

Spring 2018

Gentile da Fabriano's Adoration of the Magi: Iconographic Influences of Decorative Arts from the Islamic World

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Recommended Citation

Brooke, Ruby, "Gentile da Fabriano's Adoration of the Magi: Iconographic Influences of Decorative Arts from the Islamic World" (2018). *Senior Projects Spring 2018*. 207.
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Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi*:
Iconographic Influences of Decorative Arts from the Islamic World

Senior Project submitted to the Division of the Arts of Bard College

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2018

Thank you to by advisors, Katherine Boivin and Olga Bush,
and to my family and friends.

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Introduction

Last year, a professor drew my attention to a peculiar aspect of Lippo Memmi's *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels* (1350) [Fig. 1]: a thin line of pseudo-inscription painted in gold along the hem of the Madonna's cloak. She mentioned this detail of the altar panel in passing, citing it as an example of Eastern influence in Western European artwork. Upon exploring museums throughout the past year, I have noticed that this phenomenon extends far beyond Memmi's painting. I found that pseudo-inscriptions appear in many of Italian Medieval and Early Renaissance paintings. The presence of these inscriptions ranges from appearing in icons of saints to appearing on symbolic objects, such as the jar of lilies in Northern paintings of the *Annunciation*. This led me to wonder what the significance of the pseudo-inscriptions were to the depictions of Biblical figures and events. I began to take notice of any Eastern influence in Italian art and culture. Exploring the Bargello Museum in Florence I realized that Early Renaissance Florence had been awash with imported Islamic arts and crafts. I base my investigation of these pseudo-inscriptions on the paintings of Quattrocento Florence.

In this project I explore how the Islamic stylistic influence justifies the presence of pseudo-inscriptions on the altarpiece the *Adoration of the Magi* (1423) by Gentile da Fabriano [Fig. 2]. First, I analyze the work of art in context of the Biblical story it depicts. The Magi were viewed as kings of foreign lands in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance. These three kings who came to worship the Christ Child were meant to represent the vast geographic expanse of the Christian empire. The Magi and the Holy Family are the protagonists of the Biblical account. I argue that the foreign kings are representatives of regions with whom Italian city-states had economic and political interests. Thus, European viewers' familiarity with these

Eastern regions are depicted through the imported arts and crafts of empires they traded with. I focus on the relationship between Italian city-states and the Mamluk empire. I argue that Mamluk arts had the greatest foreign influence on Florentine Quattrocento art.

After establishing an understanding of the appearances of Islamic inspiration in the pseudo-inscribed haloes and vestments of the Biblical characters in Gentile's altarpiece, I address other instances in which we see inscriptions, both pseudo and legible, used in Italian Christian iconography. I outline the uses of Latin inscriptions of Biblical verses or names in paintings, as well as the use of languages in historically relevant contexts, such as the use of pseudo-Hebrew in depictions of Old Testament stories. I briefly consider political and historical events, such as the crusades, the *Pax Mongolica*, and opening trade routes, leading up to the fifteenth century that exposed Italian patrons and artists to the arts and languages of foreign cultures, and resulted in the adaptation of foreign scripts for their own religious purposes.

As a result of increased contact between Italian city-states and Eastern empires there was an influx of material objects of foreign styles to Italy. These objects, mostly textiles and brassware, were luxury items, available only to the wealthiest classes of society. People began to associate objects from the Muslim East with the wealthy and powerful. Eastern textiles were used by the Church as ecclesiastical vestments for the clergy, as altar cloths, and as wrappings for relics. Eastern textiles were not only used in Christian liturgy, but were also depicted as clothing for the Virgin Mary, angels, and other Biblical figures in paintings and frescoes. Italian artists understood that the Mamluk empire encompassed the Holy Land. Thus, I argue that artists were using depictions of Mamluk textiles as garments to indicate Biblical figures from the Holy Land or from early-Christian history.

Finally, having established a historical base for which the use of pseudo-inscription was relevant to Italian arts, I discuss the intentions of the patron of the altarpiece, of the artist, and of the clergy of the church for which the altar was commissioned. I address the Florentine culture and politics of the early Quattrocento and how they played a role in the creation of the *Adoration of the Magi*. The patron of the altarpiece was embroiled in a political power struggle prior to and at the time of the commission. I discuss the patron's intentions to assert his political and ideological power through the commission of the *Adoration*. The inclusion of the patron's portrait in the scene links him and his family to both the piety and wealth depicted in the story of the Magi. I conclude that the altarpiece was a declaration to all of Florence of the patron's economic and political power.

Section I:

Adoration of the Magi (1432) Gentile da Fabriano

Painter Francesco di Gentile da Fabriano (c. 1370-1427) created the altarpiece the *Adoration of the Magi* (1423) [Fig. 2] while working in Florence. The painting became his most highly acclaimed work. The altarpiece is an exquisite example of the International Gothic style of painting. The piece was commissioned by Palla Strozzi, a wealthy Florentine banker and merchant, to be the high altar in his family's chapel in the Church of Santa Trinita in central Florence. It came to be the prize of the Santa Trinita's sacristy.

The central panel of the altarpiece depicts a procession of pilgrims traveling to the city of Bethlehem to pay homage to the newborn Christ Child and to the Virgin Mary. As a whole, the altarpiece spans 80 by 111 inches. The ornate gilded frame soars above the main panel in three arches adorned with curling vegetal finials. Pillars at either side of the central panel support the architecture of the three arches.

From within the central lunette, Christ blesses the viewer from a tondo, flanked by the reclining figures of Moses and David, reminding viewers of his Davidic lineage [Fig. 3].¹ The left and right cusps contain tondoes of Gabriel descending and the scene of the *Annunciation*, respectively. The predella contains three scenes; *the Nativity* [Fig. 4], the *Flight into Egypt* [Fig. 5], and the *Presentation at the Temple* [Fig. 6], from left to right.

Under the rise of each of the three arches a part of the story of the Magi is told. The lunette under the furthestmost left arch shows the three Magi at the beginning of their journey

¹ Matthew 1:17 (Revised Standard Version).

[Fig 7]. They stand gathered at the apex of a hill looking up at the star of Bethlehem. A crowd of travelers with their horses gather below the Magi, waiting to make the journey to the Holy Land. Beyond the hill on which the Magi stand can be seen a kingdom overlooking the sea. Next to the walled fortress of the unidentified city is a port, three boats harbored, perhaps one for each of the Magi. A fourth boat already sails off towards the horizon, emphasizing the distance that the group of travelers must traverse in order to reach Bethlehem.

The central lunette depicts the travelers in the midst of their journey [Fig. 3]. A great number of horseback riders fill the winding road to Bethlehem. The crowded road emphasized the great number of pilgrims traveling to pay homage to the Christ Child. In the far distance can be seen the city of Bethlehem, the star still glinting gold above. Gentile uses *sfumato* to emphasize the expanse of the road; those farthest from the viewer, and closer to Bethlehem, fade in detail and color, while those farther back in the procession, but closer to the viewer's vantage point, can still be examined in detail. The patterns decorating their clothing and textiles are still clearly visible and executed in painstaking detail. In the middle of the procession are the three Magi, identifiable by their gold haloes. A small structure with animals grazing outside can be seen to the left of the procession, outside of the city walls. This is the same structure depicted in the foreground of the painting, the manger in front of which the Christ Child is presented to the pilgrims.

The third and final arch holds the instance that the Magi enter Bethlehem through the city gates [Fig. 7]. This scene is somewhat obscured. The arch of the frame cuts off much of the city and many members of the pilgrimage procession. Only the three Magi are visible in full. Two other members of the traveling party follow on horseback behind them, but are partially covered

by the frame. Gentile may have chosen not to articulate the scene of their arrival in Bethlehem in full because the main panel of the altarpiece depicts the majority of the procession still making their way toward the manger. The *Adoration of the Magi* in the main panel seamlessly continues the narrative from the lunettes.

The procession emerges from a distance from underneath the lunette on the right side of the frame as they complete the final leg of the journey depicted above. Figures and creatures overwhelm the right side of the composition as they press towards the foreground and towards the Christ Child at the left side of the composition. This procession represents the shepherds that are said to have travelled to Bethlehem in scripture.² In Gentile's representation the travelers appear to be wealthy noblemen rather than humble shepherds. Gentile emphasizes their prestige through detailed articulation of their clothing and the possessions that the travelers brought with them on their journey. Several exotic creatures flock amongst the crowd. Monkeys, cheetahs, leopards, falcons, and camels were brought with their masters.

In the front and center of the panel stand the three wise men who bow and kneel to the Holy Family of Mary, Jesus Christ, and Joseph in the nativity. On the left edge of the composition is a small stone building, the same building depicted from afar in the center lunette. Nearby, cattle and asses eat from a wooden manger. Mary is seated in front of the building, holding the Christ Child on her lap. She is wrapped in a robe of rich indigo, her crimson wrap peaking out at her neck and wrist. Mary wears a white textile with gold and black geometric designs wrapped around her head underneath her blue garment [Fig. 2]. The Christ Child is clothed only in a sheer cloth around his waist. Joseph stands behind the mother and child. Each

² Matt. 2:1-2 (RSV).

of member of the holy family is marked with a gold halo. The star of Bethlehem hovers over the family.

