiani, per essere la madre del «nabi» Gesù. Ossia, la madre di un inviato di Dio. Il Cristo in Croce, per l'Islam, non esiste, non ha senso ed è una bestemmia. Masaccio poteva sapere tutto questo? Certamente sì. Lavorò a lungo e intensamente, su richiesta di Felice Brancacci, ricco mercante di sete e uomo politico fiorentino, alla Cappella che porta il suo nome, all'interno di Santa Maria del Carmine. Brancacci fu console del mare e ambasciatore, tra il 1422 e il 1423, presso il sultano d'Egitto, per agevolare i commerci attraverso i porti di Pisa e di Livorno. Poi, cadde in disgrazia e venne esiliato, perché sostenitore del partito antimediceo.

Chissà quante discussioni e quanti racconti di Felice Brancacci a Masaccio, sul «misterioso» mondo egiziano dei Fatimidi e dei Mamelucchi e sulla religione di quel paese. E se Masaccio, colto e gran lettore anche se giovanissimo - come dice il Vasari- avesse avuto tra le mani anche il «Libro della Scala»?

Recentemente a Roma per una mostra, il professor Ahmed Moustafa, grande studioso egiziano delle antiche lingue arabe, iraniche e del periodo abbasside, ha confermato che la scritta nell'aureola della Madonna del Trittico di San Giovenale, è proprio la classica professione di fede islamica. Poi ha fatto vedere come, per leggerla, un arabo, debba rovesciare la riproduzione del quadro. Oppure porsi davanti all'opera, di spalle, con uno specchietto in mano, per avere la scritta nel giusto verso di lettura. Insomma, un piccolo gioco di specchi per i colti lettori della lingua araba e strani e illeggibili «segni di ornato» per tutti gli altri.

Masaccio, come si sa, a ventisei anni, partì per Roma, ma come scrive ancora Volponi, nella gioia proterva della nuova avventura, quel maestro-ragazzo «si dissangua per una ferita o si estenua nel tremito di una febbre, o cade da cavallo, o sparisce in chissà quale lotta o inganno della città». E aggiunge: «Dicesi morto a Roma per veleno: è la notizia che corre a Firenze fra creditori e notai».

Che nella capitale dei Papi qualcuno abbia finito per scoprire il segreto delle sue Madonne?

Wladimiro Settimelli

ARCHIVI

Pittori bruciati Maso, genio e «trascuratezza»

Masaccio bohèmienne? «Giovane bruciato»? E va bene, pensiamolo pure. Quelle due o tre cose che sappiamo di lui ci autorizzano allegramente a certificargli la patente di outsider, di Jim Morrison della pittura. Del resto lo diceva anche il Vasari: «Fu persona astrattissima e molto a caso», come se, pensando solo e soltanto a dipingere, si curasse poco «di sé e manco di altrui. E perché 'e non volle pensar mai in maniera alcuna alle cure o cose del mondo, e non che altro, al vestire stesso, non costumando riscuotere i denari da' suoi debitori, se non quando era in estremo bisogno, per Tommaso, che era il suo nome, fu da tutti detto Masaccio, non già perché fosse vizioso, ma per la tanta straccurataggine...».

Figlio del nuovo secolo

1401: Firenze se la sta passando benone. Finita da un pezzo la guerra contro il contado di Milano, può rilanciare alla grande e permettersi di investire tutte le energie sul proprio sviluppo. Talenti e professionisti valorizzati, ci si sta allenando alla stagione del Rinascimento. Quell'anno si fa un gran parlare del concorso per la porta del Battistero. Sponsor ufficiale il Benetton locale dell'epoca, cioè la corporazione dell'arte della Lana, Calimala. Tra i favoriti, Ghiberti e Brunelleschi. Passa Ghiberti. È questa, in ogni caso, l'atmosfera che trova il giovane Maso all'arrivo a Firenze. Va a lavorare alla bottega di un affrescatore di grido, Bicci di Lorenzo, diventa amico di Donatello e della star Brunelleschi. È fatta.

Mi presento, sono Tommaso anzi Masaccio...

«Dinanzi a voi, signori del catasto di Frenze e contado e distretto, rendo noti i beni e le sostanze che appartengono a noi, Tommaso e Giovanni di ser Giovanni da Castel San Giovanni Valdarno di sopra, abitanti in Firenze... ». È il 1427. Il catasto è stato appena istituito a Firenze, ed ecco il venticinquenne Tommaso iscriversi nelle liste cittadine. In realtà a Firenze c'è arrivato diciassettenne da un paesino a qualche decina di chilometri (oggi San Giovanni Valdarno), col fratellino e la giovanissima mamma, vedova per la seconda volta.

La prima commissione: il Trittico

Il 23 aprile del 1422 Masaccio termina forse il suo primo lavoro su commissione, il Trittico di San Giovenale. Ha solo ventun anni, ma secondo gli storici è già un professionista iscritto all'albo. Del resto, i committenti del dipinto sono i Castellani, famiglia potentissima: che figura avrebbero fatto ad affidare il loro quadro-manifesto a uno sconosciuto indipendente?

Brunelleschi il grande maestro

«Habbiamo fatto una gran perdita» andava ripetendo Brunelleschi alla notizia della morte del Masaccio. Era una stima reciproca. L'influenza del rivoluzionario architetto si è fatta sentire in Masaccio già dalle prime pennellate di quel Trittico. E in una «Sagra», di poco successiva, il giovane pittore volle sottolineare i suoi debiti artistici nei confronti del maestro facendolo comparire nel dipinto - una processione - con la sua aria autorevole e trasandata.

[Roberta Chiti]

2 Wladimiro Settimelli, Newspaper article in *L'Unità*, 27 June 1997

3 Masaccio, San Giovenale triptych. Cascia di Reggello, Museo Masaccio

the image. Instead, they are turned slightly to the right and thus create a subtle dynamic tension with the Virgin's upright head by suggesting a movement, a gentle inclination of Mary towards her son.

In 1961, Luciano Berti had rediscovered the triptych as a work by Masaccio in the church of San Giovenale near Reggello, about 25 km from Florence.[2] Due to the inscription on the lower frame which reads (ANNO DO)MINI MCCCCXXII A DI VENTITRE D'AP(RILE), its completion can be dated precisely to 23 April 1422. Since the altarpiece had suddenly become the earliest known work by the painter, it received much attention from art historians. As early as 1966, an expert in Arabic literature and philology also joined the discussion. On the occasion of a conference in honor of Werner Caskel's 70th birthday, the professor of Oriental languages Rudolf Sellheim gave a lecture entitled "Die Madonna mit der Shahâda" ("The Madonna with the *shahāda*").[3] In his interpretation of the San Giovenale triptych, Sellheim not only claimed to read the Muslim declaration of belief on the Virgin's halo, but he also suggested a reason for its appearance in the image.

In 1422, after the conquest of Pisa in 1406 and the acquisition of Livorno and Porto Pisano from the Genoese in 1421, Florence had finally gained direct access to the sea. Seeking to challenge the successful and well-established rivals Genoa and Venice, the Florentine republic was ambitious and confident enough to attempt to become a sea-power itself. The administrative function of the sea consuls (*consoli del mare*) was established and the first official embassy left the city under the command of Felice Brancacci and Carlo Federighi in 1423.[4] Their destination was al-Qāhira, Cairo, the capital of the Mamluk Empire.[5] Sellheim contextu-

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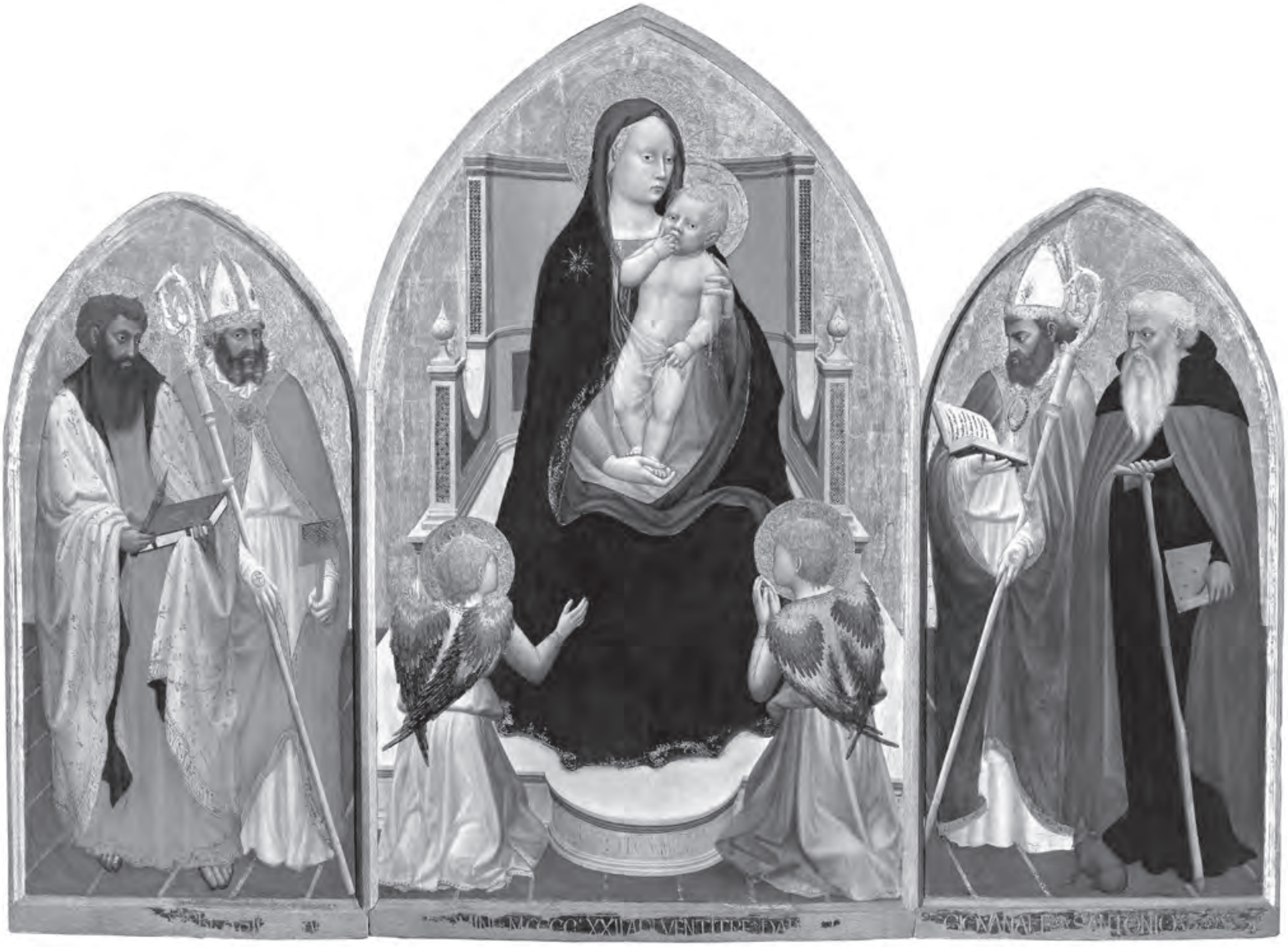
[2] *Masaccio: il Trittico di San Giovenale e il primo '400 fiorentino*, conference proceedings Cascia di Reggello 1998, ed. by Caterina Caneva, Milan 2001 (with an extensive bibliography); Dillian Gordon, "The Altarpieces of Masaccio", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Masaccio*, ed. by Diane Cole Ahl, Cambridge 2002, pp. 123–137: 124–126.

[3] Sellheim's lecture was published two years later; see Rudolf Sellheim, "Die Madonna mit der Schahâda", in: *Festschrift Werner Caskel zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. by Erwin Gräf, Leiden 1968, pp. 308–315.

[4] Michael E. Mallett, "The Sea Consuls of Florence in the Fifteenth Century", in: *Papers of the British School at Rome*, XXVII (1959), pp. 156–169; *idem*, *The Florentine Galleys in the Fifteenth Century: With the Diary of Luca di Maso degli Albizzi, 1429–1430*, Oxford 1967. For Felice Brancacci's diary of this



alized the San Giovenale triptych in this political situation. According to him, it had been commissioned by none other than Felice Brancacci himself and, originally, it was not intended for the church of San Giovenale near Reggello but for the Brancacci Chapel in Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence – the very chapel that Masaccio and Masolino decorated with wall paintings after Brancacci's return. Sellheim argued that an image of the Virgin and Child featuring an Arabic inscription in mirror writing was supposed to protect the donor since "where else could one have prayed for his safe return but in his chapel? And didn't one kneel down in front of a very particular image of the Virgin? Didn't the inscription of the *shahādā* in mirror writing in the halo and above her heart mean that the magical force, which might come from the *shahādā*, was destroyed, in the sense that the 'wrong' belief as well as its followers did not have any power over the ambassadors?"[6]

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journey, see Dante Catellacci, "Diario di Felice Brancacci ambasciatore con Carlo Federighi al Cairo per il Comune di Firenze (1422)", in: *Archivio storico italiano*, VIII (1881), pp. 157–188.

[5] Trading contacts between the Mamluk Empire and Venice were already intense by this time; see Georg Christ, *Trading Conflicts: Venetian Merchants and Mamluk Officials in Late Medieval Alexandria*, Leiden 2012; *Venezia e l'Egitto*, exh. cat. Venice 2011/12, ed. by Enrico Maria Dal Pozzolo/Rossella Dorigo/Maria Pia Pedani Fabris, Milan 2011; Catherine Diane Harding/Nancy Micklewright, "Mamluks and Venetians: An Intercultural Perspective on Fourteenth-Century Material Culture in the Mediterranean", in: *Racar*, XXIV (1997), 2, pp. 47–66.

[6] Sellheim (note 3), p. 313 (the translation is mine).

Sellheim's interpretation of the painting and his suggestion of its provenance not only relied on his reading of the inscription, but also on his assumption that the San Giovenale triptych was the only painting featuring a nimbus with Arabic letters. However, he was not the first to have thought he had read the *shahādā* on a halo. As early as 1907, the art historian Walter Bombe claimed to have identified with the help of the director of the Islamic Museum in Cairo, Max Herz Bey, the Muslim declaration of belief on a painting by Gentile da Fabriano.[7] The phenomenon of Arabicizing letters on haloes in Italian painting was known also from earlier works by Cimabue, Duccio, and Giotto,[8] and once Sellheim had published his article more attempts at deciphering inscribed haloes were undertaken.[9]

Most of these readings have been dismissed by numerous scholars. According to Franco Cardini and Maria Vittoria Fontana, there are no legible Arabic inscriptions on haloes, not to speak of the *shahādā*, but rather pseudo-inscriptions *reminiscent* of Arabic writing.[10] This is also the case regarding the halo of the Madonna in Masaccio's San Giovenale triptych: it shows Arabicizing, yet illegible pseudo-script. Nonetheless, the debate was further stirred up by authors who stressed the ambiguity of the letters, 'Latinized' them in their readings or challenged the existence of Arabicizing letters on haloes altogether. Vincenza Grassi drew attention to the resemblance of the inscription on the Virgin's nimbus in Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* with the titulus 'Maria' when written upside down,[11] whereas Alberto Maria Fortuna was eager to diminish an Arabic reference in Masaccio's San Giovenale triptych completely. He argued that the inscription consisted neither of Arabic nor Arabicizing, but, on the contrary, only of cryptic Latin letters and read: Ihesus Cristus Via Ueritas et Vita.[12]

The dispute about the Virgin's halo in the San Giovenale triptych fits in well with the scholarly discourse on Arabicizing and pseudo-inscriptions in European works of art. They have both fascinated and frustrated art historians for centuries and led to a high number of studies.[13] Still, the following statement by Maria Vittoria Fontana reflects a certain degree of exasperation: "I do not know whether intuition or further study (on which data?) would be necessary in order to be able to express an opinion on this subject, and I honestly do not know how to arrive at any conclusion other than a very general one."[14]

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[7] Walter Bombe, *Le opere di Gentile da Fabriano alla Mostra d'Arte Antica Umbra*, Perugia 1907, p. 4 and note 1. The inscription was read that way also by Oleg Grabar, "Trade with the East and the Influence of Islamic Art on the 'Luxury Arts' in the West", in: *Il Medio Oriente e l'Occidente nell'arte del XIII secolo*, conference proceedings Bologna 1979, ed. by Hans Belting, Bologna 1982, pp. 27–34: 32.

[8] See Henry Lavoix, "De l'ornementation arabe dans les œuvres des maîtres italiens", in: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XVI (1877), pp. 15–29; Archibald H. Christie, "The Development of Ornament from Arabic Script", in: *The Burlington Magazine*, XL (1922), pp. 287–292: 291 and note 9; Gustave Soulier, "Les caractères coufiques dans la peinture toscane", in: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LXVI (1924), pp. 347–358: 354; Robert Oertel, "Giotto-Ausstellung in Florenz", in: Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, VI (1937), pp. 218–238: 233; Hermann Beenken, "A Polyptych Ascribed to Giotto", in: *The Burlington Magazine*, LXV (1934), pp. 98–113: 103f.

[9] Martin Forstner, "Zur Madonna mit der Šahāda", in: *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, CXXII (1972), pp. 102–107.

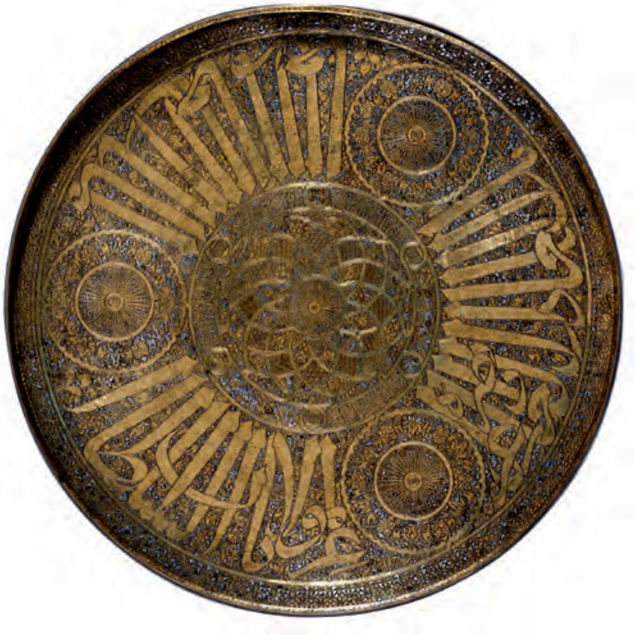
[10] Franco Cardini, "Un esercizio d'orientalismo? A proposito della 'shahada' sul nimbo della Vergine", in: *Orientalismi e iconografia cristiana nel trittico di San Giovenale di Masaccio*, conference proceedings Reggello 1998, Florence 1999, pp. 28–36; Maria Vittoria Fontana, "The Pseudo-Epigraphic Arabic Characters", in: *Giotto: The Santa Maria Novella Crucifix*, ed. by Marco Ciatti/Max Seidel, Florence 2002, pp. 217–225: 220f. For a critical discussion of an inscription formerly considered to be legible, see Michele Bernardini, "Un'iscrizione araba in una vetrata nella chiesa della SS. Annunziata a Firenze", in: *Arte d'Occidente: temi e metodi. Studi in onore di Angiola Maria Romanini*, ed. by Antonio Cadei, Rome 1999, III, pp. 1023–1030.

[11] Vincenza Grassi, "Le iscrizioni arabo-islamiche nell'opera di Gentile da Fabriano", in: *Intorno a Gentile da Fabriano: nuovi studi sulla pittura tardogotica*, conference proceedings Fabriano/Foligno/Florence 2006, ed. by Andrea De Marchi, Livorno 2008, pp. 33–44.

[12] Alberto Maria Fortuna, "Ancora sulle aureole del Trittico di San Giovenale", in: *Masaccio* (note 2), pp. 209–214: 212f.

