


**Predella** journal of visual arts, n°47, 2020 [www.predella.it](http://www.predella.it) - Monografia / Monograph 

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**Predella** pubblica ogni anno due numeri online e due numeri monografici a stampa /

**Predella** publishes two online issues and two monographic print issues each year

*Tutti gli articoli sono sottoposti alla peer-review anonima / All articles are subject to anonymous peer-review*

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**Predella** journal of visual arts - ISSN 1827-8655

## Encountering “Exotic” Ornament: Arabic Calligraphy and Islamic Luxury Textiles in Jacopo Bellini’s Paintings

*A number of studies and exhibitions have considered the interactions of the Renaissance Venetian painters Gentile and Giovanni Bellini with the East, but less attention has been dedicated to the question whether Jacopo Bellini had already been interested in Islamic art. This essay focuses on Jacopo Bellini’s reception and elaboration of Arabic calligraphy, which was a well-known element of luxury goods circulating in Venice. Several paintings by Jacopo provide us with impressive depictions of Arabic letters, especially on textiles and haloes. However, this kind of decoration did not involve copying precise words, but only single letters, and therefore shall be defined as pseudo-Arabic script. Although Jacopo’s artistic choice can be linked to Venetian traditions, the crucial influence was his teacher and collaborator Gentile da Fabriano, who depicted this “exotic” detail of Arabic script in notable ways, creating various solutions, mostly in his devotional images. A decisive source of inspiration was provided by Florentine artists, when Gentile and Jacopo, during their stay in Florence ca. 1423, were able to perceive different types of decoration with pseudo-Arabic script. Significantly, other fifteenth-century Venetian painters, such as the Vivarini and Francesco Squarcione, then started decorating garments and haloes in their devotional images with pseudo-Arabic script, a manner that continued to fascinate the following generation of painters like Andrea Mantegna and Giovanni Bellini.*

For a Renaissance Venetian painter like Jacopo Bellini (ca. 1400 – ca. 1470), Arabic calligraphy was a well-known element of luxury goods circulating in Venice, and as such, it was not regarded as being strictly “foreign”, but part of an “other” faith. Several paintings by Jacopo provide us with impressive depictions of Arabic letters on textiles, which mostly simulate silk, but also velvet. The following remarks shall examine this particular element in a few of his devotional images. The splendour of fabrics traded and worn by the wealthiest Venetian citizens of the fifteenth century was an important source of inspiration for Jacopo. By the Quattrocento many Italian cities, including Venice, Florence, Lucca, and Genoa, were leading producers of these fabrics. In this period, such textiles were no longer imported, but rather were exported to countries in the Levant<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the detail of an Arabic inscription might indicate that the textiles represented by Jacopo were not entirely inspired by Italian models. Instead, they may be defined as a combination of a European pattern for the textile decorated with Arabic calligraphy, which was probably copied from an Islamic artefact.

Portable luxury objects from what were then generally designated as Oriental countries have always played a significant role in Venetian trade, as has been extensively discussed<sup>2</sup>. Arabic letters appeared on many Islamic luxury goods, especially fabrics and metals, but also on carpets and vessels. Of course, the import

of such goods from one cultural context into another reformulated their identity and their meaning significantly. The Quattrocento was an age of growing wealth, and Venice was one of the foremost Italian trade centres with a great number of Islamic luxury goods circulating on the market<sup>3</sup>. Already a century earlier, the city had acquired a leading position in manufacturing products that could be either copied from or inspired by Oriental artefacts.

A Venetian artist like Jacopo Bellini could have had knowledge of these luxury goods, since they were preserved in church treasuries – the Tesoro di San Marco was the most important in Venice – but a great number of Islamic objects could also be found on the art market and in private households. He might have been familiar with these artefacts, as many of his paintings attest. Only in rare cases would artists – Gentile Bellini (ca. 1429-1507), Jacopo's son, is an example – have been able to possess such objects themselves<sup>4</sup>.

During the fifteenth century many Venetian painters depicted Islamic luxury objects in a precise manner, which Avinoam Shalem coined «a “Modellportrait” manner»; that is, they appear as an exact portrait of the artefact<sup>5</sup>. Then they acquired an importance similar to inventories<sup>6</sup>. Such detailed depictions bear witness to the “real” artefact, since it is possible to identify the forms, ornament, or material of these luxury goods. Jacopo was familiar with a great number of Islamic objects, but he did not always portray them precisely. Instead he aimed to change the original decoration of such an “exotic” artefact, or picked up a detail, combined, and then included it in another context. For example, an inscription found on a textile, in a book illustration, or on a vessel might be copied and then reused in the painting or sculpture in a completely different manner.

Arabic writing was doubtless a visual sign of Islamic culture, but for an artist like Jacopo it may have been the exoticism and elegance of the characters that led him to copy it. Like other Venetian painters of his time, he was attracted by the aesthetic value of Arabic letters. Most notably, there is no evidence that he had any understanding of this “exotic” writing. On the contrary, the visual vocabulary he could find inscribed on metals or fabrics was reconstituted by him in a completely aesthetic way, even if, as in a few examples, some Arabic letters were copied correctly. In any case, the Arabic characters, once “reused” in a new context, definitively lost their original meaning.

### *Which Style of Arabic Calligraphy Could Have Inspired Jacopo Bellini?*

Arabic calligraphy has a particular and important meaning in the Islamic religion, since it is a tool for the revelation and propagation of the divine word of

the Prophet Muhammad<sup>7</sup>. Originally transmitted through oral litany, the Qur'an received its first written version after the seventh century; thus, the word of the Prophet was now bound to the calligraphy. But Arabic writing was much more than a medium of revelation or promulgating ideas. Rather, it was understood as an art in itself, and the characters could acquire an importance of their own. In particular, one of the early Islamic calligraphies coined "Kufic" (from the city of Kufa in Iraq), which was not only used for the Qur'an and religious texts, but because of its geometric character was often used as epigraphic decoration of fabrics and architectural ornament. Its lack of diacritical markings makes this type of calligraphy difficult to read. But the cursive writing style of *nashki*, which can be traced by the eleventh and twelfth centuries, was much easier to understand. It was used for inscriptions on textiles, metals, and ivories. Another later variation of cursive Arabic writing is *thuluth*, which is found on textiles and objects from the Mamluk Empire of Egypt and Syria (1250-1517).

These three kinds of Arabic calligraphy are the most common ones on Islamic luxury goods in Venice and were therefore better known to Italian painters. Once inserted into a European painting, the decoration with Arabic calligraphy – most often pseudo-Arabic – acquired a different significance, as noted by Eva R. Hoffman, for its «openness and permeability»<sup>8</sup>. However, a Renaissance artist adopting pseudo-Kufic or pseudo-*nashki* inscriptions referred to a tradition of medieval pseudo-Kufic inscriptions in which Byzantium had played an important intermediary role, as Maria Vittoria Fontana has emphasized<sup>9</sup>. The Arabic letters written in Kufic or in *nashki* were assembled without making sense, then repeated several times, and thus transformed into ornament.

### *The Use of Pseudo-Arabic: A Tradition in Venetian Painting*

Pseudo-Arabic can already be found in the representations of fabrics in fourteenth-century painting in Venice. The figures in Paolo Veneziano's *Coronation of the Virgin* (ca. 1336-1349, Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia) appear in front of a cloth of honour (figs. 1-2). The textile has been identified as a Tartar silk with a ground of large flowers and borders carrying pseudo-*nashki* writing<sup>10</sup>. As Lucia Monnas pointed out, they were «reproducing the courtly taste of the day»<sup>11</sup>, a habit that continued in the Quattrocento. The identical silk appears in the mantle of Paolo's *Enthroned Madonna and Child* (1347, Church of Santa Maria, Carpineta di Cesena), but the borders bear pseudo-Kufic, not pseudo-*nashki* inscriptions. Brigitte Klesse noted that Paolo was not copying a precise fabric. Instead, he referred to a decoration with lotus blossoms and palmettes, typical of Chinese

silks of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries<sup>12</sup>. In fact, Paolo used one and the same textile, but with different pseudo-scripts.

The idea of applying Arabic inscriptions to Chinese silk fabrics derived from originals that were traded or donated to the Mamluk Empire, but painters like Paolo Veneziano created new variations on those ornamental designs<sup>13</sup>. Perhaps the representation of Arabic characters in Paolo's *Coronation* was intended to evoke a most elegant, noble environment for the Virgin and Christ and at the same time allude to the Holy Land, the Saviour's birthplace<sup>14</sup>. In this particular example, the precious textile is not simply part of the furniture, but instead intensifies the idea of a divine setting, that is, heaven.

