An Examination of the Multiple and Varied Uses of Arabic-Inspired Pseudo Calligraphy within Italian Religious and Secular Artwork from the 14th to 15th centuries

By
Shafaq Hasan
Dept. of Art History, Brandeis University
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Thesis Advisor:
Professor Jonathan Unglaub, Dept. of Art History

Thesis Committee:
Professor Charles McClendon, Dept. of Art History
Professor Jonathan Decter, Dept. of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies
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Introduction

Whether adorning the hem of the Virgin Mary, embroidering the vestments of the Lord or ornamenting robe of Judas, it is evident pseudo Islamic calligraphy had a special significance, either positive or negative, in Italian paintings, in which it appeared from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries. This thesis will examine the presence of Arabic pseudo-script, imitation script inspired by Arabic calligraphy, as it appeared on garments, fabrics and objects within paintings from the Late Middle Ages to the High Renaissance. Specifically, there are several examples of paintings including pseudo script on the garments of Christ and the Virgin, the most hallowed figures in Christian art.

Among the questions this thesis seeks to answer is why artists felt compelled to include a foreign script into paintings meant to evoke religious reverence, such as those of the Virgin and Christ. It would seem that Arabic calligraphy would contradict the presumed sacredness of the painting. However, its inclusion on these specific figures may actually have been the result of the mistaken assumption that Arabic was the vernacular language of the Holy Land during the early Christian era. Indeed, Europeans commonly confused Arabic as an ancient Eastern text that was utilized during the time of the New Testament. Consequently, artists may have used the script to help situate the figures in the area of the Holy Land and the time of Christ. In doing so, the script would have been recognizing and affirming the importance of the biblical figure or calling attention to specific figures in the scene. Moreover, given the luxury status of Islamic textiles that included inscriptions, patrons and artists may have included visual approximations of Arabic-style script in artwork to increase the opulence of the piece, and the veneration accorded certain figures. An underlying theme will be the question of the purpose of

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using pseudo-script, especially its prevalence in devotional imagery. As will be explained, the significance of the script varied depending on the painting and the context of the script.

Despite the surprising prevalence of Arabic pseudo script ornamentation in Italian paintings from the fourteenth through the fifteenth centuries few scholars have done more than note its presence in passing, if at all, even in extensive analyses of well-known works. Two notable exceptions are Rosamond Mack and Alexander Nagel, who have both contributed academic works that discuss the use of pseudo script in Italian paintings in thoughtful detail. In her book *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300 to 1600*, Mack traces the influence of Islamic trade on Italian society, including the integration of pseudo script into Italian paintings and textiles during part of the Renaissance period. Mack includes several examples of Italian paintings that include pseudo script. As mentioned, Mack purports that pseudo script in Italian paintings is the result of the inaccurate belief that Arabic was the spoken language in the Holy Land during Christ’s time.² Mack’s chapter on pseudo script is part of a broader survey of how Islamic ideas, designs, and luxury objects came to be integrated into the Italian Renaissance aesthetic. Nagel, in his article, “Twenty-five Notes on Pseudoscript in Italian Art,” also provides a general commentary on how pseudo script is used in various capacities and the purposes of that use. Published after Mack’s book, Nagel’s article also concedes that there is evidence that artists used Islamic pseudo script for its Eastern provenance and assumed connection to the Holy Land. Among other points, he also notes that the illegibility and unfamiliarity of the script further suggested, at a poetic level, its

² Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600*, 53.
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mystical origin from a divine language. Therefore, artists may have wanted to connect their works to the metaphoric divinity embodied by the script.³

Nagel and Mack’s conclusions formed the basis of this thesis and encouraged further research into how Islamic calligraphy and script came to be in Western Europe, how it was viewed by European society and why it was included in various Italian paintings of Christ and other biblical figures. Through utilizing Nagel and Mack’s works as the foundation point, this thesis then continues to evaluate the concentrated use of pseudo script in more specific contexts, such as pseudo script on works solely of the Madonna and Child and in paintings of the Annunciation. In examining why pseudo script is used in these specific thematic paintings, the purpose and significance of the pseudo script can be more thoroughly assessed and understood. For example, while Mack named works that use pseudo script, such as paintings of the Annunciation, neither she nor Nagel explores how the inclusion of script in the context of the Annunciation changes the significance of the script. Moreover, by considering later paintings from the later fifteenth century, the thesis explores how pseudo script took on a more complicated significance than earlier paintings from the fourteenth century. Therefore, in organizing paintings by their thematic points and then discussing artists’ use of script specific to the context of that painting, the thesis diverges from Nagel and Mack’s works and delves into a deeper analysis of the purpose of Islamic pseudo script in Italian paintings.

In order to fully understand the significance of pseudo script in Italian paintings, there must be a thorough discussion in the first chapter of how calligraphic designs traveled to Italy through the textile trade with the Islamic world. This background

³ Alexander Nagel, “Twenty-five notes on pseudoscript in Italian art,” Anthropology and Aesthetics 59, no. 60 (2011), 238.
information includes the historical trade routes and diplomatic relationships that facilitated the introduction of Islamic artifacts into Europe. To illustrate this relationship, the paper will examine Venice’s trade interactions with the East. As a coastal city and the commercial epicenter of the Italian peninsula, Venice was situated at the crossroads between the Islamic Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa and Western Europe. Among the key players in the commercial trade between the East and the West was the Mamluk regime, which emerged after it consolidated control of Egypt and Syria in 1259.\footnote{Mack, \textit{Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600}, 15.} In addition to the Mamluks, Venice also maintained trade relations with the Ottomans in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Mamluks’ eventual instability would later permit Venice to emerge as a contender in the competitive textile industry.\footnote{Stefano Carboni, \textit{Venice and the Islamic World, 828-1797} (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), 43.} Through a series of disasters, including the Black Plague in 1348 and military invasions by enemy territories, the Mamluk regime’s unstable economy lost its stronghold on manufacturing luxury products, and, therefore, could no longer meet the exorbitant demand in Italy.\footnote{Mack, \textit{Bazaar to Piazza}, 21.} Among the traded commodities were brassware, ceramic objects, spices, wood and \textit{tiraz} fabrics, the prime export of the Eastern Mediterranean textile industry. In particular, the European demand for these \textit{tiraz} textiles allowed them to be one of the main sources of the transmission of designs and ideas, many of which came to inform Italian aesthetic.

Islamic influence permeated both the Italian artistic and architectural culture, demonstrating this transmission of ideas. For example, Italian tradesmen that were inspired by Islamic building designs from their visits to Alexandria in Egypt encouraged
the building of Islamic-inspired architectural designs of Venice’s buildings. Italian paintings also began showing the permeation of Islamic motifs, specifically pseudo script on rendered textiles. Moreover, *Triptych: the Crucifixion; the Redeemer with Angels; Saint Nicholas; Saint Gregory* by Duccio di Buoninsegna from 1311-18 (Fig. 7) and *Saint Francis and a Bishop Saint* by Fra Angelico from the late 1420s illustrate how Islamic textiles and pseudo script began to appear in paintings of ecclesiastic costume, perhaps reflecting the real vestments worn by priests during this time (Fig. 10).

Moreover, Barna da Siena’s *The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine* demonstrates how textile patterns along with pseudo script were integrated into paintings. The popularity of the *tiraz* textiles was also reflected in the universal understanding that they represented an elite luxury and status reserved for those that were able to afford them (Fig. 11). Part of the luxury status of the fabrics was due to the inclusion of Islamic calligraphy on the textiles. Calligraphy was a revered Islamic art form because of the divine purposes for which it was utilized, specifically for transcribing the Qur’an. Therefore, the calligraphy itself was imbued with Islamic religious undertones, making its use in Christian artwork more puzzling. One of the earliest styles of calligraphy is known as *kufic*, distinguished by its bolder, angular lines and was used primarily for writing the Qu’ran. Among the other styles, *thuluth* and *naskh* were also popular calligraphic styles that were used on textiles. Mamluk textiles often included calligraphy of the titles or short phrases honoring

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state officials in higher positions, such as generals, sultans and other members of an elite class.¹²

After establishing the foundational information about the Mediterranean’s trade with the East, the diffusion of Islamic ideas into the West and the various types of Islamic calligraphic styles, the second chapter begins by analyzing the incorporation of inscriptions into the garments of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Consequently, this chapter will examine the use of pseudo inscriptions and different script styles through an in-depth analysis of three paintings of the Virgin Mary and Christ in Boston museums; *Virgin and Child* by Barnaba da Modena from the 1360s (Fig. 19), *Virgin and Child* by Simone Martini from about 1325 (Fig. 23); *Virgin and Child* by Ugolino di Nerio from 1325-30 (Fig. 28).

Barnaba’s *Virgin and Child* and Martini’s *Virgin and Child* are assessed jointly because both paintings utilize pseudo script in the traditional manner: it typically appears on the hems of the Virgin’s blue mantle. The script in these paintings most closely resembles the older kufic style, given the angular nature of the lines. As with other paintings with the Virgin Mary and Christ child, the inscription in both paintings appears at the hem of the Virgin’s luxurious blue head covering. The Madonna is often depicted wearing blue because it was one of the most expensive colors for artists to purchase and use.¹³ In that vein, Islamic textiles and the corresponding inscriptions embroidered in gold foil were a signifier of prominence and luxury. By incorporating inscriptions into these specific paintings of the Madonna and Child, Barnaba and Martini were affirming

¹² Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 41.
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the Virgin Mary and Christ’s elevated, even regal, status as King and Queen of Heaven, despite their otherwise humbleness.

By contrast, the script in Ugolinio’s painting appears on the Virgin Mary’s simple inner veil underneath the expensive, blue mantel. Perhaps focusing on the humility of the Virgin, the artistic decision to paint the script on the inside veil directly touching the Virgin indicates Ugolino was aware that Islamic script had a positive connotation to the Christian Italian worshipper and wished to emphasize it in his painting. Likewise, the inscriptions found on the Madonna’s haloes, as seen in Gentile da Fabriano’s Madon

na of Humility (Fig. 35) and the cover of the Bible in Filippino Lippi’s Madonna and Child from 1475-1480 (Fig. 37), may further portray how the script was used as a method of showing religious reverence as well as suggesting a relationship between Christianity’s Eastern roots and Islamic pseudo script.

Pseudo inscriptions have a different significance when they are utilized in paintings depicting the Annunciation, or the moment the Word is incarnated in Mary, as discussed in Chapter three. As seen in Fra Angelico’s Annunciation from 1430 (Fig. 42) and Filippo Lippi’s Annunciation (Fig. 51) from the mid-fifteenth century, the pseudo script functions as the physical manifestation of the incarnation of the divine Word. Similar to the Bible in Filippino Lippi’s Madonna and Child, the inclusion of pseudo script in a painting depicting the Annunciation is particularly meaningful. The Annunciation illustrates the moment angel Gabriel imparts to the Virgin that she has been chosen as the vessel to carry the Lord’s child. In this instance, Gabriel’s words signal the process in which the Holy Spirit converts the divine Word into flesh. The pseudo script, which itself is infused with Islamic religious significance, takes on this divine quality and
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Further exemplifies the connection to biblical times. However, the exact nature and agent of the Virgin’s miraculous impregnation was and still is shrouded in mystery. Therefore, both Angelico and Lippi may have utilized pseudo script as a sophisticated and innovative method of illustrating the incarnation of the Word.

The fourth and last chapter will conclude by examining later works that employ pseudo script differently than the Madonna and child paintings. While some of these works continue to use pseudo script as a way of connecting the script to the early Christian era and confirming the biblical figures’ importance, other works show a potentially negative connotation of the script. Consequently, these later paintings depict a more sophisticated and involved use of pseudo script than works from the late fifteenth century.

Verrocchio’s effeminate interpretation of David utilizes pseudo script in a positive manner, his statue presents an example of Islamic inscriptions used instead on a revered figure in Judaism to highlight his position as the chosen one of the Lord (Fig. 54). The statue includes pseudo script on the hem as well as the bold straps of his garment. As the future king of Israel, David was chosen and challenged by God to slay Goliath and ensure Jerusalem’s safety. While David refuses Saul’s armor, in Verrocchio’s rendering of David, he is wearing a lightweight sheath with pseudo script boldly visible on the hem and straps. Placing the script on David’s armor as one of the Lord’s Elect, like Christ, demonstrates the attempt to give the statue biblical authenticity. This may be especially significant as Christians viewed David as the ancestor of Christ.

In the Vatican, there are several artworks that use pseudo script. Luca Signorelli’s fresco The Last Acts and Death of Moses from 1481-2 (Fig. 64), Pietro Perugino’s fresco
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*Christ’s Charge to St. Peter* from 1481-2 (Fig. 68), and Filarete’s bronze doors on the Old St. Peter’s Basilica (Fig. 61-63) all appear to employ pseudo script positively to emphasize metaphorically the papal office’s power and authority. However, in Rosselli’s *The Last Supper*, the pseudo script is found exclusively on the figure of Judas and St. John the Evangelist, and omitted from Christ’s garments (Fig. 70). Instead, Rosselli employed pseudo script as a method of segregating and isolating figures in his painting, specifically Judas as the betrayer of Christ and St. John as Christ’s most loyal follower. While pseudo script was used in earlier paintings as a marker of divinity and luxury, Rosselli’s fresco and Verrocchio’s *David* instead present two examples that deviate from the traditional use of pseudo script.

Likewise, the prominent use of pseudo script on the edges of Holofernes’ tent in Mantegna’s *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* may also reflect a negative connotation (Fig. 73). Judith, a Jewish widow, seduces the Assyrian general Holofernes and beheads him before he can defeat the city of Bethulia. While Judith is viewed as the virtuous and chaste widow that triumphs over the Assyrian general, Holofernes is commonly depicted as a sinful heathen. To showcase his immorality, Mantegna may have perverted the luxury usually associated with Islamic calligraphy to instead condemn Holofernes’ licentiousness. At the same time, the placement of the script may also have been honoring Judith and her virtuous nature, further complicating Mantegna’s use of inscriptions in this painting. This possible negative interpretation of calligraphy may also reflect the

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underlying prejudices against the Islamic religion and territories inherent in the Christian world.

By examining these paintings in a chronological manner, certain trends of the use of pseudo script from the Early to the beginning of the High Renaissance become apparent. While paintings in the late fourteenth century almost exclusively used Islamic script in a positive association with biblical figures, it appears that later works became more innovative and progressive in their utilization of Islamic-style inscriptions. While still communicating the divinity of the subject matter, the script in these later works such as Mantegna’s Judith with the head of Holofernes and Rosselli’s The Last Supper also had multiple potential significances depending on how the pieces were interpreted. Although some artists may have included Arabic pseudo inscriptions in a decorative or ornamental manner, it appears pseudo inscriptions came to be considered an artistic device by European artists that complemented the complex meanings of Renaissance artworks and deepened their significances.
Along with spices, textiles and glassware, the trade between the Near East and the European West also included the transmission and comingling of cultural traits and ideas. As trade routes were discovered and relations were made between European and the Mediterranean tradesmen, the visiting Westerners became immersed in the artistic styles and ideas of the Islamic countries.¹ These Muslim regions produced several high-quality and in-demand luxury goods, such as brassware, carpets, objects in enameled glass, and textiles, that areas in Europe, such as Islamic Spain and the Italian city-states, began imitating.² Western tradesmen then brought these ideas, such as artistic motifs from Turkish carpets and techniques in silk production, back to their homes and integrated them into their own architecture and art.³ Venice was instrumental in forging Italy’s close trade relationship with the Mediterranean, particularly with Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, which fell to the Ottomans in 1453, but also ports such as Alexandria.⁴ As such, the traces of Islamic influence can be found throughout the architecture in Venice as well as the Venetian artists producing work depicting their own immersion in the Mediterranean culture, such as Gentile Bellini.⁵

Beginning in the fourteenth century, Italian artists included the tiraz fabrics heavily imported into the Italian peninsula from the Eastern Mediterranean into their paintings. These fabrics were often used to construct the garments of important Muslim rulers and included bands of Arabic calligraphy that noted the status and position of the

² Ibid., 22.
⁴ Mack, Bazaar to Piazza, 28.
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ruler. While sometimes the calligraphy was legible and meant to convey a certain message, utilizing calligraphy was also a means of creating elaborate decoration without necessarily being legible. Specifically, Italian artists incorporated this band of calligraphy into their paintings, either on objects or oftentimes on the hems of garments of biblical figures, such as the Virgin, Christ or a saint. While these artists may simply have chosen to include the script in their paintings as a decorative motif, the significance of the tiraz textile in European society as a luxury good and an indicator of wealth may have influenced artists to include calligraphy in paintings of the Renaissance. Furthermore, the importance of calligraphy in Islamic society must also be a consideration when examining Arabic-inspired pseudo script in Italian paintings. Not only was calligraphy used on tiraz fabrics to connote the power of Muslim rulers, but also the same calligraphy was used to write passages from the Qur’an. Thus, calligraphy in Islam was associated with both political and religious authority. It is likely that as tiraz fabrics, brassware and carpets were being transported through Venice into the Italian peninsula from the Islamic East, Islamic artistic motifs as well as the conceptual importance of Arabic calligraphy were being exchanged through trade as well. The increasing trade between Asia and Europe following the Crusades enabled the assimilation of pseudo script-inscribed textiles into Italian regions. Initiated in part to overtake the Islamic territories in the area of the Holy Land, the Crusades spanned over

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8 Mack, Bazaar to Piazza, 27.
9 Liu, The Silk Road in World History, 99.
two centuries from 1096-1271. As a result, Europeans were exposed to the rich culture of the Eastern Mediterranean. To help further facilitate trade, Western Europeans also created trading posts in the Latin crusader states of Antioch, Tripoli and Jerusalem. By creating these posts, French, Venetian, Pisan merchants, among others, were able to establish an economic presence as well as relationships with the Muslim rulers in these territories. Indeed, numerous European countries, including the city-states throughout the Italian peninsula, sent ambassadors to forge trade relations with these Muslim rulers in order to access the markets in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa.

The economic relations established between the East and the West were in part solidified by the creation of the Mamluk regime, which was strategically located in the middle of the Mediterranean trading hub. The Mamluk regime emerged after it consolidated control of Egypt and Syria in 1259. While most empires are founded and ruled by aristocratic bloodlines, the Mamluk regime was composed of an elite militia of emancipated Turkish slaves that had seized control following the collapse of the Ayyubid dynasty that had previously ruled Egypt. The Mamluks were in control of the Eastern Mediterranean area of Egypt to Syria from the late thirteenth century to 1517, during which time the regime experienced significant instability due to issues of succession. The Sultans of the regime lived in isolation away from their citizens within a highly structured

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
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and disciplined military elite. These rulers asserted their dominance by building elaborate mosques and funerary establishments.

In addition to their political dominance, the Mamluk regime also established its presence as a contributor and facilitator of the Eastern trade sector through the regime’s flourishing metalwork, textile and ceramic industries. Mamluk metalwork and enameled glass were considered some of the regime’s greatest achievements, influenced in part by the earlier Islamic cultures that ruled Egypt and Syria. Given their positioning in the Mediterranean, as the regime grew it was able to control the European traffic entering and trading in the crusader states. As a result, Mamluk Sultans imposed restrictions on merchants attempting to engage in trade with the crusaders states in the Holy Land. Moreover, following the Muslim reconquest of the Holy Land in 1291, a papal embargo was instituted to prevent Christian trade with Mamluk territories, primarily restricting the trade of commodities that are utilized during war, such as iron and wood; a substantial component of Europe’s trade with the Mamluks that affected the profits of both sides. Therefore, despite these limiting circumstances, trade continued between Europe and the area of Mediterranean out of economic necessity. The availability and appearance of Mamluk products, such as brassware and textiles, in Italian paintings also demonstrates that trade continued, despite these various limitations. This is illustrated most prominently with Venice’ continued trade with Alexandria situated in Egypt, despite the restrictions placed by the Pope.

Ibid.
Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 16.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
By the fourteenth century, Cairo had grown to become the greatest metropolis of the age, while the Mamluk regime itself had become Venice’s principle trading partner.\textsuperscript{21} As the commercial epicenter among the Italian city-states, Venice’s strong relations with the Islamic Near East allowed for the influx of Eastern products into the West. With the constant presence of their diplomats and consuls in the crusader states of the Holy Land as well as their cemented relations with the Mamluks, Venice was able to emerge as a distinct leading European power.\textsuperscript{22} Venice’s financial interests in Islamic culture facilitated their close relationship with the Islamic world, helping to open communication between the different regions.\textsuperscript{23}

As a result, Venetian trade with regions such as the Mamluks and the Ottoman Empire, among others, brought Islamic artistic ideas as well as commodities into the West. This enabled Venice to emerge as a leading producer of luxury exports of Eastern products, such as fine silks and glass, which had been previously monopolized by Islamic territories, like the Mamluk regime.\textsuperscript{24} As mentioned, the Mamluk regime was unparalleled in their production of luxury goods, such as textiles, ornamental rugs and brassware, among other objects. These goods were prolifically created and dispersed throughout the European continent where tradesmen from Islamic regions in the Mediterranean had found a captive audience eager to procure the exotic commodities. However, the Mamluks’ dominance of luxury good production was challenged after the epidemics of the 1340s, such as the Black Plague in 1348 that spread through the Mediterranean, the famine of 1403, military expenses in response to neighboring

\textsuperscript{21} Carboni, \textit{Venice and the Islamic World}, 828-1797, 73.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 94.
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invasions, in addition to other crippling economic devastations to the regime.\textsuperscript{25} Consequently, the Mamluks were unable to continue matching the competition for ceramics with Spain or sustain Alexandria’s textile industry.\textsuperscript{26}

As opposed to the Mamluks, Venice was able to quickly revive itself following the Plague.\textsuperscript{27} Despite the decline of the Mamluk regime and the after effects of the Plague felt throughout Europe, including a drastic reduction in population and the general standard of living, survivors in Italian city-states had an overabundance of disposable wealth and an insatiable appetite for luxury goods. To satisfy the growing demand, Venice continued investing in its burgeoning silk, glass and ceramics production industries. Eventually the rival city of Lucca became the prime textile center in Europe, producing luxury silks for the Church, royalty as well as the elite wealthy sector of the public.\textsuperscript{28} Luxury goods, whose productions had been previously dominated by the Muslim Near East, were now being produced by Italian cities and exported to the East and throughout Europe.\textsuperscript{29}

As Venice’s luxury industries grew to fill the gap left by the Mamluk regime, Italian producers also emulated many of the artistic ideas and designs of the Islamic Near East, concentrated in the Syria and Egypt area.\textsuperscript{30} Islamic artistic elements as seen in textiles and enameled glass are identifiable by their repetitive and uniform patterns. This attitude of uniformity was informed by the Islamic religion that preached a consistency of

\textsuperscript{25} Mack, \textit{Bazaar to Piazza}, 21.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Carboni, \textit{Venice and the Islamic World, 828-1797}, 76.
\textsuperscript{28} Mack, \textit{Bazaar to Piazza}, 30.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 22.
lifestyle with little differentiation between its religious and secular aspects.\textsuperscript{31} As such, exports were often decorated with repetitive geometric shapes and designs that created symmetry and balance.\textsuperscript{32} Venetian manufacturers created imitation silk luxury textiles embroidered with Eastern inspired geometric patterns throughout the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{33} Indeed, Venice’s supremacy of the textile industry over the Near East illustrates Europe’s gradual dominance in textile production.\textsuperscript{34} As seen in their official portraits, Venetian doges wore expensive brocaded fabrics to signify their wealth, with artistic motifs, such as the curled floral vine, and the dark maroon and gold color schemes seen in textiles from East.\textsuperscript{35} Likewise, Syrian and Egyptian glass painters had already mastered an innovative firing technique to create enameled glassware for centuries when the objects were brought to Venice. In so doing, beginning in the late thirteenth century, Italian artists emulated the Islamic artistic creations and established by Mamluk enameled glass production.\textsuperscript{36} The transmission of Islamic artistic ideas to Italy is also seen in the repetitive diamond-pattern brick façade of Doge’s Palace in Venice. After travelers, ambassadors and consuls were exposed to the architecture of the Mamluks, they brought back their drawings and ideas to their cities in Italy.\textsuperscript{37} Moreover, Southern Italy and Sicily were producing textiles in the early twelfth century that included legible Arabic inscriptions inspired by the \textit{tiraz} textile industry of the Islamic Near East.\textsuperscript{38} There are also

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\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{31} Ettinghausen, “Islamic Art,” 4.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Carboni, \textit{Venice and the Islamic World,} 828-1797, 183.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 186, 189.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 22.
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a few remaining examples of Italian silk textiles with Arabic-inspired pseudo inscriptions from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, as seen on an Italian textile created between 1370-1400 (Fig. 1). This would indicate Italian textile artisans were most likely directly copying and reinterpreting the inscriptions on Islamic textile exports, perhaps in an attempt to recreate the high-quality products that had originally been manufactured by the Islamic East.