Two female attendants stand to the left of Mary, one with her back to the viewer. The woman facing away wears a red garment underneath a black robe. The black robe glistens in the light where gold has been added to create the sheen of a fine silk or velvet pile. The quality of the fabric and its gold fringe imply her status and important role in the scene. Around her head she wears a wrap similar in color and design to that which Mary wears. The wrap is cream colored with bands of gold and black with a curling vegetal motif embroidered in gold inside the black band. Hanging from her shoulders is a mantle, in colors matching her and Mary's head coverings. This mantle contains thick bands of pseudo-inscription woven in gold on black background between broad sections of a delicate white diamond pattern [Fig. 9]. Small florets are interspersed throughout the script. The other woman wears a plain burgundy robe, her hair braided on top of her head. They appear engrossed in examining a golden vessel, presumably the gift that the first of the Magi has just presented to Christ. Both of these women are present in the predella scenes of the *Nativity* and the *Flight into Egypt*. They are identifiable by their garments. These women are not mentioned in the Biblical accounts of either the *Nativity*, the *Flight into Egypt*, nor the *Adoration*. However, their presence throughout the narrative of the altarpiece indicate that they must have held some importance to the patron.

There are many long-standing iconographic traditions associated with the depiction of the Magi in Western art. A canon for their depiction and symbolism had developed in Europe by the fifteenth century³. These three characters of the Biblical story are never more specifically

³ Geoffrey Grigson, "The Three Kings of Cologne," *History Today* 41, no. 12 (December 9, 1991): 30.

identified in scripture, their only mention appears in the Gospel of Matthew chapter two; “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Harod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.’”⁴ Experts believe their vague reference to “the East” indicates that the so-called three wise men, or Magi, were members of a highly educated upper class of ancient Persians⁵. In pictorial illustrations of this story from the mid-twelfth century onward, the Magi are commonly depicted as three men, occasionally of varying ages and ethnicities, indicating their origins from far off lands and representing all peoples who make up the world’s Christian population⁶. This desire to depict the vast expanse of the Christian empire was likely a response to the crusades to reclaim the Holy Land from Muslim control in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Three embalmed bodies, believed to be the bodies of the three Magi, were discovered in 1159 in the church of Sant’ Eustorgio in Milan. Of these supposed Magi, one body was of a young man, one was estimated to be in his thirties, and the last was elderly, further contributing to the legend of the three wise men as three different ages, each representing a stage in a man’s life.

The three Magi are placed in the center of the composition, to the right of the Holy Family. Each of the Magi offer gifts in gold containers. These gifts are identified in Biblical verse as “gold and frankincense and myrrh”⁷. Elaborately dressed in garments of gold and brilliant crimson with heavily adorned crowns of gold upon their heads, Gentile depicts the wealth of these men from far off lands through their vestments. Their bodies are arranged in

⁴ Matt. 2:1-2 (RSV).

⁵ Matt. 2:1-12 (RSV).

⁶ Grigson, "The Three Kings of Cologne", 31.

⁷ Matt. 2:11 (RSV).

three different stances, the youngest, and farthest from Christ, standing tall, the middle-aged Magi on a diagonal as he begins to kneel, and the eldest Magi on a horizontal as he approaches Christ on hands and knees [Fig. 2]. All three Magi's bodies overlap at a single axis point, their feet, implying a single motion from standing to prostrate before the Christ Child.

As per the canon, the eldest approaches Christ first. His golden crown is on the ground beside him as he approaches Christ on hands and knees to receive a blessing. He is grey haired and bearded, bare headed as Christ places his hand on his head. His face is visible in profile as he inclines his head to kiss Christ's foot. The majority of his body is obscured by a richly decorated mantel of orange with blue, violet, and white floral motifs and a gold, scalloped fringe [Fig. 10]. It falls away from his shoulders and pools on the ground beside him in soft folds as he kneels. The pattern of larger white flowers is balanced by smaller, dark violet blossoms with eight gold petals radiating from their centers. A light dusting of gold tooled into the floral pattern makes the mantle shimmer without detracting from the rich pigments of the garment. His shoulder and left arm, where the heavy mantle falls away, are clothed in a tunic worked heavily in gold. The white of the underlying fabric offsets the brilliant gold of intricate arabesques that interlace with larger lotus motifs with indigo and red detailing. This garment is embossed with a texture that gives the appearance of pearls or beads sewn into the textile. Gentile's delicate tooling of the gilt creates patterns similar to crosshatching, giving the appearance of the texture of thread woven into a thick fabric.

The middle-aged Magus lifts his crown from his head with one hand, his offering to Christ in the other. He leans forward slightly in preparation to kneel to Christ. His robes are a deep black with rows of gold scalloped accents above his elbows. The body of the robe is

elaborately decorated with a pattern of large gold pomegranates. Between the fruit are large leaves faintly articulated in gold [Fig. 10]. It appears that Gentile layered paint on top of gold leaf and then scraped away at the paint to create this subtle design. This pomegranate motif mirrors the fruit depicted in the bushes behind the procession [Fig. 3]. Pomegranates were used in many Italian-made textiles, often replacing the lotus blossom typical of central Asian textile designs, instead representing the Christian belief in resurrection.⁸ It was also a symbol of the humanist movement in Florence, referencing Greco-Roman myth associated with the fruit.⁹ He wears another garment of gold and red vegetal arabesque designs underneath the dark robe. This pattern is visible at his arms and chest. Again, the weight and richness of his garments are made clear by the texture worked into the gold leaf.

The youngest Magus stands behind his elders, the last to kneel. He wears a violet and gold garment over bright crimson stockings. His vestments are made from a brocaded indigo textile with patterns of flowering vines. A band of gilded design reminiscent of the eyes of peacock feathers hangs around his waist, [Fig. 10]. Layers of violet and indigo floral patterned textile hang to his knees. Bands of fabric with the same floral motif hang from his arms. Visible on his left arm is a band of gold above his elbow. Contained within this decorative band is a section of inscription [Fig. 11]. Of the three Magi, he is the only one on whose clothing pseudo-inscription appears. This band of inscription appears in the placement of a traditional *tiraz* band. *Tiraz* bands were incorporated into the vestments on the upper arm of garments worn

⁸ Rosamond E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza : Islamic trade and Italian art, 1300-1600* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 47.; Robert Baldwin, "Gentile da Fabriano (c.1390-1427): International Style and Court Culture," *Social History of Art*, last modified 2007, accessed February 26, 2018, <http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/>. 7.

⁹ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 47.

by members of Eastern royal courts.¹⁰ In this case the *tiraz*-like inscription may have been meant to indicate the Magus's intended region of origin.

In the case of Gentile's altarpiece, the Magi do not appear in the scene alone. They lead a host of men of various apparent social classes and regions of origin, indicated by their various styles of dress. The wealth of those depicted in the crowd is emphasized not only by their rich garments, but by other accessories that accompany them. Many of the men, and even their horses, wear items adorned with gold, brightly dyed fabrics, and finely patterned textiles. The exotic aspects of the procession are emphasized by certain members of the party. For instance, one man wears a headdress fashioned entirely of peacock feathers, and behind him a man wears a red turban sporting pheasant feathers [Fig. 8]. Interspersed amongst the crowd of men are exotic animals. Two men in the crowd lead leopards on leashes. One leopard pulls on his lead, held by a man wearing a white turban, causing a commotion as the feline pounces towards a horse. Two monkeys squabble from the backs of camels, where they ride [Fig. 8]. Leopards, falcons, and hunting dogs were usually owned by members of Persian cultures, used for hunting and even in war.¹¹ Arabian horses, like these depicted by Gentile [Fig. 8], were introduced to Florentines through contact with Istanbul in the early fifteenth century and were an imported luxury in high demand.¹² Their presence in the painting emphasizes the exoticism Gentile was trying to emulate within the scene, as well as denotes the painter or donor's knowledge of Persian culture.

¹⁰ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 54.

¹¹ Ibid., 136.

¹² Ibid., 23-24.

One man standing directly behind the Magi holds a trained falcon on his wrist. He wears a richly woven red and indigo tunic with gold florets and a gold belt over crimson stockings. On his head is an indigo turban with golden accents. The man beside him stares directly out of the picture plane, meeting the viewers' gaze. Although only his shoulders and head are visible, he appears to be dressed in equally extravagant attire as the man holding the falcon. His garment is a woven vegetal pattern with accents of gold flowers and hemming. He wears a red turban. These two men have been speculated to be portraits, although there has been some disagreement as to whom they were meant to represent.¹³

One young man stands out in from among his fellow travelers. He stands in the foreground behind the Magi and leads a horse by its reigns. In his other hand he holds a sheathed sword with fine details of gilding visible on the hilt. He wears a dark tunic, leather riding boots, and spurs. He is significantly shorter than those who stand nearest him. His small stature suggests that he may be of a lower hierarchical rank than the Magi and the noblemen beside him, perhaps a young groom of one of the Magi. He holds the reigns of his master's horse, a white steed harnessed with gold tack with tassels of red thread. The groom wears a sash emblazoned with solid gold embroidery resembling pseudo-Arabic script across his torso [Fig. 12]. The gilded lettering stands out against a black background of the sash with miniscule vines curling between the letters.