#### *A Decisive Source of Inspiration for Jacopo Bellini: Gentile da Fabriano*

We may suggest that Jacopo had knowledge of the works by Paolo Veneziano, but the most decisive source for his use of pseudo-Arabic script was doubtless his teacher Gentile da Fabriano (ca. 1370-1427). Although Gentile might have acquired knowledge of pseudo-Arabic writing during his documented stay in Venice (1408-1413), he significantly experimented with Arabic calligraphy in works executed during his residence in Florence (1419-1423)<sup>15</sup>. The great number of sculptures bearing pseudo-Arabic inscriptions on haloes as well as on garments may have further inspired him to inventively take up this "exotic mode"<sup>16</sup>. The most important testimony is his *Madonna of Humility* (ca. 1420, Pisa, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo; fig. 3), probably intended for private devotion. Although the textile wall hanging contains no Arabic script, Mary's halo is decorated with a stamped pattern of Arabic letters in which it is possible to discern pseudo-*thuluth* characters alternating with small rosettes (fig. 4). *Thuluth* characters were especially used in Mamluk art, common in the brassware imported into Italian trade centres, such as Venice<sup>17</sup>. The fabric draped across Mary's lap also has a border decorated with pseudo-*thuluth*. In contrast, the Virgin's mantle is decorated with Latin characters that spell out the angelic salutation<sup>18</sup>.

Gentile's interest in pseudo-Arabic script can be traced in other images for private devotion, such as the *Madonna and Child* (New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery) and the *Madonna of Humility/Nativity* (Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum). In the latter, Gentile presents another interpretation of the Madonna of Humility and chose decoration with pseudo-*thuluth* for Mary's halo, similar to the *Madonna* in Pisa; moreover, pseudo-*thuluth* letters are recognizable on the fabric draped on her lap<sup>19</sup>. Neither of these paintings is dated, although the *Quaratesi Madonna and Child* is: 1425 (London, The National Gallery, on loan from the

Royal Collection, HM Queen Elisabeth II). On the lower border of the Virgin's blue mantle are pseudo-*thuluth* letters. Stylistically all these paintings should be dated to the early 1420s, so it is noteworthy that Gentile's interest in pseudo-*thuluth* decoration can only be traced after his arrival in Florence in 1419<sup>20</sup>. The idea of using pseudo-Arabic script for haloes plausibly belongs to Florentine painting of the early 1420s, since there is no earlier extant evidence in Italian art.

Gentile is particularly careful when using pseudo-*thuluth* letters, as demonstrated in his *Adoration of the Magi*, completed in May 1423, and intended for the Strozzi Chapel/sacristy in the Florentine church of Santa Trinità<sup>21</sup> (figs. 5-6). Here pseudo-Arabic inscriptions are used not only in the haloes of Mary and Joseph, but also on the garments of other figures: the midwife who wears a turban and a white stole, both embellished with medallions and pseudo-*thuluth* inscriptions; and the groom whose baldric (chest-crossing band for holding a sword) is adorned with the same *thuluth*-like inscriptions. In the Strozzi commission the letters *alif*, *lam-alif*, *'ain*, and *kaf* can be identified, but they do not form any word. The same technique can be traced in the Pisa *Madonna*. The pseudo-script in the Virgin's halo has led to a lively discussion since Rudolf Sellheim<sup>22</sup> tried to read the inscription as a quotation from the *shahāda*, the Muslim declaration of belief («There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah»), one of the five pillars of Islam. However, the inscription, although legible, is unintelligible, as scholars such as Fontana<sup>23</sup> have confirmed. She further pointed out that other Arabic inscriptions on haloes are incomprehensible and found no reason to identify them as the *shahāda*<sup>24</sup>. And there is certainly no proof that Gentile had any knowledge of the Arabic language as the script in his paintings reveals<sup>25</sup>. However, he painted the characters in *thuluth* with notable precision, which makes it probable that he had faithfully copied the characters from an Islamic artefact, either a textile or metalwork. That the script is unintelligible but close enough to identify single characters has led scholars, including Silvia Auld, to the conclusion that this inaccuracy may indicate that Gentile did not want to reproduce real Arabic writing in a religious Christian image because he did not want to «risk blasphemy»<sup>26</sup>.

As for the possible sources of the *thuluth* characters, Auld<sup>27</sup> and Rosamund Mack<sup>28</sup>, for example, have presumed that Gentile might have copied Islamic metalwork. The haloes depict a decoration with pseudo-Arabic script alternating with medallions, very similar to fourteenth-century Mamluk brassware, which was incised and inlaid with silver and gold and has bands of inscription with perfect calligraphy interrupted by pointed medallions, often with thin pendants of bifurcated leaves<sup>29</sup>. One of these brass pieces incised with silver and gold

from Egypt or Syria (ca. 1341-1363) is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London<sup>30</sup>, and similar objects can be found in the Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo (Egypt or Syria, 1293-1341)<sup>31</sup> and in the Aron collection (Egypt or Syria, ca. 1300-1350)<sup>32</sup>. Other related examples, most notably the large basin from the Mamluk workshop in Naples (1293-1341, Naples, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte), has the composition on its exterior with elegant *thuluth* letters – referring to the ownership of the Sultan al-Malik al-Nasir Muhammad – alternating with medallions of rosettes filled with peonies, a motif of Chinese-Mongolian origin<sup>33</sup>.

Even if a comparison with these beautiful metal objects reveals great similarity with Gentile's inscribed bands of elegant *thuluth* alternating with rosettes or floral designs, we still consider them only a source of inspiration, since he perceived the «openness» of the luxury object and transformed the motif in the process of painting, when it suddenly acquired a completely different aspect and connotation. It is clear that the painter did not intend to offer a portrait of a Mamluk brass dish but was mainly attracted by the elegant decoration of the *thuluth* letters, which he considered a perfect decoration for a nimbus with a "metallic" character. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that he developed the idea in Florence, where it was also used in sculpture<sup>34</sup>.

Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* demonstrates that he used the same kind of *thuluth* script alternating with rosettes for several garments. From this we might presume that he was also familiar with fabrics showing *thuluth* letters. He could have easily referred to an Islamic textile, but we cannot exclude the possibility that he was inspired by an Italian fabric that imitated Oriental motifs. In conclusion, the problem of identifying the possible sources of Gentile's painted pseudo-*thuluth* script is complex; we have no proof, but he might have studied Mamluk metalwork or been inspired by fabrics, either Islamic or Italian imitations. In the Quattrocento, the move from importing Oriental textiles to the manufacture of imitations by Italian weavers is also highly problematic, and questions of authenticity and chronology in this field remain unresolved.

Especially Islamic silks adorned with Arabic *tirāz* inscriptions, which were enclosed in bands along the borders, defined as *tirāz*, were well known in Italy. The term *tirāz* was originally used for precious and richly decorated garments of rulers or court dignitaries, common in Abbasid and Fatimid production of the eighth to thirteenth centuries<sup>35</sup>. But it also became used for *khāssa* (private use) and *'amma* (public use), hence not necessarily for the court<sup>36</sup>. *Tirāz* inscriptions also regularly appeared on the garments of Byzantine emperors since the sixth century and can be traced in a number of Byzantine icons or frescoes<sup>37</sup>. Throughout

the centuries these inscriptions became more and more fashionable on cloth for those of lower rank as a greater number of textiles with inscriptions, especially from the Mamluk Empire, were traded<sup>38</sup>. Unfortunately, as David Jacoby remarks: «[M]any *tirāz* inscriptions, especially those on Mamluk silks, are very short and lack any chronological clues»<sup>39</sup>. But in the fifteenth century, trade in Oriental textiles became much more complex, as Anna Contadini observed<sup>40</sup>. The demand for Near Eastern silks on the European market began to decline, and the imitation of Oriental fabrics by Italian weavers was increasing. Nonetheless, the flow of luxury textiles in both directions flourished, and consequently the provenance of such textiles is difficult to establish<sup>41</sup>. Venice became one of the most important centres for the Italian production of silks and velvets. Oriental patterns were copied as was pseudo-Arabic script, and variations on these patterns were developed by creative combinations with Western motifs<sup>42</sup>.