[13] See particularly Adrien de Longpérier, "De l'emploi des caractères arabes dans l'ornementation chez les peuples chrétiens de l'Occident", in: *Revue Archéologique*, II (1845), pp. 696–706 and M. Henry/Adrien de Longpérier, "Lettre a M. A. de Longpérier sur l'emploi des caractères arabes dans l'ornementation chez les peuples chrétiens de l'Occident", in: *Revue Archéologique*, III (1846), pp. 406–411; Louis Courajod, "Notes sur des inscriptions

The aim of this study is not to try to decipher parts of the inscriptions anew nor is it an attempt to 'solve' the problem of pseudo-script in late medieval Italian painting. In a first approach, it will rather encircle the phenomenon of pseudo-inscribed haloes through the close analysis of two case studies: Masaccio's San Giovenale triptych dated to 1422, and Giotto's *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa* dated to around 1295/1300. Its point of departure is Fred Leemhuis' ingenious contribution to the topic in which he interpreted pseudo-inscribed haloes within the material culture of the pre-modern Mediterranean, as Sylvia Auld had done before.[15] Leemhuis, though, proposed a specific type of object, namely inlaid brass plates and trays from Mamluk Syria and Egypt (Fig. 4) as points of reference for pseudo-inscribed haloes in the artworks by Gentile da Fabriano and Masaccio.[16] He argued that the Arabic calligraphy on them is highly comparable to the pseudo-lettering on the haloes, also given its arrangement around the circumference of the form which is interrupted by ornamental rosettes or roundels at regular intervals. Although Leemhuis' suggestion has been



4 Inlaid tray, Syria or Egypt, 1330–1360. London, Victoria and Albert Museum

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arabes ou pseudo-arabes", in: *Bulletin de la Société nationale des antiquaires de France*, XXXVII (1876), pp. 127–129; Archibald H. Christie, "The Development of Ornament from Arabic Script: II", in: *The Burlington Magazine*, XLI (1922), pp. 34–41; Ahmad Fikry, *L'art roman du Puy et les influences islamiques*, Paris 1934; Kurt Erdmann, "Arabische Schriftzeichen als Ornamente in der abendländischen Kunst des Mittelalters", in: *Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz: Abhandlungen der geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse*, IX (1953), pp. 467–513; S. D. T. Spittle, "Cufic Lettering in Christian Art", in: *Archaeological Journal*, CXI (1954), pp. 138–152; Richard Ettinghausen, "Kufesque in Byzantine Greece, the Latin West and in the Muslim World", in: *A Colloquium in Memory of George Carpenter Miles (1904–1975)*, New York 1976, pp. 28–47; Maria Vittoria Fontana, "Un itinerario italiano sulle tracce dello pseudocufico", in: *Grafica*, VII (1990/1991), 10/11, pp. 67–84; Angelo Michele Piemontese, "Le iscrizioni arabe nella Poliphili Hypnerotomachia", in: *Islam and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. by Charles Burnett/Anna Contadini, London 1999, pp. 199–202; Gottfried Tichy, "Kufische und pseudokufische Inschriften in Salzburg und im europäischen Kontext", in: *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Salzburger Landeskunde*, CXLV (2005), pp. 339–362; Rosamond E. Mack/Mohamed Zakariya, "The Pseudo-Arabic on Andrea del Verrocchio's David", in: *Artibus et historiae*, XXX (2009), 60, pp. 157–172; Alexander Nagel, "Twenty-Five Notes on Pseudo-Script in Italian Art", in: *Res*, LIX/LX (2011), pp. 229–248; Silvia Pedone/Valentina Cantone, "The Pseudo-Kufic Ornament and the Problem of Cross-Cultural Relationships Between Byzantium and Islam", in: *Opuscula historiae artium*, LXII (2012), pp. 120–136; Margaretha Boockmann, *Schrift als Stigma: Hebräische und hebraisierende Inschriften auf Gemälden der Spätgotik*, Heidelberg 2013; Alicia Walker, "Pseudo-Arabic 'Inscriptions' and the Pilgrim's Path at Hosios Loukas", in: *Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World*, ed. by Antony Eastmond, Cambridge 2015, pp. 99–123. On Arabic inscriptions for non-Arabic readers, see Claus-Peter Haase, "Arabisch für Nichtleser", in: *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" Reconsidered*, ed. by Andrea Lermer/Avinoam Shalem, Leiden 2010, pp. 117–139.

[14] Fontana (note 10), p. 220.

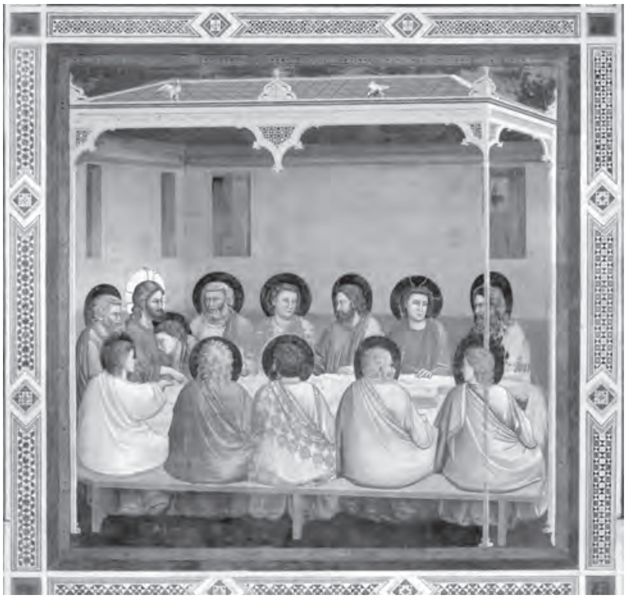
[15] Sylvia Auld, "Kuficising Inscriptions in the Work of Gentile da Fabriano", in: *Oriental Art*, XXXII (1986), pp. 246–265.

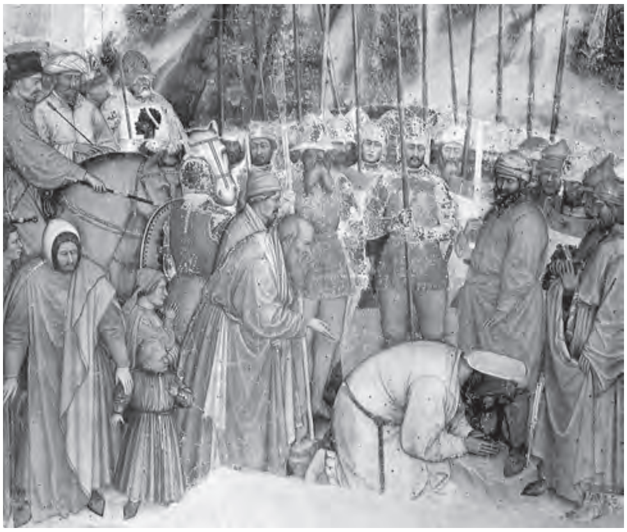
[16] Fred Leemhuis, "Heiligenscheine fremder Herkunft: Arabische Schriftzeichen in Aureolen der italienischen Malerei des frühen fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts", in: *Der Islam*, LXXII (2000), pp. 286–306.

taken up by various scholars,[17] so far it has not been examined within the artistic context of late medieval and early Renaissance Italy. In the following, I will approach this issue in a fourfold way: by questioning the representation of a nimbus in the medium of painting; by analyzing pseudo-script as a specific artistic means to decorate a nimbus; by interrogating the materiality of haloes as well as the materiality of the pictures in which they were represented; and fourthly, by briefly discussing the role of foreign scripts and languages in late medieval Tuscany. The analysis of two altarpieces featuring pseudo-script which were created over 120 years apart will reveal the continuities, similarities, and differences between the artistic use of pseudo-inscribed haloes in Florentine painting around 1300 as well as at the beginning of the Quattrocento.

II. Disks of Gold

The depiction of haloes is an artistic problem from various perspectives: with regard to their form and decoration, their materiality, their visibility and invisibility, and their position in pictorial space. On the San Giovenale triptych (Fig. 3), these questions are intriguingly raised in the rendering of the angels. Shown with their backs to the beholder, their thick metal haloes seem to be right in front of their faces. This solution had already been tested by Giotto in the scene of the *Last Supper* in the Scrovegni Chapel (1304), where Christ's disciples seem to have their view obscured by their own haloes (Fig. 5).[18] However, saints seen from behind were not the only haloed figures that confronted painters with problems. On Altichiero da Zevio's wall painting in the Oratorio di San Giorgio in Padua, showing





5 Giotto,
The Last Supper.
Padua, Scrovegni Chapel

6 Altichiero da Zevio,
Beheading of St. George.
Padua, Oratorio di San Giorgio

7 Piero della Francesca, polyptych of St. Anthony (detail). Perugia, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria

8 Carlo Crivelli, *Crucifixion* (detail). Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera

9 Francesco del Cossa, *Annunciation* (detail). Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister

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[17] Rosamond E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300–1600,* Berkeley 2001, pp. 65f.; Nagel (note 13), p. 230.

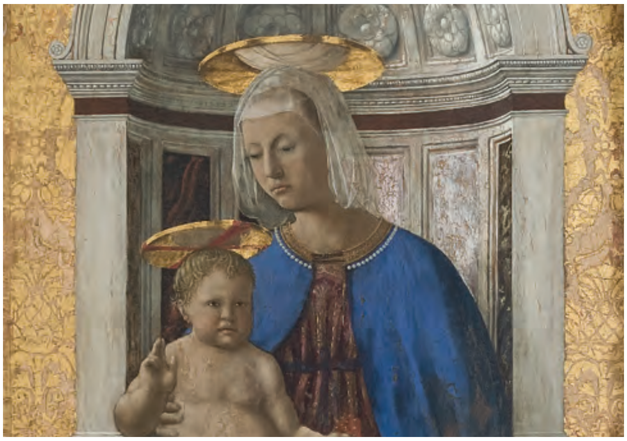
[18] See also Leonard Shlain, *Art and Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time and Light,* New York 1991, pp. 50f.

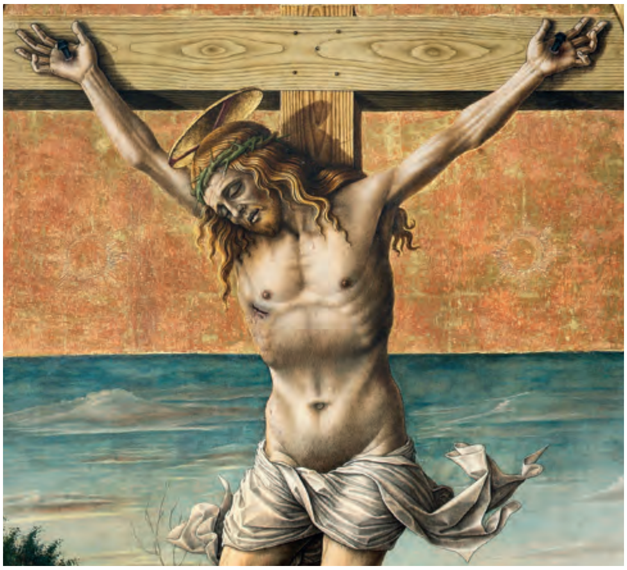
[19] Henri Mendelsohn, *Der Heiligenschein in der italienischen Malerei seit Giotto,* Berlin 1903, p. 4.

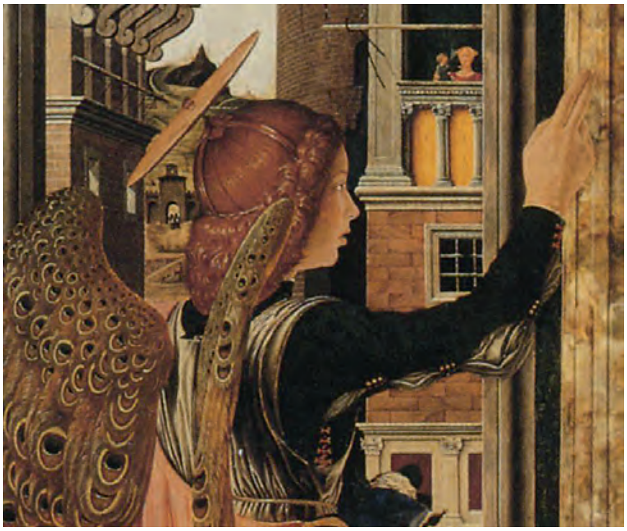
[20] A study of all the different varieties of haloes would exceed the scope of this essay. In Pseudo Pier Francesco Fiorentino's mid-15th-century *Adoration*

the *Beheading of St. George* (1385), the kneeling saint is seen in profile view, carefully balancing his nimbus like a solid metal disk on the back of his head (Fig. 6).[19]

While artistic experiments pertaining to the representation of haloes were manifold, their depiction as round disks comparable to plates was indeed among the most common.[20] This concept of a nimbus was pushed even further in the fifteenth century, when painters also applied the specific qualities of metal disks to haloes. In Piero della Francesca's polyptych of St. Anthony (ca. 1470), the solid-looking haloes seem to be polished to such an extent that they reflect the heads of the saints: the mirror images of the white veil covering Mary's hair, the Baptist's brown curls and even Anthony of Padua's tonsure are painted onto them (Fig. 7). In Carlo Crivelli's *Crucifixion* (1488–1490), in contrast, Christ's nimbus itself casts a shadow on the cross (Fig. 8). Francesco del Cossa's *Annunciation* in Dresden (1470–1472) shows perhaps one of the most original representations of a halo in a painting. Here, the angel is *wearing* a halo which is fixed to his head by means of a complicated metal construction, a kind of helmet consisting of four brackets attached to a ring (Fig. 9). In the painting, the nimbus is conceived as a material object and thus thought to share the quality of weight and experience the effects of gravity along with other worldly objects. Hence, it requires a holding device, an instrument, in order not to fall to the ground.[21] As Roland Kanz pointed out, this provocatively outspoken and accurately fitting construction clearly refers to late medieval theater equipment and prevented the angel from losing his halo – "no matter how fast he flew or how heavy the turbulences on his way to Mary through the sky might have been".[22]







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of the Christ Child, for instance, the translucent haloes are made up of rays and Arabicizing letters that evoke an immaterial sunburst: for detailed images see *Trente-trois primitifs italiens de 1310 à 1500: du sacré au profane,* ed. by Giovanni Sarti, London [1998 ca.], pp. 142–145.

[21] For a discussion of instruments from an art historical perspective see *Werkzeuge und Instrumente,* conference proceedings Hamburg/Florence 2008/2010, ed. by Philippe Cordez/Matthias Krüger, Berlin 2012.

[22] Roland Kanz, "Lachhafte Bilder: Sedimente des Komischen in der

This glimpse into the successive reification of the nimbus in the pictorial spaces of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian painting elucidates the plausibility of Leemhuis' suggestion that Mamluk plates or trays, that is objects of material culture, might have inspired Gentile da Fabriano and Masaccio. Yet, the analysis focused on a detail of each artwork only, and in order to examine the phenomenon of pseudo-inscribed haloes more closely additional aspects have to be taken into account. They regard both the specific decoration of the nimbus and the latter's role within the syntax of the paintings.

III. Pseudo-Inscribed Haloes, ca. 1300

Pseudo-script had been a common device on the Italian peninsula for centuries,[23] before it was introduced on haloes in the second half of the Duecento.[24] In both Cimabue's Louvre *Madonna* from San Francesco in Pisa (ca. 1280) and Duccio's *Rucellai Madonna* (commissioned in 1285), the Virgin's nimbus is decorated with a small band of 'Orientalizing' letters.[25] Giotto's *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa* (1295/1300), however, features a particularly compelling use of pseudo-lettering (Fig. 10).[26] The altarpiece with the enthroned Virgin and Child has been trimmed off on all sides. Mary is enveloped in a voluminous blue mantle which covers her red-tinted silken gown, and both her garments are elegantly lined with golden hems. Carefully, she holds her son on her lap whose right hand is raised in a blessing gesture, whereas his left fist encloses a scroll. The colors of the Child's vestments mirror those of his mother's clothing in inverted and lighter hues. He is dressed in a pale blue tunic, while a rose-red fabric covers his left shoulder and is wrapped around his waist. In their sumptuous but plain garbs, Mary and her son stand out from the richly patterned curtain behind them. The interlaced geometric ornamentation of the drapery decorating the elaborate throne is taken up in the stoles of the angels. The two feathered messengers frame the Madonna and Child on the right and left behind the throne. In their smoky grey-blue *sbiadato*-colored tunics with overlying crossed bands of patterned cloth, they seem to unite the decoration of the textile surfaces in the foreground.[27] Both wear narrow fillets around their curls (Fig. 11), bright red ribbons which are a common feature of Byzantine icons.[28] As if set in motion by an invisible gust of wind or a flap of their wings, the two ends of the ribbons float freely in the air and simultaneously 'invade' the haloes which are decorated with a complicated and irregular array of pseudo-lettering.

Although each nimbus is related to a figure whose head it encircles, in scholarship, the specific interplays between gilded surfaces and painted imagery are hardly ever explored. Instead, they are often looked upon as two separate realms.[29] Yet, a close analysis of the *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa* reveals the intriguing ways in which the various elements in the picture are

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Kunst der frühen Neuzeit", in: *Das Komische in der Kunst*, ed. by *idem*, Cologne 2007, pp. 26–58: 31.

[23] Maria Vittoria Fontana, "Byzantine Mediation of Epigraphic Characters of Islamic Derivation in the Wall Paintings of Some Churches in Southern Italy", in: *Islam and the Italian Renaissance* (note 13), pp. 61–75.

[24] See Bastian Eclercy, *Nimbendekor in der toskanischen Dugentomalerei*, Ph.D. Diss., Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität zu Münster 2007, pp. 274–281.

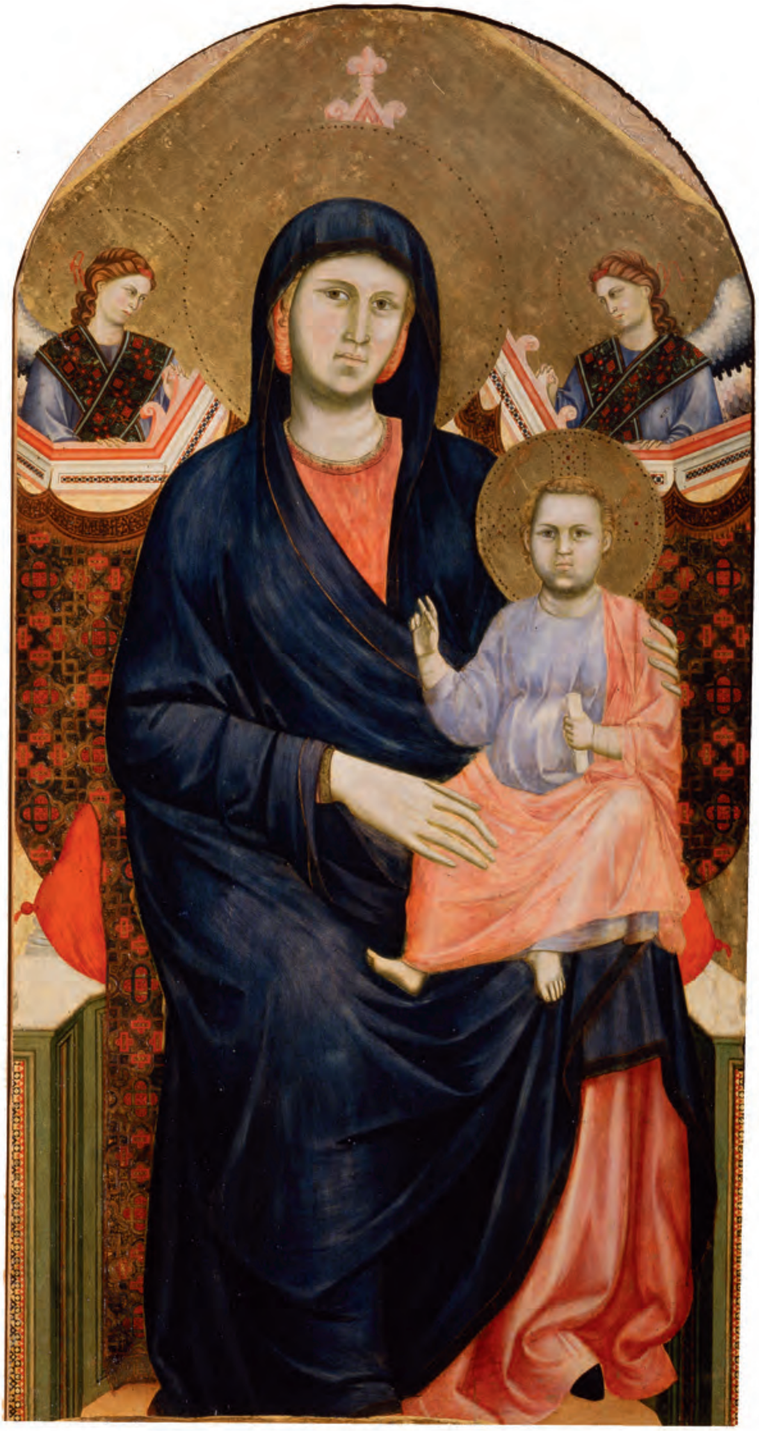
[25] *Ibidem*.