The groom is positioned directly behind the youngest Magus on whose garment appears a decorative band resembling a *tiraz*. It might be assumed that the pseudo-inscriptions seen on the sash are present to indicate the region from which he has traveled, or to identify him as a legion

¹³ Davisson, "The Iconology of the S. Trinita Sacristy, 1418-1435: A Study of the Private and Public Functions of Religious Art in the Early Quattrocento", 324.

of a specific court, possibly even an attendant of one of the Magi. The Magi are commonly referred to as the “Three Kings”, although they are never called by this title in their description in verses 2:1-12 of Matthew’s gospel. The three individuals are identified simply as “wise men”.¹⁴ Since, in Gentile’s representation of the scene, these three crowned figures are depicted as kings, the young man adorned with the sash may be a courtier of one of their courts. The inscribed garment may be identification as part of a specific court. The ornamental band worn by the Magus in Gentile’s painting resembles a *tiraz*.¹⁵ These *tiraz* were distributed only to members of the courts in Muslim kingdoms.¹⁶ They symbolized the status of the wearer within the court. The production and distribution of *tiraz* were carefully regulated.¹⁷ The fact that the groom wears a band inscribed with symbols visually similar to those on the garment of the Magus indicates that he was most likely a member of the young Magus’s court. As the only two figures in the visiting procession who exhibit pseudo-inscriptions on their clothing, this theory of their courtly relationship is strengthened. Standing at in the foreground of the painting, in such close proximity to the Magi, this eye-catching gold detailing on his garment is in a position desiring of the viewer’s attention, indicating some important meaning in the overall scene.

The use of a pseudo-Arabic inscription is clearly an important aspect of Gentile’s altarpiece as it appears in the haloes of Mary and Joseph as well as on the garments of the aforementioned Magus and his groom and on the mantle of the woman standing behind Mary. Most interesting is the use of pseudo-Arabic in the haloes of Mary and Joseph [Fig. 13], whereas the haloes of the three Magi are solid disks of gold lacking any form of decoration, and the

¹⁴ Matt. 2:1 (RSV).

¹⁵ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 46.

¹⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷ Ibid., 54.

Christ Child's halo contains only small floral rosettes. This curious decision by the artist to include pseudo-inscriptions only on these particular haloes implies that the presence of inscriptions in their haloes is specifically relevant to Mary and Joseph.

Pseudo-inscriptions appeared in Gentile's works often from the 1420 until his death in 1427. Previous to this decade instances of Latin inscriptions can be seen in his images, such as on the hem of the cloaks of Mary and Christ in his *Valle Romita Altarpiece* (1410-12) [Fig. 14], but pseudo-kufic or other styles of Arabicized scripts appear later, only after the painter's extended visit to Florence. Gentile arrived in Florence in the summer of 1420 and remained there until 1425, when he moved to Siena while working on a now-lost commission.¹⁸ During this stay in Florence, Gentile was exposed to the Florentine elite's interest in luxury objects from the East and from North Africa. Trade with these regions increased when the city-state finally gaining access to the sea, which provided the Republic with access to Syrian and Egyptian trade bases in the Mamluk empire.¹⁹

Based on the growth of scholarly humanism in Florence, Tuscan artists were showing increasing interest in the depiction of cultures different from their own. Particularly cultures that related to the stories from scripture. The Renaissance humanism movement encouraged the study of philosophy, poetry, rhetoric, history, and foreign languages.²⁰ This means that as curriculums were adapting to growing interest in these subjects, the arts in Tuscany were responding to this education, as well. Artists' attention to detail and historical accuracy in the depiction of Biblical scenes was notable as the study of history and antiquity increased.

¹⁸ Keith Christiansen, *Gentile Da Fabriano* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 50.

¹⁹ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 22.

²⁰ Craig W. Kallendorf, *Humanist Educational Treatises* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London England: I Tatti Renaissance Library, 2002), [vii].

Humanist study of history was not the only exposure to foreign culture that was affecting the artistic styles of Florence during the early fifteenth century. Florentine maritime trade routes were expanding in the early fifteenth century. Major trade sites were located in Istanbul, Damascus, and Cairo.²¹ Diplomats of the Florentine Republic had access to markets throughout the Mediterranean, where they collected luxury goods. Textiles and ceramics were the primary fascination of Florentine merchants.²² Merchants and ambassadors returning from foreign cities with their purchases and diplomatic gifts, introduced Eastern luxury goods to Florence.²³

The story of the birth of Christ, as recounted in Matthew's gospel, provided an opportunity for artists like Gentile to explore and experiment with artistic styles, fashions, and motifs from the material artifacts of foreign cultures. Gentile employs distinct styles of dress to differentiate between characters from Judea and those hailing from Eastern regions in the scene; the Holy Family and the women who appears to be attending to Mary are dressed in modest robes of solid colors. While the Magi and the other pilgrims are adorned with intricately patterned textiles of vegetal, scalloped, and floral designs. These differences in dress between the Holy Family and the Magi emphasize the exoticism of the three kings and those who journeyed with them. Eastern textiles came to represent the foreign and the "other" in Trecento and Quattrocento art. The clothing of Christ, Mary, and Joseph are not exoticized, despite the fact that the Biblical account of the *Adoration* occurred in Judea, an Eastern Mediterranean region that is now part of Israel and Palestine.²⁴ The Holy Family wear plain garments so as to

²¹ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 20-24.

²² Ibid., 23.

²³ Ibid., 24.

²⁴ Matt. 2:1, 2:5-6 (RSV).

appear familiar and recognizable to viewers. Instead, indications of the *Adoration*'s Eastern locale appear in Mary and Joseph's pseudo-inscribed haloes.

Gentile was not the only Western painter to place pseudo-inscriptions in the halo of the Virgin Mary and Joseph. Many artists adopted the use of pseudo-Arabic inscriptions in both the haloes and garments of Biblical figures through the Quattrocento.²⁵ In the next section I will discuss the use of inscriptions of various languages in Quattrocento Italian paintings. Through the analysis of different forms of inscriptions I draw connections between the use of legible text and the use of illegible pseudo-inscriptions. By understanding the role of Latin inscriptions in religious paintings one can surmise the similarities and differences in the use of pseudo-Arabic or other languages.

²⁵ James Snyder, *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4 Through 14th Century* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams., 1989), 456.

Section II:

Use of Inscriptions in Italian Paintings

The use of various legible and pseudo-inscriptions was common in Italian painting through the twelfth to fifteenth centuries.²⁶ Inscriptions appeared in many different forms within the context of painting. Latin was used most often in paintings depicting Western Christian scenes.²⁷ Latin inscriptions were often placed on the frames of paintings to identify the scenes or the figures depicted. In many cases, Latin inscriptions of Biblical verses or prayers would be included on the image itself.

Other languages were used in particular contexts when the use of that language was historically or theologically relevant.²⁸ Hebrew occasionally appears in works depicting Old Testament stories or characters. Lorenzo Monaco (1370-1425), a Florentine painter, made use of a pseudo-inscription in his depiction of *Moses* (1410) [Fig. 15] from his series of Old Testament prophets. The pseudo-script is inscribed on the two stone tablets the prophet holds. Moses holds the covenant up for the viewer's inspection. The pseudo-inscription is blocky and disjointed. Each character tapers from a wide end to a point, resembling a script written with a wedge-shaped stylus. Monaco may have intended this pseudo-inscription to be Hebrew or Aramaic, the language spoken in the Near East during Christ's lifetime.²⁹ Either of these languages would have been relevant to the image of the Old Testament prophet. This painting

²⁶ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, ed., "Aramaic Language," Encyclopædia Britannica, last modified August 28, 2017, accessed April 30, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Aramaic-language>.

provides an example of an early Renaissance painting utilizing pseudo-inscription in a theologically relevant context.

Greek appeared in Italian paintings often as well, as literacy in Greek increased due the interest of the Renaissance humanist movement in antiquity.³⁰ The *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John* (c. 1453 - 1455) by Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516) has a Greek inscription above the scene of the *Crucifixion*. The inscription states: “Jesus, King of the Confessors”.³¹ In the context of Christian imagery the use of Greek was historically relevant. Many of the earliest written Biblical documents, including the apocrypha, were written in Greek. Fewer Hebrew and Aramaic documents exist because the Biblical tradition was strictly an oral tradition in Judaic early culture.

There were other occasions in which the pseudo-script has no clear connection or historical relevance to the subject matter of the painting. For example, Lippo Memmi’s work *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels* (1350) [Fig. 1] contains a more unusual Mongol pseudo-script called ‘Pags pa’.³² The pseudo-inscription appears as a thin band of gold ornamentation along the hem of the Madonna’s hood and the garment hanging from her wrists. It is unclear what Memmi’s intention was in using the ‘Pags pa in this context. During the Pax Mongolica a few Italian painters adopted imitations of this script for their paintings from Tatar cloths they saw brought to Italy by Central Asian dignitaries.³³ Simone Martini (1284-1344), a contemporary of Memmi, also used Mongolian Tatar cloths as inspiration for the garments in his

³⁰ Kallendorf, vii.