The growth of the Islamic textile industry and its integration into the West further illustrates how Islamic artistic ideas impacted Christian Europe. Islamic textiles were known as *tiraz* fabrics. *Tiraz*, the Persian word meaning embroidery, was originally used to describe the bands of ornamental Arabic inscriptions found on fabrics produced for early Muslim rulers. Eventually, the meaning of the word expanded to refer to the entirety of the textiles. These fabrics were then used to create the garments for the Muslim rulers as an indication of their honor and importance. As Islam strongly objected to the illustration of figural imagery because they may lead to idolatry, *tiraz* textiles were often adorned with intricate calligraphy. Oftentimes, these inscriptions referenced the caliphs or officials’ names that established and ran the workshops in which the textiles were created. Officials also presented *tiraz* textiles as diplomatic gifts to visiting or local dignitaries. The names of the rulers along with the honorific inscriptions on the garments symbolized the Caliph’s public recognition of the official as an

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40 Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 54.
41 Ibid.
employee of the regime. Therefore, *tiraz* fabrics adorned with these important inscriptions took on both a religious and political significance. Given that figural imagery was prohibited, the textiles utilized calligraphy as a form of artistic expression, beyond simply delivering a message. The inscriptions became so creative that the aesthetic value of the calligraphy exceeded the significance of the inscription. This script was still considered Arabic calligraphy, despite its overly stylized appearance. However, given its illegibility, the inscription would be viewed as Arabic-inspired pseudo script, or script that appears to have the legitimacy of an authentic alphabet. While the inscription may not have been legible on the *tiraz* textile, the beauty of the fabric design was still more compelling to both Islamic countries as well as Christian Europe. Indeed, *tiraz* textiles, among other Islamic commodities, became a luxury item desired and revered in Europe, particularly in Italian society. Woven with expensive fabrics, the wearing and displaying of Islamic textiles along with the pseudo inscriptions represented the owners’ elite wealth and status.

Islamic calligraphy was used to communicate a variety of different secular and religious expressions. Within Islamic countries, calligraphy was considered a highly developed art form that was closely associated with the religion, specifically as a way of venerating the holy text of the Qu’ran. The versatility and universality of the Arabic alphabet inspired a variety of artful calligraphic styles. For example, the earliest style of calligraphy known as *kufic* calligraphy was the utilized for writing the Qu’ran (Fig.2). Its name is derived from the Iraqi city Kufa where the script was employed in the seventh

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46 Ibid.
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century. The script is characterized by uniform geometric and angular form without any rounded corners. The short vertical strokes and elongated horizontal shape produced a bold and powerful effect suitable for relaying the Lord’s message in the Holy Book.

Over the next 300 years, *kufic* continued to be the primary style of script used to write the Qu’ran and there was little variance in the style during this period.

Simultaneously, cursive styles of script co-existed with the highly regarded *kufic* style. However, while Qu’ranic and religious calligraphy on architecture was in the angular *kufic* style, cursive style was utilized only for secular purposes. Therefore, different styles of calligraphy had very different functions in the Islamic society. By the thirteenth and fourteenth century, the *kufic* was replaced by more cursive and decorative forms of script of writing the Qu’ran, such as the *naskh* style (Fig. 3). Unlike *kufic*, *naskh* calligraphy had more fluidity and irregularity in the shape of the lettering, resulting in a more artistic and expressive inscription. In the fourteenth century onward, other styles such as *thuluth*, a version of *naskh* with similar cursive letters written in a downward slant that is still in use today (Fig. 4).

The angular and geometric style that had been previously used to write the Qu’ran had been replaced with the more elegant cursive script of *thuluth*. Therefore, while the *thuluth* style was reserved for illustrating passages from the Qu’ran, the elegant *nasta’liq* style—known as the “hanging script,” the letters involved in this style appear to be floating given the fluid and flowing

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50 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
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quality—was used for less conservative purposes, like poetry (Fig. 5).\textsuperscript{54} The manner in which Islamic society differentiated the use of script based on the style and appearance of the inscription demonstrates the significance that calligraphy had in the culture. Not only did the calligraphy hold a religious authority, but also had the ability to dictate political importance of the rulers wearing inscribed garments.

As textiles, vases and brassware from Islamic countries such as the Mamluk regime traversed the world and entered the West, Arabic-inspired calligraphy also held a similar significance in Christian Europe. Artists began utilizing pseudo script to show the prominence of the figure wearing the garment. Moreover, given the luxury status of textiles in both the Islamic East and the West, artists may also have included calligraphy and the textile designs in their paintings as a method of portraying the status and importance of the owner.

As textiles continued dispersing throughout Europe, Italian artists began integrating the designs and calligraphy from the carpets and textiles into their paintings for a variety of reasons, as seen in Gentile Bellini’s (1429-1507) The Virgin and Child Enthroned from 1480 in the National Gallery, London. A prolific Venetian painter, Bellini was uniquely informed of the culture and art of the Islamic World (Fig. 6). In 1479, the Venetian Senate sent Bellini to Constantinople to work for Sultan Mehmed II.\textsuperscript{55} At the time that Bellini was visiting the Constantinople, the city had only recently become an Islamic establishment of the Ottoman Empire after the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. Venice was the only city in Europe that regularly received Ottoman dignitaries and visitors, illustrating the unique diplomatic ties between the two regions.

\textsuperscript{55} Campbell and Chong, Bellini in the East, 7.
Chapter 1: Integration of Islamic ideas into European society

Mirroring Venice’s close relationship with the Mediterranean, Bellini integrated many of the artistic designs and ideas found on luxury goods from the Islamic regions into his paintings. In *The Virgin and Child Enthroned*, the Virgin is wrapped in a richly decorated robe with a maroon pattern atop a cloth-of-gold ground.\(^{56}\) Her throne is perched atop a Turkish prayer rug covered in geometric designs.\(^{57}\) The painting’s portrayal of the Virgin dressed in decadent fabrics and surrounded by opulent rugs illustrates Bellini’s efforts to highlight Virgin’s status as a regal Queen and align her with the upper echelons of society. Indeed, serving the same function as Arabic pseudo script, the luxurious rugs and fabrics also function as a designator of a high status for the Virgin and Child. Much in the same way, the ownership of Islamic textiles and rugs also segregated the aristocracy and wealthy individuals in society.

Bellini’s *The Virgin and Child Enthroned* demonstrates Italian artists’ long tradition to incorporate patterns and pseudo script from *tiraz* textiles into devotional paintings as a method of honoring and venerating biblical figures. Duccio di Buoninsegna’s (c.1255-c.1319) earlier work from 1311-18, the *Triptych: the Crucifixion; the Redeemer with Angels; Saint Nicholas; Saint Gregory* represents how artists integrated the pseudo script from textiles into their paintings, specifically on the church vestments (Fig. 7). Flanking either side of the central panel, the Saints wear the traditional vestments of early fourteenth century Church officials. On the left, Saint Nicholas is wearing the traditional Bishop’s miter and a red outer robe under which a second layer of fabric is partially visible adorned with a band of pseudo script (Fig. 8). While only a vignette of the pseudo script is visible on this layer of fabric, the viewer can

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\(^{56}\) Campbell and Chong, *Bellini in the East*, 60.

\(^{57}\) Ibid.
see discernable shapes and lines that are intended to depict characters of a script, most closely the Arabic script. Likewise, on the right side of the central panel, Saint Gregory the Great, who had served as Pope Gregory I from 540 to 604, is dressed in Papal regalia with a ban of pseudo-script, although in a distinctly different style than the script found on Saint Nicholas (Fig. 9). Similarly, in his painting *Saint Francis and a Bishop Saint*, Fra Angelico (1395-1455) also utilizes pseudo script on the hems of the Bishop’s robes, as would be seen on the edges of a *tiraz* textile (Fig. 10). The bold golden embroidery stretches across the hems of his red robe as well as through the center and on the brim of his miter. The script itself uses rounded pseudo-Arabic characters that feature interconnecting characters. The broad bands of calligraphy are connected together by a floral detail at the center. Including pseudo script on these identifiable features of the Church suggests that Arabic script was considered prestigious enough to be included on their religious garb.

In a similar fashion, Barna da Siena’s (active c. 1330-50) *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine* from around 1340 utilizes interpretations of both pseudo script and *tiraz* textile patterns to honor and recognize St. Catherine as well as Christ (Fig. 11). Located in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the narrative painting depicts the mystic marriage between Christ and Saint Catherine of Alexandria and also includes a smaller ancillary image of Saint Anne sitting with the Virgin Mary. The painting celebrates St. Catherine who is venerated for her sacrifice for Christianity.⁵⁸ St. Catherine was martyred in the fourth century after she refused to worship the Romans’ false gods and instead tried to convert others to Christianity. In an act of defiance to the Romans, she refused to marry

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any suitors because of her sacred relationship with Christ, whom she considered “[her] God, [her] lover, [her] shepherd and [her] one and only spouse.” In response, the Roman governor in Alexandria executed her by beheading, after a miraculously thwarted attempt to kill her with a spiked wheel failed. In Italy during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the veneration and celebration of the cult of St. Catherine of Alexandria was transferred to St. Catherine of Siena, a woman from the Dominican order who also entered into a mystic marriage with Christ. Siena’s close allegiance to St. Catherine would explain Barna’s particular interest in representing this episode.

St. Catherine wears a tunic underneath her maroon covering with a pattern similar to the tiraz textiles manufactured by the Mamluk regime through the fourteenth century (Fig. 12). In the pattern there is a red floral design imposed onto a white background with flecks of golden color creating an intricate pattern. The pattern and the deep colors are similar to a fragment of a satin textile created in Islamic Persia from the thirteenth century (Fig. 13). This fragment contains repetitive animal motifs with pine trees surrounded by a floral background. Though the flowers in the Persian textile are a different shape than those seen in Barna’s painting, the two patterns share the characteristic of the flowers placed close together in varying positions to create symmetry and balance in the design. Further, the repetitive black and red, checkered border following the frame of Barna’s painting is an Islamic motif often seen on the edges of luxury rugs. Given the limited availability of surviving carpets from prior to the thirteenth century.

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century, the development of the Islamic carpet industry can only be chronicled from the thirteenth century onward. Areas such as Egypt and Syria in the Mamluk regime and Anatolia as part of the Ottoman Empire produced rugs throughout this late Medieval time, and during the time Barna painted *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*. Indeed, the frame design can be seen in a fourteenth century carpet from Islamic Turkey housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 14). As seen in Barna’s painting, the geometric square design repeats around an inner pattern. This type of intricate detailing that was most likely inspired by Islamic exports further illustrates how Italian society came to be informed by Islamic culture.

Arabic pseudo-script also appears on the hems of Christ and St. Catherine’s cloaks. The band of script has two lines bordering the top and bottom of the hem. Similar to the *thuluth style*, several letters transition into the following character through an adjoining line that intersects across the character. The linked letters create fluidity in the script that is further emphasized by the slight rightward slant of the characters (Fig. 15). Despite the attempts at creating an authentic script, the inscription appears to be illegible. However, the illegibility of the script may act to further create an ethereal mysticism around the Arabic calligraphy. As previously mentioned, Europeans often mistakenly correlated Arabic with the Early Christian period in Jerusalem because they believed Arabic was the vernacular language during the time of Christ. Therefore, Italian artists often included pseudo script as a method of situating the painting in the early Christian era during the time of Christ. The illegibility of the script along with the inclusion of the Islamic textile motifs could further serve to connect the painting to Jerusalem’s “sacred

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63 Ibid., 65.
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Therefore, the pseudo-script would understandably be found on the hems of Christ and St. Catherine of Alexandria’s garments, the most prominent figures in the painting. Her devotion to Christianity coincides with the use of pseudo script to exemplify the subject matter’s connection to the region of the Holy Land. More specifically, as St. Catherine was from Alexandria, by wearing a textile whose patterning and inscriptions reproduce the very kind of garments imported from that region, or inspired by it, the inclusion of the textile design enhances the authenticity of the image.

An even more prominent use of pseudo script on the clothing of biblical figures is seen in Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) on the long tresses of the Lord’s vestments in his Coronation of the Virgin altarpiece from 1447 created for the church of Sant’Ambrogio (Fig. 16). The painting itself depicts both a diverse assemblage of several biblical figures, such as Saint John the Baptist and Saint Ambrose, dressed in contemporary fifteenth century Florentine garb. The Virgin kneels on a raised platform with her hands clasped in respect as the Lord crowns her. Angels on either side of the Lord dressed in white vestments hold the stole, or the bands stemming from his ultramarine robes, as they cascade and unravel in long streams covered in pseudo script. Moreover, pseudo script lines the edges of the Mary’s robe. Along with the Virgin, pseudo script also appears along the garment hems and necklines of several of the nearly 60 figures in the painting, another indication that contemporary fifteenth century Florentine clothing may have included Islamic calligraphy. Even more telling, the illustration of pseudo script adorned church vestments may demonstrate that calligraphy also appeared on real church

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vestments utilized during liturgical services. This conspicuous and prominent use of pseudo script on the garments of biblical figures, including the Lord, would indicate Lippi deliberately drawing the audience’s eyes to the calligraphy. Although illegible, the script appears to be rendered in an aesthetically pleasing manner that also shows off Lippi’s talented artistic techniques.

The prestigious nature and popularity of the textiles in the West is also demonstrated in the integration of the pseudo script into secular Italian paintings. As seen in Raphael’s *A Portrait of Elisabetta Gonzaga, Duchess of Urbino* from around 1505, the Duchess appears to be wearing a real contemporary Florentine dress with Arabic pseudo script embroidered in gold thread around the neckline of her dress (Fig. 17). Raphael’s depiction of pseudo script on the clothing of a lay individual rather than a biblical figure implies that the dress portrayed in the painting was an actual garment owned by the Duchess. The portrait clearly depicts a woman from a wealthy aristocratic family, given her expensive contemporary dress and golden chain necklace. Indeed, Elisabetta was part of the renowned noble Gonzaga family, who had financial as well as political success in the Northern Italian city-states through the Renaissance.67 Her brother Francesco Gonzaga owned a number of aforementioned Turkish rugs, illustrating the family’s elite status in society.68 The use of script on her luxurious garment further emphasizes the Duchess and, consequently, the Gonzaga family’s position in the community as a wealthy noble family.

As demonstrated by Lippi’s *Coronation of the Virgin*, given the significance of calligraphy in Islam, the inclusion of Islamic pseudo script and calligraphy in paintings

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68 Ibid.
from Christian Europe may have had a deeper significance than merely serving as a decorative feature (Fig. 16). Indeed, calligraphy on the garments of biblical figures may have been used in a similar fashion as by the Islamic countries; to emphasize the elevated and honored status of certain figures, in this case the Italian clergy as well as biblical figures. Artists may have integrated designs from carpets, brassware or textiles into their paintings to symbolize prestige and bestow honor on the patrons.\(^69\) In so doing, the artist would have also been recognizing the wealth of the patron and owner of the painting who would have displayed the painting. Therefore, pseudo script would only have been utilized if the artist believed the audience and viewers of the painting would have been able to recognize the fabrics and designs included in the painting were derived from the Mediterranean East. In identifying the textiles or carpets were of Eastern provenance, the pseudo script may also have added further biblical authenticity to the painting.\(^70\) It is not certain how the audience would have perceived the pseudo script and whether they would have seen the inscription as having a larger significance in the context of the painting. By seeing the script on the hems of priests viewers may have interpreted the use of the inscription as a method of situating the scene in the East and bestowing some biblical authority to the image, as seen on the pseudo script included on the garments of St. Catherine of Alexandria and Christ in Barna’s painting.\(^71\) Perhaps given the prominence and frequent use of Arabic pseudo inscriptions in Italian paintings, Italians artists wanted to utilize calligraphy’s connection to luxury and the East to enhance the meaning of their works.

\(^{70}\) Ibid.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., 30.
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The Madonna and Child imagery is one of the dominant themes in Christian Art as a symbolic manifestation of the faith, devotion and humanity of Christ. Adorning and ornamenting the walls of churches as well as private homes, the importance of the Madonna and Child iconography permeates cultural and societal boundaries. As one of the most common and recurrent subject matter in Christian art, the development and history of the Madonna and Child iconography and its relationship to pseudo script warrants closer inspection. The most recognizable image of the Virgin Mary holding the child can be traced back to the early Byzantine Empire beginning in the 700s with the creation of the miraculous icons. These objects claimed their venerated status in the East and then later in the Western world as an authentic connection to the Holy Land in part by replicating a true likeness of the Virgin and Child. Believed to carry mystical powers to grant miracles, the most hallowed icons circulated through the Byzantine Empire into Italy, to be emulated and replicated by Western artists. The holy paintings of the Madonna and Child produced by Western artists following the dispersion of the Byzantine icons reflected an attempt to recreate the proclaimed divine properties of the Eastern icons and their alleged authenticity as portraits. The Madonna and Child paintings with pseudo script to be mentioned later are the results of this attempt to duplicate the honor and prestige of an icon. Given the Italian audience’s misunderstanding of Arabic as a contemporary language of the Holy Land during the time of Christ, the pseudo script would have generated a connection to the geographical origins of the holy figures and situate the painting in the early Christian era for the Italian worshipper.¹

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Pseudo script also relates to the most distinguished purpose of the Madonna and Child imagery: to affirm the incarnation of Christ. As Christ was conceived when the Word became flesh, artists’ inclusion of the pseudo script in these paintings illustrates the unique role played by language in Christ’s incarnation. The mysterious and seemingly divine script may correlate to the moment Gabriel announced Mary would carry the Lord’s son and was, consequently, miraculously impregnated by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, through the utilization of pseudo script, Italian artists may have believed they could produce an object of veneration similar to the miraculous Byzantine icons due to the script’s perceived authentic provenance in the Holy Land and correlation to the divine Word.

The image of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child in various positions has developed throughout the centuries, changing with the society and the time period in which the images were constructed. However, there were also common threads linking the different imagery together and creating a timeline for the development of the Madonna and Child iconography.

A frescoed archway in Rome’s Catacomb of Pricilla dating from the late second to early third century is considered by many scholars to be among the first representations of the Virgin Mary with the Christ child.2 In the fresco, the woman is looking at her child while another man points to the stars. However, perhaps one of the most venerated and influential images relevant to the history of the Madonna and Child imagery is the Byzantine icon Theotokos Hodegetria, Greek for “mother of God who leads the way.” Similar the Roman fresco, the Hodegetria depicts a solemn and somber Virgin Mary.

pointing to the Christ child suggesting that her son is “The Way.”

As celebrated and worshipped icons in the Eastern Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire, these painted portraits of the Virgin and Christ were considered to have divine significance based on the belief that they had some divine origin and could perform miraculous favors for the devout. Indeed, some worshippers believed the icons were induced with aspects of divine power. Emperor Heraclius of the Byzantine Empire attributed his ability to overthrow his predecessor and claim the throne in 610 to the Marian icon he had brought to Constantinople.

Moreover, the Eastern Christian community believed some icons were spontaneously created without human hands in Christ’s likeness through a divine miracle or physical contact with Christ. Known as acheiropoieta, “images not made by hands,” these objects received their names because worshippers believed they were not created by a human manufacture. Rather, these images came into existence miraculously through physical contact with the person whose appearance it was reproducing or through some other form of divine intervention. Among the most notable examples of this phenomenon date back to the sixth century with the Mandylion, a miraculous cloth displaying a portrait of Christ that was credited for saving the Syrian city of Edessa from the Persians. Like other acheiropoietic images, the divine appearance of Christ’s face on

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5 Ibid., 62.
6 Ibid., 53.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
the cloth was seen as proof of his incarnation. Indeed, the act of the Christ touching the cloth and, consequently, the cloth miraculously taking on the memory of his visage allowed the cloth to be viewed as a divine relic. As a result of their divine origins, these acheiropoietic images were treated like religious relics for veneration and justified the use of Christian cult images, such as the Madonna and Child archetypal model. As such, these Byzantine icons became relics connoting a physical as well as a spiritual connection to Christ.

To authenticate the Hodegetria as an icon deserving of an elevated divine status, many alleged that St. Luke the Evangelist painted the portrait of the Virgin and the Christ child. Similar to the acheiropoietic images of Christ, St. Luke was believed to have created the Hodegetria having personally witnessed the apparition of the Virgin and Christ child, increasing worshippers’ veneration of the image. Through this interaction, St. Luke would have transferred the Virgin and Christ’s miraculous powers to the portrait. The legendary image served as an authentic avenue to connect worshippers more intimately with the Virgin and Child while also becoming the notional prototype for other artists to copy. Pope Innocent III came forward in the twelfth century and acknowledged the venerated status of the Hodegetria as having been created by St. Luke. Due to the ostensible authenticity of the image, the Hodegetria would eventually become a model to be emulated by artists following its dissemination throughout the Byzantine Empire.