### *Arabic Calligraphy in Jacopo Bellini's Paintings*

The representation of Islamic luxury objects stemmed from various motivations. They could emphasize a narrative's exotic setting. This is true for a remote event, such as the *Adoration of the Magi*, which took place in the Holy Land. If a painter like Jacopo Bellini needed to illustrate an Oriental environment, he would certainly include at least one subject or some details to describe the setting. Therefore, it was common in Venetian painting to include such elements when depicting the miracles of Saint Mark, the patron of Venice, which took place in Alexandria. In fact, scenes of *Saint Mark Healing Ananias* or *Saint Mark Baptizing Ananias* required a representation of the North African city<sup>43</sup>. In other cases, Islamic artefacts – especially carpets, prized luxury goods coming from the Levant – could indicate the wealth and social status of the patron, and even have been part of the patron's property. In devotional images, the Islamic artefact might represent the nobility of the represented figure, mostly in paintings of the *Annunciation*, an enthroned Madonna, or an enthroned saint. Jacopo Bellini makes use of Arabic calligraphy in several devotional images as well as in the famous fresco of the *Annunciation* in Sant'Alessandro in Brescia.

Jacopo had collaborated with his teacher Gentile in Venice (1408-1414) and in Brescia (before 1419), and it is very likely that he accompanied his teacher to Florence in 1419, although the documents are unclear<sup>44</sup>. Almost a decade later, he was still very much linked to the style of Gentile as can be traced in one of his earliest examples of pseudo-Arabic calligraphy in Venetian Quattrocento painting, the *Annunciation* (ca. 1430, Brescia, Sant'Alessandro; figs. 7-8)<sup>45</sup>. Pseudo-



Arabic characters run along the edges of the exquisite mantle of the kneeling Virgin and on the four borders of the textile that drapes the rear wall of her chamber. However, the haloes show a floral decoration and the precious garments in golden silk-velvet are similar to contemporary Italian fabrics. The wall cloth was part of the «staging»<sup>46</sup> of this Annunciation, since such textiles had been a motif used in the fourteenth-century Venetian painting. The Arabic letters are painted in pseudo-*nashki*, but the decoration of the inner part shows an ornament of large, eight-petal rosettes alternately surrounded by smaller eight-petal rosettes, which also recalls contemporary Italian fabrics<sup>47</sup>.

In fact, the floral design is very similar to the decoration of the drapery in the background of Gentile's *Pisa Madonna of the Humility* (ca. 1420; see fig. 4) although here the borders are not embellished with pseudo-*nashki*. In both paintings the wall cloth seems to indicate a silk fabric, but this same pattern could be used by the painter to represent different materials, exemplified by the velvet mantle of the first kneeling king in Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi* (see fig. 6). Recently, the king's garment has been linked to a velvet panel (Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello), which has been classified as a work of Florentine manufacture of the late fifteenth century (fig. 9)<sup>48</sup>. Thus, it seems most likely that Gentile knew the pattern through a velvet fabric. It is difficult to say whether Jacopo was inspired by the decoration of Gentile's paintings and then added the pseudo-Arabic script, or if he was copying an Italian silk with applied bands with Arabic letters, such as was traded in Venice. Jacopo's drapery might equally refer to an Italian fabric, since already over the course of the Trecento, Italian weavers had started to include some pseudo-Arabic writing in their own textiles<sup>49</sup>.

As mentioned above, Jacopo might have been familiar with Paolo Veneziano's paintings that also included an "exotic" cloth of honour. But Jacopo adds an important detail – a carpet that recalls Anatolian examples – which emphasizes the luxurious setting. It is similar to the so-called Dragon or Phoenix carpet with a distinctive yellow field and stylized animal ornament in blue and red, which can be traced in fifteenth-century Italian inventories<sup>50</sup>. The motif of a carpet decorated with animals had become part of the iconography of the Annunciation since it was depicted in the mid-fourteenth century miraculous image in the Florentine church of Santissima Annunziata<sup>51</sup>. However, the carpet in the *Brescia Annunciation* is so precisely represented that it can be defined as a "true portrait" of a carpet, not just a repetition of an iconographic motif. This verisimilitude in representing a luxury good makes it likely that Jacopo was familiar with similar originals, which he might have seen in a church, church treasury, or even a private household. A very similar representation of the Virgin's luxurious bedchamber by Pisanello

(ca. 1395 – ca. 1455) in his fresco (1426) in San Fermo Maggiore, Verona, shows an Anatolian carpet and a precious *tapisserie* (tapestry)<sup>52</sup>. Jacopo uses pseudo-Arabic script in an almost “free” way: he recomposes those possible models, whereas an object like the Anatolian carpet is carefully portrayed<sup>53</sup>. Displaying his knowledge of luxury goods was not the only reason for the carpet’s remarkable depiction, as Paul Hills has argued: «The paintings appeal to a deep-seated yet shifting awareness of mutuality between persons and things [...]. But whatever the skills in mimetic descriptions that painters [...] deployed, they did not replicate these translations of textiles they might have witnessed; rather they symbolised them by creating an equivalent»<sup>54</sup>.

Jacopo Bellini continued to use Arabic calligraphy in some of his images for private devotion, such as the Louvre *Madonna of Humility with a Donor, probably Lionello d’Este* (ca. 1440), where pseudo-Arabic characters appear on Mary’s garments although her nimbus is decorated with Gothic letters reading «Mater regina mundi» (Mother Queen of the World)<sup>55</sup> (fig. 10). Following the iconographic tradition of the Madonna of Humility, a common subject for private devotional images in Quattrocento Venice, Mary sits on a cushion in the landscape. She presents the blessing infant Christ to the kneeling, prayerful donor, who is shown in hieratic scale. A translucent veil – a display of the Eucharistic Body of Christ – covers the naked infant, who is elegantly held by Mary<sup>56</sup>. The Virgin is represented with a precious dark blue mantle with tiny golden dots. Jacopo uses the sophisticated technique of gold dots to model the mantle, «a pointillist technique indicative of both light and texture»<sup>57</sup>. The borders carry golden characters in pseudo-Kufic as do those of Mary’s dress. However, Jacopo does not copy any entire Arabic word. He repeatedly recalls letters such as *lam-alif* or *alif*, but some signs are also very similar to Hebrew characters. Thus, the pseudo-script should be understood as a mixture of the two foreign alphabets transformed into ornament. Again, the decoration underlines the nobility, power, and holiness of Mary’s mantle, like those of rulers and high-ranking clergy<sup>58</sup>.

Jacopo did not paint a “portrait” of a luxury garment (unlike his rendering of the Anatolian carpet), since this textile cannot be linked to any Islamic or Venetian/Italian fabric of the time. His intention was to evoke the meaning of the mantle as a symbol of protection and power<sup>59</sup>, while simultaneously displaying a simple elegance that contrasts markedly with the ornate garment of the donor – a brocaded velvet decorated with vegetal ornament. A textile study in the *Codex Vallardi* by Pisanello (Paris, Musée du Louvre) shows a very similar asymmetrical foliate design, which is highly finished as if it were made as a template for weavers<sup>60</sup>. However, this type of drawing must be interpreted as a recording of

stock patterns for use in paintings, the kind Jacopo Bellini might have known.

The donor's garment reveals Jacopo's deep knowledge of textile patterns. In fact, a number of drawings included in his sketchbooks, sometimes overpainted by him, attest his familiarity with designs for fabrics, for instance, the drawing of a textile design in the sketchbook in Paris, dated to the fourteenth century (fig. 11). Even if these drawings cannot be attributed to him, having been identified more generally as Trecento textile studies, it is significant that he included them in his own sketchbooks. Jacopo's wife, Anna Rinversi, was originally from Lucca and the daughter of a silk designer/merchant; thus, it has been suggested that the textile patterns might once been owned by her father<sup>61</sup>.

The model for pseudo-Kufic might have been a textile or metalwork, the most common Islamic luxury goods imported into Venice. However, it is obvious that Jacopo did not copy any precise inscription. Rather he recalls the Arabic and perhaps Hebrew letters in a free manner derived from the luxury goods that he had in mind. This technique of selecting Oriental motifs and recombining them in a new context is similar to that used by the Flemish master Jan van Eyck (ca. 1390-1441)<sup>62</sup>, the subject of a separate study that will not be considered here.