[26] For a summary of the proposed reconstructions and earlier literature on the panel, see the catalogue entry by Andrea De Marchi, in: *Giotto e compagni*, exh. cat., ed. by Dominique Thiébaut, Paris 2013, pp. 70–75; *idem*, "La figura e il trono: La Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa risarcita", in: *Giotto, l'Italia*, exh. cat., ed. by Serena Romano/Pietro Petraroia, Milan 2015, pp. 42–53, and *La Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa di Giotto: studi e restauro*, ed. by Marco Ciatti/Cecilia Frosinini, Florence 1995. For the haloes and the decoration of the gold ground, see also Adriano Peroni, "Le aureole della Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa", in: *Florilegium: scritti di storia dell'arte in onore di Carlo Bertelli*, ed. by Laurent Golay *et al.*, Milan 1995, pp. 56–61, and Eclercy (note 24), pp. 274–280.

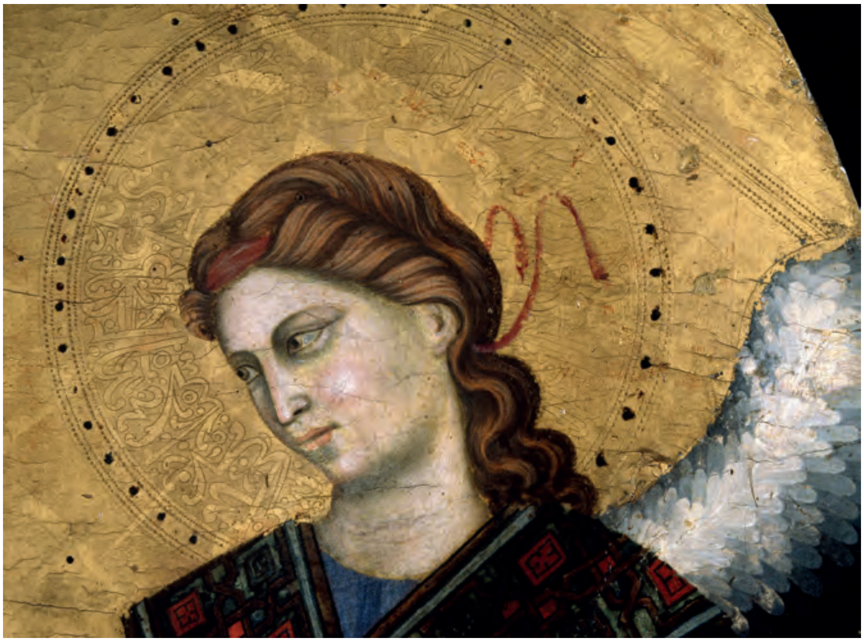
[27] The term *sbiadato* refers to in-between colors used to dye cloth; see Carole Collier Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence: Families, Fortunes and Fine Clothing*, Baltimore/London 2002, p. 176.

[28] For a Byzantine icon with these ribbons see e.g. the 13th-century *Icon with the Archangel Gabriel* at St. Catherine, Sinai, in: *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557)*, exh. cat., ed. by Helen C. Evans, New York 2004, no. 240.

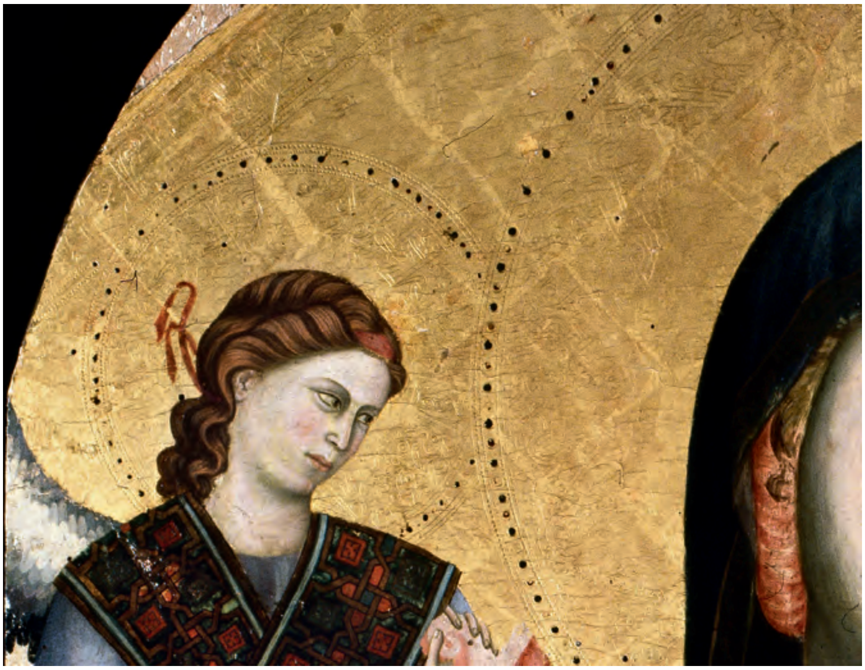
[29] For studies of the halo in Western art focusing mainly on the history and



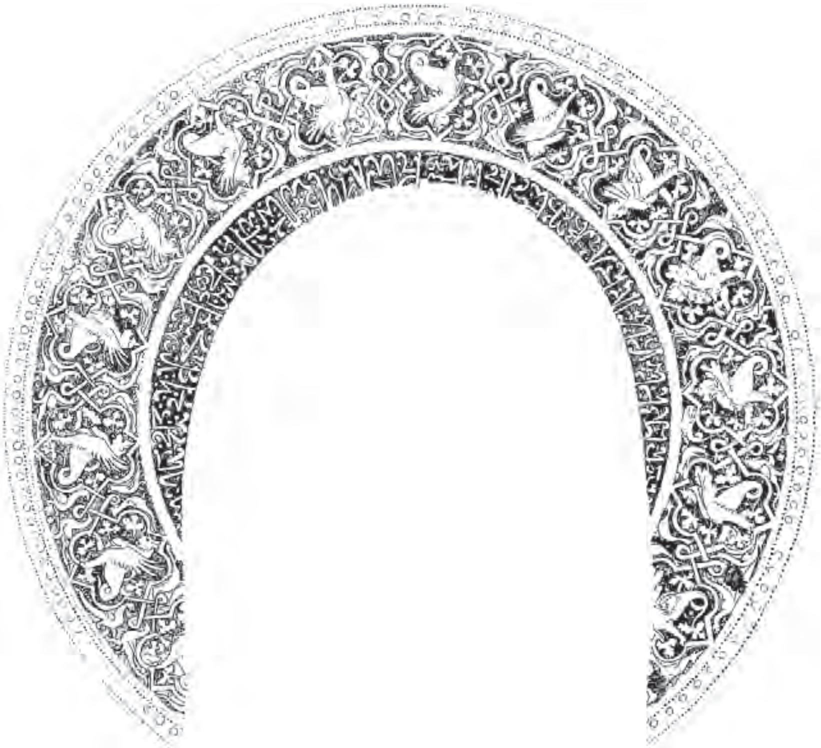
10 Giotto, *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa*. Florence, Museo Diocesano di Santo Stefano al Ponte



11 Giotto, *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa*, detail of the angel's halo. Florence, Museo Diocesano di Santo Stefano al Ponte



12 Giotto, *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa*, detail of the gold back and the haloes. Florence, Museo Diocesano di Santo Stefano al Ponte



13 Decorative scheme of the Virgin's nimbus in Giotto's *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa* (drawing by Paola Bracco)

related to or interact with one other and create dynamic areas of tension between them. Regarding the design of the halo of the angel on the right, a particularly long pseudo-letter right in front of the angel's eyes appears as if it were a vision ray emanating from them (Fig. 11). Furthermore, the angel's widened pupils seem to be echoed in the diacritical marks, that is in the dots employed in the pseudo-script. The broader topic of optics is addressed in this detail. According to a medieval theory of vision, the viewer's eyes send out rays to the object, touching it and even caressing and stroking it, "before returning to the eye carrying the memory of this touch".[30] But in this case, the depiction also refers to the difference between seeing and not-seeing a jumble of letters in bright divine light, reading and not-reading an inscription, undecipherable to the fleshly eye of the beholder, but perhaps intelligible to celestial beings.[31]

The artistic interplay between various visual elements in this scene is indeed palpable (Fig. 11). While the bright red ribbons correspond with the red-tinted lips of the angel and his rosy red cheeks, the inordinate

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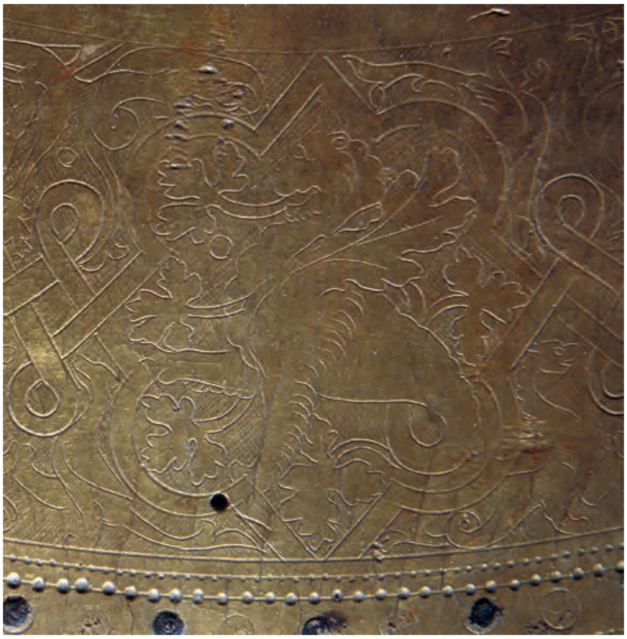
formal development of haloes as well as on their possible symbolical meanings, see Francesco Gandolfo, "Noterelle a margine del nimbo quadrato", in: *Immagine e ideologia: studi in onore di Arturo Carlo Quintavalle*, ed. by Arturo Calzona/Roberto Campari/Massimo Mussini, Milan 2007, pp. 65–72; Agneta Ahlqvist, "Cristo e l'imperatore romano: i valori simbolici del nimbo", in: *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia*, XV (2001), pp. 207–227; Francesca Baldelli, "Insigne viventis: postille all'interpretazione del nimbo quadrato", in: *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia / Università degli Studi di Perugia*, XXII (1998/99), pp. 31–47; Marisa Michieli Zanzotto, "Il ritratto di Poppo nella basilica di Aquileia e il problema del nimbo quadrato", in: *Memorie storiche forogiuliesi*, XLIV (1960/61), pp. 219–234.

[30] Bissera Pentcheva, "Epigrams on Icons", in: *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture*, ed. by Liz James, New York 2007, pp. 120–138: 130. For discussions of medieval theories of vision in an art historical context, see e.g. Cynthia Hahn, "Visio Dei: Changes in Medieval Visuality", in: *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. by Robert Nelson, Cambridge 2000, pp. 169–196; *eadem*, *s. v.* Vision, in: *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, ed. by Conrad Rudolph, Oxford 2006, pp. 44–64; Frank Büttner, *Giotto und die Ursprünge der neuzeitlichen Bildauffassung: Die Malerei und die Wissenschaft vom Sehen in Italien um 1300*, Darmstadt 2013.

[31] This interpretation of pseudo-lettering was also suggested by Nagel (note 13), p. 229.

pseudo-lettering contrasts with the ordered string of painted jewels in the peripheral border of the nimbus. The pseudo-epigraphic characters appear more entangled and disheveled than the angel's shaped wavy hair, even frenetic when compared to the neatly arranged wings and their – also regarding color gradations – balanced feathers. However, apart from their rich decoration which emphasizes their flatness, the haloes also contribute to the illusion of depth. The left angel's nimbus both slightly overlaps the band with pseudo-letters running along the edge of the picture and is itself overlapped by the enormous nimbus of the Virgin (Fig. 12). Displayed in three layers, the haloes thus indicate a distance in the medium of the gold ground. Mary's nimbus, thereby, oscillates between the gilded backdrop and the realm of the painted figures and objects. Since it is represented in front of the throne, it even conceals, to a great extent, the throne's gable except for the rose-colored wooden crown towering above.[32]

In Giotto's *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa*, Mary is in fact graced with one of the most extraordinary haloes in late medieval Italian painting (Fig. 13). While a narrow band featuring pseudo-script encircles her head, a second and broader band leads to the final line with a string of painted round jewels. Entirely executed in free-hand incising, chaotic pseudo-epigraphic characters are contrasted with a highly complex decorative pattern on the central band which, in its seriality, is strictly ordered and, simultaneously, shows ever new and changing motifs. Fantastical creatures are caught in an interlaced ornamental structure, a grid-like arrangement which none of the beasts trespass. The grid consists of squares, each of them placed on the tip, and their area is enhanced by curved semicircles on the four sides. These quatrefoils are interconnected with each other by their upper and lower bands which form loops between them. Recalling braided ribbons, they are characterized by an ambiguity between abstract geometric and interlaced textile ornamentation. The interstices, outside of the grid but determined by it, are populated with animals both facing one another and vertically grouped together. While most of these creatures resemble seals, some of them have birdlike features and others seem to turn into dragons. They interrupt the sequence of the bigger, fantastical creatures captured within the quatrefoils. One placed behind another, these bigger beasts form a rhythmical ring and lead the beholder's eye in a clockwise direction. They all sit with their right front paw lifted, while their left one remains firmly placed on the edge of the geometric frame (Fig. 14). The composite figures with their curly coats and shaggy manes resemble lions, but instead of hind legs, their bodies end in tails. With their curved formation, these tails echo the semicircles of the grid-like ornamental structure. Pleached behind the bodies, the tips of the tails open into huge succulent leaves. In fact, fleshy foli-



14 Giotto, *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa*, detail of the Virgin's nimbus. Florence, Museo Diocesano di Santo Stefano al Ponte

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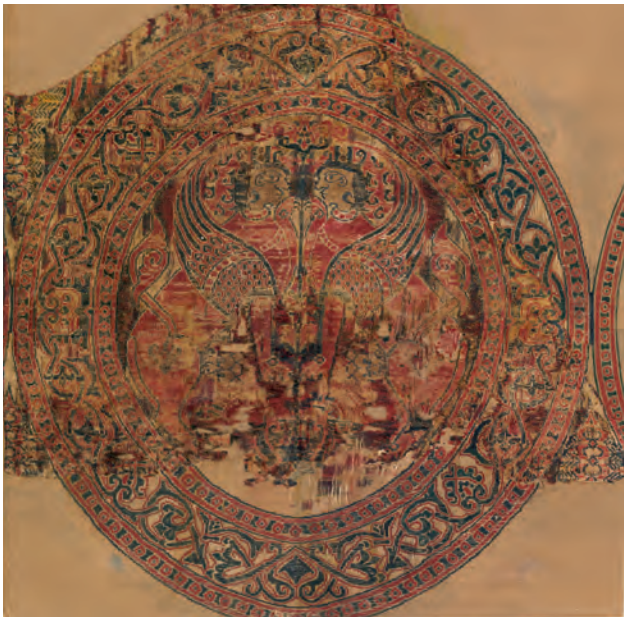
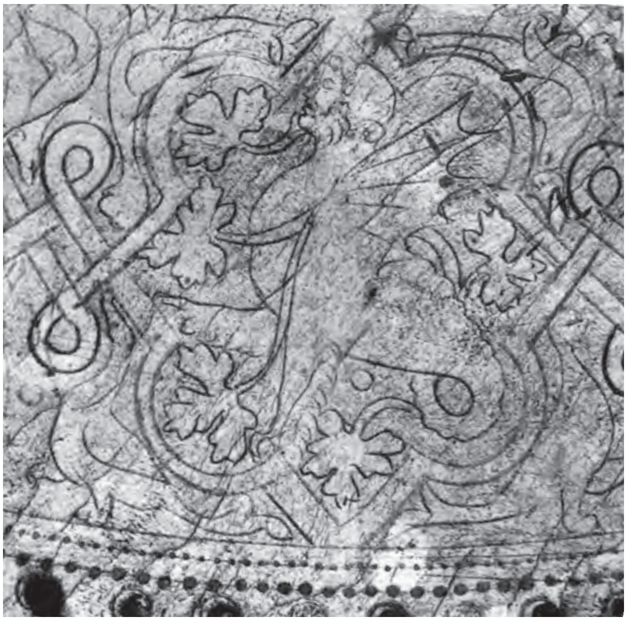
[32] For a discussion of the throne see Michael Viktor Schwarz, *Giottus Pictor,* II: *Giottos Werke,* Vienna 2008, pp. 303f.

[33] For a critical note on the term 'hybridity', when used in a transcultural sense, see Gerhard Wolf, "Kunstgeschichte, aber wo? Florentiner Perspek-



15 Silk fragment with sphinxes, probably Almería, late 11th or 12th century. New York, Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum



16 Giotto, *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa*, detail of the Virgin's nimbus. Florence, Museo Diocesano di Santo Stefano al Ponte

age seems to grow out of their bodies with ever thicker stems connected to the tails, chests and mouths, whereas the wings resemble those of either bats, dragons, or birds, or, metamorphically, turn into leafage.

These, in a biological sense, 'hybrid' creatures incorporating elements from flora and fauna have been interpreted as French gothic grills, fantastical beasts known from the margins of images.[33] They would thus have created a transcultural juxtaposition with the pseudo-inscription relating to Middle Eastern script in the adjacent band, enhanced by a reference to antiquity with the elaborate acanthus leaves on the nimbus of the Christ Child.[34] Yet, again, this derivation remains ambiguous. Instead of gothic grills, the figures could equally have been inspired by textile motifs from the Islamic world, which were widely disseminated in the Mediterranean (Fig. 15).[35] Furthermore, the features of the monstrous creatures on the Virgin's halo are enigmatic, one of them even resembles a sphinx with the face of a man (Fig. 16). Hence, they might have been understood as manticores, composite animals which were traditionally located in India and which were thought to have the body of a lion, the face of a man and a tail resembling that of a scorpion.[36] The *mantichora* was known to Avicenna, it was described in medieval texts such as Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De proprietatibus rerum*

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tiven auf das Projekt einer Global Art History II", in: *kritische berichte*, XL (2012), 2, pp. 60–68: 65. For marginal images, see Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*, London 1992.

[34] For a detailed discussion of these acanthus leaves see Eclercy (note 24), pp. 275f.

[35] Comparably, Michele Bacci proposed a derivation from textile ornament for the fantastical creatures on the frame of a 12th-century representation of the Virgin in Pisa; see Michele Bacci, "Pisa bizantina: alle origini del culto delle icone in Toscana", in: *Intorno al Sacro Volto: Genova, Bisanzio e il Mediterraneo (secoli XI–XIV)*, ed. by Anna Rosa Calderoni Masetti/Colette Dufour Bozzo/Gerhard Wolf, Venice 2007, pp. 63–78: 66. In contrast, Eclercy (note 24), p. 279, suggested that the monstrous figures in Giotto's *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa* might have been inspired by Islamic metalwork, yet without naming a possible model.