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10 Ibid., 49.
11 Ibid., 57.
12 Ibid., 53.
13 Ibid., 77.
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As the composition of the *Hodegetria* permeated the Byzantine Empire, the imagery also influenced Western renderings of Madonna and Child iconography during the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. The development of the Madonna and Child imagery continued evolving as the ideas immigrated to Italy. Perhaps most evidently, this transfer of ideas can be seen through Venice’s close relations with the Byzantine Empire. Through its support of the Fourth Crusade in 1204, Venice was intimately involved in the siege of Constantinople.\(^{14}\) Venice’s interests in Constantinople was motivated by the desire of shoring Venice’s financial relations with regions in the Mediterranean. It was during this period of Venice’s relationship with the Byzantine Empire that the Italian city’s artists began integrating the Empire’s Islamic influences into their own art and architecture.\(^{15}\) Simultaneously, the Byzantine Madonna and Child icons were also entering into the West. During the siege of Constantinople in 1204, the *Nicopeia* icon of the Virgin Mary was taken from the chariot of a Byzantine general and brought back to Venice. The icon began to be associated with the spirit of sovereignty and victory for Europe personified by the sacking of Constantinople.\(^{16}\) Indeed, the siege of 1204 brought an influx of Byzantine icons into Europe, specifically France, Germany and Italy, and started to change the West’s outlook toward icon veneration.\(^{17}\)

Initially, the Western Church believed that the adoration of relics, as in the Byzantine Church, would encourage idolatry.\(^{18}\) Indeed, until around the ninth century, the crucifix was tolerated as an object of devotion in Western Europe while the veneration of

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., 32.


images, like the Byzantine Marian icons, was still forbidden. However, these views started to shift following the integration of Byzantine icons into Western countries between the ninth and twelfth centuries. Europeans found that these icons compensated for the lack of biblical shrines in some of their countries. As such, Western Europeans utilized Byzantine icons in much the way worshippers in Constantinople did, as seen in records that indicated the icons were involved in processions and rituals as early as the twelfth century in Italy. Similar to Byzantine worshippers, the icon images forged an authentic connection to the Holy Land and functioned as a sacred relic bringing the worshipper closer to the Virgin and Christ. These icon images represented a religious experience and reinforced the reality of the Virgin and Christ living in the Holy Land in the early Christian era. Among these revered icons in the West was the Salus Populi Romani, one of the acheiropoietic images miraculously created by St. Luke. Housed in the Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica in Rome beginning in the thirteenth century, Salus Populi Romani was considered one of the most important Roman Marian icons in the West. While there have been a number of proposed dates for the icon stretching from the fifth to the thirteenth century, the icon is generally considered an example of an earlier Roman icon from the late sixth and early seventh century given the positioning of the Virgin and the green coloring of the painting indicating early Medieval restoration

20 Ibid. 
21 Nagel and Wood, Anachronic Renaissance, 73. 
22 Ibid. 
24 Ibid., 68. 
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attempts\textsuperscript{26} Painted on cypress wood, the \textit{Salus Populi Romani} depicts the Virgin staring intently out of the portrait while the Christ child looks at his mother.\textsuperscript{27} The power of the Virgin’s gaze and the manner in which she folds her hands distinguishes the portrait from the other icons, and may have further contributed to its status as a revered object.\textsuperscript{28} Indeed, the \textit{Salus Populi Romani} icon was involved in religious processions throughout Rome and neighboring cities through the late Middle Ages and Renaissance before the processions were banned by the Church in 1566.\textsuperscript{29}

Byzantine icons were both well received by the Italian worshippers and emulated by Western artists. The Italian community venerated the portrait icons due to the significance of the images’ Eastern provenance and purported authenticity as images of divine personages.\textsuperscript{30} Although the exact date and provenance of the creation of the icons was unknown, European worshippers subscribed to the authentic relic status of the Byzantine icons.\textsuperscript{31} Worshippers believed these icons hailing from Byzantium bore alleged authenticity both in the miraculous origin of the prototypes and their association with the Holy Land.\textsuperscript{32} As the Byzantine icons were believed to have a mystical and miraculous connection to Christ and the Virgin, artists wanted to align their work to the divine status of the icons. Following the transference of the Eastern icons to the West, artists began utilizing the half-length Madonna and Child portrait format that was previously foreign to the Western painting tradition.\textsuperscript{33} For example, the Eastern icons

\textsuperscript{26} Vassilaki, \textit{Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium}, 32-33.
\textsuperscript{27} Belting, \textit{Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art}, 70.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 71.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 332.
\textsuperscript{31} Nagel and Wood, \textit{Anachronic Renaissance}, 72.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
influenced Duccio, the foremost Sienese late Medieval painter, to incorporate the stylistic elements of Byzantine art into his painting *Madonna di Crevoле* from 1280, specifically the golden hatching marks or chrysography that emphasize the folds of the garment (Fig. 18). Duccio’s contemporaries Cimabue and Guido da Siena were similarly influenced by the Byzantine style of art, as seen in the *Maestà* from 1280-85 and *Adoration of the Magi* from the 1270s, respectively. The golden striations on the Virgin’s robe and non-naturalistically elongated body forms of the Christ child and Mary are characteristic of the late Byzantine style of art. Moreover, Duccio imitated the maternal features of the Madonna in the *Eleousa* archetypal image or the Compassionate Virgin that was a popular Byzantine composition around 1100. Moving away from the detached and stoic features of the *Hodegetria*, in the Compassionate Virgin, the Madonna gently rests her face touching the Christ child’s cheek. Likewise, as seen in *Madonna di Crevołe*, Duccio also begins painting a more humanized, playful Christ child that grasps and pulls at his mother’s veil. By the beginning of the thirteenth century, artists transitioned into utilizing the *Panagia Nikopia* icon, meaning, “All-Holy bringer of Victory.” Similar to the *Eleousa*, in the *Panagia Nikopia* icon, the Madonna’s face further softens and she undertakes a more maternal role with her son as she holds the Christ child on her lap. As the Byzantine icon spreads throughout the West, the Madonna and Child iconography continued developing and advancing.

The evolution of the Madonna and Child imagery is due in part to the cultural changes in the church and the corresponding changes to Marian iconography. To fully understand the development of the Madonna and Child imagery, a closer examination of

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34 Ibid.
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Mary’s significance in the Christian faith is necessary. The Virgin is very rarely mentioned in the four canonical Gospels.\(^{36}\) While she is briefly discussed in the Gospel of Mark, the majority of our knowledge of the Virgin Mary is concentrated in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, in which she makes the most notable appearances.\(^{37}\) In its opening, the Gospel of Matthew nonchalantly mentions, “Mary was found with child by the Holy Ghost.”\(^{38}\) The Gospel then turns to discuss her husband Joseph’s questions about her virtue and purity.\(^{39}\) While Mary is understood to be a figure in the sequence of events unfolding as Christ is born in Bethlehem and the family flees to Egypt, Matthew does not portray her as centrally involved in the drama. Moreover, the Gospels of Mark and John simply start with the adult Jesus, with only brief mentions of his birth and childhood. In contrast, the Gospel of Luke discusses the events that have been favored subjects in painting, including the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity and the Presentation of Christ in the Temple.\(^{40}\) While in Matthew’s Gospel, the Annunciation scene is depicted as the angel appearing to Joseph in a dream, Luke alters the story as the angel appearing to Mary, as is most often represented by artists.\(^{41}\) On the whole, together the Gospels present information about Mary almost exclusively in connection to the infancy of Christ.

The Gospels’ differing and limited accounts of Mary illustrate the evolving role of the Virgin in the religion. In the New Testament, her life is discussed solely in relation to Christ and little is known of her early life prior to Christ’s miraculous birth. However, the apocryphal Book of James and other non-canonical sources detail Mary’s origins and

\(^{36}\) Katz, Divine Mirrors: The Virgin Mary in the Visual Arts, 20.
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{39}\) Matthew:1:18.
\(^{40}\) Warner, Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary, 7.
\(^{41}\) Katz, Divine Mirrors: The Virgin Mary in the Visual Arts, 21.
background. In one particular story, the book describes Mary’s father Joachim and mother Anna and their barrenness, considered a sign of the Lord’s displeasure.\footnote{Warner, \textit{Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary}, 26.} As a result, Joachim flees to the desert to complete forty days of penance, while Anna is left at home distraught over her childlessness and the loss of her husband. In their distress, an angel appears individually to both Anna and Joachim and promises them a child.\footnote{Ibid.} In this book, not only is Mary’s own miraculous birth foreshadowing the eventual birth of Christ, but it also more strongly emphasizes Mary’s chosen status. While many of the stories such as that of Anna and Joachim were included in Jacobus de Voragine’s \textit{Golden Legend}, the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century disallowed the visual representation of the stories.\footnote{Ibid., 30.} Although Christians almost universally do not consider the apocryphal gospels as part of the Bible, many Catholics continue to incorporate some of the stories into their religious traditions.

These differences between how Christians value the stories in the Apocryphal books coincide with their differences of opinion regarding the Virgin Mary’s role in the faith, and likewise, influenced the evolution of the Madonna and Child artistic representations. While the Christ child remained perpetually significant to Christian worshippers, the Virgin Mary’s importance and role was more controversial, particularly along these different Christian sects. At the time of the Reformation several of the founded Protestant sects were iconoclastic and objected to figural imagery of the biblical figures, and this aversion extended to the images depicting the Madonna and her child.\footnote{Timothy Verdon, Filippo Rossi, \textit{Mary in Western Art} (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 2005), 24.}
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Along with the influence of the different sects on the representations of the Virgin, the changing perception of the Virgin Mary within the church and society also affected the Madonna and Child iconography. As previously discussed, the Theotokos Hodegetria originally represented the Madonna as a solemn figure that was somewhat detached from her role of a mother. In the earlier centuries, the Madonna was considered primarily the Virgin Queen and God-bearer separated from her responsibility as a mother and a woman. Moreover, although the duty of raising children was vital to the Christian society, motherhood itself was not particularly revered among some families in the Christian community.\(^\text{46}\) This attitude is reflected in the Madonna and Child representations such as the Theotokos Hodegetria from the Byzantine Empire, in which Mary is depicted in her role as a stoic and somber queen, anticipating her eventual grief of losing her son. However, the church began to slowly refocus their attention and consider the Holy family as an exemplar of domesticity. This included recognizing the importance and sanctity of marriage through its inclusion as a sacrament.\(^\text{47}\) Consequently, while Mary was already considered the ideal woman, her marriage with Joseph was also considered to be the ideal union. The church began creating handbooks for raising children and building the consummate marriage.\(^\text{48}\) As a result, beginning in the Middle Ages, Mary underwent a similar transformation in the Madonna and Child paintings. These later paintings depict a nurturing and attentive Mary as well as a more naturalistically rendered Christ child. While in the earlier eighth through twelfth centuries, Eastern icons served as method of affirming Christ’s divine status, in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance, the child-like human qualities of Christ and the Virgin

\(^\text{46}\) Katz, *Divine Mirrors: The Virgin Mary in the Visual Arts*, 64.
\(^\text{47}\) Ibid., 63.
\(^\text{48}\) Ibid., 64.
Mary were emphasized. Likewise, although the significance of Mary has changed through time, her divinity appears to be perpetually derived from her position as the epitomical mother, specifically the Mother of God. Rather, the worshippers viewed Christ’s humanity as miraculous and this shift is represented in the iconography.\(^{49}\)

This transformation into a gentle and caring mother in art reflects the iconographic significance of Madonna and Child paintings in showcasing both Christ’s divinity and his humanity. The Eastern icon of the Virgin and Christ child was viewed as the authentication of God’s incarnation.\(^{50}\) Depictions of the Madonna holding and caring for the infant Christ evoke his human characteristics through the maternal bond between a mother and her child. These images communicate the doctrine of the hypostatic union in which the Word of God and the salvation of humankind were jointly conceived.\(^{51}\) As seen with the Madonna and Child paintings, through time, the Christian icons and imagery have developed the ability to relay Christ’s divinity as well as his humanity. Likewise, the Madonna and Child iconography is a vessel to carry the message of the hypostatic union to devoted worshippers.

The Gospel of John also that states, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”\(^{52}\) As Christ’s physicality was conceived through the Word of God comingling with the flesh of the Virgin’s womb, language and writing have a unique significance in denoting Christ’s incarnation. Therefore, the addition of Islamic calligraphy in various places in Madonna and Child paintings presents a method of conveying honor onto the Virgin Mary and Christ child, and expressing the latter’s

\(^{50}\) Ibid.  
\(^{51}\) Katz, *Divine Mirrors*, 55.  
\(^{52}\) John:1:14.
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conceptual genesis in the Word of God. As discussed, the original Byzantine icons depicting the Virgin and Child were believed to have a miraculous power and authenticity as veritable portraits that Western artists such as Duccio attempted to emulate into their own work. Similar to the Eastern icons, part of the mystique of Islamic calligraphy stems from its inaccurately purported origins as a written language prevalent in the Holy Land during Christ’s lifetime. As such, it may have served as a means to express the notion of the divine Word in an aptly mystical and historical way. By incorporating pseudo script into the Madonna and Child paintings, artists used the illegible text to denote the presence of the Word of God in Christ’s human, incarnate state.

The inscriptions found in Barnaba da Modena’s *Virgin and Child* (1360s) and Simone Martini’s *Virgin and Child* (1325) both demonstrate how pseudo script was utilized on biblical figures as symbols of veneration and reverence. While painted in the 1360s, Barnaba da Modena’s (active 1300s) *Virgin and Child* is also reminiscent of the Italo-Byzantine artistic style of a century earlier, characterized by bold golden accent lines, elongated features and a non-naturalistic rendering of the subject matter (Fig. 19). The *Enthroned Madonna and Child* from the thirteenth century in the National Gallery in Washington similarly demonstrates the elements of Byzantine art, particularly the stoic rendering of the Virgin Mary and the chrysographic striations that create the appearance of dimension in the fabric (Fig. 20). Like the *Enthroned Madonna and Child*, Barnaba’s painting also includes thicker striations to indicate the larger folds of the garment. However, unlike the painting in the National Gallery, the striations that Barnaba uses are

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lined with gold foil to further exaggerate the luxurious nature of the painting. Similar to Duccio’s *Madonna di Crevole*, Barnaba may also have been influenced by the Eastern Byzantine icons. The Virgin pensively captures the viewer with her solemn gaze while the Christ child interacts tenderly with his mother. Given that the painting was created toward the end of the fourteenth century, the connection to earlier Byzantine art is not coincidental. Rather, by incorporating the characteristic Byzantine features into the painting, the painting may have been alluding to the Eastern icons and recognizing the venerated status of the Virgin and Christ child.

As seen in the Byzantine icon paintings of the Madonna and child, the Virgin holds the Christ child while wearing a blue garment accented by golden lines in Barnaba’s painting. The mantle is lined with a bright green color visible through her translucent veil. Traditionally, the deep blue mantle is embroidered with a golden star on her forehead and right shoulder, signifying the Virgin’s elevated status as the “star of the sea.” The symbolism of the star refers to the Virgin as a guiding light to worshippers. Underneath the mantle, the Virgin wears a charcoal grey tunic embroidered with faded golden ornamentation. She places her hand gently on the Christ child where viewers can see her fingers are unnaturally lengthened. Dressed in a yellow tunic and wrapped in a red fabric with gold ornamentation around his waist, the Christ child places his right arm over his mother’s mantle as he gazes up the Virgin. Against the background, two gilt haloes hover over the heads of the Virgin and Christ child.

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55 Ibid.
In addition to the ornamental golden accents on her mantle, pseudo script appears on the hems of the Virgin’s garments. As the painting utilizes the heavy and rigid lines of the Byzantine style, the script draws similar inspiration. Placed within the sweeping gold folds of the ultramarine blue fabric, the bans of script are framed by a row of rounded points and two more parallel lines. The characters have a geometric design with sharp, angled corners. These corners then enable the letters to fit together similar to an interlocking design (Fig. 21). For several letters, the artist has painted the characters in such a way that their unique shape corresponds to the shape of the proximate letter. As such, this specific style does not have connecting or adjoining letters. Rather, in some cases, two or three letters fit together creating complementary sets of characters. Unlike traditional Islamic calligraphy, these characters do not intersect or transition into the next letter. Rather, they are each independently formed.

This script resembles most closely to the older *kufic* style, given the bold and angular nature of the lines. The inscription is similar to the style of calligraphy found on a metal bowl from Egypt from the fifteenth century during the Mamluk period (Fig. 22). Six medallions on the sides of the bowl separate sections of authentic Islamic inscriptions set against an ornamental floral design. In the small space, the bolder lines of the inscriptions cause the letters to crowd together. Consequently, the small hooks at the ends of the characters fit into the spaces of the other characters creating an interlocking design, as seen with Barnaba’s painting.

The pseudo script in Simone Martini’s (1284-1344) *Virgin and Child* is also characterized by a similar interlocking design. Martini first arrived in Siena in 1315 and

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painted one of his most impressive works, the *Maestà* in the Palazzo Pubblico (Fig. 23). Among the many features of his work, Martini invented the punch design that allowed artists to repeat the same design or pattern without having to do so manually.\(^{57}\) Therefore, Martini’s works had a unique illusionistic effect that was new and different for the time. The effect of the punch design is visible in *Virgin and Child*. Holding the Christ child, Martini’s Madonna wears a dark navy robe highlighted by golden pseudo script on the hem. Under the mantle, the Virgin dons a white wimple, emphasizing her purity. Beneath the ultramarine robe, the Virgin wears a deep maroon tunic. Pulling his rose-colored ornamented cloth, the Christ child is wrapped in a light blue toga, affixed around his right shoulder. With his other hand, he grasps the Virgin’s thumb as she holds her arms around the Child to support him. Underneath his blue and rose-colored robes, the Christ child wears a translucent white tunic, symbolizing the shroud that would eventually wrap his body following the crucifixion. At the bottom of painting, there are small arches containing five figures, including a female saint holding a cross, Saint Paul, Saint Dominic, another male saint and a nun shown in profile, kneeling. In a frame around the painting, the viewer can see a repeated punch floral design. A similar ornamentation forms the haloes over the Virgin Mary and Christ child’s heads.

As with other paintings depicting the Virgin and Child, such as Barnaba da Modena’s *Virgin and Child*, Giotto’s *Madonna and Child* from 1320-1330 (Fig. 24) and Duccio’s *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels* from 1285 (Fig. 25), Martini’s pseudo inscription appears at the hem of the Virgin’s blue robe. Similar to the inscriptions found in Barnaba’s painting, Martini’s pseudo script is loosely related to the Islamic *kufic* style due to the geometric design of the characters (Fig. 26). Martini’s pseudo inscription is a notable feature in his work, adding an element of novelty and innovation to the traditional representation of the Virgin and Child in religious art.

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*Virgin and Child* follows suit with a golden embroidered inscription framed between two parallel lines running the length of the hem. Like the script in Barnaba’s painting, Martini also creates characters with angular lines that fit into each other. The viewer can discern that these shapes are made to replicate some type of linguistic character and not merely ornamentation because there is an apparent attempt to create variation in the pattern as would be seen in written script. While some characters look similarly geometric, Martini makes an effort to avoid overt identical repetition of shapes.

The inclusion of the pseudo script on the Madonna’s mantle in Barnaba and Martini’s paintings emphasizes the importance and status of the Virgin and Christ child. Islamic *tiraz* textiles and the corresponding inscriptions were signifiers of prominence and luxury in Muslim society. The inscriptions included on *tiraz* textiles were often exultations celebrating a certain leader or ruler that owned the workshop where the textile was produced. Therefore, not only did the inscription recognize the authority of the ruler, but it also emphasized his ability to own and operate the facility that created the textile. This calligraphy also appeared on the actual garments worn by the individual mentioned in the inscription and were meant to “[enhance] the prestige of the robe of honor.”

The bands of inscriptions found on *tiraz* garments are also similar to the symbolic Roman “clavus,” the bands of purple on robes that represented senatorial power and rank. European society considered inscribed *tiraz* textiles elite commodities due to their exotic and unique designs. The rarity of the materials, the technique and the decoration of the textiles enhanced the “stylishness of [the] imports among the rich and

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58 Nagel, “Twenty-five notes on pseudoscript in Italian art,” 239.
60 Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 56.
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powerful.” As such, the textiles in both Muslim and Italian culture honored the wearer of the garment as well as recognized his high position in society. While Italian artists were copying and reinterpreting Arabic script from *tiraz* textiles, there are many cases in which artists rendered accurate and legible transcriptions, either in error or through directly copying an authentic inscription. Pisanello creates an accurate transcription of Arabic calligraphy on a drawing from 1438-9 of the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Palaiologos’ garments and regalia. After Pope Eugenius IV invited the Emperor to attend a council convened in Italy in the hopes of a union between the Greek and Latin churches, Pisanello was commissioned to create a work to commemorate the Emperor’s historic visit. Pisanello imagines the Emperor’s clothing and visage from a number of perspectives. Along with his careful notes on the Emperor’s garments, Pisanello also prominently reproduces an accurate Arabic inscription used on a garment worn by the Emperor (Fig. 27). In addition to discussing the union of the two churches, the council was also in part assembled to discuss possibilities to stop the advancement of the Ottomans. Indeed, the Emperor strongly supported the destabilization of the Islamic Ottoman Empire to protect his own empire. Despite Christian Europe’s adversarial political dealings with the Islamic world, the two regions’ profitable trade relationship was important above all else. Indeed, European appreciation of Islamic commodities is evidenced by the inclusion of an Arabic inscription even on the official garb of the Byzantine emperor, whose regime was threatened by a Muslim rival, only further

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65 Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 60.
expresses the script’s reputation as a designator of status. While Pisanello chose to render an authentic and almost accurate Arabic transcription and other artists chose to create their own pseudo script, Italians’ choice to include any variation of the calligraphy in their artwork and on their garments illustrates the prominence it carried in Italian society.

Arabic calligraphy was understood in Muslim society to embody “divine power and absolute political authority,” stemming from the close relationship between calligraphy and Islam.\(^67\) In addition to utilizing inscriptions on the garments of Islamic rulers, \textit{tiraz} textiles were also used as coverings on the Ka’bah, the shrine in Mecca considered the holiest site in Islam.\(^68\) These coverings were caliphal offerings and it was important for the inscription on the textile to include the name of the ruler to recognize his piety and generosity. Moreover, as previously mentioned, calligraphy is an integral part and the identifiable feature of the Islamic religion, as its various forms are used to transcribe the Qur’an. Therefore, the inscriptions found on \textit{tiraz} textiles were intertwined with a religious as well as a political significance.

By incorporating Islamic inscriptions into paintings of the Madonna and Child, Martini and Barnaba were transferring the lavishness and prestige associated with the expensive \textit{tiraz} textiles to the Virgin Mary and Christ to recognize their elevated and divine status. As the textiles and the inscriptions reflected a high taste and culture, their inclusion in the paintings glorified the Madonna and Child.\(^69\) Given that \textit{tiraz} fabrics were often used as garments for Islamic rulers and state officials, the inclusion of the pseudo script on the Virgin Mary’s robe and tunic may further exemplify her regal


\(^{68}\) Stillman, \textit{Arab Dress: A Short History: From the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times}, 126.