Jacopo Bellini used pseudo-Arabic in another *Madonna with Child* (ca. 1440 or 1450, Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi; fig. 12)<sup>63</sup>. The half-length composition shows a close-up of the Virgin presenting the infant Christ, seated in her right hand, to the beholder. Mary supports the child with her left hand, as he gently touches his mother's hands. The composition of the hands is the quintessential element that evokes the intimacy of mother and son. Neither looks at the other nor the viewer. They are presented in a most serious and motionless manner, as if their expressions alluded to Christ's death and Passion. The dark background renders their apparition mysterious; however, it might have been overpainted later, but no recent technical examination has been made. Mary is dressed as the *Regina coeli* (Queen of Heaven) since she wears a precious crown decorated with rubies, emeralds, and pearls<sup>64</sup>. The headdress underneath is white linen, or perhaps a linen-silk, adorned with light red edges decorated with seven-petal rosettes and pseudo-*nashki* inscriptions. However, her red dress and dark brown mantle show a floral decoration. Jacopo inverts this decoration in the Christ Child's garments. He wears a tunic carefully painted with tiny golden dots and floral decoration along the borders, whereas his blue mantle displays the same golden dots, but includes pseudo-*nashki* script on the edges. In contrast to the Louvre painting, the Virgin's halo is decorated with golden pseudo-Arabic characters alternating with small five-petal rosettes, and Christ's halo is decorated with a floral ornament. Although the pseudo-Arabic script

is illegible, Auld argued for its significance: «While inscriptions on garments were reserved for persons of importance, haloes had a more specific meaning, exclusively religious»<sup>65</sup>.

The textile of Mary's headdress might refer to an actual model, which seems to be a simple, perhaps undyed linen or linen-silk, decorated with stripes of coloured embroidered bands, a so-called *tirāz*<sup>66</sup>. Such fabrics, as we have seen, were widely traded in fourteenth-century Italy. Considering their great success in Western countries, it is probable that they were predominantly imported for their aesthetic value, namely, the elegance of the *nashki* script<sup>67</sup>. But the Virgin's headdress itself can be related to the *maphorion*, her veil that was one of the most venerated relics at the Blachernes Sanctuary in Constantinople. It was associated with liturgical altar cloths, the cover of the consecrated Host, but above all, it alludes to the white linen Holy Shroud<sup>68</sup>.

Yet the infant does not reach for his mother's veil, as in another *Madonna and Child* in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and dated around 1453 by Colin Eisler with an attribution to Jacopo Bellini, and to 1460 by Mauro Lucco with an attribution to Giovanni Bellini (fig. 13)<sup>69</sup>. It is not the aim here to discuss problems of attribution linked to the old question of Giovanni Bellini's date of birth, but certain aspects make it likely that the painter was of a younger generation than Jacopo<sup>70</sup>. The Virgin wears a similar white veil, whose red border is embellished with golden pseudo-Arabic letters, which the infant Christ tries to pull towards him. Although this use of pseudo-script in the garments can be traced in Jacopo's *oeuvre*, the materials give the work a "modern" aspect. The panel is painted in tempera with an oil binder, whereas Jacopo was trained to paint in egg tempera, which he continued to use all his life<sup>71</sup>. Moreover, this composition might have been inspired by Donatello's very similar marble relief, the *Pazzi Madonna and Child* (1420-1430, Berlin, Bode-Museum), with a provenance traced back to Padua<sup>72</sup>. It is significant that the Virgin's halo in the Los Angeles *Madonna* is decorated with Gothic, not Arabic letters. The painting demonstrates the diverse use of inscriptions in the Bellini workshop, where the use of Gothic letters with a specific Christian formula was as common as pseudo-Arabic script that evoked a high aesthetic value.

Jacopo Bellini used the pseudo-Arabic script in another painting of the *Madonna with Child and Cherubim* (Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia; fig. 14), which might be dated after 1453, and viewed in relation to Andrea Mantegna's *Butler Madonna and Child* (ca. 1454, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)<sup>73</sup>. A fine decoration of golden Arabic characters and rosettes are rendered in their haloes and the edges of Christ's red tunic, which alludes to the Holy Blood and the

martyrs' sacrifices as well as to royal garments common in Byzantine art<sup>74</sup>. Mary's blue mantle is elegantly decorated with tiny golden dots and a precious brooch with a ruby, similar to the Virgin's mantle in the Louvre painting.

Jacopo's workshop continued to use pseudo-Arabic script for garments and haloes. A pseudo-*nashki* inscription appears in the *Saint Sebastian Triptych* (ca. 1462-1464, Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia), one of the altarpieces for Santa Maria della Carità, in which Giovanni Bellini might have had an important role<sup>75</sup>. The inscription decorates the halo of John the Baptist but is missing in the nimbi of the other saints.

### *Reworking Pseudo-Arabic Calligraphy in Venice*

Contemporary Venetian painters, such as the Vivarini, also used pseudo-Arabic script, as seen in several of their works. In the *Adoration of the Magi* (ca. 1441-1445, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie; figs. 15-16) by Antonio Vivarini (active 1440-1478) and his partner and brother-in-law Giovanni d'Alemagna (active 1441-1450), pseudo-*thuluth* letters (*alif*, *kaf-alif*) appear on the banners, on an attendant's "coat of arms", and on the garments of some bystanders, which might be explained by the desire to render a more authentic-seeming narrative<sup>76</sup>. However, it seems that the Vivarini were most concerned with the opulence of colours and *pastiglia* to create a greater variety of luxury textiles, as Paul Hills remarked: «[I]n Venice techniques of luxurious ornamentation became adapted to descriptive purposes»<sup>77</sup>.

One detail in the Vivarini *Adoration* may suggest a possible source for their use of *thuluth* script: the *cappelletto alla greca* (combined hat and crown) of the first kneeling king, which is carried by a page. This headdress presents a precise example of the Vivarini's knowledge of the *skiadon* (travel hat) of the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Palaeologus<sup>78</sup>, which he wore during the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438.

On 8 February 1438 the Byzantine emperor had arrived with his delegation in Venice and then travelled to Ferrara to discuss the union of the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, as urged by Pope Eugenius IV (r. 1431-1447). The costumes and especially the headdress of John VIII Palaeologus must have seemed extremely exotic. Pisanello executed several drawings of the emperor and his entourage, perhaps in 1438, when witnessing the Council in Ferrara. One sheet in black chalk shows the bust of the emperor with his distinctive hat (ca. 1438, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques)<sup>79</sup>. Another in pen and ink, preserved in the *Vallardi Codex*, represents several figures of the emperor on horseback and his entourage (ca. 1438, Paris, Musée du Louvre,

Département des Arts Graphiques; fig. 17). This drawing has notes on the costume made by Pisanello<sup>80</sup>, and on the upper part is legible script in *thuluth* letters that can be read as praise for the Mamluk Sultan Al-Malik. Perhaps he was copying a textile, which was part of the garments or armour of John VIII Palaeologus. It is well known that the Byzantine emperor had a political relationship with the Mamluk Sultan al-Mu'yyad Abou'l-Nasr, Ashraf Sayf-al-din Barsbey (r. 1412-1421), which makes it likely that Pisanello's model was fabric presented as a gift to the Byzantine court<sup>81</sup>. Pisanello's drawing is important evidence of the habit of copying an exotic inscription, a legible script that in another context might have been transposed into a different material with random letters without significance. There is no indication how the Vivarini had gained knowledge of *thuluth* script for their *Adoration*, but perhaps they had seen other copies after Pisanello's drawings.

The Vivarini continued to use pseudo-Arabic for haloes, which they must have considered highly sophisticated decoration. However, they did not create metal-like haloes with a pattern of elegant *thuluth* letters as had Gentile da Fabriano, but borrowed Jacopo Bellini's idea of a nimbus with golden pseudo-script. The Vivarini were interested in certain motifs which they thought adaptable for paintings with a gold-leaf background. In the panels of *Saint Louis of Toulouse* (Paris, Musée du Louvre; fig. 18) and *Saint Ambrose* and *Saint Nicholas* (Venice, Seminario Patriarcale), dated around 1450 and attributed to Antonio Vivarini, one finds haloes with uninterrupted inscription bands, a mixture of pseudo-Arabic and pseudo-Hebrew, quite similar to Jacopo Bellini's in the Virgin's garments in the Louvre *Madonna of Humility*<sup>82</sup>. The motif of the halo is varied in the polyptych of 1450, commissioned for the high altar of San Girolamo della Certosa in Bologna (Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale), signed by Antonio and his brother Bartolomeo<sup>83</sup>. However, the gold nimbus with punchmarks was much more common in their workshop. Among the Vivarini, the halo with pseudo-Arabic script was just another way to depict ornament, which had its origin in copied inscriptions and not in things the painters might have seen. Were there other models for Antonio and Bartolomeo Vivarini who, as is documented, worked in Padua around 1447<sup>84</sup>?