[36] Urs Kühne, "Die Manticora: Ein vergessenes Fabelwesen aus Indien", in: *Spinnenfuß und Krötenbauch: Genese und Symbolik von Kompositwesen*, ed. by Paul Michel, Zurich 2013, pp. 175–200; Salome Zajadacz-Hastenrath, "Die Manticora, ein Fabeltier aus Indien", in: *Aachener Kunstblätter*, XLI (1971),

from the thirteenth century and it is also mentioned in Brunetto Latini's *Trésor*.[37] A misunderstanding of many accounts of the manticore's extraordinary speed, which supposedly even challenged the flight of birds, led others to assume that these beasts could fly, and, eventually, they were represented as winged creatures.[38]

Given the predominant features of a lion and the artistic combination of flora and fauna in their representation on the Virgin's halo, the leafy rinceaux might have been related to colombines (*aquilegia*). Since antiquity, lions were thought to eat aquilegia in spring time in order to enhance their physical forces, a legend that inspired the plant's medieval name *herba leonis*.[39] Attention has also been drawn to the Christian interpretation of the three-leaved aquilegia referring to the trinity.[40] On the halo, the thickly, meaty leaves generated from the fantastical creatures' bodies and/or symbolizing their strength, contrast with the quatrefoils, which are themselves abstract derivations of four-leaf clovers. Spinning this visual pun between sprawling and stylized foliage even further, one could remark that both are made of *petula auri*, the gold leaf applied by the artist. In fact, even the fantastical creatures might allude to the materiality of the halo, given Theophilus' account of *aurum hyspanicum* (Spanish gold), a compound supposedly made from red copper, vinegar, human blood, and the powder of a basilisk – itself a composite fantastical creature – which takes on the character of gold in color and weight.[41]

IV. Artistic Techniques, Experiments, and the Materiality of Painting

A closer look at the haloes of the *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa* has revealed how, around 1300, a nimbus was represented as a cosmos incorporating elaborate pseudo-lettering, geometric, vegetal, and interlaced ornamentation, and creative compositions of elements from flora and fauna. Yet, it is a fantastical world which is unobtrusive and barely perceivable to the beholder. All these motifs, both scriptural and figural, were delicately incised into the gold ground and are thus only visible at very close range (Fig. 17).[42] This technique differs categorically from the one employed for pseudo-inscribed haloes in the early fifteenth century.[43] Masaccio's San Giovenale triptych shows a halo which is comparable to Mamluk brassware not only in its design but also in its visual effect since in both cases the elaborate inscriptions are highlighted. On Mamluk metalwork, the Arabic letters stand out from the surrounding motifs because

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pp. 173–181; John Watson McCrindle, "Ancient India as Described by Ktesias the Knidian", in: *The Indian Antiquary*, X (1881), pp. 296–323.

[37] Aristoteles, *De animalibus*, II, 3; Pliny the Elder, *Historia naturalis*, VIII, 30; Avicenna, *Logica, sufficientia, de caelo et mundo, de anima, de animalibus, de intelligentiis*, Venice 1508, fol. 30; Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, XVIII; Brunetto Latini, *Li livres dou trésor*, I, 192, ed. by Francis J. Carmody, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1948, p. 168.

[38] Honorius Augustodunensis, "De imagine mundi", lib. I, chap. 13, in: *Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina*, ed. by Jacques-Paul Migne, CLXXII, col. 124; Thomas Cantimpratensis, *Liber de natura rerum*, 4, 72; Zajadacz-Hastenrath (note 36), pp. 177 and 180.

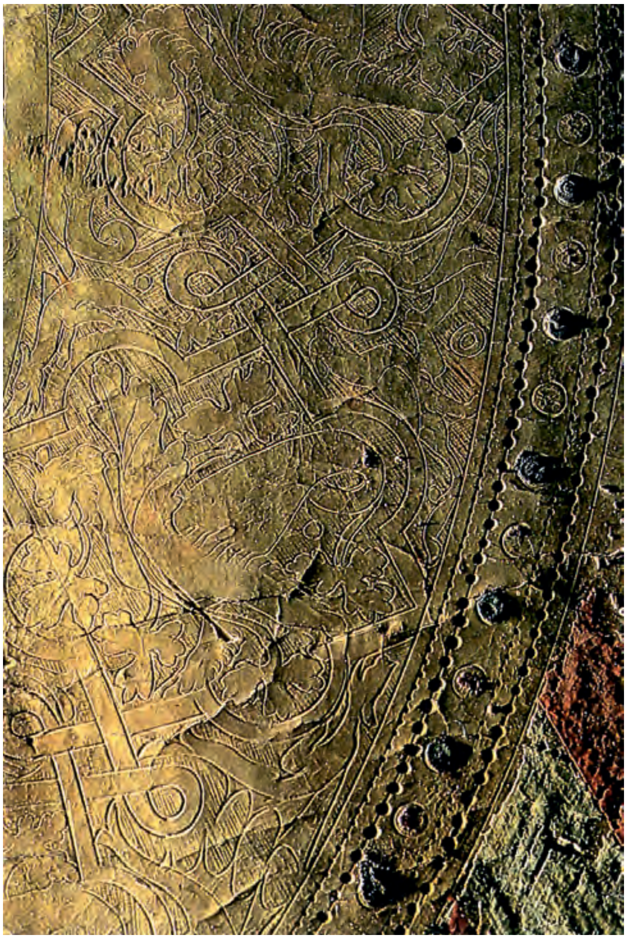
[39] Rolf Fritz, "Aquilegia: Die symbolische Bedeutung der Akelei", in: *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch*, XIV (1952), pp. 99–110; Karl Lober, *Agaleia: Erscheinung und Bedeutung der Akelei in der mittelalterlichen Kunst*, Cologne/Vienna 1988.

[40] Ester Gallwitz, *Kleiner Kräutergarten: Kräuter und Blumen bei den Alten Meistern im Städel*, Frankfurt on the Main/Leipzig 1996, pp. 91–93.

[41] "Est etiam aurum, quod dicitur Hyspanicum, quod conficitur ex rubeo cupro et puluere basilisci et sanguine humano atque aceto. [...] Sicque tamdiu faciunt, donec ipsa confectio cuprum transmordeat, et inde pondus et colorem auri suscipiat" (Theophilus, *The Various Arts: De diversis artibus*, trans. C. R. Dodwell, London 1961, 2.48: "De auro Hyspanico", pp. 96–98).

[42] The incisions are difficult to analyse through normal photographs. During the restoration campaign of Giotto's *Badia Polyptych*, Stefano Scarpelli took photographs under low-angle side lighting and created composite mosaics of these images out of which line-drawing studies were created in order to reveal the structure of the particular design; cf. *Giotto: il restauro del Polittico di Badia*, ed. by Angelo Tartuferi, Florence 2012. Regarding aspects of visibility and invisibility in medieval art see also the contribution of Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Methodological Reflections", in: *Seeing the Invisible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. by Giselle de Nie, Turnhout 2005, pp. 528–532, and *Verborgen, unsichtbar, unlesbar: Zur Problematik restringierter Schriftpräsenz*, ed. by Tobias Frese/Wilfried E. Keil/Kristina Krüger, Berlin/Boston 2014.

[43] For profound discussions of the different techniques, see Erling S. Skaug, *Punch Marks from Giotto to Fra Angelico*, Oslo 1994; Mojmír Svatopluk Frinta, *Punched Decoration on Late Medieval Panel and Miniature Painting*, Prague 1998; Joseph Polzer, "A Question of Method: Quantitative Aspects of Art Historical Analysis in the Classification of Early Trecento Italian Painting Based on Ornamental Practice", in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XLIX (2005), pp. 33–100; Eclercy (note 24); Norman Muller, "In a New Light: The Origins of Reflective Halo Tooling in Siena", in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, LXXV (2012), pp. 153–178.



17 Giotto, *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa*, detail of the Virgin's nimbus. Florence, Museo Diocesano di Santo Stefano al Ponte

18 Silk fragment with ogivals, 11th- or 12th-century Syria or Byzantium. Berlin, Kunstgewerbemuseum

the latter are inlaid with silver, whereas on the Virgin's halo in the San Giovenale triptych, which comprises no metal other than gold, the epigraphic characters are emphasized by a different tooling of the background. In accordance with a well-established artistic tradition, Masaccio chose to granulate the area around the inscription, indenting and variegating the gold leaf and thus achieving an uneven surface which would scatter reflected light. That way, the background appears darker, while the brightly shining floral and scriptural motifs are clearly visible from near and afar.

In Giotto's *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa*, in contrast, rather than the elaborate decoration, it is the gold leaf itself, which represents the factual materiality of the haloes, and their lining with a string of illusionary painted colorful gems that are primarily perceivable to the beholder. The latter refer to the long-standing tradition, still practiced around 1300, of inserting real stones or glass simulating more valuable jewels into a nimbus.[44] However, apart from these glaring references to and creative interactions with goldsmiths' work, as convincingly highlighted by Bastian Eclercy,[45] the particular visual effect of the haloes is also comparable to the one produced by a certain type of textile (Fig. 18). These monochrome samites, silk weavings whose decoration appears as if it were incised into the cloth (the German term for them is in fact *'geritzte' monochrome Seidenstoffe*), were produced in the Near East, most likely in Syria and in Byzantium, probably from the seventh until the twelfth century, as has been shown by Regula Schorta, who traced them in many European church treasuries. An exceptionally large 'incised' silk, for example, is preserved in the Abbadia di San Salvatore in Southern Tuscany.[46] Although technically different, these fabrics respond to exposure to light from different angles in a surprisingly similar way to the incised gold grounds and haloes. While at first sight both seem to be plain, changes of light suddenly reveal their rich ornamentation. This effect has critical consequences regarding the phenomenology of pseudo-lettering on the gilded surfaces. While early fifteenth-century Italian artworks are characterized by the iconicity of pseudo-Arabic script, clearly visible from near and afar, pseudo-inscribed haloes around 1300 rather emphasize the processuality of the script's emergence ("ereignishaftes Erscheinen von Schrift").[47] Furthermore, the light causing the (dis)appearance of the incised lines would have been from a candle or oil flame and would thus have had a flickering intensity adding movement to the fluidity of the pseudo-lettering framing the pictures and encircling the disks of gold.[48]

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[44] Silvana Pettenati, "The Decorated Glass", in: *Giotto* (note 10), pp. 203–215.

[45] Eclercy (note 24), pp. 366–381. For this argument see also Muller (note 43).

If the artistic practice of incising gold leaf in thirteenth-century painting indeed alluded to textiles, it would constitute not only a reason to reassess the late medieval notion of the gold ground,[49] but it would also correspond to the high presence of luxury fabrics in Italian panel painting, particularly since the Duecento. Precious silk weavings were imported to the Italian peninsula from various regions as far as China, Iran, and Central Asia, as well as from Syria, Egypt, the Iberian Peninsula, and other locations across the Mediterranean.[50] The wide-ranging mobility of these highly esteemed portable artifacts resulted in a transcultural transfer of knowledge and the migration of their techniques, functions, and patterns, also to the region of Tuscany, where they not only inspired local textile production but also painters. In the *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa*, Giotto rendered the various different textiles – the sumptuous garments and the splendid curtain – in great detail. The latter is fixed to the throne by means of long threads tied to small metal rings sticking out from the wooden furniture. The cloth's weight is indicated by these highly tensioned twines which contrast with the loosely curved folds of the fabric as it falls onto the cushion before sliding to the ground. With its geometric pattern bordered by a band featuring pseudo-epigraphic characters, the hanging, which in the literature is commonly thought to originate from Al-Andalus,[51] constitutes the colorful counterpart to the juxtaposition of pseudo-lettering and grid-like ornamentation on the Virgin's halo. Yet, Giotto not only carefully explored the similarities and differences between various textiles but also between various appearances of pseudo-script. While the pseudo-lettering on the haloes and gold ground was incised with a stylus, the pseudo-epigraphic characters on the textile border of the throne hanging was painted with lavish brush strokes in different nuances of brown. Finally, the delicate pseudo-inscriptions on the Virgin's garments which adorn her collar and the hem enclosing her wrist were applied in gold leaf to evoke embroidery.

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[46] Regula Schorta, *Monochrome Seidengewebe des hohen Mittelalters: Untersuchungen zu Webtechnik und Musterung*, Berlin 2001. For the silk in the Abbadia di San Salvatore, see also *La casula di San Marco papa: sciamiti orientali alla corte carolingia*, ed. by Loretta Dolcini, Florence 1992. For the fragment preserved in the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin, see Leonie von Wilckens, *Mittelalterliche Seidenstoffe: Bestandskatalog des Kunstgewerbemuseums*, Berlin 1992, p. 35.

[47] Susanne Strätling/Georg Witte, "Die Sichtbarkeit der Schrift zwischen Evidenz, Phänomenalität und Ikonizität: Zur Einführung in diesen Band", in: *Die Sichtbarkeit der Schrift*, ed. by *iidem*, Munich 2006, pp. 7–18: 17. For issues regarding script in the visual arts, see also *Bild und Text im Mittelalter*, ed. by Karin Krause/Barbara Schellewald, Cologne *et al.* 2011; Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "The Iconicity of Script", in: *Word and Image*, XXVII (2011), pp. 249–261; *SchriftRäume: Dimensionen von Schrift zwischen Mittelalter und Moderne*, ed. by Christian Kiening/Martina Stercken, Zurich 2008; Sheila Blair, *Islamic Inscriptions*, New York 1998; Meyer Schapiro, *Words, Script and Pictures: Semiotics of Visual Language*, New York 1996.

[48] For studies of the glittering effects of gold, see also Rico Franses, "When All That Is Gold Does Not Glitter: On the Strange History of Looking at Byzantine Art", in: *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium. Studies Presented to Robin Cormack*, ed. by Antony Eastmond/Liz James, Aldershot 2003, pp. 13–24; Bissera Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual and the Senses in Byzantium*, University Park, Pa., 2010.

[49] That the gold ground could contain references to textiles had already been demonstrated for fifteenth-century painting north of the Alps by Claudia Blümle, "Glitzernde Falten: Goldgrund und Vorhang in der frühneuzeitlichen Malerei", in: *Szenen des Vorhangs – Schnittflächen der Kunst*, ed. by Gabriele Brandstetter/Sibylle Peters, Freiburg im Breisgau 2008, pp. 45–66. For studies of the gold ground, see also Ellen Beer, "Marginalien zum Thema Goldgrund", in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, XLVI (1983), pp. 271–286; Iris Wenderholm, "Aura, Licht und schöner Schein: Wertungen und Umwertungen des Goldgrunds", in: *Geschichten auf Gold: Bildererzählungen in der frühen italienischen Malerei*, exh. cat., ed. by Stefan Weppelmann, Berlin 2005, pp. 100–113.

[50] Anne Wardwell, "The Stylistic Development of 14th- and 15th-Century Italian Silk Design", in: *Aachener Kunstblätter*, XLVII (1976/77), pp. 177–226; *Le stoffe di Cangrande: ritrovamenti e ricerche sul '300 veronese*, ed.

The intricate interplay between painting, textiles and goldsmith's work in Giotto's *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa* corresponds to guild practices of the time. Painters, goldsmiths, and silk weavers not only frequently collaborated and paid close attention to each other's works, but they also shared gold as their raw material.[52] While gold leaf was essential for backgrounds, haloes, inscriptions, and ornaments in late medieval painting, the textile industry worked with gold and silver threads. Used by the three crafts alike, gold even emanated from a common source. In the *Libro dell'arte*, Cennino Cennini refers to the *ducato*, the Venetian gold coin – introduced in 1284 – as the raw material for gold leaf in painting: "che oro e di che grosseza ebuono amettere per brunire eper mordenti: sappi che ll oro che ssi mette in piani non sene vorrebe trarre / del duchato altro che cciento pezzi dove se ne trae ciento qua / rantacinque [...]".[53] In fact, even the gold used by Italian goldsmiths and weavers derived from coins, since this was the most effective way to ensure the purity of the material.[54]

One could trace back the 'origin' of the gold used by painters, goldsmiths, and weavers even further in both the historical and economic accounts and the stories about it, which are intertwined with adventures, legends, and lore. Anne Dunlop has recently drawn new attention to the crucial role of the provenance of different pigments and the raw materials employed by painters. In this particular case, our journey would lead us to the port cities of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, and – via the various maritime routes – to the North African coast. From there, we would have to follow the trans-Saharan caravans returning to the inner regions of sub-Saharan Africa, most famously to the kingdom of Mali, the primary source of gold for the late medieval Mediterranean world.[55] Regarding the surfaces of

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by Licisco Magagnato, Florence 1983; *La seta in Italia dal Medioevo al Seicento: dal baco al drappo*, ed. by Luca Molà/Reinhold C. Mueller/Claudio Zanier, Venice 2000.

[51] Brigitte Klesse, *Seidenstoffe in der italienischen Malerei des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Bern 1967, pp. 34–38 and 133.

[52] On the collaboration of painters, textile manufacturers, and goldsmiths in Tuscany, see Christine Meek, "'Laboreria Sete': Design and Production of Lucchese Silks in the Late Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries", in: *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, VII (2011), pp. 158–168.

[53] "Which gold, and in what thickness, is good to lay for burnishing and for mordants: Know that the gold which is laid on flats, one should not draw other than a hundred pieces of it from a ducat (whereas a hundred and forty five are drawn) [...]" (*Cennino Cennini's* Il libro dell'arte, *a new English Translation and Commentary with Italian Transcription*, ed. by Lara Broecke, London 2015, chap. 139, pp. 173f.). See also Christoph Merzenich, "Dorature e policromie delle parti architettoniche nelle tavole d'altare toscane del Trecento e Quattrocento", in: *Kermes*, XXVI (1996), pp. 51–71; Alessandro Guidotti, "Battiloro e dipintori a Firenze fra Tre e Quattrocento: Bastiano di Giovanni e la sua clientela (dal Catasto del 1427)", in: *Scritti di storia dell'arte in onore di Roberto Salvini*, ed. by Cristina De Benedictis, Florence 1984, pp. 239–249; Luigi Brenni, *L'arte del battiloro ed i filati d'oro e d'argento*, Milan 1930; Andrea Mascaro, *L'arte del battiloro: cenni storici-tecnici-statistici*, Venice 1928.

[54] According to the Florentine silk weaving statutes of 1335, only the gold of gold florins was supposed to be used for gilding: *Statuti dell'arte di Por' S. Maria al tempo della Repubblica*, ed. by Umberto Dorini, Florence 1934, p. 147. See also Lisa Monnas, *Merchants, Princes and Painters: Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Paintings 1300–1550*, New Haven, Conn., 2008, pp. 7f.; Lucia Travaini, "Monete, battiloro e pittori: l'uso dell'oro nella pittura murale e i dati della cappella degli Scrovegni", in: *Giotto nella Cappella Scrovegni*, ed. by Giuseppe Basile, Rome 2005, pp. 145–155. Regarding the changeability from artworks to coins, see Finbarr Barry Flood, "From Icon to Coin: Potlach, Piety, and Idolatry in Medieval Islam", in: *Ritual, Images, and Daily Life: The Medieval Perspective*, ed. by Gerhard Jaritz, Zurich 2012, pp. 163–172.

[55] Anne Dunlop, "Materials, Origins, and the Nature of Early Italian Painting", in: *Crossing Cultures*, conference proceedings Melbourne 2008, ed. by Jaynie Anderson, Carlton 2009, pp. 472–476: 474; Irma Passeri,

Italian painting featuring elaborate and enigmatic pseudo-lettering which was carefully incised into the gold derived from coins, a network has been established that reaches as far as the mysterious continent south of the Mediterranean basin, since most of these very coins that were turned into gold grounds and pseudo-inscribed haloes were actually made of African gold.

This factual link between coin and halo regarding their materiality is enhanced by their visual association. In fact, the new interest in the decoration and in the materiality of haloes, which were no longer shown separately but overlapping each other or even overlapping faces, coincided with the re-introduction of gold coins on the Italian peninsula. The *fiorino d'oro* was first minted in 1252 (Fig. 19), and a beholder might well have associated the abundance of haloes with these golden coins which, though reluctantly used in the beginning, were soon to become the pride of Florence. For a particular type of precious fabric, which was probably produced in Iran in the area of Tabriz or in Central Asia and which became much sought-after and copied on the Italian peninsula from the late Duecento onwards, this visual association is in fact documented (Fig. 20).[56] While such a textile was described as "unum pannum tartaricum pilosum rubeum ad medalias aureas" in the 1295 inventory of Boniface VIII, the inventory of the church of San Francesco in Assisi dating to 1341 lists one as "sciamito rosso velluto con fiorini d'oro": as if Florentine gold coins were scattered all over the red cloth.[57] The visual interplay of nimbus and coin is no less evident in the manuscript of the statutes of the Florentine mint where glittering gold florins cover the pages and are juxtaposed with the giant halo of Saint John the Baptist (Fig. 21):[58] a composition that intriguingly raises the question of the 'value' of painting and carefully reminds the beholder of the fact that all gilding was a 'matter' of money.