\(^{69}\) Mack, \textit{Bazaar to Piazza}, 56.
position as the Queen of Heaven. The script also acknowledges the Virgin’s spiritual superiority through the lavish portrayal of her garments. As already noted, Madonna and Child paintings often depict the Virgin wearing a dark blue mantle with golden ornamentation. Given the effort and time required to manufacture the color, blue was among the most expensive colors artists could purchase and use. \(^70\) Likewise, the backgrounds of the paintings are also adorned with gold leaf and punch designs that serve to emphasize the luxury and extravagance of the work. Similar to the inscriptions, these measures underline the Madonna’s position and the regal Queen of Heaven and Christ as the reigning King of the Christian faith.

While the composition of Ugolino di Nerio’s \textit{Virgin and Child} (1325-30) is the same as traditional images of the Madonna and Child, the painting diverges from how the paintings of Barnaba and Martini employ pseudo script (Fig. 28). Ugolino’s earliest paintings date to 1315, although he was primarily active in the 1330s. \(^71\) As one of Duccio’s pupils, his influence and characteristic style can be seen in Ugolino’s paintings, such as the \textit{Virgin and Child}. \(^72\) In this painting, the pseudo script appears on a simple cream-colored inner veil, rather than a sumptuously embroidered blue mantle. Two parallel lines frame the inscriptions above and below the bands. The composition of the painting is nearly identical to Ugolino’s \textit{Madonna and Child} from 1325 housed in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in which the Virgin is also seen wearing a plain white cloth embellished with pseudo script (Fig. 29). \(^73\) The white wimple is closely held to the

\[^{71}\text{George Knox and James Byam Shaw, \textit{The Robert Lehman Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art} (New York: The Metropolitan Museum, 1986), 8.}\]
\[^{73}\text{Knox, \textit{The Robert Lehman Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art}, 8.}\]
Virgin’s face signifying her humility and purity, while the blue mantle provides a field for the artist to decorate luxuriously. Although the inscriptions on the mantle are oftentimes painted with gold foil, as seen with Martini and Barnaba’s paintings, the inscriptions in Ugolino’s paintings are in simple dark ink. While these previously mentioned paintings used script to focus on the opulent nature of the Virgin’s garments to emphasize her regality and superiority, Ugolino appears to place the pseudo script on the Virgin’s humble inner veil to highlight her humility. In so doing, Ugolino consciously diverges from the traditional model of the Madonna and Child paintings, as illustrated by Martini and Barnaba’s works. Moreover, on the mantle, ornamentation of a small square flanked by two white arrows repeats in a pattern around the hem. The inside of the blue fabric is a dark, maroon color. The Christ child looks up at the Virgin as he pulls at her wimple and unravels the veil, emphasizing Ugolino’s humanistic rendering of the bond between Mary and the Christ child. As the Virgin gently supports his body with her left arm, the Christ child is adorned with a translucent white tunic and wrapped in a dark maroon cloth covered in four-pointed star imagery around his waist. The white tunic and the maroon cloth represent Christ’s eventual death as well as the purity of faith he maintained throughout the flagellation and crucifixion.

The script included on the veil is elongated vertically and utilizes thinner lines similar to the *thuluth* style, demonstrating the closest imitation of Arabic calligraphy among the Madonna and Child paintings discussed (Fig. 30). As they form the characters, the lines become bolder toward the edges of the shapes. In other cases, the lines taper off and become thinner. This stylistic decision reflects how Islamic script appeared from being created with calligraphic instruments. By emulating the style of Islamic
calligraphers, the artist creates the appearance of an authentic script. The attempted legitimacy of the script is further corroborated by similarity of the script to an inscription found on a page from the Qur’an from Egypt during the Mamluk period in the fourteenth century (Fig. 31). As seen in Ugolino’s painting of the pseudo script, the inscription on the silk also includes lines that intentionally change size and dimension to emulate the script created by calligraphic tools. Like the pseudo script in the painting, some characters on the silk textile intersect while others have more space between characters.

The awkward spacing of the characters in Ugolino’s painting undermines the seeming authenticity of the pseudo script. The aesthetic appeal of genuine Islamic calligraphy is characterized by the fluidity of the characters that transition into one another. As seen with the calligraphic page from the sixteenth century illustrating the \textit{nasta’liq} style, the characters do not all intersect; while some connect to the following letter, other characters are left on their own (Fig. 32). However, there is a cohesive quality of the text that is evident when one uses a linguistic alphabet to create words. Consequently, although Ugolino di Nerio’s pseudo script may successfully mimic the appearance of an Eastern language, it is falls short of an accurate transcription, like that seen with Pisanello’s drawing.

Ugolino’s painting demonstrates how prominent pseudo script transcends mere decoration and can convey religious meaning. The Christ child playfully pulls open the Virgin’s veil and showcases the calligraphy to the viewer. Moreover, unlike other Madonna and Child paintings that include script on the expensive blue garment, Ugolino has painted the pseudo script on the inside veil closest to the Virgin, touching her face.

\footnote{Bayani, \textit{Calligraphy and the Decorative Arts of Islam}, 14.}
\footnote{Ibid., 16.}
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Through this placement he demonstrates the symbolic importance given its proximity to the Virgin. As the inscriptions were utilized in an act of venerating the Virgin and the Christ child, by including the pseudo script on the humble cloth emphasizes the Virgin’s modesty and humility, which were the source of her divinity and status. The Madonna and Child model usually represents the regal nature of the Virgin through extravagant dressings, golden embroidery, and in Martini and Barnaba’s paintings, Arabic pseudo script connecting the subject matter to Islamic luxury commodities. Instead, Ugolino chooses to use the pseudo script on the more mundane aspect of the Virgin’s garments; her white wimple. The artistic decision to draw the viewer’s eyes to the script and on a garment directly touching the Virgin indicates the artist was aware that Islamic script had a positive association for the Christian Italian worshipper.

In addition to connoting homage, status, and veneration, the pseudo script operates as a cryptic language, imbued with potent, if indefinable, holy significance. In spoken language, Christian liturgy and prayer often includes Hebrew words that have not been translated, such as Hallelujah and Amen. While these words were derived from foreign language, Christian worshippers understood the words embodied a mystical and divine meaning. When Christian worshippers felt that their own vernacular language words could not properly express their feelings toward God, these Hebrew words and even “unarticulated sounds” were found to be an ineffably mystical substitute. Moreover, an individual possessing the ability to speak in different made up tongues or spontaneously begin speaking foreign languages was considered to be divinely inspired. The Christian tradition has an established history concerning the incorporation of alien

76 Nagel, “Twenty-five notes on pseudoscript in Italian art,” 238.
77 Nagel, “Twenty-five notes on pseudoscript in Italian art,” 229.
78 Ibid.
words into the religious ideology. In Acts of the Apostles, the apostles are described speaking in tongues during the Feast of Pentecost.\textsuperscript{79} At this occasion, the assembled apostles felt that they were “filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak with diverse tongues, according as the Holy Ghost gave them to speak.”\textsuperscript{80} The words or sounds that were spoken were saturated with religious meaning and importance in a language that the apostles did not know. However, they were able to speak the words fluently, enhancing the intrigue and spirituality of the event. This mysticism would also have been accepted and embraced by the apostles because it was the Holy Spirit that had empowered them to speak in tongues. Therefore, to the Christian Italian audience, the pseudo script may have similarly acquired mysticism because of its illegibility and mystery.

The connection between the pseudo script and divine language in Christianity is further corroborated by the importance of words in the conception of Christ. The imagery of the Madonna and Child is among the most familiar subject matter found in Renaissance paintings. As discussed, the Virgin Mary’s role in Christianity is most clearly seen as the archetypal maternal figure. While the illustrations of the Madonna and Child changed throughout the early centuries, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, depending in part on the changing perception of the Virgin Mary, the established importance of the Virgin and Christ’s miraculous birth remained the same. Seen as the perfect mother, parents often placed images of the Madonna and Child in their homes to encourage their children to mimic the behavior of Christ child and, perhaps, also inspire

\textsuperscript{80} Acts:2:4.
parents to follow the example of the Virgin virtuous nature.\textsuperscript{81} Aside from being the model of humility and maternal goodness, the divine significance of the Virgin Mary extends from her miraculous conception of Christ through the words of the archangel Gabriel.

As to be discussed later in more detail, the Annunciation depicts the phenomena recounted in the opening of the Gospel of John when “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”\textsuperscript{82} The Lord’s word undertakes a physical manifestation as it is transmitted from Gabriel to the Virgin. Many paintings of the Annunciation appear to illustrate the Virgin’s receptivity to the message of the Lord through the transfer of text, even literal Latin script. The pseudo script functions in a similar manner in delivering messages and acting as a method of communicating the divine Word. To the viewer, the pseudo script highlights the honored status of the biblical figures and the mysterious unintelligibility of spiritual truth.

Artists also utilized pseudo script to connect the subject matter of their paintings with the early Christian era roots. Arabic pseudo script is often found on “accessories belonging to personages of Eastern derivation” such as the Madonna and Child to emphasize their authentic association with Jerusalem during the time of Christ. Until the sixteenth century, Europeans had very little understanding of Semitic languages, other than Hebrew.\textsuperscript{83} While they correctly associated Arabic with the Holy Land, they mistakenly identified Arabic as a language spoken during Christ’s lifetime. Rather, Arabic was only introduced into Jerusalem during the seventh century with the rise of

\textsuperscript{82} John:1:14.
\textsuperscript{83} Mack, \textit{Bazaar to Piazza}, 53.
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Islam. If thought to have been an authentic aspect of life in biblical Jerusalem, the inscriptions would also situate the Madonna and Child subject matter during Christ’s time. Particularly during this time in the Renaissance following the Muslim re-conquest, Europeans were concerned with preserving and maintaining Christianity’s Middle Eastern roots. While the Muslim conquest of the Holy Land had been completed by 1291, for the next two centuries there was the hope for another Crusade. This may help explain the prominent use of pseudo script during this specific time period. Ugolino’s presentation of the script in this painting illustrates his attempts to affirm and strengthen that association with biblical times.

Along with the inscriptions found on the Madonna’s garments, artists also incorporated pseudo script on other objects found in paintings depicting the Virgin and Christ child, such as the haloes in Gentile da Fabriano and Masaccio’s paintings and the cover of a Bible in Filippino Lippi’s painting. Pseudo script may have been used on the haloes over the heads of biblical figures to further emphasize the connection to the early Christian Era. In Christian iconography, the halo is meant to be a circle of light over the head of a holy figure designating divinity. In Roman antiquity, the halo illustrated the presence of supernatural or intellectual energy. As they started appearing in Christian art beginning in the fifth century, the halo was adopted to symbolize the holy nature of the subject. Moreover, the pseudo Arabic characters take the place normally occupied

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84 Ibid., 52.
86 Ibid.
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by Latin or Greek phrases saying *Ave Maria, alpha or omega* revering the Virgin and the Christ child. Therefore, placing the script on the halo further illustrates the artists’ attempts to build a relationship between Christianity religious reverence and Islamic pseudo script.

The inscriptions featured on the haloes are similar to a bolder *kufic* style, rather than the *thuluth* style seen previously. As seen in Gentile da Fabriano’s *Madonna of Humility* from 1422 and Masaccio’s *Madonna and Enthroned with Angels* from 1426, the script appears on the Virgin’s halo in thicker pseudo Arabic characters. The script that is found on the haloes is visually different than those found on the Madonna’s garments discussed. Similar to the *kufic* style, the inscriptions stretch within the width of the halo, in an elegant fashion. Gentile da Fabriano was among the few artists utilizing pseudo script on haloes on paintings depicting the Madonna and child iconography. Masaccio, as a younger painter, followed Gentile’s lead and also incorporated pseudo Arabic into his work.\(^{89}\) This is evident by Masaccio’s less skilled rendering of the pseudo script on the Virgin’s haloes. Masaccio’s *Madonna Enthroned with Angels* was the central panel of the Pisa altarpiece in the Santa Maria del Carmine church (Fig. 33).\(^ {90}\) The Madonna sits on a grey stone throne adorned with Ionic, Corinthian and Composite order columns, holding the Christ child while surrounded by four angels. While parts of the painting have been reconstructed or damaged, the halo remains in good condition.\(^ {91}\) Although the halo is eclipsed partially by the Virgin’s head, the script is clearly visible in the circular frame. While the inscription is created to reflect pseudo Arabic, the characters may very

abstractly read the Latin phrase, “Ave Gratia Plena,” exalting the Virgin Mary (Fig. 34).\(^92\) However, the overtly stylized features of the characters identify the inscription as an attempt at pseudo script. Unlike the *thuluth* style found on the hems of the Virgin’s robes, the bolder and thicker *kufic* lettering demands greater attention. The script itself occupies more space on the painting than the space used by the script previously seen on the hems of the Madonna’s garments. Rather, the script here appears on the background rather than on the Virgin’s person. There is a punch design following the rim of the halo. Two parallel bands frame the script containing more punch detail. The letters are reminiscent of Arabic calligraphy given the tapered ends and stylized, geometric shape of the characters. However, the amateur nature of the script becomes apparent when examining the different sizes of the letters. While some letters stretch the entire width of the halo, others stop short of the bottom of the halo. Furthermore, the characters themselves vary in sizes. Without uniform letters in length and size, Masaccio’s attempt at pseudo script is less masterful than Gentile’s.

Gentile da Fabriano’s *Madonna of Humility* was a private commission and originally the central panel of a portable altar, given the residual hinges marks on the sides of the piece (Fig. 35).\(^93\) The painting utilizes the Venetian motif of the mother adoring her son as he reclines on her lap.\(^94\) This specific iconography of the Madonna folding her arms over her chest represents the eventual grief that the Madonna would experience during the Crucifixion.\(^95\) Gentile’s halo has clear, more defined letters that have a uniformity Masaccio’s script was lacking. The letters remain within a near

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 204.
\(^{94}\) Laureati and Onori, *Gentile da Fabriano and the Other Renaissance*, 248.
\(^{95}\) Ibid.
identical size and width within the halo. Similar to Masaccio’s script, Gentile’s inscription also appears authentic given the pointed edges of the letters and the undulating lines that change width, as would be seen in letters written with a calligraphic pen. Moreover, the Virgin crosses her hands over her chest and gazes down at the Christ child who looks back at his mother. She holds him in her lap in a sumptuous gold cloth embroidered with pseudo script. Unlike Masaccio, Gentile’s Madonna also has pseudo script decorating the hems of her gown. The Eastern influence is further cemented in the distinct textiles utilized in the painting. Half moon shapes with a floral decoration appear on the floor behind the Virgin and the Christ child. A corresponding lotus flower pattern adorns the background, a design often seen in Islamic traditional art.\(^{96}\)

While in both paintings the pseudo inscriptions appear on the haloes of the Virgin Mary, they are absent from the Christ child’s haloes. Rather, these haloes include traditional floral decoration. There are several possible logical reasons for the decision to include pseudo script strictly on the Virgin’s haloes; for example, the significant effort that would have been required to construct the design in the gold foil. As there would not have been a punch available to create the pseudo script pattern, the artists along with their assistants would have had to painstakingly craft each character by hand. Moreover, the Virgin’s haloes are also larger than the Christ child’s. Perhaps the artists found it easier to create the larger characters of pseudo script in detail than mimic the same design on a smaller scale.

According to Rosamond Mack, the inscriptions on the haloes may have been derived from the work seen on brassware imported from Islamic territories.\(^{97}\) The style of

\(^{96}\) Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 40.

\(^{97}\) Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 65.
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the calligraphy as well as its positioning on the halo strongly suggests that Italian artists were aware of the designs found on Islamic brassware and attempted to emulate those designs in their paintings. As seen with a brass dish dated 1345-1346 from the Egypt and Syria area featuring the names and titles of the Mamluk sultan Shaban I, the form of the script, its placement in the dish and the circular appearance of the inscription are similar as seen on the haloes (Fig. 36). This attempted emulation illustrates the strong connection between the Islamic trade conducted with the Mediterranean and the Mamluk territories in Egypt and Syria and the Italian artists that experienced the effects of the trade in society. It also further emphasizes the prestige of the pseudo script as would have been reflected by the trade sales of the Islamic objects.

Another area of privilege highlighted by the presence of pseudo script is on the Holy book itself. The inscription found on the Bible cover in Filippino Lippi’s painting Madonna and Child from 1475-1480 connects his painting to the religious reverence of the Bible (Fig. 37). In this painting, the Madonna wears a navy robe embroidered with a star on her left shoulder. Underneath the mantle, the Virgin wears a coral tunic with golden embroidered pseudo script at the collar and sleeve cuffs. Across the chest of her tunic, the Madonna has two bands of dark fabric with an embroidered geometric pattern meeting in the center. The window behind the Madonna appears to overlook a scenic lake dividing the foreground from the castle and trees in the background. Wearing a simple translucent cloth over his waist, Virgin balances the Christ child as he carefully stands on her leg, clutching the open Bible in her hand. The edges of the Bible are decorated with a gilt border of pseudo script framed as a band. On the corners, the Bible has decorative patterns that are reminiscent of leaves.

98 Ibid.
The script on the Bible has been created with delicate lines to form individualized letters. While some lines transition into the next letter creating one uniform character, many of the shapes are formed independently (Fig. 38). As evidenced by Ugolino’s pseudo script, by crafting individual letters, the script does not present the most authentic recreation of Islamic calligraphy because the inscription lacks the flow of the Arabic alphabet. However, Lippi has clearly attempted to mimic the Arabic alphabet as can be seen through the vague reproduction of certain Arabic characters. For example, the character near the Christ child’s right hand with a curved line intersecting two straight lines is similar to the characters that form the word *Allah*, the Arabic word that used to refer to god in Islam (Fig. 39). However, the authentic rendering of Arabic is dubious because the letters do not fully form the word *Allah*. Moreover, it is unlikely that textiles, brassware or any object traversing the world and exchanging different hands in trade would have included a holy inscription that could have been dishonored. For example, if a brass dish bearing a holy inscription falls on the floor as it is being transported, Islam would consider the act sacrilege. The risk of such occurrences increases exponentially when individuals unfamiliar with the religion or unable to read Arabic are handling the trade goods. Whether a version of this word was mistakenly created as Lippi copied characters from a textile or he fabricated the script from his own imagination, the inscription does bare an authentic resemblance to Arabic calligraphy.

The addition to the inscription on the Bible illustrates Lippi’s attempts to solidify the connection artists were creating between the Islamic script and Christianity by promoting the significance of the Lord’s Word. As previously mentioned, the Bible exemplifies the Word of God that was made flesh through the incarnation. By placing the
pseudo script on the cover of the Holy Scripture, the artist is aligning the importance of
the Lord’s Word with the pseudo inscription. In doing so, Lippi implies the pseudo script
is undertaking the significance of the Word and can be employed to communicate the
theological message of the painting to the worshipper. Similar to the other artists already
discussed, Lippi would have been aware of the Italian audience’s misconception of
Arabic as a hallowed language from antiquity. Therefore, the inscription on the Bible
operates in a similar function as the pseudo script found on the garment and haloes of the
Madonna. However, more so than the inscriptions on the Virgin’s mantle and halo,
Lippi’s pseudo script promotes the significance of God’s incarnation through the Word.
Likewise, the decision to have the Christ child reaching out and touching the pseudo
script-embossed Bible is similar to Ugolino’s painting in which the Christ child is
undoing the Virgin’s veil. In both paintings, the Christ child and the Virgin are touching
the pseudo script. As opposed to the inscriptions on the mantle, the script on the Virgin’s
veil was significant because it had the privileged position of being the closest to the
Virgin; a spiritual feat that worshippers yearned to accomplish. As previously discussed,
Virgin and Child icons were venerated because many believed they had divine powers.
For some icons, this power was attributed because it was thought the Virgin Mary or
Christ had been in physical contact with the object. Therefore, the icon portraits were
treated similar to relics. By having the Virgin and Christ child touching the pseudo script,
the artists were in effect transferring the miraculous powers of the figures to the
inscriptions. Consequently, as Western artists adopted the compositions of Eastern
Byzantine icons, these strategic uses of pseudo script also illustrate an effort to enhance
the divinity and prestige of the paintings. While the divinity of Christ and the Virgin
Chapter 2: Pseudo Script in Madonna and Child Paintings

Mary was indisputable to the Italian worshippers, artists would nevertheless have wished to connect their paintings to the ancient Holy Land through simulated Arabic script, the status of elite ornamentation, and the child’s divine status as the Word incarnate through his mother, the God-bearer.
“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” When the angel Gabriel descended to earth in the Annunciation, he relayed the Lord’s Word and informed Mary of her divine duty to be the vessel to carry the Lord’s child. In this moment when Mary acknowledges and accepts her duty, the Word is incarnated in one of the most often replicated and portrayed biblical scenes. Although the Italian compositions of the Annunciation scene have varied throughout the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, the symbolism and iconography of the scene remained relatively the same among Renaissance paintings. In these images, Gabriel and the Virgin are often shown facing each other, indicating the moment they meet and speak for the first time. However, artists differed in how they portrayed the actual incarnation of the Word. Both artists and theologians were captivated by how the conception came to be and the manner in which Mary was impregnated. According to some exegetes, the method of the conception was not meant to be understood, as it was part of the Lord’s work.

The mysticism shrouding the Annunciation compelled some artists to find unique methods of the illustrating the moment of Mary’s impregnation. Some artists directed a divine light beam from heaven to the Virgin while others painted a dove surrounded in divine light representing the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary. Others still like Fra Angelico and Filippo Lippi included illegible pseudo script in their paintings, perhaps as an allusion to the incarnation of the Word; however, Lippi and Angelico use script in two very distinct ways. Angelico includes several different forms and degrees of legible and illegible texts to physically represent the incarnation of the Word. Specifically, Angelico writes out the Latin conversation exchanged between the Virgin and Gabriel, includes an open book with an illegible script strewn on the pages and also uses strategic positioning

1 John:1:14.
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of pseudo script on the garments of the two figures as well. In so doing, the Angelico may be exploring how the illegibility of script relates to the divinity of the figures and to the incarnation of the Word. Alternatively, Lippi uses an optical representation of the Annunciation scene in his painting. Through suggesting the image of light rays entering an eye to produce vision, Lippi provocatively portrays the transfer of divine light between the dove and through an open slit above Mary’s womb. Despite their differing interpretations, both Lippi and Angelico utilize illegible pseudo script as a method of metaphorically showing the boundary, and potentially the breach of the boundary, of the Virgin’s womb. The mystery and illegibility of the pseudo script mirrors the intrigue of the divine Word; the audience may not have been meant to understand the script, but they would have known that it was an indication of importance. In utilizing pseudo script, artists like Angelico and Lippi may have been responding to the question of how Mary was impregnated by demonstrating the script’s connection to the Word incarnate.