An additional source of inspiration for the Vivarini's use of pseudo-Arabic inscriptions might be a work by the Paduan painter Francesco Squarcione (ca. 1395-1448). The *Madonna and Child* (Berlin, Gemäldegalerie; figs. 19-20), dated around 1453 to 1455, after his *De Lazara Polyptych* (1449-1452, Padua, Musei Civici Eremitani)<sup>85</sup>, is his only surviving image for private devotion. The haloes of the Virgin and infant Child are decorated with punchwork and bands of painted gold inscriptions. Moreover, the light red edges of Mary's blue mantle also bear bands of inscription. The letters on the haloes as well as those on the mantle are

illegible; they show only vague similarities with Roman, pseudo-Hebrew, and pseudo-Arabic characters. Therefore, this script can almost be read as an elegant decoration that affirms the nobility of Mary as *Regina coeli*, but has no specific connotation. A few years before the presumed date of Squarcione's *Madonna and Child*, Donatello (ca. 1386-1466) had arrived in Padua (1447). Did he have any influence on the use of pseudo-scripts in Venetian painting? It seems likely that more than one source of inspiration prompted this new manner of decorating haloes and garments.

*Epilogue: Giovanni Bellini and Andrea Mantegna*

When we look at paintings by Gentile and Giovanni Bellini (1435-1516), the representation of Islamic objects, such as carpets, are truly important elements in some of their works, but Arabic calligraphy used for decorating haloes or garments appears quite rarely<sup>86</sup>. Giovanni composed with colour, and each detail in his paintings carries meaning; even the absence of an element is significant<sup>87</sup>. He was probably familiar with pseudo-Arabic letters, since his father Jacopo had made extensive use of this calligraphy in his paintings. Nonetheless, Giovanni made the choice to avoid this visual vocabulary. Among his many paintings of the Madonna, it is difficult to detect pseudo-Arabic script, except in the half-length *Madonna Greca* (1470-1475, Milan, Brera; fig. 21). Here, the pseudo-Kufic letters on the dark blue mantle covering the Virgin's head are hastily painted with gold brushwork. By focusing on the faces and hands to evoke the strong symbolic bond between mother and son, Giovanni clearly refers to the Byzantine tradition. Neither landscape nor precious garments distract the beholder, but the painter also aims to enhance Mary's nobility with pseudo-Kufic borders on the dark blue mantle, recalling the Venetian tradition. The script animates the dark blue and becomes a tool to transmit light around the Virgin's beautiful face. However, he avoided painting the same ornament on the other edges of Mary's mantle or dress.

Pseudo-Arabic writing had been part of the decoration in paintings executed in egg tempera. The new technique of binding colour pigments with the oil medium allowed Giovanni to create a unity, a «power of colour»<sup>88</sup> that no longer needed to focus on precisely depicted details. Did he consider pseudo-script part of the "old-fashioned" court culture? Nonetheless, he did use it when referring to an Oriental setting. He was especially careful when painting the *tirāz* decoration on the garments of Saint Mark and the tunics of the angels in the *Madonna and Child with Saints and Doge Agostino Barbarigo*, the *Pala Barbarigo* (1488, Murano,

San Pietro Martire). A very similar use of pseudo-Arabic script can be traced in the works of a painter close to him, Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano (ca. 1460-1518). When depicting an Oriental environment in his panel of *Saint Mark Healing Anianus* (1497-1499, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie), he decorated the saint's garments with elegant letters of pseudo-*thuluth*<sup>89</sup>.

However, this pseudo-script decoration must be distinguished from the ambition of painters like Giovanni Bellini and Cima da Conegliano to provide a precise portrait of Islamic luxury goods – the «Modellportrait»<sup>90</sup> – such as carpets, metals, or the magnificent jar held by Nicodemus in Giovanni's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (ca. 1475, Vatican City, Pinacoteca Vaticana), originally the upper part of the altarpiece for San Francesco in Pesaro<sup>91</sup>. Moreover, Giovanni's continued interest in Oriental artefacts is demonstrated by the representation of dishes from Iznik (Turkey) and a vase, quite similar to Mamluk or Iranian examples, in the *Feast of the Gods* (1514, Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art)<sup>92</sup>.

Andrea Mantegna (ca. 1431-1506), Jacopo Bellini's son-in-law, also used pseudo-Arabic script a few times, as in the devotional image of the *Madonna with Saints Jerome and Louis of Toulouse* (ca. 1455, Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André; fig. 22)<sup>93</sup>. The painting still reflects the influence of Donatello, and in contrast to the previously cited examples by Jacopo Bellini, the Vivarini, or Squarcione, the haloes are depicted as metallic plates with a pseudo-script that partly resembles Kufic. The three-dimensional effect of these haloes differs from the ornamental description of Jacopo's haloes. Mantegna seeks to evoke an effect of light on the nimbus against the airy background of sky. It is not only the pseudo-Arabic that he is depicting, but, in a manner similar to that of Giovanni Bellini, he aims to create portraits of a variety of "exotic" luxury artefacts, as in the *Adoration of the Magi* (ca. 1495-1505, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum)<sup>94</sup>.

In this essay, I have underscored some of the issues linked to the perception of Islamic artefacts and the values they might have had for a Renaissance painter like Jacopo Bellini in Venice, the centre of trade with the Orient. My aim has been to show that Jacopo's source of inspiration for the use of Arabic calligraphy was rooted in the Venetian tradition but was decisively nurtured by his teacher Gentile da Fabriano. Learning from Florentine painting and sculpture during their stay, Gentile and then Jacopo further explored the creative use of pseudo-Arabic on haloes as well as on textiles in devotional images. As a leader of one of the most important workshops in Venice in the first half of the fifteenth century, Jacopo's impressive depictions of pseudo-Arabic script remarkably not only motivated the competitive workshop of the Vivarini, but also inspired the following generation of painters, such as Giovanni Bellini and Mantegna. Whether it was



the exotic “otherness”, the utter beauty, the representation of luxury and nobility, or a reference to the Holy Land or North Africa, the depiction of pseudo-Arabic calligraphy remained a leitmotiv of Venetian painting throughout the centuries.

*The argument of this article has been inspired by numerous discussions with Diane Cole Ahl in Venetian museums, and I am deeply grateful to her. I would like to express my gratitude to Barbara Wisch for her wise counsel and generous support. I would also like to thank Jonathan Davies and Gerardo de Simone.*

- 1 For an excellent summary of this argument, see M. Spallanzani, *Arti decorative tra Firenze e il Vicino Oriente nel Rinascimento. Un quadro dinamico / Decorative Arts between Florence and the Near East during the Renaissance. A dynamic scenario*, in *Islam e Firenze. Arte e collezionismo dai Medici al Novecento / Islamic Art and Florence from the Medici to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, exh. cat., Firenze 2018, ed. by G. Curatola, Firenze, 2018, pp. 36-44.
- 2 See the fundamental study on this subject: E. Ashtor, *Studies on the Levantine Trade in the Middle Ages*, London, 1978; *id.*, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton, 1983; D. Jacoby, *Silk crosses the Mediterranean*, in *Le vie del Mediterraneo, Idee, uomini, oggetti (secoli XI-XVII)*, ed. by G. Aivaldi, Genova, 1997, pp. 55-79. Excellent documentation is provided in M. Spallanzani, *Ceramiche orientali a Firenze nel Rinascimento*, Firenze, 1978; *id.*, *Oriental Rugs in Renaissance Florence*, Firenze, 2007; *id.*, *Metalli islamici a Firenze nel Rinascimento*, Firenze, 2010; *id.*, *Vetri islamici a Firenze nel primo Rinascimento*, Firenze, 2012.
- 3 R. Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence: A Study of Four Families*, Princeton, 1968, esp. pp. 250-272; *id.*, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300-1600*, Baltimore-London, 1993.
- 4 Gentile Bellini, during his stay (1479-1481) at the court of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II in Istanbul, was also honoured as a knight. He might have acquired or received Islamic objects, such as carpets, as gifts; see A. Chong, *Gentile Bellini in Istanbul: Myths and Misunderstandings*, in *Bellini and the East*, exh. cat., Boston-London 2005-2006, ed. by C. Campbell, A. Chong, London, 2005, pp. 106-119.
- 5 A. Shalem, *The Portraiture of Objects: A note on representations of Islamic objects in European painting of the 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries*, in *Europa e Islam tra i secoli XIV e XVI / Europe and Islam between 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries*, ed. by M. Bernardini, C. Borrelli, 2 vols., Napoli, 2002, vol. 1, pp. 497-521; see p. 499, where Shalem refers to a definition given by E. Buschor, *Bildnisstufen*, München, 1947.
- 6 See the volumes by Spallanzani in notes 1 and 2 above.
- 7 Fundamental remarks by C.-P. Haase, *L'arte del libro / The Art of Books*, in *Islam e Firenze*, cit., pp. 140-142.
- 8 E.R. Hoffman, *Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian interchange from the tenth to the twelfth century*, in «Art History», 24, 1, 2001, p. 17.
- 9 M.V. 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*, ed. by C. Burnett, A. Contadini, London, 1999, pp. 61-75; cfr. *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition, 7th-9th Century*, exh. cat., New York 2012, ed. by H.C. Evans, New York, 2012, with examples