Around 1300, when depicting haloes, artists paid particular attention to aspects of the media and materials represented or involved.[59] The nimbus can even be called an artistic arena in which the visual effects of various materials as well as their illusionistic imitations were explored. While the use of beaten gold and real stones, which were inserted into the gold ground, as well as glass evoking more valuable jewels and gems referred to goldsmith's work, the free-hand incisions with a stylus relate to both the visual effect of Near Eastern 'incised' silk weavings and to the technique of drawing. Finally, the materiality and the illusionistic qualities of painting are presented in the small circles filled with pigments on the edge of the halo which were intended to imitate precious stones. All these were material and trans-material experiments with a supposedly immaterial object, a circle of divine light.

V. *In formam scuti rotundi*

In the late thirteenth century, artists were not the only ones who strove to grasp the phenomenon of the halo. Since early Christianity, the nimbus had been a theological issue. The Latin term *nimbus* actually means

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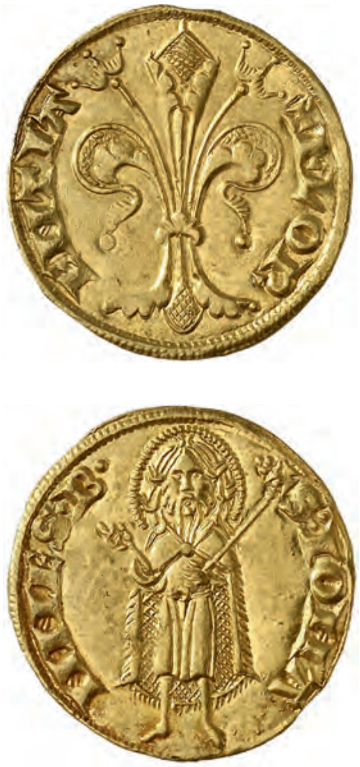
"Gold Coins and Gold Leaf in Early Italian Paintings", in: *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logistics, c. 1250–1750*, ed. by Christy Anderson/Anne Dunlop/Pamela H. Smith, Manchester 2014, pp. 97–115; Robert Sabatino Lopez, "Back to Gold, 1252", in: *Economic History Review*, IX (1956), pp. 219–240; Timothy Garrard, "Myth and Metrology: The Early Trans-Saharan Gold Trade", in: *The Journal of African History*, XXIII (1982), pp. 443–461.

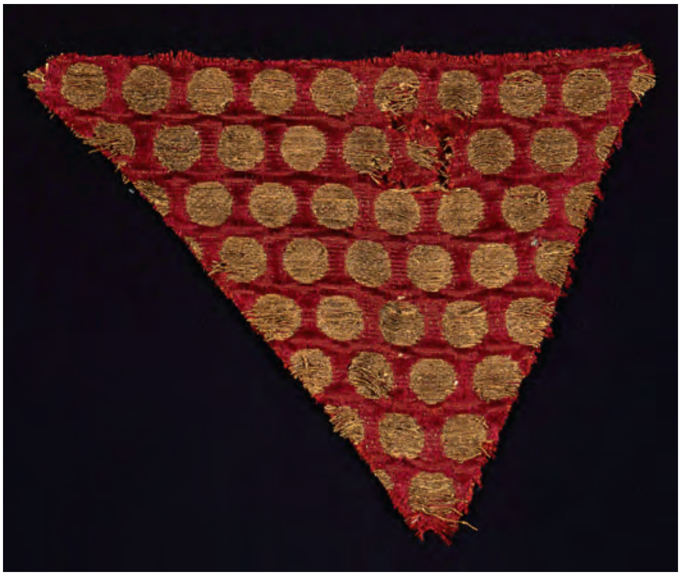
[56] Milton Sonday, "A Group of Possibly Thirteenth-Century Velvets with Gold Disks in Offset Rows", in: *The Textile Museum Journal*, XXXVIII/XXXIX (1999/2000), pp. 101–150; Anne Wardwell, "*Panni Tartarici*: Eastern Islamic Silks Woven with Gold and Silver", in: *Islamic Art*, III (1988/89), pp. 95–173: 111.

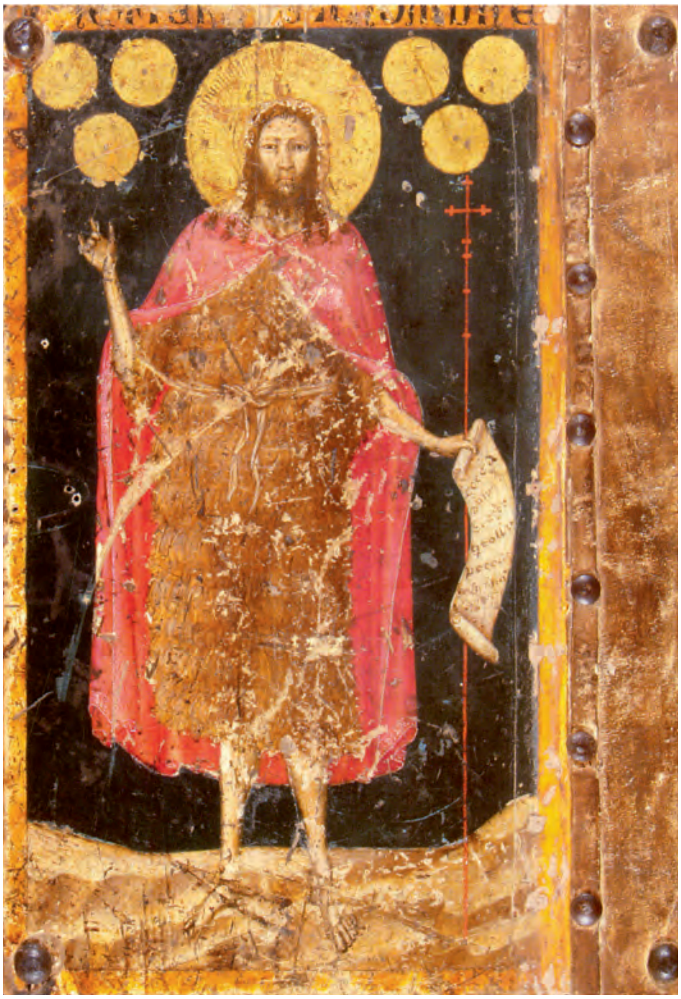
[57] Émile Molinier, "Inventaire du Trésor du Saint Siège sous Boniface VIII (1295): suite", in: *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes*, XLVI (1885), 1, pp. 16–44, no. 1165, p. 108; Giuseppe Fratini, *Storia della Basilica e del Convento di San Francesco ad Assisi*, Prato 1882, p. 179; Monnas (note 54), p. 70. Painters, most famously Simone Martini, soon responded to the challenges which these resplendent velvets featuring golden disks posed in their materiality and motifs; see Cathleen S. Hoeniger, "Cloth of Gold and Silver: Simone Martini's Techniques for Representing Luxury Textiles", in: *Gesta*, XXX (1991), pp. 159f.

[58] Vanna Arrighi, "Statuti dei monetieri", in: *Denaro e bellezza: i banchieri, Botticelli e il rogo delle vanità*, exh. cat., ed. by Ludovica Sebregondi/Tim Parks, Florence 2011, pp. 122f.

[59] Marco Ciatti, "The Restoration and the Study of the Crucifix", in: *Giotto* (note 10), pp. 25–64: 50–55.







19 Verso and recto of a gold florin, between 1252 and 1303. Frankfurt on the Main, Deutsche Bundesbank

20 Textile fragment with gold disks, 13th- to 14th-century Iran or Central Asia. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts

21 Statutes of the Florentine mint, 1314–1461. Florence, Archivio di Stato, Ufficiali della Moneta poi Maestri di Zecca, 1

‘cloud’, but as early as antiquity it was also used to signify a luminous circle around the heads of gods and other figures.[60] While a variety of different expressions such as *aurea*, *splendor*, *gloria*, and *lumen* exist for halo in medieval texts, the term *corona* is particularly frequent and implies a material connotation of the nimbus.[61] In his study of Italian Duecento haloes, Bastian Eclercy drew a connection between the theological conception of the nimbus as a *corona* and the glaring references to metalwork in the representations of haloes in late medieval Italian painting.[62] Yet, the material associations were not restricted to the literal signification of the Latin term.

In 1286, William Durandus the Elder defined the nimbus (*corona*) in his liturgical treatise *Rationale divinorum officiorum* as follows: “The halo of this kind will be painted in the form of a round protective shield since the saints enjoy divine protection, which is why they sing and congratulate each other saying: Lord, you crowned us with the shield of your will.”[63] Durandus’ reference point for haloes is a *scutum rotundum*, a round shield. This comparison had already been drawn by Honorius Augustodunensis in the late twelfth century,[64] but the definition became particularly well-known with Durandus’ *Rationale*, which was one of the most influential liturgical treatises, widespread all over Europe since the late thirteenth century. Durandus refers to biblical passages that describe God as a “shield” (*scutum*) or the protection granted by him as a “shield of faith”.[65] Furthermore, Durandus explicitly addresses artists with these lines. When reflecting that “the halo […] will be painted (*depingitur*) in the form of a round protective shield”, painters may well have understood this point of reference literally and taken inspiration from worldly shields, a train of thought which brings us back to the phenomenon of pseudo-inscribed haloes.

Medieval Islamic arms and armor very often bore inscriptions, not only weapons but also helmets, suits of armor, and shields.[66] In a Seljuk manuscript of ʿAyyūqī’s *Varqa va Gulshāh*, probably produced in Konya between 1225 and 1250 and today in the Topkapı Palace Library (MS. Hazine 841), the central horseman of the composition has his inscribed shield raised above his head (Fig. 22).[67] The inscription next to the figure informs the beholder that it is Varqa who is fighting against Rabīʿ ibn Adnān, while his lover Gulshāh, disguised as a man, stands on the right watching the combat. Originally, Rabīʿ’s shield, now faded and undecipherable, was also inscribed. Competing with the golden saddles and bridles in their glimmering splendor, two haloes encircle the heads of the figures on the left and right. As in the other folios depicting battle scenes, the artist has played with the formal analogies and differences between shields and haloes.[68] While Rabīʿ’s nimbus partly overlaps his magnificent

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[60] Wladimir Weidlé, *s. v.* Nimbus, in: *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. by Engelbert Kirschbaum, III, Rome 1990, col. 323–332; Christian Hecht, *Die Glorie: Begriff, Thema, Bildelement in der europäischen Sakralkunst vom Mittelalter bis zum Ausgang des Barock*, Regensburg 2003, pp. 51–62; Marthe Collinet-Guérin, *Histoire du nimbe des origines aux temps modernes*, Paris 1961.

[61] Hecht (note 60), p. 52.

[62] Eclercy (note 24), p. 169.

[63] “Corona autem huiusmodi depingitur in formam scuti rotundi, quia sancti de protectione diuina fruuntur, unde cantant gratulabundi: Domine ut scuto uoluntatis tue coronasti nos” (Guillelmus Duranti, *Rationale divinorum officiorum*, I, III, 19f., ed. by Anselme Davril/Timothy Thibodeau, Turnhout 1995, p. 419).

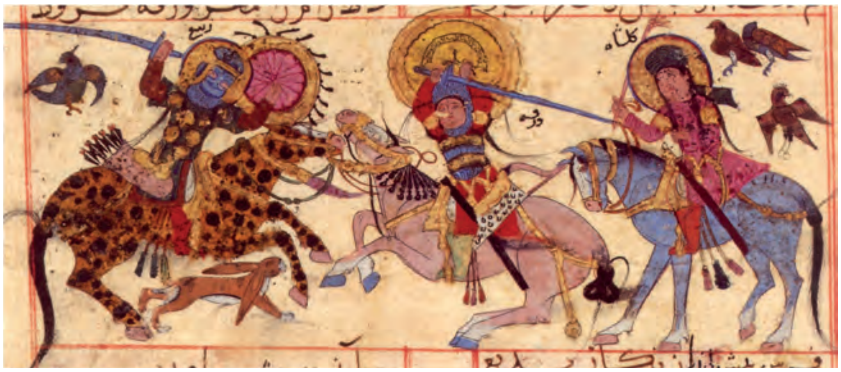
[64] “Lumina, quae circa capita sanctorum in ecclesia in modum circuli depinguntur, designant quod lumine aeterni splendoris coronati fruuntur. Idcirco vero secundum formam rotundi scuti pinguntur, quia divina protectione ut scuto nunc muniuntur. Unde ipsi canunt gratulabundi: Domine ut scuto nos bonae voluntatis tuae coronasti (Psal. V).” (Honorius Augustodunensis, “Gemma Animae”, Lib. I, Cap. CXXXIII [“De corona in ecclesia”], in: *Patrologiae cursus completus* (note 38), LXXII, col. 586).

[65] Cf. e.g. Ps 5, 13: “Domine ut scuto bonae voluntatis coronasti nos”. On the symbolic and pictorial notion of the shield in Romanesque art, see Herbert Kessler, “Evil Eye(ing): Romanesque Art as a Shield of Faith”, in: *Romanesque Art and Thought in the Twelfth Century: Essays in Honor of Walter Cahn*, ed. by Colum Hourihane, University Park, Pa., 2008, pp. 107–135.

[66] *Furusiyya*, II: *Catalogue*, ed. by David Alexander, Riyadh 1996, pp. 102f.

[67] *Ibidem*, pp. 64–67. See also Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, “Matériaux pour servir à l’histoire de la peinture iranienne, II: le Roman de Varqe et Golšāh”, in: *Arts Asiatiques*, XXII (1970), pp. 1–264.

[68] For illustrations, see *Furusiyya* (note 66), pp. 64–67. For a creative and politically symbolic appropriation of shields in the architecture of Fatimid Cairo, see Avinoam Shalem, “A Note on the Shield-Shaped Ornamental Bosses on the



22 ʿAbd al-Muʿmin al-Khuwayyī, battle scene from ʿAyyūqī's *Varqa va Gulshāh*. Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, MS. Hazine 841

pink shield with its golden border and black tassels which dynamically fly through the air, Varqa's halo is simultaneously concealed by his gigantic shield and seems to be blurred with it.

Placing inscriptions on shields was a custom that had been practiced since antiquity and which, as several scholars suggested, might have simply continued in the medieval Mediterranean world.[69] Islamic inscribed shields also made their way into Christian visual culture. They were frequently depicted on Crusader icons of soldier saints such as on the back of a double-sided Cypriot icon with the Virgin and Child as Maria Brephokratoussa and with Saint James the Persian, where the Arabic inscriptions were turned into pseudo-lettering around the rims of the shield (Fig. 23).[70] George C. Miles proposed that Byzantine depictions of shields featuring Arabicizing inscriptions were inspired by actual arms and armor imported from Damascus and other Islamic domains.[71] Pseudo-inscribed arms and armor were also represented in late medieval Italian painting: helmets with pseudo-lettering such as in the *Crucifixion* by Giotto in the Louvre, but also shields. As a matter of fact, Giotto even armed the angels with pseudo-inscribed shields in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (Fig. 24).[72]

Regarding shields featuring pseudo-inscriptions in Byzantine art, Miles did not rule out a protective, apotropaic function.[73] Apotropaic and magical interpretations of pseudo-script and particularly of Arabicizing inscriptions have been proposed in different contexts by a number of scholars.[74] Alicia Walker's recent analysis of the pseudo-Arabic bands positioned on a Middle Byzantine bowl today in the treasury of San Marco in Venice also heads in a similar direction.[75] According to

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Façade of Bāb al-Nasr in Cairo", in: *Ars Orientalis*, XXVI (1996), pp. 55–64.

[69] Kolias refers to the custom of signing shields in ancient Rome (mentioned e.g. in the Roman history of Dio Cassius); see Taxiarchēs G. Kolias, *Byzantinische Waffen: Ein Beitrag zur byzantinischen Waffenkunde von den Anfängen bis zur lateinischen Eroberung*, Vienna 1988, p. 125. On Trajan's Column and the Column of Marc Aurelius in Rome, an enormous round shield is placed in the center of the spiral bas reliefs. Here, Victoria, the personification of victory, writes on the shield about the emperor's triumph in war over his enemies.

[70] Rebecca W. Corrie, "Icon with the Virgin and Child (front) and Saint James the Persian (back)", in: *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843–1261*, exh. cat., ed. by Helen C. Evans/William D. Wixom, New York 1997, pp. 127–129; for the inscription on the shield, see Maria G. Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images: Byzantine Material Culture and Religious Iconography (11th–15th Centuries)*, Leiden/Boston 2003, p. 150; *Il viaggio dell'icona dalle origini alla caduta di Bisanzio*, exh. cat., ed. by Tania Velmans/Elka Bakalova, Milan 2002, pp. 140f. See also Piotr Ł. Grotowski, *Arms and Armour of the Warrior Saints: Tradition and Innovation in Byzantine Iconography (843–1261)*, Leiden/Boston 2010, pp. 241–243, for more Byzantine examples of painted shields with Arabicizing inscriptions.

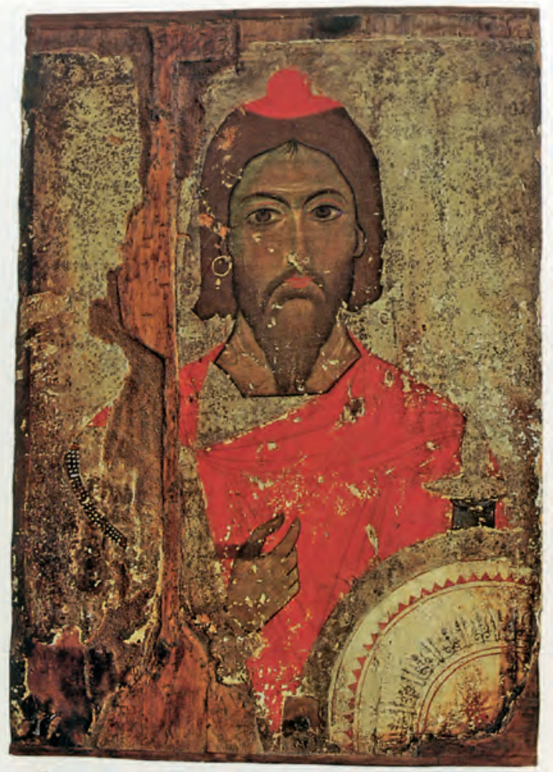
[71] George C. Miles, "Byzantium and the Arabs: Relations in Crete and the Aegean Area", in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, VIII (1964), pp. 1–32.

[72] More Italian examples are known; see, for example, Paolo Veneziano's representation of St. George holding a shield with pseudo-inscriptions in the *Pala Feriale* in Venice.

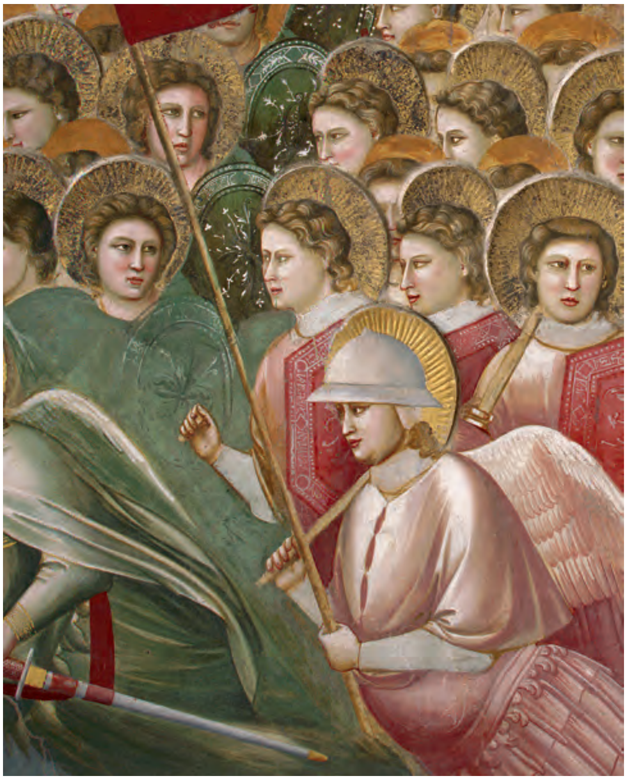
[73] *Ibidem*, p. 29.