Among the scenes illustrated in Luke’s Gospel, the Annunciation represents the moment of the conception and creation of the Lord’s son. On the occasion that Christ was conceived, the archangel appeared to Mary and indicated that she was in the Lord’s favor and had been chosen to carry a son who will “reign over the house of Jacob and of his kingdom there shall be no end.” In the Gospel, Mary questioned how she could carry a child without having been with a man. Although at the time she had been betrothed to her eventual husband Joseph, Mary was a virgin. According to Luke, the angel Gabriel replies, “The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee.”

\[\text{Luke:1:33.}\]
\[\text{Luke:1:35.}\]
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As previously discussed, the use of pseudo script on the garments or as decorative elements in the painting could convey the esteem and mystery of the divine Word. This association became especially palpable in images of the Annunciation, the event wherein the divine Word becomes flesh, as seen in Fra Angelico’s *The Annunciatory Angel* (Fig. 40) and *The Virgin Annunciata* from 1450 to 1455, panels from a larger polyptych (Fig. 41). A contemporary of Gentile da Fabriano and Masaccio, Fra Angelico likewise incorporated pseudo Arabic characters in an effort to symbolize the origins and spiritual significance of the Madonna and Child. The tempera and gold panel paintings of the archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary include the bold use of pseudo script on the haloes and the garments of the Virgin and angel Gabriel. In *The Annunciatory Angel*, Gabriel extends his left index finger in a gesturing pointing toward the sky. His colored wings are painted in gradation with varying shades of red and brown. The script appears in golden bands across the collar, mid-torso and sleeves of Gabriel’s robe. Similarly, in the painting depicting the Virgin, Mary folds her arms across chest and bows her head in an act of acceptance and humbleness. In her left hand she grasps a book, perhaps portraying the image of a more learned and educated Virgin Mary. The inclusion of the book of scripture also further correlates to the scene of the Annunciation, in which Christ is created as the Word incarnate. More specifically, the book of scripture references the Hebrew Scriptures, which prophesize the Virgin birth and the coming of the Messiah. Similar to the angel Gabriel, the script on Mary appears in golden embroidery on the hem and collar of her coral tunic. Akin to Gentile’s *Madonna of Humility* and Masaccio’s

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*Madonna Enthroned with Angels*, Fra Angelico has also included a ban of Arabic pseudo script in Mary’s halo.

The kufic-style inscription is contained within a punch design outlining the halo. Like Gentile and Masaccio’s attempts at calligraphy, Fra Angelico has also created each pseudo Arabic character individually. The letters are equally spaced within the area of the halo and do not touch the following character. The inscription has a marked similarity to Gentile’s precision and organization of uniform characters. By similarly mimicking the strokes created by calligraphy instruments, the characters have broader lines that taper and change shape. Although the characters do not betray any authenticity to Arabic words, Angelico’s mastery of the pseudo script reveals the accurate rendering of certain Arabic letters. Most prominently, the inscription includes characters similar to the *alif* and *lam* a number of times. As common characters of the Arabic alphabet that often appear in the formation of words, the inclusion of the *alif* and *lam* in the inscription may simply reflect that Angelico utilized another Islamic inscription as a reference for the painting.

In an even more compelling fashion, Fra Angelico employed Islamic inscriptions to compliment the meaning and significance of the divine Word in the *Annunciation* for the church of San Domenico in Cortona from 1430-1 (Fig. 42).5 The evocative but ambiguous language of Luke’s Gospel has spawned a range of visualizations of the process and the manner through which Mary was impregnated. The scene serves both as the announcement of Christ’s birth as well as the moment of his conception. Like many traditional renderings, Fra Angelico’s *Annunciation* illustrates the scene as the angel

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facing and bowing toward the Virgin in respect. The Virgin returns the bow acknowledging her divine duty to give birth to the Son of God. In the background, Adam and Eve can be seen being expelled from Paradise, representing the fall of mankind. In contrast, the Annunciation scene in the foreground illustrates the reversal of the Adam and Eve’s expulsion with Christ’s conception and the redemption of humanity. Gabriel and Mary stand at the corner of a loggia beside an enclosed, burgeoning garden, a motif often utilized in paintings of the Annunciation to represent Mary’s fertility and safeguarded virginity. The angel steadies his index finger over his mouth, pointing toward Mary as the written Latin dialogue travels between Gabriel and the Virgin. Mary folds her arms over her chest in an act of humility and acceptance. She balances an open book with a bright red cover on her leg as the two golden clasps fall to the sides.

The imagery and the iconography of Angelico’s Annunciation reinforce the process of the incarnation in which the Word becomes flesh. The Annunciation functions as both the announcement of the Christ’s birth as well as his conception. The process of the incarnation involved three distinct instances of speech: the human words uttered by the Virgin, the word of the angel that has taken on the human form and the divine Word of the Lord articulated by the angel. The Lord’s Word was necessary for Christ to be incarnated fully endowed with “free will, merit and the blessed vision.” Consequently, representations of the Annunciation often include more than the simple dialogue between the Virgin and Gabriel. Instead, when the Virgin speaks Ecce Ancilla Domini Fiat Mihi

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9 Ibid., 107.
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Secundum in Angelico’s painting, she responds directly to the Lord, opening her body to the Word and preparing for the Incarnation. Therefore, the Incarnation occurs through Gabriel articulating the Lord’s divine message in person and the Virgin voicing her submission to the Word, and these words are represented in their physical form in Angelico’s painting.

The Latin words of their dialogue are carefully situated between the Virgin and Gabriel. The top line spoken by Gabriel reads, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you.” This line curves upward, as if attempting to motion to the Holy Spirit that originates from heaven. The middle line, perpendicular to the Virgin and Gabriel, Mary says to the Lord, “Behold the handmaiden of the Lord, do unto me according to thy Word.” While the Virgin is referencing and speaking directly to the Lord, middle line does not curve upward like the first line of dialogue. Rather, it is inverted to visually represent her rapport with the Lord. Lastly, the bottom line, directed sharply downward toward the Virgin’s womb, reads, “The Virtue of the Most High will overshadow you.” This inscribed interpretation is reminiscent of Simone Martini’s earlier work, Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus from 1333 (Fig. 43). Similar to Angelico’s painting, the words of the conversation are inscribed on the gilded foil as they are exchanged between the Virgin and the angel Gabriel. From the angel’s kneeling position, the inscription slants upward to the area of the Virgin’s ear as she turns away discomfited by his message. More specifically, Gabriel says, “‘Ave gratia plena Dominus tecum,’ (Hail,

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full of grace, the Lord is with thee).”

Inscribed biblical verses are not particularly unique in images of the Annunciation from the high and late medieval period. However, like Angelico’s painting, the specific phrases Martini chooses to depict and the physical rendering of the words between the two figures in Martini’s painting is still significant particularly for the iconography of the Annunciation scene and its relation to the divine Word. The presence of the written inscription gives the scene immediacy and represents the act of the speech becoming visible and corporeal. Further, theologians have traditionally viewed Martini’s specific choices of the words “full of grace” and “the Lord is with thee,” as terms connoting the Incarnation. More specifically, at the time this altarpiece was created in the fourteenth century, “Ave Maria” was an immensely popular phrase in prayer and regularly used during liturgical services. The inscription of these specific words in gilded foil would have drawn worshippers closer to the depiction of the scene and elicited a familiar devotional response toward the Virgin, the vessel for the Lord. Consequently, Angelico, like Martini, utilized the physical rendering of these biblical verses in an attempt to fully capitalize on the iconography of the Annunciation scene and importance of the Word.

As a method of visualizing how the Word was incarnated into flesh in the scene of the Annunciation, Martini and Angelico may have been influenced by the concept of

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 421.
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conceptio per aurem or the conception through the ear.\(^{17}\) St. Zeno, the Bishop of Verona, Italy suggests that Christ himself entered through the Virgin’s ears and made his home in her womb.\(^{18}\) This interpretation indicates the words spoken by Gabriel as reiterating the Word of God took on a physical form and precipitated the impregnation. The concept of the aural impregnation was encouraged and supported by individuals in the West, such as St. Bernard in the twelfth century and throughout songs and hymns in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.\(^{19}\) As previously discussed, paintings of the Annunciation may also have represented the conceptio per aurem through their dialogues rendered in raised embossed letters along a trajectory targeting the Virgin’s right ear. Martini illustrates this concept more explicitly, while Angelico presents an unusual variation of the conceptio per aurem convention. While the words are not seen entering her ear, they appear to be guided by Gabriel toward her face. In Angelico’s Annunciation, the words exchanged between the Virgin and Gabriel move in three different directions, including one line that is also directed at her face. Alternatively, Martini concentrates one line of dialogue that moves exclusively to her ear. Although the lines of the dialogue in both paintings do not enter into the Virgin’s ear, explicitly illustrating the conceptio per aurem theory, the direction and orientation of the lines appear to be a deliberate attempt at communicating meaning and significance. In Angelico’s painting, the downward slant of the last line to the Virgin’s womb may be Angelico’s subtle reference to the conception. As this part of the dialogue attempts to answer the question of how the Virgin will be impregnated, by directing the word “overshadow” to her womb, Angelico could be showing his

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 27.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 31.
interpretation of the conception. While the provocative conceptio per aurem concept seeks to indirectly provide an answer of how the miraculous conception occurs, it still avoids delivering a comprehensive response of how the conception actually occurs. Therefore, Angelico may have also utilized pseudo script to help elucidate or provide another symbolic reference to method of the conception.

Fra Angelico includes pseudo script on the garments of both the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary as well as, potentially, inside Mary’s book. The angel Gabriel’s bright pink robe is punctuated by intricate golden embroidery. On the bottom cuff, Angelico has painted a darker red border decorated with golden details. The robe functions as an extension of and method to enhance the divine significance of the angel. In particular, Gabriel has a wide band of calligraphy ornamented by a floral vine border. As much of the inscription has faded away, it is difficult to determine if the inscription is meant to emulate Islamic script. The style of the characters would indicate the inscription was Arabic-inspired. The characters have the distinctive curved and fluid appearance often seen in Arabic calligraphy. Moreover, there are certain characters and shapes that are reminiscent of the Arabic letters seen in previous inscriptions. For example, between the folds of the robe, there is a shape that appears to be a “W,” or in Arabic, the word Allah. This shape has been replicated in other paintings, as seen on the Bible cover of Filippino Lippi’s painting Madonna and child from 1475-1480 (Fig. 37). However, the characters over the right side of the robe appear to be Greek letters. The “S” like formation may be a zeta and the character that looks like an “O” with a dash through the center is recognizably a theta, “θ,” (Fig. 44). However, the right side of the angel’s robe does not appear to be written in any identifiable Greek characters. It is possible that one part of the
inscription is meant to be Islamic pseudo script while the latter half is comprised of Greek letters, the language of the New Testament. Perhaps by juxtaposing Islamic pseudo script with the Greek lettering, Angelico was attempting to confer the legitimacy of the Greek script to the less authentic rendering of Islamic pseudo script.

The cuffs of the Virgin’s tunic and hems of her navy mantle display a similar style of script with features of Islamic calligraphy. Alternatively, it is uncertain whether script lining the book on Mary’s lap was also inspired by Arabic calligraphy. The book lays slanted on her lap as the pages are feathered open. Both pages of the book are filled with seven parallel lines of text. As seen with the script on the Gabriel’s robe, this script in the book exhibits some of the characteristics of Islamic script. The characters are painted with fluid, black ink. Each letter is comprised of multiple short strokes. Resembling the effect achieved by a calligraphy tool, the lines change thickness and length, depending on how the letter is created. Similar to the inscription on Gabriel’s robe, there are certain aspects of the letters that mimic Arabic lettering. For example, on the second page in the third line, there is a character that may have been inspired by Arabic characters. Specifically, the “U” shape with a small, curved line in the center is similar to the “kaaf” letter (Fig. 45). Moreover, in the first line there a shape that looks like a lowercase “N” with a small dot underneath the character is reminiscent of the “noon” (Fig. 46). However, the script also bears a resemblance to another language, Aramaic, the language spoken by Christ.20 Although the languages have very different styles and compositions, the alphabets appear similar, especially because both languages use diacritical marks, indicating the tone changes. Therefore, it is difficult to discern if

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the script was painted to look like either Arabic or Aramaic, or resemble a different language entirely.

There are fewer doubts that the script on the cuffs and hem of the Virgin’s robe were inspired by Islamic calligraphy. As she crosses her arms over her chest, her dark red tunic is ornamented with a wide golden collar imprinted with Latin, “Ecce Ancilla Domini Fiat Mihi Secundum,” meaning, “Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord, do onto me according to thy Word.”\(^{21}\) Her shoulders support a rich navy mantle accented with a golden embroidered hem. Similar to the butting inscriptions on Gabriel’s robe, the Virgin Mary’s robe also appears to have two distinctly different patterns compiled on one hem. On the bottom edge of the hem resting along Mary’s leg, Angelico has painted a repeated buckle pattern. Buckle is composed of two mirrored “S” shapes that are connected to another buckle shape facing in the opposing direction. The pseudo script is placed between two thick bands and a curled line pattern. The pattern is then broken by a floral image framed within a box, complimenting the geometric style of the buckle. To the right of the floral image, the viewer can see the beginnings of the pseudo script. The script begins at the same point the buckle of the book falls over Mary’s lap. The inscription is still visible as it follows the fabric’s folds and curves cupping Mary’s abdomen. As has been previously seen in other paintings depicting Islamic pseudo script, the letters have the appearance of being created with a calligraphic instrument, given the varying widths of the lines of the letters. Moreover, the character seen in the hem created by two curved lines meeting at the rounded apex is a shape often illustrated in pseudo script because of its similarities to the Arabic letter “waw” (Fig. 47). This would indicate

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Angelico relied on another inscription or a textile produced by someone who had at least basic knowledge of Arabic script.

The script continues along the edge of the robe as it falls into a deep chasm created by the weight of the fabric anticipating the eventual growth of the womb. Directly below her womb, the fabric bends upward to reveal the resurfacing buckle pattern. Although the entire hem is not entirely visible, Angelico seems to alternate between the pattern and the pseudo script. At the edge of the fabric’s dip, a sliver of the pseudo script appears on the hem. This script is again separated by a floral image before the buckle pattern continues. Angelico then introduces another pattern, again divided by a small floral box. Similar to the buckle, this new design also utilizes two “S” shaped placed adjacent to one another in opposing directions. The additional design continues until it disappears behind the overturned edge revealing the golden underside of the mantle. On her right arm, there is a discernable band of pseudo script on the cuff of her left wrist in the same style as the script on the hem of the mantle. As seen on the hem, the script is also framed within three bands and a curved line.

Artists representing the Annunciation during the Renaissance often left the question of the means of the impregnation unclear in their paintings. This equivocation on their part may have been intentionally done to avoid addressing the question.\(^22\) It seems the mystery surrounding the method of the Virgin’s impregnation evoked a sense of mysticism and wonder among worshippers that some did not wish to probe.\(^23\) Indeed, a sermon written by Photius, the Patriarch of Constantinople in the ninth century asks,

\(^22\) Steinberg, “‘How Shall This Be?’ Reflections on Filippo Lippi's ‘Annunciation’ in London, Part I,” 32.
\(^23\) Ibid., 26.
“Who has the strength to scrutinize an inscrutable mystery? … I praise the miracle in song, and worship the birth, but I am at a loss to tell the manner of the conception.”^24

Rather, artists were careful to avoid explicitly illustrating the method of conception. Likewise, Angelico’s Cortona *Annunciation* includes the Lord peeking through a small rounded vignette at the top of the composition and a dove shrouded in golden rays as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. However, the dove only hovers over the Virgin and does not make any contact with here.

The deliberate placement of the pseudo script compliments the representation of the dialogue and may also present an implicit illustration of the incarnation. Like the angled direction of the lines of dialogue, the script is strategically placed at the outer corners of the Virgin’s womb, as the fabric overturns and dips to create the appearance of an empty vessel ready to undertake the impregnation. The manner in which the fabric falls open and creates a perfectly symmetrical chasm illustrates Angelico’s efforts to intentionally draw attention to the Virgin’s womb (Fig. 48). As the pseudo script lines the edges of the location where the incarnation takes place, the script mimics the appearance of the boundary between the Virgin’s womb and the outside. However, the script only appears on each end of fabric before and after it dips into the shape of a vessel. Therefore, the boundary is broken only in the area directly proximal to the Virgin’s womb. This positioning may indicate that the mystical boundary of the Virgin’s impermeable womb was transgressed through the incarnation. The detail of the dialogue lines as well as the specific placement of the pseudo script as a broken boundary may

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^24 Steinberg, “‘How Shall This Be?’ Reflections on Filippo Lippi’s ‘Annunciation’ in London, Part I,” 30.
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illustrate Angelico’s attempts to subtly convey his interpretation of the method of the conception.

If the Word physically incarnated Christ’s flesh, the significance of the Lord’s words spoken through Gabriel to the Virgin Mary must be further examined. Gabriel begins by telling Mary she has found favor in the Lord and has been chosen to carry his son. In her surprise, she asks, “Quomodo?” meaning “How?” or in other translations, she says more clearly, “How shall this be?” given that she has not been with a man.25 Gabriel told Mary that the Holy Spirit will “come upon” her and the power would “overshadow” her.26 In the moment that she was convinced to consent and accept this truth, Mary conceived Christ.27 However, in giving him life, the Word of God also gave Christ the redemptive powers that would save humankind. Given that Christ was created and borne for the purpose of reversing Adam and Eve’s original sin, the Word also undertakes a “repairing” quality as it eventually saves humanity.28 Moreover, the theory of conceptio per aurem has been compared to the Temptation, in which Eve spoke to the Serpent and was enticed to pick the apple from the Forbidden Tree.29 While Eve was lead astray by an “evil angel” leading to the fall of mankind, the Virgin listened to a “good angel” and saved humanity with the birth of Christ when the Holy Ghost entered her ear.30 Therefore, the words exchanged between Gabriel and the Virgin factored significantly

25 Steinberg, “‘How Shall This Be?’ Reflections on Filippo Lippi’s ‘Annunciation’ in London, Part I,” 25.
26 Ibid.
28 Didi-Huberman, Fra Angelico: Dissemblance & Figuration, 117.
30 Ibid., 29.
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into Christ’s incarnation, in both the physical manifestation of Christ as a being and imbuing him with redemptive powers over humankind.

Artists portraying the Annunciation, such as Angelico, may have utilized pseudo script on the clothing of the Virgin to further emphasize the importance of the Word in the incarnation of Christ. As such, Angelico’s Annunciation includes several references to texts and words in the painting. Other artists illustrate the interaction between Gabriel and the Virgin and the conception through visual symbolism, rather than using words, like Angelico. For example, while Angelico features the actual words that were exchanged between the two as well as Mary’s reaction, Filippo Lippi portrays the Virgin’s surprise through her body language in his Annunciation from 1445 in the Martelli Chapel, Florence (Fig. 49).\(^\text{31}\) Mary turns away and holds hand to stop Gabriel as he crouches in front her with a white lily, symbolizing her virginal purity. However, by displaying the dialogue visually, Angelico, inadvertently, also highlights the role the Word played in the Annunciation scene. Similar to St. Zeno’s previously described interpretation, by writing out the conversation into a physical form, Angelico may have suggesting how Christ took physical form through the Word. The depiction of the conversation in this format itself represents the Annunciation. In the way that the Word undertakes the ability to create a fully-bodied Christ, the words spoken between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin are transformed into physical being as well. As mentioned, the connection between the illustration of the conversation and the incarnation is further solidified by the visual representation of the dialogue and the mystical pseudo script.

Specifically, the line of dialogue in which Gabriel explains how Mary will be

impregnated is directed at the Virgin’s womb. Gabriel indicates that the Holy Ghost will “overshadow” the Virgin, resulting in the pregnancy. Therefore, in illustrating the physical form of the word “overshadow,” Angelico may have been referencing the act and process of Christ’s incarnation. Similarly, by physically portraying a mysterious, illegible Eastern language beside the area of the incarnation, Angelico may also have been demonstrating the process of the mystical Lord’s Word incarnating.

Angelico also includes a text covered book open on Mary’s lap written in a mysterious script, perhaps pseudo Arabic or Aramaic. Undoubtedly, Mary as a devout figure would have been immersed in reading the scripture prior to Gabriel’s arrival. Illustrating the book in a mystic, illegible language further emphasizes the spirituality of the experience. Not only did the mystery of Christ’s conception captivate the worshippers’ imaginations, but also the mysticism of the unknown language inscribed in the religious book would similarly have evoked a sense of wonder and awe in the story. As Arabic was thought by some to be the contemporary language of Christ’s time and Aramaic was the actual language historically spoken by Christ, the inclusion of pseudo script in either language would represent the place and time Mary had lived in.\textsuperscript{32} In so doing, worshippers would have viewed the painting as a more authentic portrait of the Annunciation scene because of the inclusion of the pseudo script

The decisive positioning of the Arabic pseudo script on the Virgin Mary’s robe also demonstrates the importance role of the Lord’s Word in the incarnation. Alternating between the buckle pattern and the script, the inscription is visible beginning at the point when the strap of book ends along the Virgin’s abdomen (Fig. 50). Again, the ambiguous

\textsuperscript{32} Deiss, \textit{Joseph, Mary, Jesus}, 8.
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and mystical nature of the inscription in the book may reflect the potential significance of text and words in the painting; to visualize the Word and how it essential for the conception. Therefore, for the script to begin at the exact point the book ends may be an attempt to also connect the pseudo script to the Word and the incarnation. Furthermore, the Arabic pseudo script is seen in the folds of the fabric where Mary’s womb is contained. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the fabric falls into a deep dip and the hem of the mantle twists and turns, leaving only parts of the script visible. Despite the limited visibility of the script, the inscription follows the fabric as it cups the bottom of Mary’s womb. The inscription may have been intentionally placed so closely to the area where Christ would be given his human life. Therefore, Angelico may have painted the script and placed it in this specific location to underscore the relationship between the Word and Christ’s creation.

Along with the placement of the script, the increasing illegibility of the text from the dialogue exchanged between the Virgin and Gabriel to the pseudo script on the book and even more cryptic text on the garment hem may also be significant. There are three different illustrations of text in the painting, mirroring the three different variations of speech—those by the angel Gabriel, the Virgin Mary and the Lord—that are exchanged in the Annunciation scene. The clearly and most authentic illustration of text is the conversation between the Virgin and the angel articulated in Latin. As these were the words that were said in Luke’s Gospel, this use of text represents a conventional illustration of the Annunciation. Moreover, the pseudo script represents a second instance of script in the painting, less legible than the written conversation. As already mentioned, the script appears in strategic locations, such as the hem surrounding the Virgin’s womb.
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While the script has identifiable features of Arabic calligraphy, the script does not appear to be an authentic transcription. Rather, the script would be illegible to both an individual familiar with Arabic as well as the lay Italian worshipper. The last instance of text is the script written in the Virgin’s book of scripture. The script in the book, like the pseudo script on the hem of the mantle, is also illegible. However, unlike the pseudo script on the Virgin’s garments, it is difficult to identify whether the script in the book is attempting to emulate Arabic or Aramaic, or perhaps a combination of languages.