- on pp. 183-185. For a general overview of Oriental script, see R.E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza. Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1500*, London, 2002, pp. 51-71.
- 10 D. Jacoby, *Dall'Oriente all'Italia. Commercio di stoffe preziose nel Duecento e nel primo Trecento, in Cangrande della Scala. La morte e il corredo di un principe nel medioevo europeo*, ed. by P. Marini, E. Napione, G.M. Varanini, Venezia, 2004, p. 145; L. Monnas, *Merchants, Princes, and Painters: Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Paintings, 1300-1550*, New Haven-London, 2008, p. 223.
  - 11 Monnas, *Merchants*, cit., p. 226. See also *ead.*, *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 L.E. Saurma-Jeltsch, A. Eisenbeiß et al., Berlin, 2010, pp. 65-89.
  - 12 B. Klesse, *Seidenstoffe in der italienischen Malerei des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts*, Bern, 1967, p. 65, compares the decoration with a Chinese silk (*ivi*, fig. 141) once in Berlin in the Kunstgewerbemuseum.
  - 13 *Ivi*, p. 75. On the trade with the Mamluk Empire, see S. Auld, *The Mamluks and the Venetians Commercial Interchange: The Visual Evidence*, in «Palestine Exploration Quarterly», 123, 1991, pp. 84-102. For a general overview, see Ashtor, *Levant Trade*, cit., pp. 285-286, 352-353.
  - 14 Monnas, *Merchants*, cit., pp. 222-223.
  - 15 See C. Schmidt Arcangeli, *Oggetti islamici nell'arte fiorentina del Rinascimento. Il fascino dell'esotico diventa "maniera moderna" / Islamic Objects in the Florentine Art of the Renaissance. Fascination for the Exotic becomes the "Modern Manner"*, in *Islam e Firenze*, cit., pp. 46-63.
  - 16 This connection was already mentioned by S. Auld, *Kuficising Inscriptions in the Work of Gentile da Fabriano*, in «Oriental Art», 32, 3, 1986, p. 247; A. De Marchi, *Gentile da Fabriano. Un viaggio nella pittura italiana alla fine del gotico*, Milano, 1992, p. 53.
  - 17 See E. Atil, *Renaissance of Islam: Art of the Mamluks*, Washington, D.C., 1982; Spallanzani, *Metalli islamici*, cit., pp. 1-21.
  - 18 Cfr. C. Frosinini, cat. entry: *Gentile da Fabriano, Madonna dell'Umiltà*, in *Gentile da Fabriano e l'altro Rinascimento*, exh. cat., Fabriano 2006, ed. by L. Laureati, L. Mochi Onori, Milano, 2006, pp. 248-251.
  - 19 M. Minardi, cat. entry: *Gentile da Fabriano, Natività e Madonna dell'Umiltà*, in *ivi*, pp. 148-149. The artist again made use of pseudo-*thuluth* in the decoration of the haloes and in the edges of the garments in another *Madonna and Child* panel (Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art) and in the *Madonna with Saints Lawrence and Julian* (New York, The Frick Collection).
  - 20 Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, cit., p. 66, argues that Masaccio (1401-1428) was inspired by Gentile da Fabriano, his contemporary. Yet the epigraphic motifs by Masaccio clearly differ from Gentile da Fabriano's. What the two painters had in common was their ambition to adorn haloes with elegant and sophisticated decoration. However, they were transforming different sources and found different solutions for the representation of pseudo-Arabic or pseudo-Hebrew. These differences make it difficult to believe that one painter directly inspired the other. Instead, it confirms a common, imaginative engagement with exotic artefacts that were present in Florence.
  - 21 See Schmidt Arcangeli, *Oggetti islamici*, cit., pp. 49-52.

- 22 R. Sellheim, *Die Madonna mit der Schahāda*, in *Festschrift Werner Caschel zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. by E. Graft, Leiden, 1968, pp. 308-315. For a similar argument before Sellheim, cfr. W. Bombe, *Le opere di Gentile da Fabriano alla Mostra d'Arte Antica umbra*, Perugia, 1907, p. 7, note 1; for this argument, see O. 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*, ed. by H. Belting, conf. proc., Bologna 1979, Bologna, 1982, pp. 27-34.
- 23 M.V. Fontana, *The Pseudo-Epigraphic Arabic Characters*, in *Giotto. The Santa Maria Novella Crucifix*, ed. by M. Ciatti, M. Seidel, Firenze, 2002, pp. 217-223, esp. pp. 220-221. For a similar opinion, see M. 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 A. Cadei, Roma, 1999, vol. 3, pp. 1023-1030, where the author mentions that the inscription on the stained-glass window with the Medici coat of arms in the Florentine church of SS. Annunziata is an illegible pseudo-Arabic script.
- 24 V. Grassi, *Le iscrizioni arabo-islamiche nell'opera di Gentile da Fabriano*, in *Nuovi studi sulla pittura tardogotica. Intorno a Gentile da Fabriano*, ed. by A. De Marchi, Livorno, 2007, pp. 33-44, who argues that the inscription on Mary's halo might be the *titulus* «Maria» written upside down.
- 25 Auld, *Kuficising*, cit., pp. 246-265; Frosinini, cat. entry: *Gentile da Fabriano, Madonna dell'Umiltà*, cit., p. 248.
- 26 Auld, *Kuficising*, cit., p. 247.
- 27 *Ivi*, pp. 246-247.
- 28 Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, cit., pp. 65-66.
- 29 Most recently, see C.-P. Haase, *I metalli islamici in Italia fino al Cinquecento / Islamic Metal Artifacts in Italy up to the 16th century*, in *Islam e Firenze*, cit., pp. 87-89.
- 30 Spallanzani, *Metalli islamici*, cit., p. 127, pl. 8.
- 31 *Ivi*, p. 126, pl. 7.
- 32 See Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, cit., p. 65, fig. 57.
- 33 Haase, *I metalli islamici*, cit., p. 88.
- 34 See Schmidt Arcangeli, *Oggetti islamici*, cit., pp. 49-63.
- 35 A. Contadini, *Fatimid Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London, 1998, pp. 39-58.
- 36 *Ivi*, pp. 39, 43-44.
- 37 Cfr. *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)*, exh. cat., New York 2004, ed. by H.C. Evans, New York, 2004, pp. 146, 162, 166, 167.
- 38 Jacoby, *Oriental silks go West*, cit., pp. 72-74; see p. 74, fig. 2, for the famous example of the pattern adorning the inscribed silk found in the tomb of Cangrande I della Scala, Lord of Verona [Tabriz (?), first decades of the fourteenth century, Verona, Museo di Castelvecchio].
- 39 *Ivi*, p. 72.
- 40 A. Contadini, *Artistic Contacts: Current Scholarship and Future Tasks*, in *Islam and the Italian Renaissance*, cit., p. 12: «The international trade in textiles was in fact rather more complex than the simple importation of luxury goods into Europe suggested by the presence of Middle Eastern textiles in Italian Renaissance paintings».
- 41 Fundamental for this argument is R.A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, Baltimore, 2009, esp. pp. 282-295; for a general overview, see Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, cit., pp.