[74] Sellheim (note 3); Ettinghausen (note 13). See also Benoît Grévin/Julien Véronèse, "Les 'caractères' magiques au Moyen Âge (XII^{e}-XIV^{e} siècle)", in: *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes*, CLXII (2004), pp. 305–379.

[75] Alicia Walker, "Meaningful Mingling: Classicizing Imagery and Islamicizing Script in a Byzantine Bowl", in: *The Art Bulletin*, XC (2008), pp. 32–53.



23 Double sided 12th- or 13th century Cypriot icon, view of the back with St. James the Persian. Paphos, The Holy Bishopric of Paphos



24 Giotto, *Last Judgement*, detail of the angels. Padua, Scrovegni Chapel

Walker, the pseudo-lettering positioned in less visible areas on the inner rim and base was intended to endow the object with supernatural force, clearly related to magical traditions. Meanwhile, Don Skemer discussed late medieval textual amulets featuring pseudo-script in his book-length study *Binding Words.*[76] Whether such associations were also at play when decorating paintings with pseudo-inscriptions, more particularly with pseudo-inscribed haloes, is a controversial question. Islamic textiles frequently bore talismanic, protective inscriptions (for instance, the term *baraka*), and inscribed magical bowls were known and used in the Middle East, also in Mamluk Egypt,[77] though none of the pseudo-inscribed haloes in late medieval Italian painting resemble one of these magical bowls, but only Mamluk luxury platters instead. The fact that we encounter Arabic letters on the Italian peninsula next to other magical signs, such as next to a magical circle at the feet of Giotto's *Fides*[78] in the Scrovegni Chapel and the connotation of the nimbus as a protective shield, a *scutum rotundum,* both indicate that pseudo-lettering on haloes might have indeed been more than a decorative device and could have served a magical, apotropaic function, particularly when they were first introduced in the late Duecento. In any case, these haloes featuring 'Orientalizing' lettering testify to the close contacts and intense artistic transfer between the Italian peninsula, the Mediterranean, and regions beyond.

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[76] Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages*, University Park, Pa., 2006.

[77] Plinio Prioreschi, *A History of Medicine*, IV: *Byzantine and Islamic Medicine*, Omaha, Neb., 2001, p. 353.

[78] Ignác Goldziher, *Zauberkreise: Aufsätze zur Kultur und Sprachgeschichte vornehmlich des Orients, Ernst Kuhn gewidmet*, Breslau 1916; Philippe Cordez, "Les marbres de Giotto: astrologie et naturalisme à la Chapelle Scrovegni", in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, LV (2013), pp. 8–25: fig. 10.

VI. Exploring Babel

In the late thirteenth century, when 'Orientalizing' lettering first appeared on haloes in Tuscan painting, a new interest in languages and scripts had arisen. This attentiveness finds expression in Giotto's crucifix in the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence with the remarkable *titulus* reading "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews" as a trilingual inscription in Hebrew, Greek and Latin.[79] Several scholars have suggested that it might be more than a coincidence that the crucifix, which also features an abundance of pseudo-inscriptions, both on the frame and on the haloes of Mary and St. John the Evangelist,[80] is housed in the church belonging to the convent of Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (ca. 1243–1320). The friar who later became the prior of the monastery was particularly renowned for his knowledge of foreign languages; his necrology celebrates his excellency in Arabic, a skill he had continuously prided himself on during his lifetime.[81] As a young missionary, Riccoldo had travelled to the Middle East where he studied the Qur'an in order to refute the Muslims and, in his letters from Baghdad, addressed lines like the following to Christ:

> But I beg you, read what he says about you, your mother, and your apostles. As you know, frequently when reading the Qur'an in Arabic with a heart full of utter grief and impatience, I have placed the book open on your altar before your images and that of your most holy mother, and said, 'read, read what Mahomet says!' And it seems to me that you do not want to read. I ask, therefore, that you not disdain to hear a little of what I recount to you.[82]

Riccoldo not only read the Qur'an in Arabic, but he also depended on the language in order to preach to the infidels since, as he argued, "[…] pure gold fears neither file, nor fire, nor the test. And therefore Christians, trusting in God's truth, which is most strong and endures forever, freely debate about the Gospel with other nations, rejoice when it is read by others, and desire for it to be made public to all and to be translated into other languages."[83] Still, this functional use of Arabic for missionary purposes did not prevent him from noticing the particular beauty of the language. On the contrary, he openly stated it in several of his studies:

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[79] Gad Sarfatti/Anna Pontani/Stefano Zamponi, "Titulus Crucis", in: *Giotto* (note 10), pp. 191–199.

[80] See Fontana (note 10).

[81] Pierre Mandonnet, "Fra Riccoldo de Monte-Cruce, pèlerin en Terre Sainte et missionnaire en Orient", in: *Revue biblique,* II (1893), pp. 44–61, 182–202, 574–607: 606 A. 3: "in lingua arabica ita profecit, quod ipsum proponebat populis verbum Dei"; Ricoldus de Montecrucis, *Confutatio Alcorani (1300)*/ Martin Luther, *Verlegung des Alcoran (1542)*: annotated Latin-English edition of the text, ed. by Johannes Ehmann, Würzburg 1999, p. 34: "Unde cum transuissem multa maria et loca deserta et inclytam Saracenorum urbem Babylona deprehendens, ubi maxima et universalia studia apud eos existunt, illicque litteras et arabicam linguam similiter discens diligentissimeque et continue cum magistris apud eos disputans magis magisque deprehendi praedictae legis peruersionem." See also Berthold Altaner, "Zur Kenntnis des Arabischen im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert", in: *Orientalia Christiana Periodica,* II (1936), pp. 437–452: 446. For a recent discussion of knowledge of Arabic in late medieval Europe, see Matthias M. Tischler, "Grenzen und Grenzüberschreitung in der christlich-muslimischen Begegnung: Bemerkungen zum Stellenwert der Arabischkenntnisse in der abendländischen Missionsgeschichte", in: *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft,* XCIII (2009), pp. 58–75.

[82] "Sed oro te, legas quod de te dicit et de tua matre et de tuis apostolis. Ego autem pre maximo dolore cordis et impatientia, ut nosti, frequenter cum legerem alchoranum arabice, ipsum librum apertum posui super altare tuum coram ymagine tua et tue sanctissime matris et dixi, 'legatis, legatis, quod dicit Machometus!' Et videtur mihi, quod non vultis legere. Rogo igitur, quod non dedigneris audire pauca, que referam" (Riccoldo da Montecroce, *Epistolae ad ecclesiam triumphantem,* 3, publ. as: *Lettres de Ricoldo de Monte-Croce,* ed. by Reinhold Röhricht, in: *Archives de l'Orient latin,* II [1884], p. 286). See also Rita George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq: Riccoldo da Montecroce's Encounter with Islam,* Turnhout 2012, pp. 86f. Riccoldo's way of addressing images can be contextualized within late medieval communication practices and interpreted as a curious 'reverse' phenomenon of images 'speaking' to their beholders; cf. Klaus Krüger, "Bilder als Medien der Kommunikation: Zum Verhältnis von Sprache, Text und Visualität", in: *Medien der Kommunikation im Mittelalter,* ed. by Karl-Heinz Spieß/Oliver Auge, Wiesbaden 2003, pp. 155–204.

[83] "Scimus autem uerum aurum nec limam timet nec paragonem nec etiam

> The Saracens and Arabs glory exceedingly in the rhythmical wording and style of their law, and they say that this shows that God made this book and revealed these exact words to Mahomet, because Mahomet was an illiterate man who would not have known how to speak in such a style and with such phrases.[84]

While Riccoldo praised the rhythmical order of the Arabic language in this passage, artists frequently 'rhythmicized' Arabic script.[85] Pseudo-inscriptions predating the late thirteenth century, many of them reminiscent of Kufic calligraphy, often juxtapose longer letters with shorter ones derived from Arabic writing. In contrast to these earlier modes of depiction, pseudo-script around 1300 frequently turned into actual battlefields of letters and lines which, in many cases, bear hardly any resemblance to Arabic script. As several scholars have suggested, the great variety at the turn of the thirteenth century makes it reasonable to speak of 'pseudo-scripts' rather than 'pseudo-Arabic script'.[86] One attempt at making out new scriptural referents was undertaken by Hidemichi Tanaka, who proposed the Phags-pa script, practiced in the Mongol Empire, as a model for the pseudo-inscriptions by Giotto and other late medieval Italian painters.[87]

Riccoldo was in fact intrigued by the Mongolian script, and his close attention to linguistic and scriptural peculiarities is remarkable. He compared Mongolian to Hebrew and argued that the former was closer to Chaldean than the latter and therefore had to be the more "ancient" one.[88] Furthermore, Riccoldo learned Syriac in order to be able to read the biblical and theological texts of Nestorian Christians whom he particularly aimed to convert.[89] Nonetheless, so far, apart from Hidemichi Tanaka, no scholar has compared the many different pseudo-scripts in late medieval Italian painting with languages and scripts other than Arabic. Syriac was equally used for inscriptions on artifacts in the Eastern Mediterranean (even on circular objects adorning their rims such as in the case of the famous flabellum from the Egyptian monastery Deir as-Surian now in Mariemont),[90] which were portable and could have reached the Italian peninsula, like others inscribed in Persian or Cuman.

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries have been referred to as the "era of translations", when languag-

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ignem. Et ideo Christiani, quia de ueritate Dei confidunt que fortissimo est et 'manet in eternum', libenter cum aliis nationibus de Euangelio conferunt, gaudent cum ab aliis legitur, et desiderant quod omnibus publicetur et in linguas alias transferatur." (Riccoldo da Montecroce, "L'ouvrage d'un frère prêcheur en Orient à la fin du XIII^{e} s. suivi de l'édition du *Contra legem Sarracenorum*", ed. by Jean-Marie Mérigoux, in: *Memorie Domenicane*, XVII [1986], chap. 9, p. 109); George-Tvrtković (note 82), p. 81.

[84] "Saraceni tamen et Arabes in hoc maxime gloriantur quod sermo legis eorum et stilus est rithmicus. Et dicunt quod in hoc patet quod Deus fecit illum librum et reuelauit Machometo de uerbo ad verbum, quia Machometus qui fuit homo idiota nesciuisset adinuenire talem stilum et tales sententias." (Montecroce [note 83], chap. 4, p. 77); cf. George-Tvrtković (note 82), p. 85.

[85] See the examples in Ettinghausen (note 13).

[86] Nagel (note 13), p. 229.

[87] Hidemichi Tanaka, "Giotto and the Influences of the Mongols and the Chinese on His Art: A New Analysis of the Legend of St. Francis and the Fresco Paintings in the Scrovegni Chapel", in: *Art History (Sendai)*, VI (1984), pp. 1–15; *idem*, "The Mongolian Script in Giotto's Paintings at the Scrovegni Chapel at Padova", in: *Europäische Kunst um 1300*, conference proceedings Vienna 1983, ed. by Hermann Fillitz/Martina Pippal, Vienna 1986, pp. 167–174; *idem*, "Oriental Scripts in the Paintings of Giotto's Period", in: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, CXIII (1989), pp. 214–226.

[88] "La loro scrittura è assai simile a quella antica della Caldea, da dove uscirono i Giudei, e la lingua e scrittura caldea è molto affine alla giudea" (Riccoldo da Montecroce, *Libro della peregrinazione: epistole alla Chiesa trionfante*, trans. by Davide Cappi, Genoa 2005, p. 57).

[89] Emilio Panella, "Ricerche su Riccoldo da Monte di Croce", in: *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, LVIII (1988), pp. 5–85: 46.

[90] Mat Immerzeel, "The Thirteenth Century Flabellum from Deir al-Surian in the Musée Royal de Mariemont (Morlanwelz)", in: *Eastern Christian Art*, I (2004), pp. 113–139.

[91] Felicitas Schmieder, "*Tartarus valde sapiens et eruditus in philosophia*: la langue des missionnaires en Asie", in: *L'étranger au Moyen Âge*, conference proceedings Göttingen 1999 (= *Actes des congrès de la Société des historiens médiévistes de l'enseignement supérieur public*, XXX [1999]), Paris 2000, pp. 271–281; *eadem*, "Die Welt des *Codex Cumanicus*: Außereuropäische Kontexte lateinischchristlicher Sprachgrenzüberwindungen: Grenze und Grenzüberschreitung im Mittelal-

es became a crucial factor both within the Mongol Empires and in regions that were in close contact with them, one of which, notably, was the Italian peninsula.[91] In order to provide ways of communicating with the various peoples of the vast territories, interpreters played a central role, and numerous translation projects were undertaken. The latter culminated in the Rasulid Hexaglot, a fourteenth-century dictionary of Arabic, Persian, Turkic, Greek, Armenian, and Mongol.[92] The Codex Cumanicus is another of these accomplishments, consisting of a mercantile dictionary in Latin, Persian, and Cuman, on the one hand, and a 'Missionary's handbook' with Christian prayers such as the Pater Noster, Credo, and Ave Maria, sermons and biblical phrases translated into Persian, on the other.[93] While the provenance of this codex is still a matter of debate, Giovanni da Firenze, originally from Florence but from 1330 the Latin bishop of Tbilisi, has recently been proposed as the probable commissioner of a comparable work, the Codex Borgianus.[94] Giovanni, who, according to his necrologue, "tria varia ydiomata perfectissime didicit in quibus diversis orientalium nationum populis xpm summa verbi efficacia predicavit multosque convertit", directed the Dominican mission in Armenia as well as the congregation of the Frati Unitori in Kirnë.[95] Furthermore, the three cases of fourteenth-century Tuscan poetry, a *ballata*, a *terzina* and a *quartina* at the end of the first part (fol. 56v and 59r) of the Codex Cumanicus, which have been associated with Petrarch and enhance the mercantile and religious texts with a poetic dimension,[96] attest the entanglement and interwovenness of languages, scripts, and geographical space.

The artistic device of pseudo-lettering has to be studied in this context of attentiveness towards various scripts and languages,[97] a context that was also present in Tuscany, not only due to Riccoldo da Monte di Croce. In 1264, Bonaventura da Siena, a Sienese notary, translated a Castilian version of the Arabic *miʿrāj* generally known as *The Book of the Ladder* into French and Latin for Alfonso the Wise, while the Florentine Brunetto Latini was at the latter's court in Toledo.[98] Dante, whose comments on translation are famous, reasoned about the origin of the Italian *volgare* in *De vulgari eloquentia*, and about the rise of vernacular script in Tuscany. In fact, in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, even the language of angels was being discussed.[99]

In the Trecento, writers creatively responded to these language and script issues. In Boccaccio's description of the eventful life of Alatiel, the daughter

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ter", in: *Grenze und Grenzüberschreitung im Mittelalter*, ed. by Ulrich Knefelkamp/Kristian Bosselmann-Cyran, Berlin 2007, pp. 285–295; Dennis Sinor, "Interpreters in Medieval Inner Asia", in: *Asian and African Studies*, XVI (1982), pp. 292–323. In 1312, the Council of Vienne issued a decree that Hebrew, Syriac, Greek, and Arabic should be taught at the Papal Court and at the universities in Paris, Oxford, Bologna, and Salamanca.

[92] See the introductory essay by Thomas T. Allsen in: *The King's Dictionary: The Rasulid Hexaglot. Fourteenth Century Vocabularies in Arabic, Persian, Turkic, Greek, Armenian and Mongol*, trans. by Tibor Halasi-Kun *et al.*, Leiden 2000, and Denise Aigle, *The Mongol Empire between Myth and Reality: Studies in Anthropological History*, Leiden/Boston 2014, pp. 164–174.

[93] *Il Codice Cumanico e il suo mondo*, conference proceedings Venice 2002, ed. by Felicitas Schmieder/Peter Schreiner, Rome 2005. See also Felicitas Schmieder, *Europa und die Fremden: Die Mongolen im Urteil des Abendlandes vom 13. bis in das 15. Jahrhundert*, Sigmaringen 1994; Marina Münkler, *Erfahrung des Fremden: Die Beschreibung Ostasiens in den Augenzeugenberichten des 13. und 14. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 2000; Folker E. Reichert, *Begegnungen mit China: Die Entdeckung Ostasiens im Mittelalter*, Sigmaringen 1992.

[94] Angelo Michele Piemontese, "Il Codex Cumanicus alla luce delle glosse sul vangelo persiano datato 1338", in: *Il Codice Cumanico* (note 93), pp. 183–198: 187.

[95] Cit. from Marc-Antoine van den Oudenrijn, "Annotationes Bibliographicae Armeno-Dominicanae. II", in: *Analecta sancti ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum*, XIV (1920), pp. 280–294: 286.

[96] Piemontese (note 94), p. 193; Carlo Frati, "Versi italiani nel codice 'Cumanico' della Marciana e F. Petrarca", in: *Il libro e la stampa*, n. s., IV (1910), pp. 3–9; Vladimir Drimba, "Sur la datation de la première partie du Codex Cumanicus", in: *Oriens*, XXVII/XXVIII (1981), pp. 388–404.

[97] *Traductions et traducteurs au Moyen Âge*, conference proceedings Paris 1986, ed. by Geneviève Contamine, Paris 1989; *Rencontres de cultures dans la philosophie médiévale: traductions et traducteurs de l'antiquité tardive au XIV^{e} siècle*, conference proceedings Cassino 1989, ed. by Jacqueline Hamesse/Marta Fattori, Louvain-la-Neuve 1990.

[98] Cf. María Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, Philadelphia 1987, p. 123.

[99] Luisa Miglio, "L'altra metà della scrittura: scrivere il volgare (all'origine delle corsive mercantili)", in: *Scrittura e civiltà*, X (1986), pp. 83–114; *eadem*, *Governare l'alfabeto: donne, scrittura e libri nel Medioevo*, particularly pp. 35–53. Gio-

of the (Mamluk) Sultan in Babylon (Cairo), the language barrier is crucial for perpetuating her adventures. Wherever she arrives on her many – often undeliberate – voyages across the Mediterranean, she is never able to communicate. On the island of Mallorca, when a rescuer arrives, she and her companions "broke into tears and begged for his mercy, but when they realized that they could not understand each other's language, they tried to explain their misadventures to him with sign language".[100] In yet another story (VIII.9) in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a lack of communication is replaced by multiple misunderstandings, creative word-plays and word-inventions:

> Stanotte fu' io alla brigata, ed essendomi un poco la reina d'Inghilterra rincresciuta, mi feci venire la gumedra del gran Can d'Altarisi. Diceva il maestro: "Che vuol dir gumedra? Io non gli intendo questi nomi. O maestro mio – diceva Bruno – io non me ne maraviglio, ché io ho bene udito dire che Porcograsso e Vannacena non ne dicon nulla." Disse il maestro: – Tu vuoi dire Ipocrasso e Avicenna! Disse Bruno: – Gnaffe! Io non so: io m'intendo così male de' vostri nomi come voi de' miei; ma la gumedra in quella lingua del gran cane vuol tanto dire quanto imperadrice nella nostra.[101]

Especially foreign names of imported goods, expressions for their forms, techniques, and materiality, for instance textile vocabulary, became ever more elaborate and frequent on the Italian peninsula and 'invaded' all sorts of texts, from merchant manuals and inventories to literary genres.[102] For the Islamic world, Lisa Golombek has shown how the extensive textile vocabulary reflects the great significance of the textile medium.[103] In late medieval Tuscany, the quantity of textile terms not only refers to foreign languages, but also often mirrors the artifacts' provenance and accomplished journey. The interweaving of these foreign words into texts could also function as a way to interweave into them knowledge about the foreign lands they came from. While the expression *mandylion* is derived from *mandīl* (منديل),[104] the Arabic word for handkerchief, *baldacchino* recalls *Baldacco*, the Italian name for Baghdad.[105] Yet, they could also take on new meanings, for instance when denoting local products, and hence intertwine geographies, such as in the case of the *baldacchini* that were 'copied' and woven in Lucca in the thirteenth century.