The legibility of the script may directly be correlated to the assumed divinity of the object or individual wearing the garment. The more illegible and obscure the script is, the more divine and awe-inspiring the individual or object. For example, as a human figure, the script on the Virgin’s hem and cuffs is most legible and identifiably inspired by Arabic calligraphy. While Mary has been chosen by the Lord and has found in His favor, she is also a bridge connecting worshippers from the human world to the divine. Likewise, while Gabriel is a divine figure, he assumes a human role to reach Mary. Therefore, there is a combination of Greek and possibly Arabic pseudo scripts present on her robe, both less legible than the script found on the Virgin’s tunic and robe. This combination of different illegible scripts reflects Gabriel’s position in between the human and divine realms. Lastly, the script on the book of scripture containing the Lord’s Word is least legible of the instances of script in the painting. While worshippers may not have been able to read the pseudo script on the Virgin’s hem or Gabriel’s robe, they would be able to identify the script as being inspired by Arabic or Greek, both languages often associated with the Holy Land.\(^{33}\) However, worshippers would not be able to distinguish

\(^{33}\) Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 52.
whether the script in Mary’s book is meant to emulate Arabic or Aramaic. This additional ambiguity mirrors the mystery and intrigue behind the Lord’s Word. Similar to how some artists and theologians believed we should not know exactly how Mary was impregnated, the audience also should not completely understand the pseudo script on the book of scripture. The increased obscurity of the script representing religious text also isolates the book and calls further attention to this particular script. Angelico’s choice to use a different style of script for this particular object containing Word of God instead of the Gabriel and the Virgin’s clothing appears to be a deliberate decision. Consequently, Angelico may have been utilizing pseudo script as a method of portraying divinity and showcasing the importance of the Lord’s Word in the Annunciation scene.

Angelico’s use of pseudo script and integration into the Annunciation iconography appears to be self-conscious and deliberate. Others artists may have included pseudo script in their paintings as a matter of convention, for aesthetic purposes or to increase the value of the painting as Arabic calligraphy was often associated with luxury foreign textiles. Rather than adorning the entire hem of the Virgin’s mantle with the script as seen in other paintings, Angelico has chosen specific points where the script begins and ends to emphasize its positioning near the Virgin’s womb. Moreover, he includes different types and styles of pseudo script with varying levels of legibility, perhaps to focus attention on the Lord’s elevated divinity. During his time at friaries around Italy, like San Marco or Cortona, he was able to absorb and exercise his knowledge of scripture and religious bodies of work. During a four-year period from

34 Mack, Bazaar to Piazza, 52.
1419 to 1423, Angelico became Fra Giovanni, a famous Dominican preacher. Angelico may have been attracted to the Dominican order because he was able to pursue the evangelical model of a chaste and obedient life, while also live under a clerical institution that allowed him to invest in his craft. As a monk with his education and experience, Angelico would have had understanding of the potential theological significance of Eastern languages, even if he could not read them directly, to be able to make these deliberate decisions in his work. His paintings and usage of pseudo script is informed and colored by his theological learning.

Filippo Lippi’s *Annunciation* from between 1449 and 1460 in the National Gallery, London, also utilizes pseudo script on the Virgin’s garments in an attempt to demonstrate the significance of the Word, without inscribed dialogue (Fig. 51). Lippi’s painting shifts away from the heavy textual focus of Angelico’s painting to a more visual representation of the Annunciation. A Carmelite friar, Lippi painted nearly ten different renditions of the Annunciation scene, exploring the mystery and inventing his own symbolism. The painting illustrates the Annunciation scene taking placed in a walled garden as the Virgin Mary and Gabriel bow, facing each other. Gabriel holds lilies in his hands that also appear in a vase placed between the angel and Mary. In the area above the angel and Mary, a hand emerges from a clouded, dark sky. The floating right hand of the Lord directs his thumb, pointer and index finger at the Virgin. The hand is surrounded by an effervescent golden sheen representing the Lord’s divine light. Absorbed in the Lord’s light, a white dove descends upon the Virgin Mary and poises itself closely in front of her

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37 Ibid.
38 Steinberg, “‘How Shall This Be?’ Reflections on Filippo Lippi’s ‘Annunciation’ in London, Part I,” 34; Holmes, *Filippo Lippi: Carmelite Painter*, 215-244.
womb. Evidently the agent of the Lord, the dove carries the divine light to the Virgin.

The Virgin Mary wears a coral tunic beneath a royal blue mantle and holds a book in her hands. Her left hand grips a small book while with her right she clutches her robe over her womb as it absorbs the golden rays emitted by a white dove. Mary’s eyes are drawn to the white dove and exhibit the submissive acceptance often seen in other depictions of the Annunciation.

As other artists may have used *conceptio per aurem* to illustrate the impregnation, Lippi instead utilizes the divine dove as carrying the Word of God in his unprecedented interpretation of the Annunciation. In Lippi’s *Annunciation*, the divine dove descends from the skies. The dove is directed by the right hand of the Lord, who is holding out his index and middle fingers, and thumb in the direction of the Virgin. Overlapping gilded orbits surround the dove and decrease in circumference the more proximal they are to the dove. Poised directly in front of the Virgin’s womb, the dove’s golden orbit bursts to emit several shorter rays of light. These lines vary in length as they extend over the Virgin’s open book of scripture. One line almost carries over from the dove to the mirrored spray of lines emitted from the Virgin’s womb; however, the light ray halts in the middle before reaching the Virgin’s womb (Fig. 52). The lines radiating from Mary’s abdomen, also varying in length, are produced from what appears to be a small slit the Virgin’s tunic.39 The cut in the Virgin’s garment is apparent from the subtle change in the light rose color of the tunic to the dark brown mark where the slit appears.

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Chapter 3: Role of Script in Paintings of the Annunciation

Other artists have also included a commonplace image of the dove embodying the Holy Spirit and descending upon the Virgin and Gabriel. However, in these interpretations, the dove is hovering far above the scene. For instance, Francesco Pesellino’s *The Annunciation* from 1451-53 at the Courtauld Institute Gallery in London also features the symbolism of the dove surrounded by divine light (Fig. 53). In this painting, the light rays stretch diagonally across the composition, but does not come near the Virgin. The dove rests atop the light, but, like the divine light, does not make contact with Mary. Rather, the painting depicts the divine dove before it reaches the Virgin. Likewise, in the previously discussed Angelico’s *Annunciation*, Pesellino also paints the image of a dove incased in an orb of golden light above the Virgin’s head. In both these illustrations, neither the dove nor the light is close enough to touch the Virgin.

Unlike these other interpretations of the scene, Lippi’s *Annunciation* places the dove inches from the Virgin’s womb. The Lord’s dove loiters, wings outstretched, as if aiming the light at her womb. In an act of acceptance, the Virgin parts her robe inviting the light. The anticipated comingling of the rays emitted through Mary and the light of the divinely inspired dove would indicate a connection with the Holy Spirit in the moment of the conception, perhaps even reminiscent of the intimate act of touching. Similarly, there may be a correlation between the parallel positioning of the dove and the Gabriel’s right hand as he blesses the Virgin. In the same time as he reiterates the Word of the Lord and motions his hand during the announcement, the dove is releasing the power of the divine light. A straight line can be drawn connecting the angel’s raised right hand and the floating dove. With his eyes fixed on the dove, it appears as if Gabriel’s hand is directing the dove to this specific positioning beside the Virgin’s womb. Lippi
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may have used this unprecedented depiction of rays of light transferring between the dove and the Virgin’s womb to visually represent the Holy Spirit in the act of impregnating the Virgin’s impermeable womb.\textsuperscript{40}

Lippi’s illustration of the transfer of divine light and the accompanying pseudo script painting may answer the Virgin’s question, “Quomodo?” As discussed by Leo Steinberg and Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr. in their article on Lippi’s \textit{Annunciation}, the fifteenth century European understanding of optics and light may have inspired Lippi to create this interpretation, specifically in how light passes through the eye.\textsuperscript{41} Light enters and leaves through the eye forming a cone, similar to the illustration of light rays opening and spraying in different directions at the slit on the Virgin’s garment as well as the dove’s orbit.\textsuperscript{42} Given the dispersion of the manuscripts detailing optical information in the mid-fourteenth century, Lippi would have had access to this information to be able to realistically integrate it into his paintings.\textsuperscript{43} The allegory of the light passing through an eye creating vision can be likened to the divine light passing through Virgin’s womb, preserving her virginity and functioning as the vehicle for the conception. Indeed, Lippi had already used this device, as have many other Renaissance painters and writers, in his \textit{Annunciation} in the Martelli Chapel from 1440. In this painting, a small space is carved out of the foreground for a glass vase filled with water through which sunlight passes through and creates a shadow. Further, the theory of the light impregnating Mary also

\textsuperscript{40} Edgerton, “‘How Shall This Be?’ Reflections on Filippo Lippi’s ‘Annunciation’ in London, Part II,” 51.
\textsuperscript{41} Steinberg, “‘How Shall This Be?’ Reflections on Filippo Lippi’s ‘Annunciation’ in London, Part I,” 38.
\textsuperscript{42} Edgerton, “‘How Shall This Be?’ Reflections on Filippo Lippi's 'Annunciation' in London, Part II,” 47.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
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reflects the angel’s words that the Holy Ghost would “overshadow” the Virgin. The contemporary understanding of light and its religious significance corroborates the interpretation of Divine light causing the pregnancy. After Medieval and Renaissance philosophers discovered that light could pass through a transparent object unrefracted or an opaque, inflammable object and causes burning, light began to be associated with divine and moral power. Likewise, in the scene, light also illuminates the truth for the Virgin in the moment she accepts that she will be the vessel carrying the Lord’s child.

This specific imagery of divine light trying to connect with Mary’s womb may illustrate Lippi’s interpretation of Christ’s conception, as conjectured by Edgerton. His article notes that this unprecedented interpretation showing the transfer of light has not been given substantial attention nor has it been emulated. However, it is important to note that the metaphor of the light shining through glass in art and literature usually refers to Christ’s birth, not the method of his conception. As previously mentioned, artists and priests alike often circumvented the issue of the agent that lead to the Virgin’s pregnancy. In turn, artists from the Renaissance have created a number of metaphoric images that allude to different aspects of the impregnation. For example, the enclosed garden reflects the Virgin’s impenetrable womb and the dove represents the divine communication exchanged between the Lord and the Virgin. While artists such as Angelico and Pesselino have used the dove and beam of light in their paintings of the Annunciation, the

44 Edgerton, “‘How Shall This Be?’ Reflections on Filippo Lippi’s ‘Annunciation’ in London, Part II,” 46.
45 Ibid., 47.
46 Ibid., 51.
48 Edgerton, “‘How Shall This Be?’ Reflections on Filippo Lippi’s ‘Annunciation’ in London, Part II,” 50.
actual agent of the impregnation is not clearly identifiable. In part, by using these symbols, the Renaissance artists avoid directly addressing the question of how the Virgin becomes pregnant with the Christ child. Likewise, Lippi’s illustration only provides part of the response to the Virgin’s question, “Quomodo?” While the painting depicts the involvement of the Lord and the Word manifesting as divine light in the form of the dove, the actual method of the conception is not fully articulated. Although the rays of light emerging from the Virgin and the dove appear as if they are going to touch each other, that physical connection is not shown. Rather, perhaps due to the provocative nature of his interpretation, Lippi only implies the connection. Therefore, in addition to the rays of divine light, Lippi may have also included pseudo script to adequately illustrate the presence of the Word.

The blue robe containing pseudo script rests on the Virgin’s shoulders and drapes into large folds as it falls around her feet. The pseudo script is embroidered in golden thread in a dark colored frame around the edges of Mary’s robe. Evenly spaced dots follow the frame around the script. Similar to the pseudo script previously observed and discussed, Lippi’s script also attempts to emulate the strokes and lines formed by calligraphic tools. The lines change shape and thickness throughout the character. While the tops of the letters are wider in shape, the lines tend to taper off, as if painted with a calligraphic instrument using different amounts of pressure. The inscription is most similar to the kufic-style calligraphy, characteristic for its bold characters. Given the thickness of the lines, there is very little space between the shapes. As such, the individual characters are elongated vertically due to the cramped inscription. Similar to
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the pseudo script in Barnaba da Siena’s painting *Virgin and Child*, the slanted lines and corners of the characters intricately fit together, creating an interlocking design.

Along with their respectively optical and logocentric representations of the Annunciation, Lippi and Angelico may have also utilized pseudo script as another method of showing how Christ was conceived by alluding to the power of the Word. As has been already discussed, words hold a special spiritual significance in Christianity. For example, the obscurity of foreign languages has been noted in scripture to embody a mystical and spiritual power. As previously described in the Act of the Apostles, at the Feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit compelled the gathered apostles to started speaking fluently in foreign tongues previously unknown to them. The Feast was considered divinely significant because it marked the coming of the Holy Spirit. First, there was a strong wind and loud echoing noise from heaven that filled the house. Then, there were tongues of fire that came to rest on each of the apostles. Lastly, each of the apostles was bestowed with the gift of tongues.49 The event served as a demonstration of the influence of the Holy Spirit and the equally interminable power of the Lord and Christ. Therefore, this illustration of sovereignty would have only encouraged the apostles to more emphatically invest their faith in the Lord. Moreover, the event also reflected Christ’s words that his disciples would be baptized with the Holy Spirit, as John had baptized Him first with water.50 The act of a baptism creates a bodily and spiritual union between the faithful worshiper and Christ. While a baptism in water allows for the individuals’ salvation and entry into Christ’s body, a baptism with the Holy Spirit enables the

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50 Acts:1:5.
individual to acquire certain gifts and powers, such as the gift of tongues.\textsuperscript{51} Indeed, St. Peter considers the Feast of Pentecost as the beginning of the baptism by the Holy Spirit because the apostles are filled and compelled by the Holy Ghost, as one would be when they are baptized.\textsuperscript{52} In the Acts and in other areas of the scripture, speaking in obscure languages is considered a gift and an example of the Lord’s power. Particularly, the obscure and unknown nature of the episode may be the representation of the divine power. The apostles may not necessarily have understood how these events were occurring, but they would have known the events were a demonstration of the power and work of the Lord. Likewise, worshippers would not have been able to read or comprehend the illegible pseudo script on these works of the Annunciation, but they would have known the script was an element in promoting the devotion and veneration of the image through its placement in the composition on the garments of the figures.

The obscurity of the pseudo script may take on a similar significance in Lippi’s \textit{Annunciation} and Angelico’s \textit{Annunciation} as the speaking of tongues seen during the Feast of Pentecost. Although incomprehensible and unintelligible to the average Christian worshipper, members of Italian society would have been able to recognize the script as having been derived from an Eastern language. As previously mentioned, some worshippers may have incorrectly connected Arabic to the Holy Land and Greek and Aramaic are genuinely associated to the Early Christian era as the language of the New Testament and the authentic language spoken by Christ, respectively. Therefore, Christian worshippers would assumedly be able to recognize the appearance of the pseudo script in Angelico and Lippi’s paintings as significant. Understanding and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{51} Verna M. Linzey, \textit{The Baptism with the Holy Spirit} (Longwood: Xulon Press, 2004), 40.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
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identifying that the script had a mystical power was more important than being able to read or articulate the meaning of the script. As such, the pseudo script reflects the spirit of the Annunciation as a moving and powerful event shrouded in mystery. Some artists emulated the traditional compositional elements of Annunciation paintings while others like Lippi and Angelico experimented with new symbolism. While Lippi’s visual representation of the conception mirroring the optic system was a new and innovative illustration of the Annunciation, it has not been reproduced or replicated, perhaps because of the potentially inflammatory nature of the painting. By depicting a slit opening on the tunic of the Virgin’s abdomen, Lippi appears to be implicitly suggesting that her womb may have been penetrated in the course of the divine impregnation. Similarly, the splintered border of pseudo script on the Virgin’s garment at the area of the impregnation in Angelico’s painting also implies the idea of a broken barrier. While Lippi and Angelico may not have intended for their work to be interpreted in a potentially blasphemous manner, iconographic innovation, however insightful, can be obscure and invite misinterpretation. Their provocative work demonstrates the tension artists and theologians may have felt in attempting to uncover the mystery of the Annunciation while respecting the boundaries of their faith.

Pseudo script may have presented an acceptable compromise in properly relaying the intrigue and mysticism of the conception while simultaneously reflecting the importance of the divine Word to the Annunciation scene. While illegible, Lippi and Angelico may have been aware that their audience was at least familiar with the styles of script apparent in their paintings. While some artists utilized pseudo script as a decorative feature to perhaps promote the luxury of the painting, Lippi and Angelico’s use of pseudo
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script moves beyond the aesthetic and takes on meaning. In the context of the
Annunciation, the Virgin’s submission to Gabriel’s relaying the Lord’s message, prepares
her body to accept the divine Word incarnate. Gabriel’s message, the Virgin’s acceptance
and the Lord’s Word are all interacting together to culminate in the moment when she is
impregnated with Christ. Consequently, physical appearance of the pseudo script may
function in the painting as a representation of the how the Word is transformed into a
physical entity; Christ. Therefore, rather than merely ornamenting the edge of the
Virgin’s tunic, the pseudo script in these paintings serves the significant role of
portraying Christ’s physical incarnation.
Chapter 4: Divergent Uses of Pseudo Script in Later Works

Artworks from the Early to the High Italian Renaissance help chart the progression and development of Islamic pseudo script and the capacity in which it was utilized in Italian art. This trajectory begins in the late thirteenth century with paintings of the Madonna and Child and then moves to include more involved scenes of the Virgin and Christ, such as the Annunciation, the Coronation of the Virgin and scenes depicting other biblical figures in church vestments decorated with pseudo script. While the uses and purposes of pseudo script ranged from venerating the biblical figure whose garment it adorned or emphasizing the wealth of the patron, pseudo script had a generally universal positive association within Italian society until it appears in the High Renaissance, beginning in the late fifteenth century.

At this point in the Renaissance, artists began having more varied intentions with the Islamic pseudo script and moved beyond simply using calligraphy to recognize and honor biblical figures. Later Italian artists, such as Filippino Lippi (Fig. 37) as we have seen in Chapter two, still employed Arabic-style calligraphy to honor the Virgin, Christ, and the incarnate Word; others, however, used script strategically not only to venerate biblical figures, but to condemn certain characters, such as Judas, as well. Indeed, pseudo script in works created in the later fifteenth century took on more complicated significances, perhaps coinciding with the increased sophistication of art in the High Renaissance. Throughout the Renaissance, a return to classical Roman and Greek antiquity influenced artists on how to depict the poses and body language of figures in paintings, and eventually may have led to the waning use of the pseudo script in Italian works.¹ Moreover, Italian artists began incorporating the progressive theory of linear

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perspective from the 1430s into their paintings to achieve more realistic renderings of structures and rooms. Around the same time that artist’s were creating more naturalistic work, it appears some artists also began using pseudo script in new and more innovative ways, along with continuing to use script for the traditional purposes of venerating biblical figures as well. Throughout the later fifteenth century, there are several examples of artwork using pseudo script that diverges from the traditional uses of the fourteenth century. While some artists, such as Verrocchio, choose to continue using pseudo script in a positive fashion, other artists such as Cosimo Rosselli and Andrea Mantegna utilized Islamic calligraphy in an unprecedented approach that deviates from the strictly positive manner examined thus far.

As a central figure of Judaism and Islam as well as Christianity, Verrocchio’s *David* provides an example of pseudo script utilized positively on a work that moves beyond the examples previously discussed. Born Andrea di Michele Cione in Florence, Verrocchio (1435-1488) was among the most talented and prolific group of Tuscan sculptors and painters to emerge out of the fifteenth century. As a pioneering and innovative artist, Verrocchio created work in several different mediums, from bronze and marble to metal, as well as heading a painting workshop where Leonardo and Botticelli trained.² Like Filippo Brunelleschi and Botticelli, Verrocchio was also literate in the humanist works, such as Ovid, and he had a working knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman art.³ Indeed, he incorporated some of the poses and qualities he studied of works from antiquity into his sculptures.⁴ The Medici family, the ruling family over Florence

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³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
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during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, also recognized his talents and he became a
sort of court artist for the family, following the artist Donatello’s death.\(^5\)

Verrocchio’s *David* depicts the biblical story of David’s defeat of the giant
Goliath (Fig. 54). As discussed in the Book of Samuel, Saul, the king of Israel, was
facing the impending assault by the Philistines and their prized fighter, Goliath. David, a
young, handsome shepherd’s son, saw the Jewish people’s fear of Goliath and
volunteered himself, along with the aid of the Lord, to defeat the giant. Although at first
Saul was hesitant, he soon believed that David could be victorious and offered him his
heavy armor. However, David rejected Saul’s armor and instead chose to wear a
lightweight sheath. Armed with a sling, shepherd’s staff, a bag of pebbles and the Lord’s
support, David propelled a pebble at Goliath’s head and struck a fatal blow. David then
used Goliath’s sword to sever the giant’s head to be displayed as a trophy of the
Israelites’ victory. Therefore, as a wider allegory for persistent struggle of the Jewish
people also embodied by Moses, Samson and Judith, David’s story remains a Christian
and Judaic archetype for the triumph of good over evil.\(^6\)

Created in the 1460s, *David* is considered the bronze masterpiece from
Verrocchio’s early career. Shrouded in mystery, the conception and exact dating of the
bronze statue is still debated. While a document for the sale of the statue indicates the
Medici brothers Guiliano and Lorenzo the Magnificent owned the *David* in 1476, their
father, Piero di Medici was most likely the original commissioner of the work in the mid-

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\(^5\) Ibid.
434-436.
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to-late 1460s.\(^7\) While a life-size sculpture, the \textit{David} is still too small to have been
indefinitely placed within a public space. Therefore, the statue was probably
commissioned for a private space, perhaps in Medici palace.\(^8\) Moreover, the gilding that
has recently been rediscovered from restoration efforts reveals that these intricate details
were not meant to survive in an open environment.\(^9\) Consequently, historians presume the
\textit{David} was originally placed in the Medici palace until 1476 when it was later installed in
the \textit{Palazzo} della \textit{Signoria} or the town hall in Florence for the public to the admire.\(^10\)

Verrocchio’s bronze statue depicts slender, young, even effeminate David tasked
to defeated Goliath in remarkable detail. His crafted curls embody the volume of hair as it
hangs over the edges of his forehead. Having been recently restored, the gilded gold
details on his hair and armor are once again visible.\(^11\) As his left arm rests on the sides of
his hips, the curvature of his muscles is apparent in the positioning of his arm. As David’s
right arm grasps his sword, the bulging veins on his forearm further demonstrate the
realistic nature of the statue. David dons the lightweight sheath, instead of Saul’s armor,
which he takes off prior to facing Goliath.\(^12\) His ribs protrude slightly and navel is visible,
extenuating both the thinness of his armor and the slimness of his body. Similarly, the
muscles of legs are defined and subtlety outlined, but they are far from the strength of the
large, intimidating Goliath as he is often portrayed in artistic representations. David’s
meekly muscular body type may signal Verrocchio emphasizing David as the unlikely

\(^7\) Gary M. Radke, \textit{Verrocchio's David restored: A Renaissance bronze from the National Museum
\(^8\) Radke, \textit{Verrocchio's David restored: A Renaissance bronze from the National Museum of the
Bargello, Florence}, 62.
\(^9\) Ibid., 61.
\(^10\) Ibid.
\(^11\) Ibid.
\(^12\) Tsumura, \textit{The First Book of Samuel}, 434-436.
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winner of the fight with Goliath. Below his feet, Goliath’s severed head has come to rest, as a confident and victorious David wears a knowing smile.