- 51-71. More specifically, see G. Curatola, *Tessuti e artigianato turco nel mercato veneziano, in Venezia e i Turchi – Scontri e confronti di due civiltà*, Milano, 1985, pp. 186-195; *id.*, *Quali rapporti fra tessuti turchi e tessuti veneziani*, in *Venezia e l'Oriente Vicino. Arte veneziana e arte islamica*, ed. by E. Grube, Venezia, 1989, pp. 211-216. W.B. Denny, *Oriental Carpets and Textiles in Venice*, in *Venice and the Islamic World, 828-1797*, ed. by S. Carboni, New Haven-London, 2007, pp. 174-191.
- 42 See Klesse, *Seidenstoffe*, cit., pp. 54-87.
- 43 The patron Saint Mark was already represented with orientalising garments in fourteenth-century painting; see Paolo Veneziano with his sons Luca and Giovanni, *Pala feriale* (1343-1354, Venice, Museo di San Marco), where the half-length *Saint Mark* appears in a garment with *tirāz* decoration. A similar tunic with *tirāz* is shown in Lorenzo Veneziano's *Saint Mark* (1371, Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia), and once for the Ufficio dell'Arte della Seta at the Rialto; see the entries in *Venezia e l'Egitto*, exh. cat., Venezia 2011-2012, ed. by E.M. Dal Pozzolo, R. Dorigo, M.P. Pedani, Milano, 2011, pp. 283-284, 286.
- 44 K. Christiansen, *Gentile da Fabriano*, London, 1982, pp. 164-166, doc. IX; *id.*, *L'arte di Gentile da Fabriano*, in *Gentile da Fabriano e l'altro Rinascimento*, cit., p. 30.
- 45 C.T. Eisler, *The Genius of Jacopo Bellini. The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, New York, 1989, p. 38.
- 46 P. Hills, *Veiled Presence: Body and Drapery from Giotto to Titian*, New Haven-London, 2018, p. 31.
- 47 Klesse, *Seidenstoffe*, cit., p. 433.
- 48 *Islam e Firenze*, cit., p. 209.
- 49 Auld, *Kuficising*, cit., pp. 257-258; M.V. Fontana, *L'influsso dell'arte islamica in Italia*, in *Eredità dell'Islam – Arte Islamica in Italia*, ed. by G. Curatola, Milano, 1993, pp. 456-470; see also *ead.*, *A Note on the Pseudo Writings Deriving from the Arabic Alphabets in Some Funerary Monuments of the 1400s*, in *ead.*, *Islam and the West. Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo Inscriptions*, Universitas Studiorum, Mantova, 2020, pp. 153-178; F. Leemhuis, *Heiligenscheine fremder Herkunft: Arabische Schriftzeichen in Aureolen der italienischen Malerei des frühen fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts*, in «Der Islam», 72, 2000, pp. 286-306; Schmidt Arcangeli, *Oggetti islamici*, cit., pp. 48-54.
- 50 See Spallanzani, *Oriental Rugs*, cit., pp. 58-59; G. Curatola, *Tappeti anatolici. Ovvero del sacro che si rinnova*, in *Crivelli e l'arte tessile. I tappeti e i tessuti di Carlo Crivelli*, ed. by M. Tabibnia, T. Marchesi, E. Piccoli, Milano, 2010, pp. 36-40.
- 51 Curatola, *Tappeti anatolici*, cit., pp. 150-155.
- 52 For the reconstruction of the design of the *tapisserie*, see B. Degenhart, A. Schmitt, in collaboration with H.-J. Eberhardt, B. Blass-Simmen, *Pisanello und Bono da Ferrara*, München, 1995, pp. 70-71.
- 53 C. Schmidt Arcangeli, *Fra rito e potere. Il tappeto nella pittura del XV secolo*, in *Crivelli e l'arte tessile*, cit., p. 98.
- 54 Hills, *Veiled Presence*, cit., p. 34.
- 55 Eisler, *The Genius*, cit., pp. 46-47.
- 56 P. Hills, *The Renaissance image unveiled: From Madonna to Venus*, Edinburgh, 2010, esp. pp. 9-21.

- 57 *Id.*, *Venetian Colour. Marble, Mosaic, Painting and Glass, 1250-1550*, New Haven-London, 1999, p. 101.
- 58 For the mantle of Roger II (1133-1134), see Hoffman, *Pathways of Portability*, cit., pp. 26-33.
- 59 For the iconography, see C. Belting-Ihm, «*Sub matris tutela*». *Untersuchungen zur Vorgeschichte der Schutzmantelmadonna*, Heidelberg, 1976, p. 12.
- 60 Monnas, *Merchants*, cit., pp. 52-54.
- 61 Cfr. B. Degenhart, A. Schmitt, *Corpus der italienischen Zeichnungen 1300-1450*, part 2, vol. 4, *Venedig: Addenda zu Süd- und Mittelitalien*, 4 vols., Berlin, 1980, vol. 1, p. 175, cat. 661, 662; Monnas, *Merchants*, cit., pp. 49-51.
- 62 See D.M. Cottrell, *Unravelling the Mystery of Jan van Eyck's Cloths of Honor: The Ghent Altarpiece*, in *Encountering Medieval Textiles and Dress: Objects, Texts, Images*, ed. by D.G. Koslin, J.E. Snyder, New York, 2002, pp. 187-189.
- 63 For a date ca. 1440: Degenhart, Schmitt, *Corpus*, cit., part 2, vol. 5., *Venedig: Jacopo Bellini: Text*, Berlin, 1990, pp. 166-167; Eisler, *The Genius*, cit., p. 46, proposed 1450.
- 64 The precious stones carry symbolic meaning: rubies for the virtue of martyrdom; emeralds for the eternal afterlife; and pearls allude to Christ and to Mary's chastity.
- 65 Auld, *Kuficising*, cit., p. 246.
- 66 Contadini, *Fatimid Art*, cit., pp. 39-58.
- 67 *Ivi*, p. 149.
- 68 See Hills, *Veiled Presence*, cit., pp. 95-99.
- 69 Eisler, *The Genius*, cit., p. 46, proposes 1453 by comparing the miniatures of the *Passio Mauritii et sotiorum eius* (dated 1453, Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal); consequently, he attributes the painting in Los Angeles to Jacopo Bellini. For an attribution to Giovanni Bellini, see M. Lucco, *Un'opera dimenticata di Giovanni Bellini (e qualche considerazione sulla sua data di nascita)*, in *Giovanni Bellini «...il migliore nella pittura»*, ed. by P. Humfrey, V. Mancini, A. Tempestini, G.C.F. Villa, Venezia, 2019, pp. 2-15, esp. p. 9.
- 70 For a summary of this discussion, see *ivi*, pp. 3-7. For a proposal of an earlier birth date (1424/1428), see D.W. Maze, *Giovanni Bellini: Birth, Parentage, and Independence*, in «*Renaissance Quarterly*», 66, 2013, pp. 783-823.
- 71 M. Lucco, *Un'opera dimenticata*, cit., pp. 3-7.
- 72 See recently N. Rowley, *When Bellini traced Mantegna: Two Paintings of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple*, in *Mantegna & Bellini*, exh. cat., Berlin 2018-2019, ed. by C. Campbell, D. Korbacher, N. Rowley, S. Vowles, München, 2018, pp. 140-143.
- 73 Lucco, *Un'opera dimenticata*, cit., pp. 11-12. The marriage of Andrea Mantegna and Jacopo's daughter Nicolosia Bellini in 1453 is taken as confirmation that Jacopo had more access to the works of his son-in-law. In fact, the motif of cherubim in the background of Jacopo's *Madonna* in the Accademia appears earlier in Mantegna's *Butler Madonna* and might therefore confirm this hypothesis.
- 74 For examples, see *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, cit., pp. 162-165.
- 75 See S. Vowles, D. Korbacher, *Jacopo Bellini and the formation of Giovanni*, in *Mantegna & Bellini*, cit., p. 95; D. Tosato, *Giovanni Bellini e il contesto storico e culturale dei «Trittici della Carità»*, in *Giovanni Bellini «...il migliore della pittura»*, cit., pp. 75-87.
- 76 Blass-Simmen, «*Laetentur coeli*», cit., p. 452, fig. 2; p. 457, fig. 5.