³¹ Mauro Lucco and Anna Pontani, "Greek Inscriptions on Two Venetian Renaissance Paintings," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 60 (1997): 111.

³² Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 69.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

paintings.³⁴ Ultimately, the use of 'Pags pa in Italian painting was brief, leaving few examples today.³⁵

More common than any other language used was, of course, Latin. Although multilingualism was becoming more common in the upper classes of society, the majority of the populations of Italian city-states could understand only the Italian.³⁶ Latin was the official language of the Roman Church and was spoken during Mass. Therefore many phrases were recognizable even to those who could not speak or read it fluently.³⁷

There are many instances where both legible Latin inscriptions appear next to foreign pseudo-scripts in the same painting. Memmi's *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels* uses the Latin inscriptions "AVE" on Mary's red garment underneath her blue top cloak and "GRA[tia]" on the hem around her wrist [Fig. 1]. "*Ave gratia*" translates roughly to "hail and give thanks". The Latin phrase "ave gratia" was an expression even illiterate churchgoers would have been familiar with. Its purpose in paintings like the *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels* is to remind the viewer of their duty of piety and their debt to the Virgin.

Simone Martini's altarpiece depicting *Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus* (1333) [Fig. 16], a collaboration with Memmi, utilizes Latin inscriptions throughout the piece.³⁸ Rondels containing images of the prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Daniel look on the scene from above in four of the five spandrels above the main panel. Each of the saints holds a

³⁴ Ibid., 35.

³⁵ Ibid., 51.

³⁶ Ibid., 69.

³⁷ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, ed., "Romance Languages," Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed April 30, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Romance-languages>.

³⁸ John White, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1250-1400*, 3rd ed. (Penguin Books Ltd, 1966; Hong Kong: Yale University Press Pelican History of Art, 1993), 356-357.

banner with Latin inscriptions. In the central panel Gabriel offers a palm frond as he kneels to Mary. The Madonna reclines on her wooden throne, holding a partially opened book on her lap. The saints Margaret and Ansansus flank the figures of the Madonna and the Archangel from the two side panels. Gabriel gestures gently towards Mary and his mouth is open slightly as though he were speaking. From his mouth extends the embossed Latin phrase “ave gratia plena dominus tecum”, meaning “hail full of grace”. The words pass through the space from the Archangel to the Madonna. Gabriel’s silver and gold robe has thick bands of pure gold around his wrists, a sash wrapped around his body of the same color. Within these gold bands are faint Latin phrases extolling the power of forgiveness.³⁹ The angel’s name is embossed at the hem of his right sleeve, identifying him [Fig. 17].⁴⁰

Mary wears the canonical red tunic under a deep indigo robe. Gold bands of embroidery are painted along the hem of both of these garments. The decorative band on her indigo robe is a repeating block pattern, but the adornment on her red garment is a pseudo-inscription. The difference can be seen in the irregularity of the shapes and their conjoining lines. The garments of saints Margaret and Ansansus, who stand in the wings of the altarpiece, are decorated with gold bands much like Mary’s. However, these bands of ornamentation are the same as the pattern on Mary’s outer robe.

After Latin inscriptions, those most often found in Italian Renaissance paintings are pseudo-Arabic⁴¹. The appearance of pseudo-Arabic differs slightly in some pieces. Some

³⁹ Snyder, *Medieval Art*, 467.

⁴⁰ Cathleen S. Hoeniger, "Cloth of Gold and Silver: Simone Martini's Techniques for Representing Luxury Textiles," *Gesta* 30, no. 2 (1991): 158, http://www.jstor.org/stable/767057?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents.

⁴¹ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 51.

instances of pseudo-Arabic are based on a *kufic* script while others are based on a cursive script called *thuluth*. *Thuluth* was used to decorate luxury wears that were being collected by wealthy Italian merchants during the fourteenth century.⁴² *Thuluth* is characterized by its free-hand, cursive calligraphy style. It is composed of curved angles and gentle diagonals. As opposed to *kufic* script, which emphasizes straight lines and sharp angles. *Kufic* is a calligraphic print script. *Kufic* was often used in Qurans as its defined, bold lines made it easy to read. Both forms of script were used as decorative elements on Islamic luxury objects. Many objects from the Islamic world such as Mamluk dishes and textiles were inscribed with poetry or proverbs as decoration. Such objects were closely studied by European artists who mimicked these inscriptions. Artists like Gentile and Simone would have encountered Arabic inscriptions on luxury items imported from the Islamic world and drew inspiration from these objects for their own paintings.

The use of Eastern-inspired pseudo-scripts was limited to only a few centuries, appearing regularly in Italian art only from the late thirteenth to early sixteenth century.⁴³ One of the earliest identifiable instances of pseudo-Arabic inscriptions in Italian artworks is the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels* (1285) [Fig. 18] by Duccio di Buoninsegna (c. 1255-1318). The painting is tempura and gold leaf on panel. Duccio created the paintings for the Santa Maria Novella in Florence.⁴⁴ Six angels flank the enthroned Virgin and Child, three on either side. Three of the six angels have bands of pseudo-inscription on *tiraz*-like bands on their garments. The angels hold a tapestry behind the enthroned Madonna. The tapestry has a thick band of gold

⁴² Ibid., 51.

⁴³ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 54.

⁴⁴ White, *Art and Architecture*, 197.

pseudo-Arabic inscription along the top edge of the floral weaving.⁴⁵ The Madonna's cloak has a thin band of pseudo-inscription along the hem. Duccio, the Sienese master, was one of the first artists from the Italian peninsula to adopt pseudo-inscription as a form of ornamentation. This painting, also known as the *Rucellai Madonna*, inspired Tuscan painters to utilize pseudo-inscriptions in their paintings for two centuries.

Another early instance of the use of pseudo-inscription appears in the frescoes of the Upper Church of San Francesco of Assisi in a series of late thirteenth century frescoes. Among the works in the church are pieces by Giotto and Cimabue. Both painters used pseudo-Arabic inscriptions in a number of their works.⁴⁶ The west transept of the Upper Church is decorated with Cimabue's *Maestà* (c. 1280) fresco. Unfortunately, this fresco is too faded to determine if Cimabue included pseudo-inscription. It is possible that the decorative band at the edge of the tapestry held by angels behind the Madonna and Child once held pseudo-inscription, but it can not be known for certain.

Giotto's fresco scenes of the New Testament were created between 1315 and 1320, within a few decades of Cimabue's contributions to the cathedral. These frescoes in the same arm of the west transept as Cimabue's *Maestà* depicts. Pseudo-inscriptions appear in each of the New Testament scenes. The pseudo-inscriptions appear only on items of clothing, not in haloes. Numerous individuals in each scene wear garments decorated with *tiraz*-like strips of gold pseudo-inscriptions along their hems and at their shoulders. For example, in the scene of the

⁴⁵ Snyder, *Medieval Art*, 467.

⁴⁶ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 51.; Vera-Simone Schulz, "Intricate Letters and the Reificatici of Light Prolegomena on the Pseudo-Inscribed Haloes in Giotto's 'Madonna di San Giorgio Alla Costa' and Masaccio's San Giovenale Triptych," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorisches Institutes in Florenz*, 2016, 62.

Nativity on the east wall of the western transept Mary and Joseph's blue robes have a gold fringe and band of pseudo-script along their hems [Fig. 19]. Eight of the host of twenty-seven angels who overlook the scene wear pseudo-inscriptions in bands at their shoulders. Those who do not have pseudo-inscriptions on their clothing have bands of geometric patterns of interlocking diamond shapes on their shoulders, in the same placement as the bands of inscription. The use of pseudo-inscriptions is notable in Giotto's San Francesco frescoes because he used them so liberally. In the scene of the *Presentation at the Temple*, for instance, nearly every figure wears robes adorned with pseudo-script [Fig. 20]. The Christ Child is wrapped in the a blue cloth with gold fringe and pseudo-inscription. One of the clergymen how does not wear a pseudo-inscribed robe holds aun unfurling document with inscriptions written on it. This document is written in the same script as appears on the garments in the scene, but the bold black characters of the text stand out against the white surface, making them more visible to viewers. The use of pseudo-inscriptions in the Scenes of the New Testament in San Francesco was prevalent that it can be surmised that Giotto intended for them to convey some meaning about the imagery to the clergy and congregation of the basilica. These paintings may have been the influencing factor that introduced the use of pseudo-inscriptions to other Tuscan painters.⁴⁷

Cimabue also created a *Maestà* (c. 1280-85) panel painting for a chapel in the Santa Trinita, the same Florentine church the Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi* was painted for. The Santa Trinita *Maestà* includes a subtle line of pseudo-Arabic on the border of the tapestry hanging behind the enthroned Madonna and Child. The script is almost entirely hidden behind the Virgin, visible behind her shoulders. This early example differs from later paintings by its

⁴⁷ Snyder, *Medieval Art*, 467.

subtle coloring. Rather than using the typical heavy gold leaf gilding to emphasize the script, Cimabue used minimal gold in the band, leaving it almost unnoticeable. It is likely that Gentile was aware of the presence of pseudo-inscription on the *Maestà* in the church. However, I do not believe he was responding to Cimabue's *Maestà* in his inclusion of pseudo-inscriptions in the *Adoration*, rather that the use of pseudo-inscription had become the canon in Florentine art.