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vanni Curatola suggested a reference to Pentecost regarding pseudo-script in late medieval Italian painting; see Giovanni Curatola, "Les influences islamiques dans l'art européen", in: *L'art de la Méditerranée: Renaissances en Orient et en Occident 1250–1490*, ed. by Tania Velmans/Eduard Carbonell/Roberto Cassanelli, Arles 2003, pp. 169–179: 179. For angelic language and the search for universal languages, see Barbara Faes de Mottoni, "Thomas von Aquin und die Sprache der Engel", in: *Thomas von Aquin: Werk und Wirkung im Licht neuerer Forschungen*, ed. by Albert Zimmermann, Berlin 1988, pp. 140–155; Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, Oxford 1995.

[100] *The Decameron*, trans. by Mark Musa/Peter Bondanella, New York 2002, II.7, p. 130. See Sharon Kinoshita/Jason Jacobs, "Ports of Call: Boccaccio's Alatiel in the Medieval Mediterranean", in: *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, XXXVII (2007), pp. 163–195.

[101] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. by Vittore Branca, Turin 1992, VIII.9. "Last night I was with the company, and since I'm getting a little bored with the Queen of England, I had brought to me the *gumedra* of the Khan of Altarisi. And the doctor said, 'What is *gumedra*? I don't understand such names [words].' 'I'm not surprised, master, since I have heard that neither Porcograsso nor Vannacenna talks about them.' 'You mean Hippocrates and Avicenna!' he replied. 'What do I know!' said Bruno, 'I can't understand your words [names] any more than you do mine. But the *gumedra* in that language of the Great Khan means what empress does in ours'" (Menocal [note 98], p. 138).

[102] Francesco Gardani, *Dynamics of Morphological Productivity: The Evolution of Noun Classes from Latin to Italian*, Leiden/Boston 2013, pp. 260–279; Giovan Battista Pellegrini, *Ricerche sugli arabismi italiani con particolare riguardo alla Sicilia*, Palermo 1989.

[103] Lisa Golombek, "The Draped Universe of Islam", in: *Late Antiquity and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World*, ed. by Eva R. Hoffmann, Oxford 2007, pp. 97–114.

[104] Franz Rosenthal, "A Note on the *Mandīl*", in: *idem*, *Four Essays on Art and Literature in Islam*, Leiden 1971, pp. 63–99. For the mandylion, see *Mandylion: intorno al* Sacro Volto*, da Bisanzio a Genova*, exh. cat. Genoa 2004, ed. by Gerhard Wolf/Colette Dufour Bozzo/Anna Rosa Calderoni Masetti, Milan 2004.

[105] Lisa Monnas, "The Impact of Oriental Silks on Italian Silk Weaving in the Fourteenth Century", in: *The Power of Things and the Flow of Cultural Transformations: Art and Culture between Europe and Asia*, ed. by Lieselotte E. Saurma-Jeltsch/Anja Eisenbeiß, Berlin *et al.* 2010, pp. 65–89; Monnas (note 54), p. 14.

From the late Duecento onwards, as such foreign words filled Tuscan texts, complicated and adorned them,[106] and as writers rose to their phonetic and orthographic challenges, worked with them and creatively responded to them, more and more pseudo-lettering appeared in works of art. At the same time, while Latin and *volgare* were increasingly interspersed with foreign vocabulary, artists explored the boundaries between different kinds of legible and illegible scripts, also technically applied in a variety of manners, written, painted or incised. Furthermore, they sounded out the areas of tension between pseudo-lettering and ornament, vegetal scrolls, and interlaced ribbons, particularly in the margins and threshold areas of their paintings, that is on hems, haloes, and frames. It is this remarkable contemporaneity in the arts, both figural and scriptural, on various levels, that it would be so fruitful to study collaboratively from an interdisciplinary perspective.

VII. *Bild, Ding, Kunst,* or: 'Mamluk Aesthetics' in Early Fifteenth-Century Florence[107]

From the mid-fourteenth century onwards, the plurality of scripts and languages remained an important issue in diplomatic, missionary, and mercantile ties between Tuscany, the Middle East, and Asia. Francesco Cinquini, who died in his native city Pisa in 1348, had been bishop of Tabriz.[108] Moreover, when the Florentine Giovanni de' Marignolli returned after fourteen years from his voyage as a papal envoy via Central Asia and India to China, he stopped first in Florence in 1353 before continuing his travels back to Avignon with a letter from the Great Khan.[109] We know of several translators who worked for Tuscan cities, such as Francesco Gerioli, who was an interpreter for the Comune di Pisa in its diplomatic contacts with the Sultan of Fez in 1358, or Piero Paganucci, who translated contracts between Pisa and Tunis from Arabic into Latin in 1397.[110] The Sienese merchant, scholar, and diplomat Beltramo Mignanelli (1370–1455) travelled from Egypt to the Persian Gulf and became renowned for his biography of the Mamluk Sultan Barquq and the *Gesta Thomorlegh,* a biography of Timur, which he wrote in Constance in 1416 by order of the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund.[111] Due to his excellent knowledge of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew, Mignanelli served as an interpreter first for the Florentine cardinal Giovanni Dominici at the council of Constance in 1415[112] and then for the pope at the Council of Florence between 1439 and 1442.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century, Florence's main long-distance interests had shifted considerably from Asia to the Mediterranean and the North African coast, and in the 1420s particular emphasis was placed on Syria and Egypt, that is the territories of the Mamluk Empire. Yet, in order to situate Masaccio's San Giovenale triptych in this context, it is not necessary to attribute its commission, as Sellheim did, to Felice Brancacci – the patrons of the altarpiece are today rather assumed to have been the rich Castellani family, resident, among other places in and near Florence, in the territory of Reggello.[113] In fact, the 'Mamluk connections' went far beyond individual figures such as Brancacci and Federighi, and dominated, as will be seen, the visual culture in Florence and Tuscany in these years in general.

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[106] For a thought-provoking study of a contemporary German case, see Michael Stolz, "'A Thing Called the Grail': Oriental Spolia in Wolfram's Parzival and Its Manuscript Tradition", in: *The Power of Things* (note 105), pp. 188–216.

[107] For the phrase "Image, Object, Art", see *Bild – Ding – Kunst,* ed. by Gerhard Wolf, Munich 2015. Cf. also *idem,* "Alexandria aus Athen zurückerobern? Perspektiven einer mediterranen Kunstgeschichte mit einem Seitenblick auf das mittelalterliche Sizilien", in: *Lateinisch-griechisch-arabische Begegnungen: Kulturelle Diversität im Mittelmeerraum des Spätmittelalters,* ed. by Ulrike Ritzerfeld/Margrit Mersch, Berlin 2009, pp. 39–62.

[108] Raymond-Joseph Loenertz, *La Société des Frères Pérégrinants: Étude sur l'Orient dominicain,* I, Rome 1937, pp. 157f.

[109] Anna-Dorothee von den Brincken, "Die universalhistorischen Vorstellungen des Johann von Marignola OFM: Der einzige mittelalterliche Weltchronist mit Fernostkenntnis", in: *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte,* XLIX (1967), pp. 297–339.

[110] "In nostro ydiomate sive lingua latina reducti et nobis diligenter ostensi et explanati per prudentem virum Franciscum Gerioli, dilectum civem et interpretem nostrum"; cf. Livio Petrucci, "Documenti in volgare nei carteggi tra Pisa e i paesi arabi", in: *Pisa crocevia di uomini, lingue e culture: l'età medievale,* conference proceedings Pisa 2007, ed. by Lucia Battaglia Ricci/Roberta Cella, Rome 2009, pp. 205–215: 210. "Superscripta omnia […] interpretata et translata de lingua arabica et saracena in latinam per Pierum Paganuccii pisanum civem habitantem Tunithio, in fondaco dictorum pisanorum torcimennum"; cf. *ibidem,* pp. 212f.

[111] Angelo Michele Piemontese, "Il corano latino di Ficino e i corani arabi di Pico e Monchates", in: *Rinascimento,* XXXVI (1996), pp. 227–273: 233f.; *idem,* "Beltramo Mignanelli senese biografo di Tamerlano", in: *Oriente Moderno,* n. s., XV (1996), pp. 213–226.

[112] "Al dì primo di Maggio andò Beltramo Mignanelli al Concilio di Costanza nella Magna con il Cardinale, el quale lo volle seco per i diversi linguaggi, che haveva, come Interprete" (*Annali Sanesi sub anno 1415,* cited after Piemontese, "Il corano latino" [note 111], p. 233).

This was due, first of all, to traded artifacts. Mamluk metalwork in particular had been sought after on the Italian peninsula as early as the fourteenth century, as Petrarch eloquently attests in his *De remediis utriusque fortunae*:

> When Mummius captured Corinth by armed force, and sacked and burnt it to the ground, many of the statues of gold, silver, and bronze, once so plentiful in ancient Corinth, which somehow had escaped the hands of the conquerors, melted in the flames, so that the veins of all kind of metals seemed to flow in one gushing stream. This was the origin of these priceless vessels, and from the ruins of a city luxury derived its name. The craze did not start in the city when it perished, but the material for the craze was prepared there. In this sense Corinth was the source of this madness. Now it is from Damascus that these vessels come and capture your eyes and your minds.[114]

When Simone Sigoli visited Damascus in 1384 and 1385, he elaborately described the markets in the city, where "also is made a great deal of brass basins and pitchers and really they appear of gold, and then on the said basins and pitchers are made figures and foliage and other fine work in silver, so that it is a very beautiful thing to see". Impressed by the beauty and quality of the merchandise, he exclaimed at another point: "Verily if you had money in the bone of your leg, without fail you would break it off to buy these things."[115] In order to obtain such precious commodities, Florence had to compete with well-established Italian port cities. It is evident that Coluccio Salutati (d. 1406) had this Mediterranean trading competition in mind when he praised Florence with the following lines: "What [city] is richer [...]; what city, *without a port*, imports or exports more goods? Where is the commerce greater [...]? Where are men more illustrious? [...] Where Dante? Where Petrarch? Where Boccaccio?"[116]

In a detailed study that traces the history of the import of Mamluk metalwork to Florence, Marco Spallanzani made a peculiar observation. Given the prestige of Mamluk metal artifacts, he wondered why hardly any of them were represented in Florentine painting,[117] a scarcity that is ever more striking when compared with the numerous depictions of other imported artifacts such as Oriental carpets since the late thirteenth century.[118]

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[113] See Valentina Cimarri, "Famiglie fiorentine e loro possessi a Cascia nel 1422", in: *Masaccio* (note 2), pp. 125–132.

[114] "Mummius, dum Corinthum armis captam direptamque flammis absumeret, aureis simulque argenteis atque eneis quecumque victorum forte manus evaserant statuis, quarum abundantissima olim illa urbs fuit, pari incendio liquefactis, omnium metallorum vene ibi uno torrente fluxerunt unoque ex omnibus iam nobiliore metallo; et pretiosioribus vasis exordium et a clade Urbis nomen luxurie partum fuit, non quod is furor in ea urbe consurgeret que ruebat; sed venturo furore materia parabatur. Ad hunc modum tunc Corinthus huius fons fuit insanie, nunc Damascus: inde hodie vasa mittuntur vestros captura oculos animosque" (Francesco Petrarca, *De remediis utriusque fortune* [1354–1366], I.42: "De vasis corinthiis"). The English translation is quoted from *Petrarch's Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul*, I: *Remedies for Prosperity*, trans. by Conrad H. Rawski, Bloomington 1991, p. 135.

[115] The English translation is quoted from Sylvia Auld, "Master Mahmud and Inlaid Metalwork in the 15th Century", in: *Venice and the Islamic World, 828–1797*, exh. cat. New York 2006, ed. by Stefano Carboni, New Haven 2006, pp. 212–225: 215. See also Ulrike Ritzerfeld, "Mamlūkische Metallkunst für mediterrane Eliten: Grenzüberschreitungen in Luxus und Machtrhetorik", in: *Integration und Desintegration der Kulturen im europäischen Mittelalter*, ed. by Michael Borgolte *et al.*, Berlin 2011, pp. 523–539.

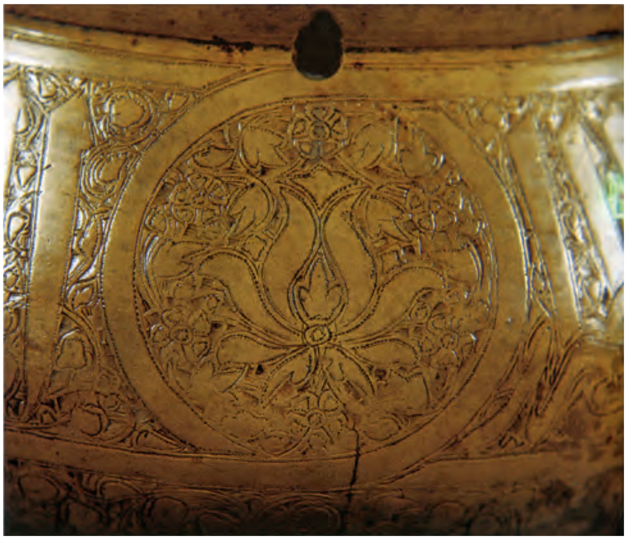
[116] "[...] quaenam [...] abundantior; quae civitas portu carens tot invehit, tot emittit? Ubi mercatura maior [...]? Ubinam viri clariores? [...] ubi Dante? ubi Petrarca? ubi Boccaccio?" (Coluccio Salutati, "Invectiva in Antonium Luschum Vicentinum", in: *Prosatori latini del Quattrocento*, ed. by Eugenio Garin, Milan 1951, pp. 7–37: 34; the translation and the italics are mine).

[117] Marco Spallanzani, *Metalli islamici a Firenze nel Rinascimento*, Florence 2010. See also Rachel Ward, "Plugging the Gap: Mamluk Export Metal-

Spallanzani's assessment is based on the concept of a 'portraiture of objects', understood as artifacts represented in pictorial space. Whereas analyses of the depiction of objects in the medium of painting used to be primarily the subject of discussions of still life painting, they are nowadays – in the course of the recent interest in issues pertaining to objects – more the focus of attention than ever before. Among these, representations of artifacts from other parts of the world than the country in which they were painted have been of particular interest to scholars who aim to tackle not only questions regarding representations of three-dimensional objects in the medium of painting, but also biographies of objects, issues of transculturality and processes of transfer and pre-modern globalization.[119] The analysis of pseudo-inscribed haloes contributes to this discussion, but it also provides a more complex understanding of image-object-interrelations in thirteenth- to fifteenth-century Italian painting from a transcultural perspective.

Contrary to Spallanzani's view, the artistic reception of Mamluk metalwork exceeds any other depiction of Islamic artifacts in early fifteenth-century Tuscan painting and it rivals even the depiction of Oriental carpets. However, instead of being illusionistically represented in pictorial space, Mamluk metal artifacts were represented in the medium of the gold ground, the metal 'epidermis' of the paintings, not accidentally the same material as the cherished goods.

In Masaccio's San Giovenale triptych, the Virgin's halo is decorated with pseudo-inscriptions strongly reminiscent of Mamluk calligraphy, and so is her neckband (Fig. 1). On the garment's border, the painted pseudo-lettering is supposed to evoke golden embroidery, which is ever more evident in contrast to the yellowish-blond curls of the infant Jesus and to the wisps of Mary's hair of the same color. The pseudo-epigraphic characters are rendered in such a way that darker gold stands out before a lighter background and they thus echo the inscriptions in the halo which are similarly highlighted and visible from afar. What is more, the curved neckband seems to be the offset and missing part of the halo's roundness, complementing and closing the circle. The subtle visual relationship between the inscribed hem and the inscribed halo enhances the latter with a textile dimension. Yet, this interplay is outweighed by the association of a metal plate. This is not only due to the design and placement of the pseudo-Arabic inscriptions around the circumference of the form as legible



25 Inlaid brass basin, Egypt, 3rd decade of the 14th century, detail of the *chinoiserie* motif of the lotus blossom. Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia

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work 1375–1475", in: *Facts and Artefacts: Art in the Islamic World. Festschrift for Jens Kröger on His 65th Birthday*, ed. by Annette Hagedorn/Avinoam Shalem, Leiden 2007, pp. 263–284.

[118] On this aspect see Marco Spallanzani, *Oriental Rugs in Renaissance Florence*, Florence 2007.

[119] See e.g. Avinoam Shalem, "The Portraiture of Objects: A Note on Representations of Islamic Objects in European Painting of the 14th–16th Centuries", in: *Europa e Islam tra i secoli XIV e XV*, ed. by Michele Bernardini/Clara Borrelli, Naples 2002, I, pp. 497–521; *Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500–1800*, exh. cat., ed. by Anna Jackson/Amin Jaffer, London 2004; *Luxury for Export: Artistic Exchange between India and Portugal around 1600*, exh. cat. Boston, Mass., 2008, ed. by Pedro de Moura Carvalho, Pittsburgh, Pa., 2008.

Arabic inscriptions would appear in Islamic metalwork, but also to the halo's decoration with oblong rosettes featuring large, carnose petals which are lotus blossoms, a very popular *chinoiserie* motif in Mamluk metalwork at that time (Fig. 25).[120] The material thickness of the halo and its protrusion from the surface of the painting further strengthen the allusion to goldsmith's work.

In the early fifteenth century, artists such as Masaccio, Gentile da Fabriano, Fra Angelico, Gherardo Starnina, Giovanni di Francesco Toscani, and Mariotto di Cristofano, to name but a few,[121] consciously used the gilded parts of their paintings for the representation of haloes whose pseudo-Arabic inscriptions are clearly visible, and they thus incorporated into their artworks visual references to artifacts imported to Florence from the Middle East.[122] One could even go as far as speaking of 'Mamluk aesthetics' that were evident and at play in the visual culture of early Quattrocento Florence.

In the discipline of Islamic art history, 'Mamluk aesthetics' have been fervently debated.[123] In our case, though, the use of this term is not intended to postulate certain general 'aesthetics' of Mamluk art. Instead, it seeks to describe the Florentine approach to artifacts imported from the Mamluk Empire and it aims to assess the dominant impact these artifacts had on the city's visual and material culture, an impact that became increasingly multi-layered.[124]

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the diplomatic and mercantile relationships between Florence and the Mamluk Empire were reinforced.[125] Once the galley system had been established, the first major embassy was sent to Cairo, where Felice Brancacci and Carlo Federighi's mission consisted of negotiating favorable trading conditions. Their aim was to obtain the same conditions that the Mamluks had previously granted to Pisa, Genoa, and Venice. In order to improve their negotiation stances, the Florentines commissioned Raimondo Cardus to translate contracts between Cairo and Pisa from Arabic into *volgare* that had been issued in 1179 and 1216, and they assembled further copies of translations of Egyptian documents from the twelfth and thirteenth century in Pisa's favor.[126] With these documents at hand and given their conquest of Porto Pisano in 1406, Florence presented herself as the legitimate 'heiress' of the commercial privileges once granted to Pisa. The fact that the Mamluk

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[120] For the Mamluk basin preserved in Palermo featuring this ornamentation, see Ursula Staacke, *I metalli mamelucchi del periodo baḥrī*, Palermo 1997, pp. 114–117. For a 14th-century Mamluk tray with this *chinoiserie* ornamentation, once in the Palazzo Strozzi Sacrati and now in a private collection in Florence, see Spallanzani (note 117), fig. 9. The motif was also widespread in Mamluk textiles; see Bethany J. Walker, "Rethinking Mamluk Textiles", in: *Mamluk Studies Review*, IV (2000), pp. 167–217: 179.

[121] While Masaccio's and Gentile da Fabriano's pseudo-inscribed haloes gained attention in art historical scholarship, pseudo-inscribed haloes by most other Quattrocento painters remain unnoticed. Examples can be found in *Bagliori dorati: il Gotico Internazionale a Firenze 1375–1440*, exh. cat., ed. by Antonio Natali/Enrica Neri Lusanna/Angelo Tartuferi, Florence 2012, no. 74; *Trente-trois primitifs* (note 20), no. 14; Wolf-Dietrich Löhr, "Gherardo Starnina, der sogenannte 'Maestro del Bambino Vispo'", in: *An der Wiege der Kunst: Italienische Zeichnungen und Gemälde von Giotto bis Botticelli*, exh. cat. Dresden 2014, ed. by Judith Claus/Gudula Metze, Berlin 2014, pp. 60–63. Mantegna's later reception of pseudo-inscribed, platter-like haloes in his paintings would be a topic of its own; see, for instance, his *Madonna and Child with St. Jerome and St. Louis of Toulouse*, in which the pseudo-inscribed haloes, seen from various perspectives, rival the protagonists' headgear, in: *Primitifs italiens*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Babelon, Paris 2000, fig. 41.