- 77 Hills, *Venetian Colour*, cit., p. 101.
- 78 The reception of the *skiadon* was very much influenced by Pisanello's famous bronze medal of Emperor John VIII Palaeologus, ca. 1438-1439 (London, The British Museum), which was also modified by his followers by representing the Byzantine emperor with a crown placed upon the hat (medal in Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Objets d'arts). The latter medal became particularly successful in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century painting in Venice. This variation is depicted by the Vivarini; see Blass-Simmen, «*Laetentur coeli*», cit., pp. 456-461. Vittore Carpaccio still made use of this particular *skiadon* in his cycle of canvases for the Scuola di Santo Stefano in Venice, 1511; see C. Schmidt Arcangeli, *Giovanni Bellini e la pittura veneta a Berlino. Le collezioni di James Simon e Edward Solly alla Gemäldegalerie*, Verona, 2015, pp. 214-223.
- 79 D. Cordellier, cat. entry: *Pisanello, Giovanni VIII Paleologo, a mezzo busto, di profilo verso sinistra*, in *Pisanello*, ed. by P. Marini, Milano, 1996, pp. 372-373.
- 80 *Ivi*, pp. 368-371.
- 81 *Ivi*, p. 370, with further bibliography; G. Curatola, *Firenze alla domaschina / Florence alla domaschina*, in *Islam e Firenze*, cit., p. 19, does not exclude the possibility that the *thuluth* inscription was copied from a medal.
- 82 R. Pallucchini, *I Vivarini (Antonio, Bartolomeo, Alvise)*, Venezia, [1962], p. 109, figs. 95-97.
- 83 See *ivi*, pp. 108-109; C. Cavalca, *La pala d'altare a Bologna nel Rinascimento: opere, artisti e città, 1450-1500*, Milano, 2013, pp. 93-96.
- 84 The commissions of the Vivarini in Padua are documented: in 1447, the polyptych of the *Nativity* for San Francesco; in 1448, Antonio and Bartolomeo Vivarini were commissioned to fresco the Ovetari chapel in the Church of the Eremitani (destroyed 1945). This latter work was executed together with Andrea Mantegna and Niccolò Pizzolo.
- 85 Cfr. Schmidt Arcangeli, *Giovanni Bellini*, cit., pp. 383-389; N. Rowley, «*Sculpting in Paint*»: *Mantegna's training in Padua*, in *Mantegna & Bellini*, cit., pp. 90-91.
- 86 For Gentile Bellini and Islamic art, cfr. *Bellini and the East*, cit.
- 87 See Hills, *Venetian Colour*, cit., pp. 133-158.
- 88 *Ivi*, pp. 133-138.
- 89 Schmidt Arcangeli, *Giovanni Bellini*, cit., pp. 268-274.
- 90 See note 5 above.
- 91 Shalem, *The Portraiture of Objects*, cit., pp. 505-507.
- 92 *Ivi*, p. 507.
- 93 G. Agosti, cat. entry: *Andrea Mantegna, Madonna con il Bambino tra i Santi Gerolamo e Ludovico da Tolosa*, in *Mantegna, 1431-1506*, exh. cat., Paris 2008-2009, ed. by G. Agosti, D. Thiébaud, Paris, 2008; Italian ed. curated and corrected by A. Canova, A. Mazzotta, Milano, 2008, pp. 116-117.
- 94 See D.W. Carr, *Andrea Mantegna: The Adoration of the Magi*, Los Angeles, 1997.



Fig. 1: Paolo Veneziano, *Coronation of the Virgin*, 1336-1349, tempera on panel.  
Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia. Photo: Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.



Fig. 2: Paolo Veneziano, *Coronation of the Virgin*, detail, 1336-1349, tempera on panel. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia. Photo: Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.





Fig. 3: Gentile da Fabriano, *Madonna of Humility*, ca. 1420, tempera on panel. Pisa, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo. Photo: Pisa, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo.



Fig. 4: Gentile da Fabriano, *Madonna of Humility*, detail, ca. 1420, tempera on panel. Pisa, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo. Photo: Pisa, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo.



Fig. 5: Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1423, tempera on panel.  
Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 6: Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail, 1423, tempera on panel. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi. Photo: Public Domain.



Fig. 7: Jacopo Bellini, *Annunciation*, ca. 1430, tempera on panel. Brescia, Sant'Alessandro.  
Photo: Brescia, Fotostudio Rapuzzi.



Fig. 8: Jacopo Bellini, *Annunciation*, detail of the Virgin, ca. 1430, tempera on panel. Brescia, Sant' Alessandro. Photo: Brescia, Civici Istituti Culturali.



Fig. 9: Velvet panel of Florentine manufacture, late fifteenth century.  
Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello. Photo: Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello.



Fig. 10: Jacopo Bellini, *Madonna of Humility with a Donor*, probably Lionello d'Este, ca. 1440, tempera on panel. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: Paris, Musée du Louvre.



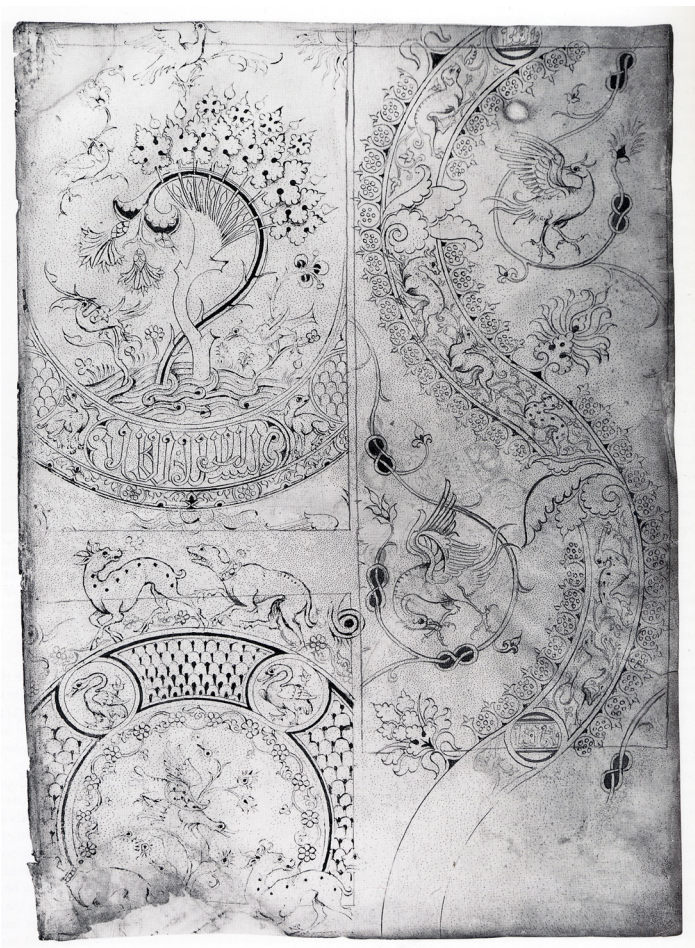


Fig. 11: Textile design from the sketchbook of Jacopo Bellini, pen on parchment, second half of the fourteenth century. Paris, Département des Arts Graphiques, Musée du Louvre. Photo: Paris, Musée du Louvre.



Fig. 12: Jacopo Bellini, *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1440 or 1450, tempera on panel. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi. Photo: Public Domain.



Fig. 13: Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1460, tempera on panel.  
Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.  
Photo: Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Fig. 14: Jacopo Bellini, *Madonna and Child with Cherubim*, ca. 1450. tempera on panel. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia. Photo: Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.



Fig. 15: Antonio Vivarini and Giovanni d'Alemagna, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail, ca. 1441-1445, tempera on panel. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo: Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Christoph Schmidt).



Fig. 16: Antonio Vivarini and Giovanni d'Alemagna, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail, ca. 1441-1445, tempera on panel. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo: Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Maria Reimelt).



Fig. 17: Pisanello, Text in *tuluth* characters with *John Palaeologus on Horseback and Three Other Figures*, ca. 1438, pen and ink. Paris, Département des Arts Graphique, Musée du Louvre. Photo: Paris, Musée du Louvre.



Fig. 18: Antonio Vivarini, *Saint Louis of Toulouse*, ca. 1450, tempera on panel. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: Paris, Musée du Louvre.





Fig. 19: Francesco Squarcione, *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1453-1455, tempera on panel.

Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

Photo: Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Christoph Schmidt).



Fig. 20: Francesco Squarcione, *Madonna and Child*, detail, ca. 1453-1455, tempera on panel. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo by Author.



Fig. 21: Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna Greca*, 1470-1475, tempera on panel.  
Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera. Photo: Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera.



Fig. 22: Andrea Mantegna, *Madonna with Saints Jerome and Louis of Toulouse*, ca. 1455, tempera on panel. Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André.  
Photo: Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André.