Along with the slenderness of his body, in placing his arm on his waist and cocking his hips to the side, David also exudes an effeminacy and sensuality that further underline his youth and remain truthful to the biblical account of David. The effeminate nature of the statue is exhibited through David’s tightfitting armor. The statue’s apparent sensuality corroborates the biblical account of David in the Book of Samuel, which describes David’s handsomeness and Saul’s son Jonathan’s attraction to David. He wears neither the heavy armor offered him by Saul or the shepherd’s clothes he had worn previously. Instead, he wears an ornate and decorated armor with gilded floral and calligraphic details. Adorned with hems of Arabic-style pseudo script along the shoulder straps, the inscriptions create a V-shaped opening on his chest. The edges of the inscription on his chest meet in the center of the “V” and are joined by a nine-petal floret decoration. Two flowers are also placed on his chest, perhaps strategically meant to mimic areolae on female breasts. The V-shaped belt around his waist completes the flower motif with several smaller floret shapes. The flowers along with the skirted bottom, also decorated with a ban of pseudo script, only serve to further represent David effeminately. Given the details of his body that can be seen through the armor, the skirted bottom and his exposed shoulders, Verrocchio portrays David androgynously, similar to Donatello’s earlier interpretation of David from the mid-fifteenth century (Fig. 55).

Furthermore, by depicting David sensually, partially nude with his hand on this hip and wide-legged stance shifting his balance, Verrocchio seems to intentionally be connecting

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13 Radke, Verrocchio’s David restored: A Renaissance bronze from the National Museum of the Bargello, Florence, 63.
the statue to works from Roman and Greek antiquity with similar qualities. Specifically, the placement of the legs and the turn of the torso are features often seen in heroic poses from antiquity. Known as the “walking pose,” Verrocchio was most likely influenced by classical statuary, such as Greek sculptor Polykleitos’ *Diadoumenos*, in which the statue has one limp leg that slightly drags behind him and the other leg remains stationary; a pose often mimicked by other Greek and Roman artists (Fig. 56).

Moreover, Verrocchio’s *David*’s body type is similar to the *Spinario*, another a bronze statue from antiquity of a young boy with curled hair and thin, muscular arms and legs (Fig. 57). While it is difficult to determine what sources directly influenced Verrocchio, the *David*’s pose reveals an apparent attempt at portraying the figure as classically and naturalistically as possible.

The inscription on *David*’s armor is reminiscent of the descriptive *thuluth* style utilized to write the Qu’ran. The *thuluth* style was often used in Egyptian and Syrian art from the Mamluk regime. Given the Italian city-states’ trade relationship with the East, Verrocchio would mostly likely have had the opportunity to copy and reinterpret an inscription available on an object from the Islamic World exported to Western Europe. Or perhaps, he could have been inspired by a pseudo inscription on an Italian silk textile from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, as seen on a textile from Italy in the

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1370-1400 (Fig. 1). As previously described, the inscriptions form the shoulder straps as well as the hem of the skirt of his armor. While it is unlikely the inscription is an accurate reproduction of Arabic, the inscription appears authentic because the letters transition and flow into one another; a unique feature of Arabic calligraphy. The “hooks” at the end of the characters, formed by a thicker, bolder line at the ends of the letters, further demonstrates an attempt at authenticity (Fig. 58). While certain Arabic letters are discernable such as the alif and lam in part of the inscription, there are no words that can be identified nor can the inscription be read. Moreover, there are no diacritical or accents marks present in the inscription, which further inhibit the legitimacy of the inscription. After examining the script, Verrocchio appears to have mirrored and repeated certain characters, such as the character with three lines connected by two loops on the bottom of the letters (Fig. 59). Therefore, Verrocchio’s interpretation of pseudo script indicates he was most likely unfamiliar with Arabic calligraphy and pseudo script when he was commissioned to create the work. However, given that Piero di Medici’s inventory of 1463 included several brass and glass Mamluk works, the likely patron would have been familiar with pseudo-Arabic inscriptions originating from the Mediterranean East. Indeed, in 1464 he commissioned a circular stained glass window for the Church of Santissima Annunziata, which included a partly accurate Arabic-inspired inscription around the rim in the thuluth style (Fig. 60). As the patron of both works, Piero appears to have been aware of the luxurious status of pseudo script in both

19 Ibid., 163.
21 Ibid., 162.
22 Ibid., 163.
European and the Mediterranean society and, therefore, may have been responsible for its strategic inclusion on the *David*.

Given the gilded detail on the pseudo script and the ornateness of the armor containing the script, the pseudo inscription on Verrocchio’s *David* may further serve to designate and recognize David’s new honored status among the Jews as the chosen one. Unlike prior instances of pseudo script on the Virgin’s garments or on church vestments, Verrocchio’s *David* presents an example of pseudo script on a biblical figure that is a more revered and instrumental figure in Judaism than in Christianity. Represented as a savior of the Jewish people, David is venerated for overcoming significant odds and obstacles to defeat Goliath. As opposed to his humble beginnings as a shepherd boy, the elaborate pseudo inscription and decorated armor illustrate David’s transformation into the victorious king.²³ Given the costliness of bronze during the Renaissance, the medium was used almost exclusively for public commissions to be utilized by a guild or the Church. Therefore, the Medici family’s commission of a full-scale bronze statue, among other sculptures, itself meant to evoke luxury and showcase their power over Florence. Likewise, as already discussed, pseudo script was used on *tiraz* fabrics in the Islamic territories as a method of recognizing an official’s position. As the textiles were exported into Western Europe, the script continued to embody the same elite sense of luxury and indulgence among aristocrats and other wealthy citizens. By including script on a statue of David, Verrocchio may have been comparing David’s status as the chosen one to defeat Goliath with the prestige of an individual wearing a *tiraz* fabric.

Taking into account the statue’s likely original position in the Medici Palace as well as its status as a Medici donation outside the Florentine town hall, the pseudo script

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may also have a political significance in addition to its biblical connection. The Medici family consolidated political control throughout the fourteenth century and gained power due to their highly profitable banking enterprise. Their position as the wealthiest family in the city allowed them to take de-facto control over Florence, despite the presence of a republican government.\footnote{Radke, \textit{Verrocchio’s David restored: a Renaissance bronze from the National Museum of the Bargello, Florence,} 62.} The sculpture itself represents Medici power, as they were the only family in Florence that could afford to commission a large-scale bronze statue for their own personal use.\footnote{Ibid.} Around the time when Verrocchio’s \textit{David} was commissioned and created in the mid 1460s, Piero took over the family business responsibilities following his father, Cosimo’s death in 1464. Opposition forces within the local Florentine government believing that Piero was now vulnerable without his father’s strong leadership, staged an unsuccessful coup to usurp the Medici family. The opposition had not taken into account Piero’s shrewd and strategic thinking that helped uncover the plans and quash them, leaving the family in a stronger position than prior to the coup.\footnote{Ibid., 65.} As the \textit{David} was created in the aftermath of these events, the extravagant nature of the statue may have served as a reaffirmation of the family’s power. Indeed, it would show that the family had the disposable wealth and power to be able to commission an expensive bronze statue for their own use without providing any immediate benefit to the Florentine public. As such, the pseudo script, as a signifier of regal status and wealth, exemplifies the Medici’s position as the supreme power within Florentine society, despite the forces working to topple their regime. The script may also function to connect the Medici’s elevated status with David’s position among the Lord’s
chosen people. In identifying themselves with the David, the Medici may also be
designating their challengers as the philistines, fated to lose to the divinely anointed one.
Further, Verrocchio’s interpretation of David as a young and promising adolescent
warrior may also symbolically refer to Piero’s sons Lorenzo and Guilano, who were
teenagers at the time Verrocchio was commissioned to create the work. As such, the
inclusion of the script could also be reinforcing the regal ambitions of protecting and
maintaining the Medici dynasty through the leadership of the divinely chosen youth.
Perhaps by attempting to mirror David’s victory sanctioned by the Lord, Piero may have
commissioned the David and utilized pseudo script at this specific time during their
control of Florence to showcase the Medici’s own success over their opposition, despite
the Goliath-like threat from their opposition.

As another example of a bronze work, pseudo script also appears to be used in a
positive manner in several panels of Filarete’s (1400-1469) bronze doors as part of the
public main entrance to St. Peter’s Basilica from the mid-fifteenth century. A band of
Arabic-style pseudo script follows along the inner frames of the St. Paul (Fig. 61), St.
Peter (Fig. 62) and Christ (Fig. 63) panels as well as on both of the figures’ haloes. As
seen most clearly in the St. Paul and St. Peter’s panels, the script has the authentic
appearance of the classic thuluth style, the traditional script for writing the Qu’ran. With
varying thickness, the lines mimic the style of a calligraphic tool. The script also boldly
appears across Christ’s halo in the Christ panel, as also seen in Masaccio and Gentile da
Fabriano’s previously mentioned works in Chapter two. As the halo is an important
honorable signifier of divinity, the inclusion of pseudo script has significance similar to
Arabic script on church vestments. By including script on these identifiably Christian
features, the artists as well as the commissioners of the work would have been comfortable associating the Church with Arabic script. Given that the script is located on the public doors to the basilica, all individuals walking into the church must pass the pseudo script. Perhaps functioning as a permeable barrier and threshold, the inscription on the doors may act like a purifier that blesses worshippers as they pass into the sanctity of the basilica. Further, the reliefs above and below the Paul and Peter panels depict scenes from Byzantine Emperor John VIII Palaiologos’ trip to Italy in 1438-9 to discuss an alliance between the Greek and Roman churches to address the Ottoman Empire’s encroachment in the East.27 As previously seen in Pisanello’s drawing, the pseudo script and the appearance of a tiraz garment may have been used to project the image a stable empire. As such, perhaps the script is also included on the doors of the basilica to associate the figures with the prestige of the tiraz fabrics. Whether the script was meant as religious veneration, the script may not been completely visible to the worshipper, especially for the Christ panel given its height at the top of the door. This would indicate the placement was most likely not merely for decorative purposes. Rather, the script may have been used to transfer the prestige and honor of the tiraz inscriptions to the biblical figures and connect the script to the sacred space of the church and the liturgical ceremonies that take place in that space.

In a more privileged and exclusive setting within the Vatican, there are several examples of pseudo script appear on the garments of biblical figures in the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel. Erected in 1477, the chapel was built on the foundation of an older structure known as the Great Chapel by Pope Sixtus IV and named the reconstructed

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chapel after himself. While Filarete’s bronze doors could be admired by the entire public, the Sistine Chapel created exclusively for a group of nearly two hundred men that included the pope, the members of the papal curia, the College of Cardinals, senior churchmen and important secular public officials. Pope Sixtus enlisted several painters, such as Pietro Perugino, Luca Signorelli and Cosimo Rosselli to decorate the interior of the chapel over the course of several decades, resulting in some of the most accomplished works from the Italian Renaissance. Sixtus’s successor and nephew Pope Julius II later commissioned Michelangelo to paint the chapel’s ceiling illustrating scenes from the Book of Genesis, as well as the Old Testament Prophets and Pagan Sibyls. While the exterior is largely unassuming and plain, the walls within the chapel are lined with 16 narratives frescoes created by the aforementioned artists. The fresco cycles are arranged in a strategic sequence with the Life of Moses on the right wall opposite Life of Christ cycle, paralleling the lives of the two leaders. Between the windows, frescoes depicting the cycle of standing Popes are painted. As discussed in depth by Carol F. Lewine, specific scenes may have been included in the cycles as an attempt to reflect the religious texts referring to the events between the Advent and the Pentecost during which “the entire Christian mystery and the entire life of Christ’s are unfolded in Roman liturgy.” Christ’s cycle omits his miracles and, instead, focuses on his ministry. Likewise, the Life of Moses frescoes avoid familiar scenes such as the Ten Plagues and instead depict less

30 Pietrangeli, The Sistine Chapel: the Art, the History, and the Restoration, 27.
31 Ibid., 13.
known events such as the *Circumcision of Moses’ Son* and the *Punishment of Korah*.\(^{33}\) By intentionally excluding the other more popular episodes, the Pope may have intended for the frescoes to coincide with Lenten themes. Moreover, choosing these scenes may also have been motivated by a deliberate return to Early Christian sources to investigate the origins of Christianity.\(^{34}\) Pope Sixtus was drawn to the Franciscan order that advocated for a return to the ideals of the early church.\(^{35}\) Likewise, the Sistine Chapel itself was also a reflection of the prestige and power of the pope and the Church.

Therefore, while the wall paintings were illustrated to display several liturgical messages, they were also a representation of “the history of the Papacy and a statement of its legitimacy, its priority…and its absolute rights.”\(^{36}\) Consequently, there were likely several motivations and thoughts behind selecting the scenes that would be included in the chapel. The coordination between these different intentions reflects that deliberate symbolic decisions were made to fully reflect the religious reverence of the chapel and papacy.

As part of these deliberate decisions, artists may have included pseudo script on the hems of the garments of the biblical figures, such as in Luca Signorelli’s fresco *The Last Acts and Death of Moses* from 1481-2 (Fig. 64) and Pietro Perugino’s fresco *Delivery of the Keys* from 1481-2 (Fig. 68) for a number of reasons. As the last narrative fresco of the Mosaic cycle, Luca Signorelli’s *The Last Acts and Death of Moses* includes pseudo script on the hems of several figures’ garments. Taught by Piero della Francesca, Signorelli (1441 or 1450-1523) produced work throughout the fifteenth and into the

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 3.
\(^{34}\) Lewine, *The Sistine Chapel walls and the Roman Liturgy*, 13.
\(^{35}\) Ibid.
sixteenth century. Despite having prominent patrons such as Pope Sixtus IV, Pope Julius II, Lorenzo di Medici as well as several other individuals and members of the religious order, Signorelli has been described as the “least known major artist of the Renaissance.” His fresco appears at the end of the Mosaic cycle opposite from Cosimo Roselli’s *The Last Supper* to be discussed later. The foreground of the fresco depicts the biblical scene in which Moses transfers his staff of leadership to Joshua, a Jewish hero that plays an important part in Christian liturgy. To the right side of the fresco, Moses sits enthroned reading from the book of law to a cluster of Israelites at his feet. The prominence of Moses’ giving over his power and assuming his role as the lawgiver in the fresco, may be a symbolic representation of the replacement of Judaism with Christianity with the coming of Christ. Likewise, Moses’ narrative reflects the ceremonial use of the *ferula* or the rod that is handed down to the newly elected pope assuming the office. As much as the Sistine Chapel walls depicted religious liturgy and biblical scenes, it was also an elaborate depiction of the Church’s power. As such, the inclusion of this specific scene may not only conclude the narrative of Moses’ life, but also serve to metaphorically depict the Church as it sees itself; as the lawgiver and divinely elected leader within European society.

Signorelli includes pseudo script most prominently and authentically across the thigh of the figure in the center with his back to the viewer (Fig. 65). The highly stylized inscription has the appearance of a calligraphic tool with tapered edges and sharp corners, similar to Arabic calligraphy. This inscription is notable because of its bold presence on the central figure of the fresco to which the viewer’s eyes are immediately drawn. Similar

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38 Lewine, *The Sistine Chapel walls and the Roman Liturgy*, 86.
39 Ibid.
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to Filarete’s bronze doors, while the frescoes would have been placed on the walls of the chapel within eyesight of the viewer, the pseudo script would not have been easily visible. Therefore, the placement of the pseudo script in the frescoes raises questions about its purpose. The script does not appear either on Joshua or Moses, the central figures of the episodes. Rather, Signorelli has included script solely on the clothing of less important characters, such as the aforementioned figure with script on his thigh and the nude youth seated at reading of the Law, among others.\(^\text{40}\)

While the script may have been used as mere decoration, given that the placement of the fresco cycles in the chapel and the images that were selected were done so strategically, the use and positioning of pseudo script in Signorelli’s fresco would seem meaningful and there are multiple possible explanations for its inclusion. The exclusion of the script on Moses and Joshua may relate to how this specific scene depicts the transfer of power, and thus, the momentary equal status of Moses and Joshua. Instead of recognizing one figure over the other with pseudo script, it is possible the exclusion of calligraphy was meant to show they are both equally important. Perhaps more compelling, throughout the Mosaic cycle, Moses is depicted almost exclusively wearing a yellow gown and green cloak with red lining.\(^\text{41}\) For example, Botticelli and Cosimo Rosselli both illustrate Moses in the same yellow and green garments in the Punishment of Korah (Fig. 66) and The Adoration of the Golden Calf (Fig. 67), respectively. By depicting him consistently in the same color garments, viewers would have been able to easily identify Moses in the scenes. However, in both Botticelli and Rosselli’s frescoes, Moses also has a band of pseudo script on his green cloak, while Signorelli’s Moses does

\(^\text{40}\) Pietrangeli, The Sistine Chapel: the Art, the History, and the Restoration, 144.

\(^\text{41}\) Henry, The Life and Art of Luca Signorelli, 41.
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not. Signorelli’s decision to diverge from previous depictions of Moses in the cycle may correlate to the specificities of the biblical episodes in the scene and their larger importance within the cycle. Instead of highlighting and venerating Moses or Joshua individually, the pseudo script may instead be used to show the importance of the entire scene in general and its metaphoric importance to the Church.

In representing the last testaments of Moses, the fresco may metaphorically be illustrating the change of leadership and power in the papal office as well as the Church’s position as the divine lawgivers for European society. Consequently, the pseudo script, despite its appearance on less important figures, may be signifying the importance of the scene, rather than Moses or Joshua specifically. In showing the change in leadership, this scene and the script serves as an affirmation of the Church and Pope’s power, which is exchanged through succession. Inscriptions on Islamic textiles indicated that the caliph or Muslim ruler recognized the state official’s position in society. Likewise, pseudo script in Signorelli’s fresco may function as the divine Word sanctioning the Church’s position and power. This interpretation is even more compelling given that, as a private space, the chapel’s audience was limited to the religious order and the papal office. Unlike the ordinary worshipper, the pseudo script would have been present during masses and ceremonies in the chapel, perhaps to help sanctify the Church’s religious power during these liturgical services.

The pseudo script in Perugino’s Delivery of the Keys may similarly connect to the motif of the papal office’s position and authority, since this is the explicit message of the fresco (Fig. 68). An apprentice for Verrocchio, Perugino (1450-1523) began to work
independently in both Florence and Perugia in 1472. He focused his technique in producing accurate spatial environments through linear perspective and symmetrical compositions that aligned with the Florentine style of the late fifteenth century. While he was regarded for a time as the “best master in Italy,” his work was also considered somewhat formulaic as he often repeated the same figure type and pose. After his work was no longer thought to be progressive among Florentine society, he focused his efforts in Umbria. Perugino participated in decorating the Sistine Chapel from 1480-2, most notably producing Delivery of the Keys. As part of the Life of Christ cycle, the fresco illustrates the moment Christ gives St. Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven, as indicated in the Gospel of Matthew. In the fresco, the figures surround Christ and a kneeling St. Peter as they are uniformly fanned out from the center, similar to the composition of Masaccio’s The Tribute Money that was painted earlier in 1425 (Fig. 69). While artists would normally take steps to bluntly differentiate Judas from the rest of the figures, Perugino depicts Judas as the fifth figure to the left of Christ with a halo like every other apostle. However, in a more subtle attempt at foreshadowing his eventual betrayal, Perugino illustrates Judas with his hand in a moneybag referencing how he gave Jesus to the Romans for money. The middle ground of the fresco depicts the Stoning of Christ. Dressed in traditional Roman robes from antiquity, several figures’ garments, including those of Christ and St. Peter, are adorned with a faded decorative hem. Upon

44 Boskovits, Italian paintings of the fifteenth century (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2003), 347
45 Ibid.
46 Becherer, Pietro Perugino: Master of the Italian Renaissance, 258
47 Lewine, The Sistine Chapel walls and the Roman Liturgy, 65.
48 Ibid.
closer examination, the decoration is similar to a pseudo script reminiscent of Arabic calligraphy. Like Signorelli’s fresco, Delivery of the Keys is also a symbolic representation of the Gift of the Keys that was crucial for the founding of the Church.\footnote{Ibid., 69.} This same scene recalls the moment when Christ honors the first Roman bishop with a position of power, in the way that the pope is selected and honored as the head of the Church.\footnote{Ibid., 70.} Indeed, this biblical episode sanctified and established the succession of ecclesiastical sovereigns beginning with St. Peter as the first pope, as depicted in this fresco. Again, this scene and the pseudo script may have been included in the chapel to consecrate the Church’s successive leadership and well as its divinely acquired responsibility over the salvation and damnation of the Christian world, which was derived from Christ’s endorsement.

By contrast, the placement of the pseudo script in Cosimo Rosselli’s (1439-1507) The Last Supper executed in 1481-2 in the Sistine Chapel on Judas’ robe may present a more involved and complicated representation of Arabic-style calligraphy than the strictly positive examples that have been discussed thus far (Fig. 70). Situated on the northern wall of the Sistine Chapel next to Perugino’s Delivery of the Keys, the fresco appears as the last part of the Story of Christ and includes several other episodes within the image. The background of the fresco features a rounded apse depicting three windows illustrating Christ’s Passion, The Agony in the Garden and the Kiss of Judas and the Crucifixion panels from right to left.\footnote{Lewine, The Sistine Chapel walls and the Roman Liturgy, 69.}

Rosselli uses the symmetrical positioning of the figures to symbolize their different roles and significance in the scene. In the foreground, a five-sided semi-circular
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table includes the twelve apostles receiving the news that one among them would betray Christ. Seated opposite from Judas, Christ appears in the center of the table blessing the chalice and the host. As often depicted in scenes of the Last Supper, Judas sits isolated on the other side of the table, splitting the fresco into two equal halves. The apostles on either side of the table separated by Judas are shown emphatically reacting to the pronouncement of betrayal; some clasping their hands in prayer, some in exclamation, some in protestation of innocence, while others turn to their neighbor to discuss their surprise and horror. St. John, seated to Judas’ right, appears somber, quiet and unresponsive as he stares at Judas. Perhaps like Christ, St. John knows that Judas is the betrayer. While the other apostles’ haloes are golden, Judas’ halo is a dark color, in another attempt to differentiate him from the others. He has a removed and distant look on his face as if he is listening to the red devil on his back whispering in his ears. The profile of Judas’ left side is visible as he faces Christ. Their adversarial pose may be symbolically reflected by the cat and dog fight occurring in front of the table. Likewise, the animals may also relate to a quote from the Gospel of Matthew, “Do not give that which is holy to dogs,” in which case, the fight would also serve as a cautionary warning of Judas’ betrayal. There are also several references to Christian numerology within the fresco, specifically the number 8 and 5. Both symbolic numbers, 8 signified perfection and it was also on the 8th day that Christ was circumcised. The number has also been connected to both baptism and the Resurrection. The significance of the numeral may account for there being 8 original frescoes in each cycle. The octagonal ceiling in the

52 Ibid.
53 Lewine, *The Sistine Chapel walls and the Roman Liturgy*, 69
54 Ibid., 86.
55 Ibid., 15.
56 Ibid., 66.
fresco demonstrates how Rosselli incorporated numerology into his work. With the exclusion of Judas, there are 8 pairs of individuals that are huddled together in couples, creating further symmetry in the painting. Further, the number 5, perhaps representing the five wounds Christ receives during the Passion, is reflected in the number of panels in the background; three with images and two blank walls. Moreover, the unusual table where the apostles are seated also has five sides. These distinct details illustrate Rosselli’s intentions to derive and create meaning from each element in his fresco, including the pseudo script on the garments of the figures.