[122] See also the recent study of the pseudo-inscribed glass window in Santissima Annunziata inspired by Mamluk artifacts, presented by Bradley James Cavallo, "Of Medici and Mamluk Power: Islamic Forms in a Renaissance Florentine Stained-Glass Window", in: *Viator*, XLV (2014), 1, pp. 311–330.

[123] For studies of Mamluk art and architecture, see Nasser O. Rabbat, *Mamluk History Through Architecture: Monuments, Culture and Politics in Medieval Egypt and Syria*, London 2010; *The Cairo Heritage: Essays in Honor of Laila Ali Ibrahim*, ed. by Doris Behrens-Abouseif, Cairo/New York 2000; Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Practising Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate: Gifts and Material Culture in the Medieval Islamic World*, London 2014; *Renaissance of Islam: Art of the Mamluks*, exh. cat., ed. by Esin Atıl, Washington, DC, 1982.

[124] In contrast to Florence, the impact of Islamic works of art and architecture on the art production and visual culture of Venice have already been extensively and thoroughly studied by art historians; see Deborah Howard, *Venice and the East: The Impact of the Islamic World on Venetian Architecture 1100–1500*, New Haven 2000; *Venice and the Islamic World* (note 115).

[125] Doris Behrens-Abouseif, "Mamluk Artistic Relations with Latin Europe", in: *La frontière méditerranéenne du XV^{e} au XVII^{e} siècle*, ed. by Albrecht Fuess/Bernard Heyberger, Turnhout 2013, pp. 351–374.

[126] See Petrucci (note 110).

Empire was a highly topical issue on the political and economic agenda of the city of Florence in the early Quattrocento and the increased interest in trade with its territories correspond with the multiple visual referents to Mamluk goods in Florentine painting in these years. Yet, the situation is even more complex.

Spallanzani pointed out that many Florentines had in fact only limited knowledge of metal production centers in the Eastern Mediterranean. Inlaid metalwork was generally referred to as *di* or *da Damasco*, even when it had been more likely produced in Cairo or outside of the Mamluk Empire. Hence the difficulty in determining the exact provenance of metal objects through Italian archival and literary records. Even more ambiguous is the frequently used term *alla domaschina* since it could not only refer to Islamic inlaid metalwork but also to local 'copies'. In fact, by the sixteenth century, the local production had become so successful that Italian *alla domaschina* metalwork was exported to the Middle East.[127]

Masaccio's, Gentile da Fabriano's, Giovanni di Francesco Toscani's, and other early Quattrocento painters' experiments with Mamluk metalwork in the medium of the gold ground precede the flourishing moment of local inlaid metalwork production on the Italian peninsula. However, this does not imply that the compositions of all pseudo-Arabic haloes were derived from actual Mamluk metalwork. Just as, around 1300, artists might have taken inspiration from Giotto's use of pseudo-inscriptions as much as – or at times even more than – from imported goods, in the early fifteenth century some artists, when representing pseudo-inscribed haloes, may have intended to follow Masaccio or Gentile da Fabriano and did not necessarily have Mamluk metal plates in mind or at hand. Once introduced into Florentine painting, these Middle Eastern visual elements became part of the thriving local network of artists and patrons, with cross-references between imported artifacts and artworks by fellow painters, and – oscillating between script and ornamentation – they eventually developed 'a life of their own'.

Yet, in the case of the San Giovenale triptych, the detail of the *chinoiserie* motif of the lotus blossoms on the Virgin's halo indicates that Masaccio had indeed been in close contact with Mamluk metalwork and had not just seen pseudo-Arabic lettering in a painting by another Tuscan artist. The San Giovenale triptych testifies to Masaccio's strong artistic interest in the imported artifacts, and well-travelled, urbane beholders with suave manners who had 'Damascene' metalwork in their palaces or donated it to local monasteries and churches will have recognized and appreciated the visual referents to these precious goods.

VIII. Conclusion: From Circulation to Presentation or: The Lure of the Round

Due to the increased interest in transcultural and Mediterranean art history, 'Orientalizing' inscriptions have received more scholarly attention in recent years. Their occurrence in many Italian paintings, however, has still only marginally and insufficiently been studied, and they have been almost exclusively compared with Arabic script. Particularly with regard to art production since the late Duecento, when Tuscany was in contact with regions as far as Central Asia and China and when the incised gold grounds of Tuscan panel painting and objects represented in pictorial space abounded with all kinds of different types of lettering, most of them only remotely recalling Arabic script, the expertise of epigraphers of various scripts and of linguists of a number of languages such as Persian, Cuman, Syriac, Armenian, Hebrew, and Mongolian, among others, are needed.[128] Even for the ear-

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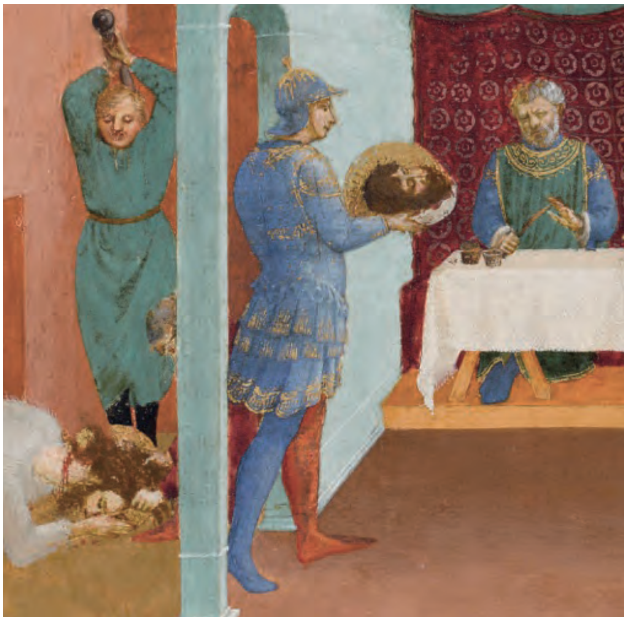
[127] Sylvia Auld, *Renaissance Venice, Islam and Mahmud the Kurd: A Metalworking Enigma*, London 2004. See also Vasari's comment on Italian "tausia, cioè lavoro a la damaschina" (Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, ed. by Paola Della Pergola/Luigi Grassi/Giovanni Previtali, Milan 1962, I, chap. 33: "Introduzione alle tre arti: della pittura", pp. 159f.).

[128] See, e.g., the results of the new interdisciplinary and interlinguistic research project on inscriptions, formerly considered to be pseudo-script,



26 Fra Giovanni Angelico, *The beheading of St John the Baptist and the feast of Herod* (detail). Paris, Musée du Louvre

ly fifteenth century, when visual references to Arabic calligraphy clearly dominated Italian panel painting, detailed epigraphic studies would certainly bring to light new cases of legible or partly legible Arabic inscriptions or legible single words among the pseudo-lettering in the paintings.[129] It is indeed almost ironic that the material has never been systematically examined despite the fact that these inscriptions grace none other than the 'canon' of late medieval and early Renaissance Italian painting.

Though further epigraphic studies of 'Orientalizing' inscriptions in Italian painting and investigations into their transcultural historical, political, and mercantile context are highly necessary and will provide us with new insights into the manifold connections between the Italian peninsula, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Asia, it remains the crucial task of art historians to consider the specific roles of these inscriptions in the paintings: how they were integrated into the compositions; whether they appear on the surfaces of the images, in the medium of the gold ground or on artifacts represented in pictorial space; their size and shape; their visibility and invisibility, including various gradations from one to the other; their frequency; as well as combinations and creative visual interplays between different kinds of scripts or between inscriptions and ornamentation.

This paper has taken a closer look at two Florentine panel paintings featuring haloes with 'Orientalizing' lettering from an art historical perspective: Giotto's *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa* and Masaccio's San Giovenale triptych. Particularly, the latter has received much attention since the 1960s due to the halo of the Madonna, allegedly featuring the *shahādā* in Arabic letters in mirror-writing. Yet, when Maria Vittoria Fontana and others identified the inscription to be pseudo-script only reminiscent of Arabic writing, the nimbus of the Virgin attracted considerably less scholarly interest. This paper has shed new light on the artistic practices of pseudo-inscribing haloes in late medieval Tuscan painting beyond questions of epigraphic accuracy, legibility and illegibility. It has explored the crucial role of (inscribed) artifacts in transcultural encounters between Tuscany and the Islamic world, artistic engagements with their materiality as well as with the materiality of (the various components of) painting and the many layers of image-object-interrelations when artifacts were represented in the medium of the gold ground or in pictorial space.

The close analysis and contextualization of two artworks created around 1300 and in the 1420s, respectively, has elucidated the continuities and discontinuities in the artistic use of pseudo-script on haloes over time. While around 1300, Tuscan gold-

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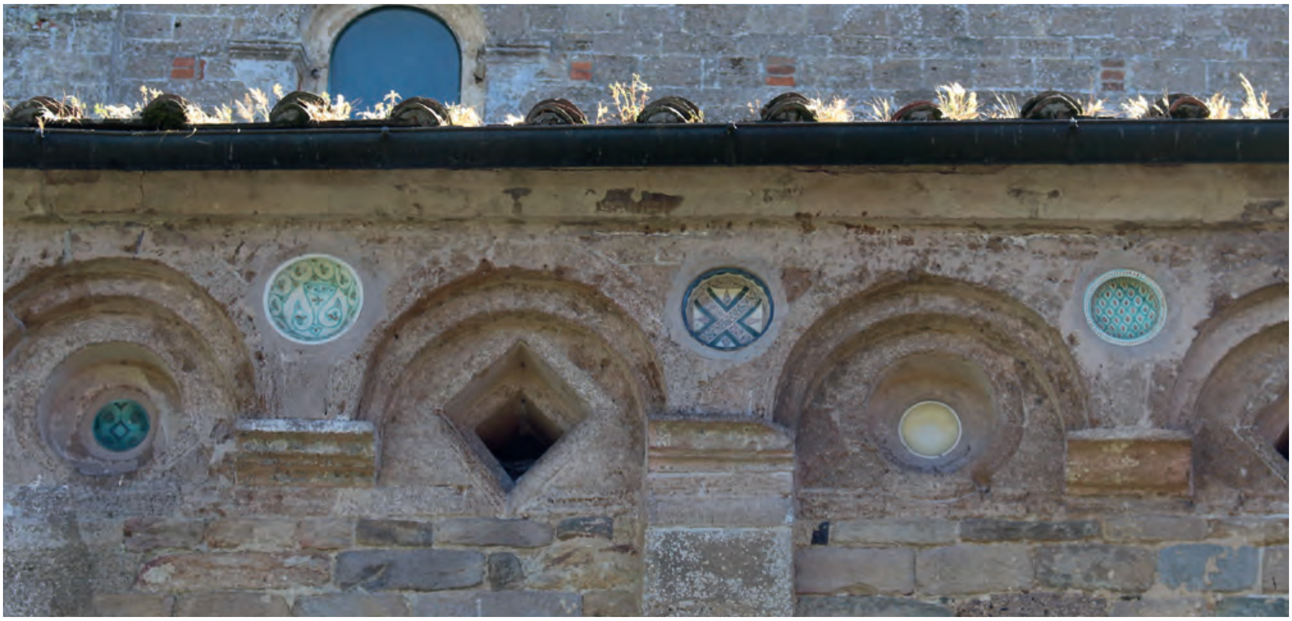
in ancient Greek art: Adrienne Mayor/John Colarusso/David Saunders, "Making Sense of Nonsense Inscriptions Associated with Amazons and Scythians on Athenian Vases", in: *Hesperia*, LXXXIII (2014), pp. 447–493.

[129] For a new reading of a legible Arabic inscription in a 14th-century Tuscan painting, see Vera-Simone Schulz, "The Saviour in the Sultan's Clothes: A Miraculous Image in Tuscany in a Mediterranean Perspective", in: *Trecento*



27 Pisa, San Piero a Grado, *bacini* on the north flank

back painting featuring incised pseudo-lettering was characterized by allusions to and creative interactions with numerous media and techniques such as goldsmith's work, 'incised' textiles, drawing practices, and painting with its illusionary possibilities, early fifteenth-century pseudo-inscribed haloes were much more strongly related to one type of artifact: inlaid metal plates and trays from Mamluk Syria and Egypt.

As is well-known, intricate combinations of heads and plates were artfully tested in representations of St John the Baptist – where the saint's nimbus had to compete visually with the tray on which his head was 'served' to Salome; when halo and plate were carefully distinguished from, or, on the contrary, became merged with one another (Fig. 26).[130] Yet, this paper has shown that solid metal disks or plates were generally one of the key referents for artists who sought to represent a nimbus in the medium of painting and that early fifteenth-century Florentine experiments with Mamluk metal plates have to be considered in the vivid context of exploring the visual analogies, possibilities, specific means, and limits of representing haloes in the arts.

The fact that Tuscan painters drew inspiration from Mamluk metalwork reflects both the impact of the interactions and processes of artistic transfer in the pre-modern Mediterranean and the multi-layered dynamics between material and visual culture. Mamluk metal plates turned into haloes call to mind previous creative approaches towards imported artifacts in Tuscany. Tableware from the Islamic world had indeed already been artistically appropriated and re-contextualized centuries earlier, when – as in other locations across the Mediterranean – ceramic plates and bowls,

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Art and Textiles as Material Culture, ed. by Emily-Jane Anderson/Robert Gibbs/John Richards, Leiden (*in print*).

[130] See Barbara Baert, *Caput Johannis in Disco: Essay on a Man's Head*, Leiden 2012; Gerhard Wolf, "Teller und Tuch, Haupt und Gesicht", in: *Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe, Tod*, exh. cat. Vienna 1995, ed. by Christoph Geissmar-Brandi/Eleonora Louis, Klagenfurt 1995, pp. 397–399.

so-called *bacini*, from Tunisia, Al-Andalus, and Fatimid Egypt were inserted into the walls of churches, most prominently in Pisa (Fig. 27).[131] Once imported to the Italian peninsula they did not only circulate secularly as tableware; their circulation was also partly brought to a halt when some of them were inset in church walls, their former mobility giving way to a vertically immobilized position. Even though nowadays they have been often replaced by modern copies, while the originals are preserved in museums, the ceramics – many of them decorated with a luster glaze and thus evoking golden metalwork – glister in the sunlight and create colorful accents in the stone.

The artistic reception of Mamluk brass plates in Italian panel painting, however, was of a different kind. When *bacini* were inserted or encased with bricks into the walls architects appropriated the actual objects. In early Quattrocento painting, Mamluk tableware also appears to be 'frozen' in a vertical position, yet it was not attached to the painting but rather represented in it or on it. Though there is clearly a material connection between the imported metal objects and the paintings in which the former appear, since the visual referents to Mamluk metalwork are mainly confined to the areas of the gold ground, both are highly diverse when it comes to techniques. The haloes are not rendered in inlay as the metalwork is, rather the visual effect for the nimbus is achieved simply through different ways of tooling gold.

Gold backs and haloes from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries have been well-studied in terms of the technical aspects, most prominently by Erling Skaug, Joseph Polzer, Mojmír Frinta, and Bastian Eclercy.[132] With regard to the first half of the fifteenth century, though, that is the period when Italian panel painting witnessed a revival of pseudo-inscribed haloes, gold-ground decoration has not received much attention in scholarship.[133] It is as if scholars had taken Leon Battista Alberti's rejection of the use of gold in panel painting more seriously than early fifteenth-century artists,[134] who still very consciously used gold leaf in their paintings, not least to incorporate into them clearly visible references to artifacts imported to Florence from the Middle East.

Pseudo-inscribed haloes in thirteenth- to fifteenth-century Florentine painting broaden the prevalent art historical notion of a 'global Florence' whose awareness of and artistic interaction with the world is often reduced to the council of Florence and its aftermath – when John Palaiologos arrived with his courtiers from Byzantium in 1439, and Ethiopians and Egyptian Copts travelled from the African continent to the Arno – or to the universal collection practices of the Medici family from the mid-fifteenth century onwards.[135] In contrast, the complex and multi-faceted artistic entanglements between Florence and the world before the mid-Quattrocento, which are so evident in paintings by Giotto and Masaccio, have yet to be fully explored. It is clear that this endeavor can only be undertaken collaboratively and that it has to draw on the competence of various disciplines: diplomatic, economic, and cultural history, epigraphy, literary studies (in various languages), and contact linguistics, to name but the major ones.

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[131] Graziella Berti/Liana Tongiorgi, *I bacini ceramici medievali delle chiese di Pisa*, Rome 1981; David Abulafia, "The Pisan 'Bacini' and the Medieval Mediterranean Economy: A Historian's Viewpoint," in: *idem, Italy, Sicily and the Mediterranean, 1100–1400*, London 1987, pp. 287–302; *Pisa e il Mediterraneo: uomini, merci, idee dagli Etruschi ai Medici*, ed. by Marco Tangheroni, Milan 2003; Karen Rose Mathews, "Other Peoples' Dishes: Islamic Bacini on Eleventh-Century Churches in Pisa", in: *Gesta*, LIII (2014), 1, pp. 5–23.

[132] See note 43.

[133] For Northern Europe, see Blümle (note 49) and Barbara Baert, "Between Technique and Symbolism: Notes on the Meaning of the Use of Gold in Pre-Eyckian Panel Painting. A Contribution to the Comparative History of Art North and South of the Alps", in: *Contributions to Fifteenth-Century Painting in the Southern Netherlands and the Principality of Liège*, ed. by Dominique Deneffe, Brussels 2009, II, pp. 7–22.

[134] For a discussion of Alberti's dictum, see Wenderholm (note 49).

[135] For transcultural analyses of Florence from the mid-fifteenth century onwards, see, e.g., Francesca Fiorani, *The Marvel of Maps: Art, Cartography and Politics in Renaissance Italy*, New Haven 2005; Hannah Baader, "Universen der Kunst, künstliche Paradiese der Universalität: Florenz, seine Sammlungen und Global Art History I", in: *kritische berichte*, XL (2012), 2, pp. 48–59; Mark Rosen, *The Mapping of Power in Renaissance Italy: Painted Cartographic Cycles in Social and Intellectual Context*, New York 2015.

Whereas, around 1300, pseudo-lettering can be said to have been one of the main artistic devices in all its diversity, elucidating Tuscany's manifold contacts with regions as distant as the Middle East and Asia, in the early fifteenth century Florentine and Tuscan panel painting was primarily characterized by Arabicizing lettering, a tendency which coincides with a stronger focus on and interactions within the Mediterranean world, particularly with Mamluk Syria and Egypt. Yet, both the fact that Masaccio's San Giovenale triptych, in its evocation of a brass plate imported from the Islamic world, features not only pseudo-Arabic script but also lotus blossoms, a Chinese motif that was popular in Mamluk metalwork at the time, and the fact that the artist combined the Arabicizing lettering with the ornamental *chinoiserie* motif as was common in Syria and Egypt, reflect the multi-faceted processes of transfer in the pre-modern period. Giotto's *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa* and Masaccio's San Giovenale triptych thus testify to creative artistic negotiations concerning image-object-script interrelations, to trans-medial and trans-material appropriations and transformations, their interwovenness and fields of tension, and to the complex and manifold global networks of late medieval and early Renaissance Florence.

My warm thanks go to Avinoam Shalem and Gerhard Wolf for lively discussions and for their valuable comments during the course of my work on this article. I am also very grateful to Ortensia Martinez, Rebecca Milner and Samuel Vitali for their careful and critical editing of this text.

Abstract

Arabicizing and pseudo-inscriptions in artworks from non-Islamic regions have received much attention in recent years, particularly due to the renewed scholarly interest in Mediterranean exchange processes between the Christian and the Islamic world in the field of art history. This article focuses on two case studies: Giotto's *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa* (1295/1300) and Masaccio's San Giovenale triptych (1422). It correlates the use of pseudo-script in both works with the impact of artifacts from the Islamic world, mainly metalwork and textiles; it investigates issues of materiality, transmedial and transmaterial dynamics, and image-object interrelations regarding the representation of haloes in the arts; and it sheds new light on the artistic dimensions of the Mediterranean and the global entanglements of 13th- to early 15th-century Florence.

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