Few experts believe that pseudo-inscriptions in European art can be translated.⁴⁸ German professor of Oriental languages Rudolf Sellheim (1928-2013) claimed in a 1966 lecture that he could translate the inscription that appears in Masaccio's *San Giovenale* altarpiece [Fig. 21].⁴⁹ The only pseudo-inscription in the triptych appears in Mary's halo. Sellheim stated that this inscription was an inverted *shahada*.⁵⁰ The *shahada* is an Islamic statement of faith, which proclaims "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah".⁵¹ In his lecture Sellheim theorized that the mirror writing canceled out the power of the "'wrong' belief", thus protecting the patron from harm.⁵² Unsupported, this conjecture relies on the reading of the pseudo-inscription in the *San Giovenale* triptych as the *shahada*, an interpretation which many scholars dispute.⁵³ Despite Sellheim's bold claim, most pseudo-Arabic inscriptions in Italian art are completely illegible, and likely were not meant to be read, but rather held symbolic meaning based on their placement within the image.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Schulz, "Intricate Letters," 62.

⁴⁹ Schulz, "Intricate Letters," 60. Sellheim's lecture was entitled "Die Madonna mit der Shahada" ("The Madonna with the shahada").

⁵⁰ Schulz, "Intricate Letters," 60.

⁵¹ Richard C. Martin, *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Macmillan Reference USA, 2016), 723.

⁵² Schulz, "Intricate Letters," 61-62.

⁵³ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁴ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 51.

Others have speculated there were other hidden meanings in pseudo-Arabic inscriptions. Vincenza Grassi points out that the script in Mary's halo in Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi* has a strong resemblance to her Latin name, Maria, written upside down [Fig. 13].⁵⁵ Speculations of these inscriptions being Latin phrases written in an Arabicized script have been ventured, but few scholars support this theory. Another scholar postulated that the inscription in the *San Giovenale* triptych was a Latin inscription: "IHESUS CRISTUS VIA UERITAS ET VITA".⁵⁶ Scholars Franco Cardini and Maria Vittoria Fontana, Italian medievalists and art historians, claim that there are in fact no legible Arabic inscriptions that appear in haloes.⁵⁷

In Muslim regions written Quranic verses and poetry were used to decorate everything from architecture to household items. These lines of text were considered a high art and therefore elevated any item adorned with them to a class of luxurious imagery.⁵⁸ In Muslim material culture inscriptions served as decorative content in lieu of figurative icons. Western viewers might have interpreted the meaning of Arabic inscriptions as symbols of power and holiness when placed on or near the person of a Christian saint or Biblical figure.

Gentile was not the only Western painter to place pseudo-inscriptions in the halo of the Virgin Mary and Joseph. Examples can be found in *The Marriage of the Virgin* [Fig. 22] (1430) by Lombard painter Michelino da Besozzo (c. 1370-1455) and in the *San Giovenale* triptych (1422) [Fig. 21] by Masaccio (1401-1428). In the case of Besozzo's piece, which depicts the scene of the marriage of Mary and Joseph attended by a priest and a small crowd of onlookers,

⁵⁵ Schulz, "Intricate Letters," 62.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 62. "IHESUS CRISTUS VIA UERITAS ET VITA" translates to the phrase "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." from John 14:6 (RSV).

⁵⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁸ Oleg Grabar, "The Intermediary of Writing," in *The Mediation of Writing*, Bollingen Series XXXV 38 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 64.

both Mary and Joseph have pseudo-inscribed haloes. This pseudo-inscription is more fluid than those found on Gentile's paintings. The markings have softer edges than the blocky lettering seen in Mary's halo in the *Adoration of the Magi* and appear to blend into one another as if they were a form of cursive script.

The pseudo-inscription in Masaccio's *San Giovenale* altarpiece bears more similarity in appearance to that of Gentile's works than Besozzo's. Masaccio's script has many sharp corners and harsh diagonals. Whereas Besozzo chose to adorn both Mary and her husband with pseudo-script, Masaccio chose only to incorporate the inscription into the Madonna's halo. Instead, Masaccio decorated the Christ Child's halo with cartouches containing vegetal motifs. Christ's halo in Gentile's piece also lacks the pseudo-script that adorns both Mary and Joseph's haloes. Gentile, unlike Masaccio, chose a geometric pattern of tri-lobed motifs.

Masaccio's altarpiece has drawn attention to the appearance of pseudo-script in images of the Madonna on numerous occasions. Schulz addresses some previous assertions that the pseudo-inscriptions may be inversions of the shahada, the Muslim profession of faith, copied backwards into the halo of the Madonna as a way to erase the power of this invocation of the incorrect deity⁵⁹. If that were the artist's intention, one must wonder why the shahada would have been included in the painting at all. Schulz speculates that the use of pseudo-inscriptions was inspired by objects of material culture that were flooding the Western market as trade options expanded and as conquests to Eastern regions increased.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Schulz, "Intricate Letters," 62.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 63-64.

Schulz explores the influences of Eastern material culture on Western works of art.⁶¹ The influx of objects from the Muslim regions to the Italian peninsula was substantial through a developing mercantile relationships in Italian city-states.⁶² Many Eastern objects came to the West through the collection of booty from Western campaigns to the Holy Land.⁶³ There is a strong visual correlation between some Eastern objects and the images with pseudo-Arabic inscriptions that appear in Italian paintings. In the following section I discuss the influences of Mamluk arts, which I believe to have had the strongest Islamic stylistic impact on Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi*.

⁶¹ Ibid., 62-63, 66-93.

⁶² Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 15-17.

⁶³ Ibid., 3, 5, & 115.

Section III:

Influence of Imported Arts from the Mamluk Empire

Textile production was an integral part of the material culture of Islamic dynasties. Luxury fabrics were the primary export from the Mamluk empire through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Fiber arts were integrated into almost every aspect of daily life. Carpets and tapestries covered interior spaces. Most documentation regarding Islamic textiles used as furnishings survives in Mamluk textual records and in European paintings.⁶⁴ Western artists took an interest in imported textiles and later began producing locally made textiles inspired by Eastern examples. The effect that Mamluk textiles had on Italian culture can be seen through their appearance in works of art. These Italian paintings capture how these textiles were utilized in European contexts and give clues to how these textiles were viewed and valued by Western societies. The Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt maintained their capital in Cairo from 1250 to 1517.⁶⁵ The Barhi period, during which the Mamluks ruled from 1250 until 1382, was prosperous and the economy thrived.⁶⁶ Textile production exploded and Mamluk Egypt became the main supplier of luxury textiles internationally.⁶⁷

Trade between Italian city-states and Eastern cities increased during and after the crusades.⁶⁸ Venice led Italian commercial trade through the thirteenth century with trading bases established throughout the Mediterranean. In the fourteenth century, Venetian merchant galleys

⁶⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁵ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 15.

⁶⁶ Louise W. Mackie, "Toward an Understanding of Mamluk Silks: National and International Considerations.," *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 127.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 127.

⁶⁸ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 15.

extended to Syria, Constantinople, Egypt, England, and Flanders.⁶⁹ By the fifteenth century routes were added to France, Spain, and Morocco.⁷⁰ Pisa and Genoa were both major port cities, both of whom had strong relationships with Venice.⁷¹ This fostered intercity trading throughout the Northern region of the peninsula. Florence's international trade was limited without direct access to the sea. Only imported spices were available in Florentine markets until the early fifteenth century.⁷² Luxury goods mostly found their way to Florence as gifts or were bought by ambassadors from their travels.

Relationships of Italian city-states with Mamluk territories proved profitable. Nearly all imports from the East en route to Venice passed through Mamluk regions of Syria.⁷³ Damascus was Italy's primary source of raw silk and other luxury goods.⁷⁴ Venetian state galleys specialized in the import of luxury goods, including raw silk, dyes, and carpets.⁷⁵ Damascus's location made it the most accessible Mamluk city to Western merchants traveling between Venice and Eastern bases.⁷⁶ Traveling merchants had access to Damascus's open textile markets. Contact through trade exposed the European market to the goods manufactured by the Mamluk kingdom as merchants purchased goods on their travels and brought them back to Italy.

Textiles were not only dispersed via commerce. Eastern textiles were desired by Westerners for their high quality weaving and expensive materials. Textiles were often given as

⁶⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁷¹ Ibid., 15.

⁷² Ibid., 23.