While each apostle’s robe is decorated with a hem of ornamentation, it appears that only Judas and St. John’s robes have a border of pseudo script (Fig. 71). Although the exact nature of the script is difficult to determine given the aged and diminished quality of the fresco, the letters have the appearance of Arabic script. Rosselli makes the deliberate decision to choose which figures he wanted to be associated with the pseudo script. This fresco provides perhaps one of the few instances where pseudo script is utilized in a work including Christ and not included on his person. Indeed, Rosselli has chosen to depict Christ and nearly every other apostle with a simpler decorative border and instead used the script along the hem of Judas’ robe. St. John, who quietly looks directly at Judas without reacting, also appears to have a ban of pseudo script around his neckline and possibly on the edge of his cloak on his shoulder (Fig. 72). In the biblical narrative, St. John was the only apostle that remained with Christ during the Passion and until his death. Moreover, among the four gifts bestowed to him by the Lord, St. John was given the grace of virginal chastity.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, unlike Judas, St. John was free from

being corrupted, by the flesh or through the mind. Indeed, St. John’s loyalty and devotion would be considered the opposite of Judas’ actions. Therefore, while Perguino utilized the symbol of the moneybag to segregate and mark Judas in his *Delivery of the Keys*, Rosselli may have instead used pseudo script partly as a means of recognizing and calling attention to these two figures. Rosselli’s interpretation of *The Last Supper* is not solely concerned with venerating and honoring Christ, like previous examples that have been discussed. Instead, the fresco uses pseudo script to focus on Judas’ actions and isolating him as the negative figure in the painting through a comparison with St. John.

Consequently, pseudo script in Rosselli’s fresco has multiple meanings. He may be using the script negatively to condemn Judas for his cowardly betrayal of Christ, while simultaneously venerating St. John for his resilience. Instead of carrying a strictly positive or negative connotation, the inscriptions on this piece are informed by the individual on whom it appears and thus, takes on both positive and negative attributions. While some Italian artists often used pseudo script as merely a decorative purpose, to convey luxury or even to honor the biblical figure, the inscriptions in Rosselli’s fresco appear to have a more complex significance conferring both reverence and a denunciation.

In a similar complex use of pseudo script, Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) may have used pseudo script in his *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* from 1495 to both negatively portray Holofernes while also honoring Judith (Fig. 73). Born near Padua, Mantegna apprenticed for Paduan artist Francesco Squarcione at an early age and was educated at his school established in 1440.  

classical antiquity into his artwork as well as his progressive techniques involving spatial illustrations and linear perspective. After leaving Squarcione’s studio, Mantegna began his own independent work in 1448 and later moved permanently to Mantua in 1459, where he worked for three generations of the aristocratic Gonzaga family.59

Mantegna’s Judith with the Head of Holofernes is painted in tempera on a wooden panel, though he was often used the technique of distemper on canvas.60 The painting depicts the story of Judith, a virtuous Jewish widow, who seduces the Assyrian general Holofernes and beheads him before he can defeat the city of Bethulia. Depicting the dichotomy of good and evil, Judith and Holofernes was often a subject represented by artists in their works. Derived from the Book of Judith from the Old Testament, the story begins when Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of the Assyrians, ordered his general to lay siege over the Jews in Bethulia because the city blocked his route into Jerusalem. In an effort to save her people, the beautiful and chaste widow Judith volunteered her assistance. Having befriended the general and enthralled him with her beauty, Judith convinced Holofernes she would aid him in winning victory over the city. Waiting until Holofernes became intoxicated on wine, Judith then moved swiftly and beheaded him with his sword. She along with her servant, Abra, took the severed head to the city wall of Behtulia for all to see the dead general and signal the Assyrian’s defeat.61 Judith’s heroism as she freed the Jewish people has been paralleled to Samson as well as the biblical narratives of David and Moses.62 Consequently, similar to the story of David and 

59 Boskovits, Italian paintings of the fifteenth century, 436.
60 Ibid., 436-8.
62 Ibid., 155.
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Goliath, artists throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance may have been attracted to her story because it showcased the struggle between good and evil where Judith represented the virtuous and Holofernes the immoral. As such, Judith also became an allegorical figure for the Virgin Mary.63 This connection is further cemented as Bethulia is derived from the Hebrew word betulah, meaning virgin as well as innocent young woman.64 Judith embodied the virtues of the Virgin Mary, including her devout and self-sacrificing nature. By contrast, Holofernes exhibits the vices of greed and pride as the Assyrians intended to conquer Bethulia and utilize its riches.65 Therefore, the story of Judith and Holofernes has a very clearly delineated hero and villain in Christian typology.

In the painting, Judith steps forward with the sword in hand as Holofernes’ tent unfurls open. Judith’s left hand plucks at the tresses of his hair as Holofernes’ severed head dangles, his face turned away from the viewer. She looks off into the distance, nonchalantly passing Holofernes’ head to the servant catching the head in a mustard colored bag. Holofernes’ foot rests in a bed of tussled white sheets with a golden, ornamented bedpost, a more discreet reminder of Holofernes’ presence in the painting. Mantegna’s used minute strokes to create the exhaustive detail of the shell gold on the bedpost and the sword.66 Judith is dressed in a cross-body navy covering, leaving the majority of her upper body exposed to reveal a thin white dress, perhaps associated with her chastity and purity. The servant holding the bag dons a traditional wrapped headpiece, signaling her association with the East.

64 Cheney, “Giorgio Vasari’s Judith and Holofernes: Athena or Aphrodite?” 156.
66 Boskovits, Italian paintings of the fifteenth century, 438.
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Holferenes’ tent is tinted a light coral color with a ban of golden embroidered Arabic-style pseudo script. Various colors of tassels are suspended from the edges of the embroidered hems. The characters of the script crowd together forming an interlocking design as the corners and curves of the letters fit into each other. Similar to the kufic style calligraphy, the letters are thicker with longer vertical strokes and short horizontal strokes. Like Rosselli’s fresco, the pseudo script on Holferenes’ tent diverges from previous examples of pseudo script in works from the Renaissance as it has a complex, twofold significance in the context of the painting.

Mantegna’s tent represents an instance of pseudo script used to simultaneously recognize Holferenes’ negative image and perhaps also to identify Judith as the savior of the city. As the embodiment of vice and evil in the story, Holferenes is decidedly viewed negatively in both Christian liturgy as well as artistic portrayals of the narrative. In Christian symbolic liturgy, in particular, Judith’s victory was seen as the triumph of chastity and humility over Holferenes’ pride and wanton nature.67 Given the archetype established by previous utilizations of script in paintings from the Renaissance, Judith’s garments would have been the traditional location for the script decoration. Script was often included on the garments or the halo of the Virgin Mary as seen in Gentile da Fabriano’s Madonna of Humility from 1422 (Fig. 35) or on the vestments of bishops, priests as well as the Lord, as evidenced in Filippo Lippi’s Coronation of the Virgin from 1447 (Fig. 17) Italian artists also utilized pseudo Arabic calligraphy on particular objects, such as the cover of the Bible in Filippino Lippi’s Madonna and Child from 1475-80 (Fig. 37). These inscriptions—authentic or interpreted—appeared on objects that the

artist wanted to honor and celebrate. By associating the pseudo script with the garments of the Virgin, the vestments of the Lord or the cover of the Bible, Italian artists were implying that the script had a comparable honor. Likewise, in an effort to recognize her devoutness and to honor the triumph of good over evil, Mantegna could have included script in the typical manner artists had before him. However, Mantegna appears to have deliberately and boldly chosen to include script on the tent of the Eastern general, rather than the hem of Judith’s robe. This decision may have several reasons. It is possible that Mantegna included the script as a decorative feature not meant to signify a deeper significance. However, this explanation is less likely given Mantegna’s innovative and progressive work.

In a more compelling explanation, Mantegna may have used Arabic pseudo script to negatively associate the luxury of script-adorned Islamic textiles with Holofernes’ wantonness. As previously mentioned, tiraz textiles with Arabic inscriptions were a luxury good from the Islamic East exported to the West for wealthy aristocrats and other affluent members of European society to decorate their homes or garments. Artists included inscriptions in paintings inspired by tiraz fabrics at the behest of the patron to exhibit his or her ability to afford the expensive textiles. However, while these were instances of pseudo script depicted positively, Mantegna’s *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* may negatively be correlating the luxury of pseudo script with Holofernes’ licentious and greedy nature. According to the biblical story, Holofernes and the Assyrians wished to overcome Bethulia and conquer its rich resources. As opposed to Holofernes’ vice, Judith represents humility, as is demonstrated by her simple, unremarkable clothing. Indeed, Mantegna’s efforts to juxtapose Holofernes’ wanton

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68 Cheney, “Giorgio Vasari’s Judith and Holofernes: Athena or Aphrodite?” 156.
luxury with Judith’s humble nature may explain his decision to omit pseudo script from Judith’s garments, as other artists would have done. As Mantegna would not have wanted to connect Judith with indulgent luxury or sumptuous fabrics, placing the inscription on the general’s tent corroborates the Assyrians’ gluttonous intentions for conquering Bethulia. The gold shell detail on the bedpost and the handle of the sword indicate that Mantegna took the time to create extravagant detail on certain parts of the painting as a method of recognizing and designating their importance. While the bedpost would again relate to the Assyrians’ desire for luxurious goods, the handle of the sword was the object utilized to kill Holofernes. Likewise, the pseudo script was also meticulously painted in gold as the opulent fabric owned by the Assyrian general. Consequently, these decisions show that Mantegna strategically considered which objects he wished to associate with luxury using pseudo script or other painting techniques. This interpretation of Mantegna’s work would illustrate one instance of pseudo script being utilized to represent a negative portrayal of a biblical figure.

In another possible theory, Mantegna may have employed pseudo script to portray the Assyrians and the Mediterranean East negatively. The painting already depicts several stereotypically Eastern elements to help authentically situate the scene in the Mediterranean territories. For example, Abra, the servant that accepts the head of Holofernes, wears a turban, a stereotypical headpiece that is typically associated with the Islamic East. Moreover, the colors of the painting, the garments worn by the figures and the tent evoke the atmosphere of the East. Viewers may previously have seen inscriptions in paintings located on the garments of the Virgin or even in real life on the elegant dresses of aristocrats who had them incorporated into their wardrobe, as seen previously.
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with Raphael’s *Portrait of Elisabetta Gonzaga* (Fig. 17). Consequently, it is likely that viewers would already associate calligraphy with honoring a biblical figure or displaying the wealth of an individual in the upper echelons of society. Alternatively, Mantegna associates the pseudo script in this painting with Holofernes and the Assyrians. Instead of venerating a biblical figure, the script is not only linked with Holofernes’ greed, but also with the immoral actions of the Assyrians as well. By connecting the inscription to the Assyrian general, the pseudo script may also be creating a more general negative commentary on the people of the Mediterranean East.

Mantegna’s use of pseudo script to portray the East negatively is corroborated by the underlying prejudices against the Islamic religion and territories inherent in the Christian world. As discussed previously, Venice developed close relationships with Islamic trading territories. However, in order to support these profitable trade routes and maintain these relations, the Venetian oligarchy had to often circumvent the religious and philosophical differences they had with the Islamic world.\(^69\) It is important to remember that while strong trade relations existed between these regions from the thirteenth century on, beginning in the eleventh century the Crusades were motivated by defeating Islam and driving the Muslims out of Jerusalem.\(^70\) Following the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottoman Empire, Islam had to be treated as a military and political threat to the West.\(^71\) The impetus behind reconquering the Holy Land from the Muslims would certainly color the Christian West’s perception of the Muslims. Indeed, Venice’s close

\(^{71}\) Carboni. *Venice and the Islamic World, 828-1797*, 17.
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relationship with Islamic territories and its immersion in their culture were sometimes even deemed suspicious by Christian Europe.\(^{72}\)

Given the placement of the pseudo script and Judith, the inscription may also function as a means of honoring Judith, further complicating Mantegna’s use of Islamic calligraphy. With her arm carrying Holofernes’ head crosses over her body, Judith stands beneath the billowing opening of the tent framed by the pseudo script. While Mantegna does not directly associate her with the script, the lines created by the bans of script lead to Judith. The triangular, decorative flaps with the hanging tassels point toward Judith standing below with the head of Holofernes. The symmetrical opening of the tent and the placement of the pseudo script situate Judith in the center of the painting. There are prior compositional prototypes which place the Virgin Mary at the center framed by unfurled drapery. For example, Masaccio’s *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* from 1424 depicts St. Anne standing behind the Virgin as she holds the Christ Child (Fig. 74). Behind these figures, angels hold open a richly decorated fabric with maroon flowers contrasted against a black background. Moreover, the Verrocchio’s *The Virgin and Child with Two Angels* from the late 1470s similarly situates the Virgin in the center of two opening lavishly decorated curtains in the background (Fig. 75). The compositions of these paintings serve to draw the viewer’s eyes to the figures in the center, the Virgin or Judith. Likewise, the opulent fabrics of the curtains and Mantegna’s use of the inscriptions further confirm the figures’ importance within the context of the painting. Consequently, the lines created by the tent and Judith’s position in the painting aligns her within the frame of the pseudo script, drawing the viewer’s eyes from the script to Judith in the center of the painting.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 18.
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Taking into account these various interpretations, Mantegna may have meant for the pseudo script to evoke several meanings. The script may have been associated with both Judith and Holofernes, providing a unique example of one of the more intricate uses of Arabic-style calligraphy in Renaissance art. Metaphorically, the dual purposes of the script could relate to the dichotomous nature of the Judith and Holofernes biblical story, in which Judith is the moral and religious opposite of Holofernes. While he is gluttonous, wanton and proud, Judith exudes humility and chastity. As such, these two possible interpretations of the script—one honoring Judith and the other emphasizing Holofernes’ vices—may actually be complimentary. How the pseudo script is interpreted depends on the context of the painting and how the viewer approaches the composition. Therefore, the pseudo script is malleable to both positive and negative connotations.

This polarity indicates that Mantegna may not have had personal notions of the script itself, but rather saw it as a tool for furthering the significance of the painting, whether by honoring Judith, condemning Holofernes or both. Likewise, Rosselli’s fresco also includes pseudo script on the two religious opposites at the Last Supper, the traitor Judas and the loyal St. John the apostle. This later Sistine Chapel fresco further provides evidence that Islamic pseudo script developed into a more complicated role by the end of the fifteenth century. Indeed, both Verrocchio’s David and Mantegna’s Judith and Holofernes focus pseudo script related to Judaic figures, as opposed to earlier examples that only involved the Lord, the Virgin Mary and Christ. Perhaps as artwork grew more sophisticated and realistic entering into the High Renaissance and following Leon Battista Alberti’s theory on linear perspective in the mid fifteenth century, the use of pseudo script also grew beyond the limited purposes for which it had been previously
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employed. Mantegna took the original purpose of using Islamic inscriptions to relay luxury and opulence to instead depict the religious immorality of overindulging in fine goods. Likewise, by including pseudo script in two distinct capacities, Rosselli is simultaneously recognizing Judas’ betrayal and St. John devotion. Displaying pseudo script in these interpretations indicates that it had become a small part of the fabric of Renaissance artistic technique and symbolism. While the calligraphy emerged from a foreign territory whose beliefs and ideals would appear to run counter to Christian Europe, Islamic script evolved into a device evidently utilized intentionally by Renaissance artists to further the motifs and meaning of their artwork.
Conclusion

The evolution of pseudo script in Italian painting chronicles both the change of artistic style and technique over the course of the Renaissance as well as the development of the trade relations between the West and the East. Along with their profitable trade with the Mediterranean East, Western artists were exposed to a number of Eastern products acquired by wealthy aristocratic residents of the Italian city-states. More specifically, Venice facilitated healthy trade relations with the Mamluk regime and the Ottoman Empire, in part because of its genuine interest in Islamic culture. In addition to the commodities entering into the West, Islamic artistic ideas and motifs were being traded as well. Impressed by the high quality of the Islamic products being brought into the West, geometric and symmetric patterned designs were being integrated into silk textiles being produced in Lucca and the enameled glass coming out of Venice. Italian textile artisans and painters appear to have also copied the calligraphic inscriptions found on the tiraz textiles.

Some Italian Renaissance artists may have been interested in the inscriptions for their aesthetic value. The intricacy of the lines and the mystical appearance of the language would have attracted artists and patrons alike. Indeed, the popularity of the appearance of the script would help explain why several paintings of the Madonna and Child by various artists each individually included script only on the Virgin’s garments. The pseudo script became a convention to be imitated, although Barnaba, Martini and Ugolino each uniquely reinterpreted the style of the calligraphy to their own desired look. However, this script may have had more meaningful purposes than simply serving as a decorative feature, like the Islamic geometric pattern designs seen on both Islamic and Italian textiles. Ugolino’s decision to include the script on the inner veil of the Virgin
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rather than her sumptuous blue mantle indicates he may have been emphasizing her humble nature. Alternatively, given that some worshippers considered Arabic the language of the Holy Land during the time of Christ, the presence of calligraphy on a painting could have served to situate the Madonna and Child paintings in the early Christian era, enhancing the presumed authenticity of likeness inherent in the Byzantine icons that provided the inspiration for these works. Regardless, in defying the convention and making deliberate choices in the placement of the script, some artists throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries appeared to have used inscriptions in more meaningful ways than others.

Transcending mere decoration, the inclusion of Arabic-style pseudo script in paintings like Fra Angelico’s Annunciation and Cosimo Rosselli’s The Last Supper was the result of such deliberate decisions. Depending on the subject matter of the painting and the context in which it is interpreted, pseudo script had a variety of meanings. Script in paintings of the Annunciation undertook the mystical power of the Word as it was incarnated in the Virgin. The physical reproduction of the conversation entering into the Virgin’s ear in Angelico’s painting mirrors the Lord’s Word taking on the physical form of Christ, equipped with the redemptive powers that would save humankind and absolve their sins. Instead of simply reproducing the Islamic calligraphy on the Virgin’s hem like other artists, Angelico chooses strategic places he wished to be associated with the script, most notably the area of the Virgin’s womb. Indeed, the intermittent exchange between the pattern design and the pseudo script on the Virgin’s hem approaching her womb was a deliberate decision. As the womb is the location of the incarnation, the inclusion of the
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script on this part of the hem and it’s omission from other areas of the Virgin’s garments is significant.

As demonstrated by Angelico’s painting, the places that artists choose to place script are just as significant as the locations where inscriptions are excluded. Rosselli’s *The Last Supper* demonstrates how script was utilized as a device to deepen the significance of the painting and create a multi-layered artwork. Like other frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, Rosselli’s fresco uses minute details to convey larger, more complicated messages. The possible references to Christian numerology to the numerals 8 and 5 indicate that Rosselli may have been interested in using subtle details to illustrate more significant points. The five-sided table may allude to Christ’s five wounds and the octagonal ceiling could relate to the Resurrection. Moreover, Rosselli also uses the positioning of the apostles to isolate Judas and draw attention to him as a figure. Rosselli, like many other artists may have come to see pseudo script as another tool like color, figure positioning or numerology to convey symbolism. Likewise, Mantegna’s *Judith with the head of Holofernes* illustrates how the pseudo script can be interpreted in both positive and negative manners depending on how the viewer interprets its use in the painting. A viewer who approaches the painting having seen a large repertoire of art in which pseudo script has been used to honor biblical figures, would consequently view the inscription as recognizing Judith’s honored and virtuous status. On the other hand, a worshipper who is unfamiliar with pseudo script but knowledgeable of the story of Judith and Holofernes would view the script, tainted through its origin in the Muslim East, as a negative commentary on the wanton heathen who has received his just punishment. Thus,
it seems by the fifteenth century, pseudo script had developed into a more complex role within the Italian artistic culture.

Perhaps more significant, it is notable that Islamic pseudo script became an artistic convention utilized by numerous Italian artists in various capacities in both secular and religious works from the fourteenth century through the early sixteenth century in Italian Renaissance art. This may have been possible due to the calligraphy’s generally esteemed association with Christianity and revered in position in society. However, pseudo script ultimately waned out of use by the sixteenth century. The question of why Islamic calligraphy was not a more permanent fixture in Italian art must also be examined to fully understand how it came to be a part of their artistic culture. According to Mack, the disappearance of pseudo script in Italian paintings by the sixteenth century was due to a shift in the public’s perception of Eastern scripts. By the High Renaissance, artists wished to depict the early Christian era by emphasizing Roman antiquity in paintings through robes and classical style poses. Indeed, Raphael included pseudo script decoration on several of his earlier works, such as *St. Sebastian* (1501) and *Madonna with Child and Saints* (1502). His later works omit the script and instead focus on portraying his figures in Roman garb, such as *The School of Athens* (1509-10), one of Raphael’s most famous paintings. Therefore, instead of using pseudo script to situate the scene in the contemporary time of Christ, artists like Raphael relied on classical antiquity as well as Latin and Roman inscriptions.\(^1\) However, it may also be worth noting that Venice was in some ways perpetually in competition or in battle with the Ottoman Empire and the Mamluk regime at the height of the use of pseudo script in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, undoubtedly straining Venice’s diplomatic relationship and

\(^1\) Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 71.
openness to Islamic artistic motifs. The first conflict between the Venice and the Ottoman Empire was in 1416, in which the Ottoman fleet was destroyed. There were several battles that followed, in 1463, 1499 and throughout the next two centuries. Likewise, Venice’s textile industry was in direct competition with the Mamluk’s *tiraz* industry and eventually overtook production following the decline of the regime. While trade was still the most important element in Venice’s relationship with the East, it is possible that ill feelings toward the Mediterranean East affected European’s perception of script, leading to the decline of its use. Although art historians may not be able to definitely determine the exact cause of the disappearance of pseudo script, it is certainly noteworthy that script was invited and accepted into the Italian artistic culture during the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance, and appeared on some of the most accomplished artwork from the time period. Whether the inscriptions simply grew out of fashion or the decline was a reflection of military and trade relationships with the Muslim East, pseudo Arabic evolved into more than a decorative feature. It was not merely a singular and isolated incident in Italian art. Rather, it developed into a meaningful element of Renaissance art that was imitated and revered by both secular and religious audiences. Therefore, the breadth of interest in Islamic calligraphy during the Renaissance, its expansive use by a multitude of artists spanning over several centuries, and its ability to function in a number of different contexts reveals a rich area of academic scholarship that merits further research and in-depth study.

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Bibliography


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