⁷³ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 21.

diplomatic gifts or claimed as war spoils.⁷⁷ Textiles made in the Islamic world were so valuable in Europe that they would often be adapted for church use despite the presence of Arabic inscriptions.⁷⁸ Garments and textiles given to European rulers as diplomatic gifts were of the highest quality. Tatar cloths were given as gifts from Persian envoys.⁷⁹ Mamluk honorific garments and other fine clothes were often sent to foreign emissaries as gifts.⁸⁰ Ambassadors from Italian city-states were sent to Cairo in Mamluk Egypt.⁸¹ The Mamluk empire had political connections with Sicilian and Venetian ports and kingdoms in Iberia.⁸² The textiles ambassadors received as gifts were one way in which Italians became familiar with- and gained a taste for- luxury Mamluk textiles. Before long, Italian city-states were the primary foreign consumers of Mamluk textiles.⁸³ The collapse of the textile industry during the Burji Mamluk period (1382 to 1517) destroyed the formerly strong economy of the Mamluk kingdom.⁸⁴ The Burji faction's rise to power in Cairo, as well as Timerlane's violent campaign against the Mamluk control of Aleppo, left Mamluk Egypt and Syria struggling against famine, an increasing military state, and inflation.⁸⁵ Unable to maintain their industry, quality and variety of Mamluk textiles began to decline.⁸⁶ The sudden decrease in exports from Egypt stimulated the development of high

⁷⁷ Ibid., 24 & 27

⁷⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁰ Elias I. Muhanna, "The Sultan's New Clothes: Ottoman - Mamluk Gift Exchange in the Fifteenth Centuries," *Muqarnas* 27 (2010): 191 & 193.

⁸¹ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 21.

⁸² Merriam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain* (London, England: V&A Publishing, 2010), 63.

⁸³ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 23-24.

⁸⁴ Mackie, "Toward an Understanding," 127.

⁸⁵ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 21.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 21.

quality textile manufacturing centers in Europe.⁸⁷ Italian craftsmen were producing their own approximations of Mamluk honorific garment designs for the local urban market by the fifteenth century.⁸⁸

Genoa and Venice were the leaders in international trade and import to the Italian peninsula in the early fourteenth century.⁸⁹ The Venetian and Genoese ports and their command of major commercial fleets brought the finest raw materials to the peninsula from the Caspian region.⁹⁰ Imports of fine raw silk allowed centers of textile production in Italy to thrive, eventually developing to rival the fabric arts produced in the East. Italy surpassed the Mamluk empire in production of luxury textiles by the beginning of the Quattrocento.⁹¹ In the early Cinquecento, Venice was exporting large amounts of textiles and fabrics to the Ottoman and Mamluk empires.⁹² The Venetian senate was gifting foreign ambassadors with fine brocades and velvets produced in the city of Venice.⁹³

Sicilian workshops briefly led textile production in Italy during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These early centers influenced other sites of production in the Southern peninsula, which replicated their styles.⁹⁴ Sicily's close relationship to Muslim Spain through the Norman kingdom heavily influenced Sicilian arts.⁹⁵ Textile workers learned to replicate Muslim Spanish and Byzantine designs and motifs. Despite this exposure to Spanish Muslim textiles, Sicilian

⁸⁷ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁹¹ Mackie, "Toward an Understanding," 127.

⁹² Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 24.

⁹³ Ibid., 24.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 29-30.

⁹⁵ Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts*, 44-45.

weavers never mastered the high quality of Spanish textiles. Textiles produced in Sicily tended to be coarser than their Muslim counterparts.⁹⁶ Despite their lesser technical skill, Sicilian craftsmen captured many of the stylistic qualities of Islamic textiles. Spanish Muslim designs and the knowledge of different weaving techniques moved to the Northern Italian peninsula as Sicilian textile workers fled the civil war that resulted from the collapse of the Hohenstaufen empire.⁹⁷

Rivalries between various cities began to develop in the northern Italian peninsula. At the start of the fourteenth century, workshops in Genoa, Venice, Lucca, and Prato were at the height of their production.⁹⁸ Lucca, a city east of Florence, was the leader of luxury textile production in northern Italy. Skilled Lucchese craftsmen were able to master weaving techniques to rival Spanish versions, and many were recruited to Venetian workshops.⁹⁹ The dispersion of the knowledge and skill from the early Sicilian workshops to cities like Lucca and Venice initiated the use of Islamic-inspired designs and weaving techniques throughout Italy.

Tuscan textile production was regulated by guilds and was supervised by both secular and ecclesiastical agents.¹⁰⁰ These regulations were relatively loose, and allowed members of the mercantile class to dictate the designs of the productions. Merchants who owned cloth factories were able to produce textiles of whichever styles and qualities they deemed most profitable.¹⁰¹ Due to high mercantile success in the fifteenth century, merchants rose to the highest economic

⁹⁶ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 29.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 30-31.

¹⁰⁰ Gene A. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 56-57.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 59.

class and local economy thrived. The cloth industry attracted the most wealthy investors, second only in investments to banking.¹⁰² This economic climate was favorable to the local Italian luxury textile industry, providing a wealthy market for the consumption of the goods.¹⁰³

Both imported fabrics and locally-made textiles had many uses and interpretations in Europe. Islamic stylistic influence in Italian arts extended beyond the collection of imported textiles and other luxury arts from Muslim territories. Western weavers began to replicate motifs and even inscriptions found in Islamic textiles in their own crafts. Cloths known as “Perugia towels” were produced in the Italian city they were named for, located between Assisi and Florence.¹⁰⁴ The design of these towels reflected an Egyptian Mamluk style. Perugia towels are typically a white cotton with colored woven designs and long fringe adorning the edges. Their banded layouts mimic Islamic textile patterns. Weavers of Perugia towels even adopted the use of inscriptions in the decorative bands. One Italian example shows the word *amore* woven into the towel, a rosette separating each iteration of the word [Fig. 23].¹⁰⁵

The uses of these Perugia towels varied. Documentation of them being used as towels, headscarves, and tablecloths exist in various Italian paintings.¹⁰⁶ Perugia towels are depicted in use Gentile’s *Adoration of the Magi* altarpiece. The woman in the far left of the composition, standing behind the Virgin Mary, wears Perugia towels as a headscarf and as a shawl [Fig. 9]. Her headscarf shows a black band with gold details of a vegetal pattern with repeating five-leafed florets, a motif that often appears in Islamic architectural and textile decoration. The

¹⁰² Ibid., 59.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 56-59.; Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 45.

¹⁰⁴ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 47-48.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 48.

shawl features a repeating black band encased between two gold strips. Within the thick black bands are pseudo-Arabic inscriptions in gold font, separated into “phrases” by florets. The presence of pseudo-Arabic inscription in Gentile’s representation of Perugia towels confirms that there was an association of these Italian-produced fabrics with Mamluk textiles.¹⁰⁷

This association might be extended further to a direct connection of Perugia towels with the stylistic qualities of Egyptian cloths. In the central predella scene of Gentile’s altarpiece, *Flight into Egypt*, the same two women who attend Mary in the main panel can be seen accompanying the Holy Family as they flee the *Massacre of the Innocents* initiated in Judea by King Harod [Fig. 5].¹⁰⁸ The woman in a brocaded dress can clearly be seen wearing the inscribed Perugia towel draped over her left shoulder. Despite the predella’s small dimensions (12.6 in by 43.3 in), the lettering of the pseudo-inscription is made clearly visible within the black bands on the cloth. Gentile’s dedication to depicting this miniscule detail indicates the vital importance of the inscription to the narrative drawn throughout the altarpiece. Its presence also denotes an acknowledgement of the artistic and cultural differences of the geographic location in the narrative in the book of Matthew.

Luxury textiles were so highly prized by the Italian aristocracy and wealthy merchants that they were preserved throughout generations. Textiles were mended and repurposed many times so as to maintain the expensive and sought after fabrics. Tuscan high fashion was informed by both imported and locally made textiles based on Eastern designs.¹⁰⁹ Ruling courts of Italian city-states purchased large quantities of Eastern made fabrics.¹¹⁰ Aristocratic families

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰⁸ Matt. 2:1-18 (RSV).

¹⁰⁹ Hoeniger, "Cloth of Gold," 154.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 154.

had access to imported fabrics for clothing and furnishings. Tastes for luxury fabrics as clothing were so voracious that sumptuary laws were instigated in Florence in the fourteenth century to stay the consumption of such excessive luxury materials.¹¹¹

The prestige of owning such extravagant items extended beyond the aristocracy. The popular fashions of the high class society informed the urban styles of Florentine citizens, as well.¹¹² Italian made textiles were more affordable to the upper-class citizens of Florence, who copied the aristocracy's fashions in textiles inspired by imported Mamluk fabrics. The use of Eastern fabrics began to define Florentine fashion by fourteenth century.¹¹³ Both the ruling class and the wealthy adopted Eastern inspired fabrics as part of their wardrobe as a symbol of their wealth and high status within the city.

The high value of Eastern textiles made them highly desirable for church treasuries. Many Eastern textiles- or merely records of them- exist today in church inventories. Textiles of all types were repurposed by the Church for use as ecclesiastical vestments, altar cloths, as well as garments for church statuary.¹¹⁴ Imported textiles and locally made fabrics based on Islamic designs were fashioned into copes, dalmatics, and chasubles worn by clergymen during ceremonies and Mass.¹¹⁵ The extravagant designs of the fabrics employed in church vestments were meant to be viewed by the congregation. In the case of some repurposed foreign textiles,

¹¹¹ Ibid., 154.; Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 47.; "Mantle for a statue of the Virgin with lotus blossoms and medallions, c. 1430," The Cleveland Museum of Art, accessed March 15, 2018, [http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1939.40?collection_search_query=Mantle&op=search&form_build_id=form-WrDiYlxAREguuUa_HMgnqfGWtWFqHKNb5nI7tqSAp0g&form_id=clevelandart_collection_search_form&c=1&f\[0\]=field_collection%3A96](http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1939.40?collection_search_query=Mantle&op=search&form_build_id=form-WrDiYlxAREguuUa_HMgnqfGWtWFqHKNb5nI7tqSAp0g&form_id=clevelandart_collection_search_form&c=1&f[0]=field_collection%3A96).

¹¹² Hoeniger, "Cloth of Gold," 154.

¹¹³ Ibid., 154.

¹¹⁴ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 27.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 27.

Arabic inscriptions were obscured by added decorative elements, as the textiles were refashioned for Christian use.¹¹⁶

One chasuble, believed to have been owned by Saint Thomas Becket, was constructed out of a gold-embroidered textile now found in the treasury of the cathedral of Feremo in Eastern Italy. The original textile was produced in Almeria, Spain in the early twelfth century. The textile is thought to have been an item of spolia, possibly from the tent of an Almerian general or ruler.¹¹⁷ Too precious to be discarded, the threadbare portions of the textile were removed and the remaining fabric was fashioned into this ecclesiastical vestment.¹¹⁸ Textiles like this one were so valuable that it was repurposed for church use despite its Arabic inscriptions. The chasuble is a light blue silk with gold-thread embroidery. It is adorned with large roundels, each containing an animal or a human figure, connected by smaller roundels with eight pointed stars in the diamond-shaped spaces between them. The long panel that extends down the center of the chasuble once contained an Arabic inscription that read "In the name of Allah the Merciful, the Compassionate, the kingdom is Allah's ... greatest blessing, perfect health and happiness to its owner ... in the year 510 in Mariyya".¹¹⁹ Parts of the inscription seem to be missing due to reconstruction of the original textile into the ecclesiastical vestment. For the textile's use in a Christian context, this band of inscription was covered with an embroidered vegetal arabesque.¹²⁰ In her article "The Fermo Chasuble of St. Thomas Becket and Hispano-Mauresque Cosmological

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 27

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 27 & Simon-Cahn, 3.

¹¹⁸ Annabelle Simon-Cahn, "The Fermo Chasuble of St. Thomas Becket and Hispano-Mauresque Cosmological Silks: Some Speculations on the Adaptive Reuse of Textiles," in *Essays in Honor of Oleg Grabar* (n.p.: Brill, n.d.), 3, previously published in *Muqarnas* 10 (1993): 1-5.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 1.

¹²⁰ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 27.

Silks: Some Speculations on the Adaptive Reuse of Textiles” Annabelle Simon-Cahn explores the route by which the original textile was brought to the Italian peninsula. She traces the Genoese sack of Almeria, where the textile was made, through the ports at Genoa or Sicily, who both had strong commercial connections to Andalusia.¹²¹ From these ports the textile could have been traded to any Italian city-state.¹²²

Many other textiles repurposed as ecclesiastical vestments are still owned by Christian institutions throughout Europe. For instance, a fragment which was once a part of an ecclesiastical vestment used in the Alte Kapelle basilica in Regensburg, Germany, is believed to have been made in Iran during the first half of the fourteenth century.¹²³ Unlike Thomas Becket’s chasuble, the inscription on this garment was not obscured when the textile was adapted for Christian use. The Arabic reads “glory, victory, and prosperity” in repeating bands separated by arabesque medallions [Fig. 25].¹²⁴ This fragment is one of a set of vestments once owned by the Alte Kapelle.¹²⁵ Items like this fragment in church treasuries prove that textiles from all over the Islamic world were considered prestigious by Christian standards, thus were employed in a church setting as symbols of wealth and power.

It is speculated that clergymen adopted Eastern styles of dress due to the association of certain types of fabric and textiles with Eastern royalty.¹²⁶ Thus, the use of imported textiles for ecclesiastical vestments was seen as a symbol of the rank of the individual who wore them.¹²⁷

¹²¹ Simon-Cahn, "The Fermo Chasuble," 4.

¹²² Ibid., 3.

¹²³ "Woven textile," V&A, last modified 2017, accessed March 15, 2018, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O109136/woven-textile-unknown/>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Hoeniger, "Cloth of Gold," 158-9.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 161.

Due to Tuscan high society's admiration of these luxury fabrics, there would have been a strong association of these designs with the powerful local elite. The vestments worn by the clergy would have been recognizable to members of the congregation as designs worn by noblemen and the wealthy and represented in paintings of Biblical figures, as in Gentile's altarpiece. Biblical figures depicted in frescoes and altar paintings wearing Eastern textile designs created an association of these ecclesiastical vestments with early Christianity and Biblical history. These associations between Eastern textiles and elite society gave the churchmen who wore them as ecclesiastical vestments a higher status in relationship to the laity.

Textiles from the Islamic world were not only repurposed for ecclesiastical vestments to be worn by the clergy, but also as garments to adorn religious statues. Instances of textiles being reworked into mantles for statues are recorded in both Spain and Italy. A mantle, now in the collection at the Cleveland Museum of Art, was constructed for a statue of the Virgin Mary in Spain during the Nasrid period (c. 1430) from a Mamluk silk damask made in Egypt [Fig. 24].¹²⁸ It is woven in three colors: light blue, gold, and a light, undyed fiber. The mantle is composed of three primary motifs in its design. Large lotus blossoms are interspersed with ogival medallions, and smaller lobed roundels, both containing inscription in Arabic. The inscription in the medallions is mirrored, on either side of the ogive, so each one reads twice "Glory to our master, the sultan, the king." The small roundels contain an abbreviated version of this inscription, stating "The sultan, the king."¹²⁹ Its patterns and colors are similar to the Mamluk textile now housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which was once a mantle for the *Enthroned*

¹²⁸ "Mantle for a statue," The Cleveland Museum of Art.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Madonna with Saints by Bambino del Vispo.¹³⁰ The ogival medallions and the roundels in the Italian garment even contain the exact same inscriptions as the Spanish mantle.¹³¹

Eastern textiles were used to wrap relics in translation.¹³² This practice was particularly prevalent during the crusades.¹³³ Christian relics were commonly encased in precious materials such as gold, silver, and jewels to give visual representation of the value of the relic within. The textiles were valuable enough to contain precious relics and to represent the worth of the relics they held. After translation some relics remained encased in the textiles they were transported in. This was one way in which many textiles came to be owned by church treasuries.

The use of Mamluk textiles and Eastern-inspired Italian fabrics to dress a bishop or deacon created an association of Eastern fabrics with high ranking religious figures in Europe. These associations then extended beyond the real vestments worn in church to depictions of the textiles in Christian art. Cathleen Hoeniger concludes her investigation of the portrayal of luxury fabrics in Italian paintings with an acknowledgment of the laymen's familiarity with the luxury textiles worn by the highest classes of Florentine society and the clergy in her article "Cloth of Gold and Silver: Simone Martini's Techniques for Representing Luxury Textiles".¹³⁴ Hoeniger focuses her argument on the *Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus* altarpiece for the Cathedral of Siena by Simone Martini. In the central panel of the altarpiece Simone represents the Archangel Gabriel wearing a dalmatic robe, the vestment worn by a deacon or a bishop, with Eastern vegetal patterns [Fig. 17]. Thus, seeing these patterns and garments represented in

¹³⁰ Mackie, "Toward an Understanding," 137.; "Mantle for a statue," The Cleveland Museum of Art. The work by Bambino Del Vispo can not be found.

¹³¹ Mackie, "Toward an Understanding," 137.

¹³² Simon-Cahn, "The Fermo Chasuble," 1. Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts*, 37.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³⁴ Hoeniger, "Cloth of Gold," 161.

paintings of angels and Biblical figures elicited from the viewer the association of the vestment with the sacred and, at the same time, with the elite Italian aristocracy and clergy.

Florentine aristocrats were not the first to covet luxury textiles as symbols of status. Members of Mamluk courts were given full wardrobes of luxurious, locally-produced garments appropriate to the individual's rank and role in court.¹³⁵ Mamluk courts followed strict dress codes. Elements of decoration, such as inscriptions, gold-wrapped thread, or beading on the textiles denoted the power of whomever wore the garment. Textiles, especially those adorned with gold and silver-wrapped silk thread embroidery were under strict regulation of the state.¹³⁶ Luxury textiles were regulated and only produced in capital cities so as to be more easily controlled by the Mamluk court. Production of fine luxury textiles of cotton, linen, and silk were restricted to Aleppo, Damascus, Baalbek, Alexandria, and Cairo.¹³⁷

Many garments worn by the Mamluk ruling class were adorned with inscriptions of blessings to the Sultan. Textiles inscribed with Arabic phrases showed that the owner had political power and held a close position to the ruler.¹³⁸ Inscriptions were an integral part of Islamic arts. They appear in all media, including textiles. Mamluk textiles that are embellished with inscriptions can be categorized by a few styles of decorative organization. Geometry and symmetry were the most important aspects of Mamluk textile design. By the thirteenth century linear organization of inscriptions became the most prevalent form of textile decoration.¹³⁹ Of the existing examples of Mamluk textiles, half of them show legible Arabic inscriptions.¹⁴⁰ Most

¹³⁵ Mackie, "Toward an Understanding," 127.

¹³⁶ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 56.

¹³⁷ Mackie, "Toward an Understanding," 127.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

commonly found amongst these examples are phrases praising and blessing the sultan.¹⁴¹

Mamluk textiles tended to exhibit shorter inscriptions than were typically found on *tiraz* bands of courts in other Islamic empires.¹⁴² Common Mamluk patterns featuring Arabic inscriptions were linear and foliate.¹⁴³ Vegetal designs often incorporated medallions containing inscriptions inside ogival florets, like the fourteenth century example from Syria or Egypt that Mackie discusses. The short inscription held within the ogives states “glory to our master the sultan the king”.¹⁴⁴ Blessings like this were common, as their lack of specificity allowed for their continued use after changes of power from one ruler to another.¹⁴⁵

Banded designs were also used in court garments. These designs were repetitious, mirroring patterns in symmetrical strips [Fig. 26]. This fourteenth century fragment from Egypt shows a common linear design. The textile is made up of three repeating bands. One band is a solid blue, one contains a vegetal motif of three-leaved plants, and one holds a series of diamond shapes into which the word “al-sultan” is inscribed. This textile presents a traditional tri-color scheme of blue, black, and undyed fibers.¹⁴⁶ This textile’s inscription, the title of the highest ruler of the Mamluk Sultanate, denotes it as an item created for use by a member of the highest class of society. Linear patterns similar to this example occasionally held longer inscriptions. Long strips of inscriptions allowed for more specific honorific blessings. These inscriptions occasionally cited rulers by name, such as in a textile in the collection of the Museum of Islamic

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 130.

¹⁴² Ibid., 131.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 137.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 130.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 130.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 128.

Art in Cairo, which states “Glory to our master the sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf, may his supporters be glorified”.¹⁴⁷

These court garments were not only coveted for their symbolic power, but also for their high quality materials. Fine raw silk was imported to Egypt from China, wool brought from Eastern Turkey.¹⁴⁸ High quality textiles were brilliantly colored with expensive dyes.¹⁴⁹ Gold and silver were used in the most luxurious honorific garments. A technique of beating the precious metals down to a fine gilt thread was used in order to weave the gold into the textile.¹⁵⁰ Few textiles woven with gilt thread survive.¹⁵¹ This extravagant use of precious materials only increased the value of the finely woven items.

The luxury textiles worn by the Mamluk ruling class informed the fashions of the common people of the empire. Patterns and styles of the textiles worn by the court were copied by craftsmen in unregulated local markets.¹⁵² While luxury textile production was restricted to cities, local artisans produced affordable textiles in villages throughout the Mamluk empire.¹⁵³ These artisans made use of materials more affordable to the middle class customer. Rather than the silk thread imported to the Mamluk empire from East Asia, they used linen and cotton fibers from local regions.¹⁵⁴ These linen and cotton textiles did not use expensive dyes, nor gilt threads that made luxury textiles so lavish. Blue was the most common color for locally made Mamluk

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 134.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 143.

¹⁵⁰ Hoeniger, "Cloth of Gold," 158.

¹⁵¹ Mackie, "Toward an Understanding," 128.

¹⁵² Ibid., 127.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 127.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 127.

textiles.¹⁵⁵ The locally grown indigo plant made blue dye the most economical color choice.¹⁵⁶

Blue and undyed fibers were combined to create simple banded patterns.¹⁵⁷ These simple textile patterns became widespread in Egypt, inspiring the Italian adoption of similar styles [Fig. 23], like the two-toned Perugia towels.¹⁵⁸

After the economic decline in Egypt and Syria during the Burji period, craftsmen working in Italian city-states were the first Western European artisans to master the techniques of Mamluk weaving.¹⁵⁹ Local Italian production of textiles changed the patterns and motifs very little from their Mamluk inspiration. Most motifs used in Mamluk textiles were transferred to Italian workshops. Unlike inscriptions, these designs did not hold specific cultural meanings, and were therefore adopted to Italian production.¹⁶⁰ Italian-made textiles did not incorporate Arabic inscriptions. The use of any inscriptions was rare, although on occasions Italian inscriptions were used as decoration, such as in the Perugia towel inscribed with the Italian verb *amore* or “love” [Fig. 23].

Many examples of motifs employed in Islamic textiles are preserved in Italian paintings. The earliest depictions of Eastern textiles in Italy appear in the previously discussed Upper Church of San Francesco of Assisi, dating as early as 1280.¹⁶¹ The textiles depicted in the frescoes show such a high level of detail that it is likely the artists were referring to specific textiles as they painted.¹⁶² According to Mack, the textiles depicted in the San Francesco basilica

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 127.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 128.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 127.

¹⁵⁸ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 48.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁶² Ibid., 33.

frescoes are similar to Spanish silks with geometric-based patterns of Spanish silks.¹⁶³ These same latticed and ogival patterns seen in the frescoes at Assisi and in certain works of Duccio, Giotto, Simone, and other Italian painters were also produced in the unregulated markets of Mamluk Cairo. *Tiraz*-adorned garments for the use of the Mamluk court were made under strict control of the state, but textiles in similar styles were made for export were produced without the state's oversight.¹⁶⁴ Mamluk craftsmen produced and exported the designs that were most desirable on European markets. These unregulated textiles were mostly latticed patterns and ogival vegetal motifs, remarkably similar to the Spanish textiles represented in Italian paintings. These stylistic similarities between the Mamluk and Spanish textiles are a result of the close interchange between the Mamluk capital of Cairo and the Nasrid capital of Granada on the Iberian peninsula.¹⁶⁵ Textiles with alternating bands decorated with floral motifs and inscriptions alluding to the sultan were the primary gift of Mamluk rulers to emissaries during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, at the height of diplomatic exchange between the Mamluks and the Nasrids.¹⁶⁶ These political interactions inevitably influenced the stylistic affinities of the Spanish textile industry. Thus, the painters of the frescoes of the Basilica of San Francesco were most likely familiar with Nasrid luxury textiles.

Tuscan painters were highly influential in the development of Italian painting styles in the representation of luxury textiles. Painters began to investigate new methods of depicting fabrics in response to the high consumption of luxury textiles in Italy.¹⁶⁷ Techniques for painting

¹⁶³ Ibid., 31-33.

¹⁶⁴ Mackie, "Toward an Understanding," 130.

¹⁶⁵ Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts*, 62-63.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶⁷ Hoeniger, "Cloth of Gold," 154.

textiles began to evolve beginning in the twelfth century. Duccio used the mordant gilding method, which was developed in the twelfth century, to represent Spanish textiles in his 1308 *Maestà* [Fig. 27]. This method inspired Simone Martini's contribution to the development of *sgraffito* technique. The term *sgraffito* comes from the Italian verb *sgraffiare* meaning "to scratch".¹⁶⁸ This method consists of scratching into tempera and gilt layered on a wood panel, then tooling the exposed gilt in order to create a textured surface to refract light.¹⁶⁹ Consequently, the painted surface has a luminous sheen. It gives the appearance of the metal being an integral material woven into the depicted fabric, rather than superimposed on top of the textile.¹⁷⁰ *Sgraffito* was used in the depiction of the textiles in Simone's 1330 *Annunciation* altarpiece for the Cathedral of Siena [Fig. 17].

A technique similar to *sgraffito* was occasionally used by followers of Duccio to represent metallic thread embroidery on the hem of Mary's mantel.¹⁷¹ Duccio's method, called "translucida", consisted of layering tempera glazes over tin to create an imitation-gold that would shine through the translucent layers of paint, giving the painted fabric a luminous sheen.¹⁷² "Translucida" was used to capture the reflective quality of silk velvets and to represent metallic thread embroidery on the hem of garments.¹⁷³ This over-painting on small sections of metal leafs became a common technique in representing luxury Eastern textiles which used metallic threads in their ground weave or in gilt brocade.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 156.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 156.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 156.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 160.

¹⁷² Ibid., 160.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 160.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 160.

Textiles were, however, not the only material objects from the Islamic world to influence works of European art. Objects in different mediums had significant impact on Italian painting tropes of the early Renaissance.¹⁷⁵ While textiles were the most highly sought after imports from the Eastern Mediterranean, other objects were being introduced to the Italian market of luxury goods. Especially valued were ceramics, glass, and metalwork from Syria and Spain.¹⁷⁶ The extraordinary skill of Muslim craftsmen, working in different techniques and styles, made decorated tableware highly influential in the Italian understanding of Islamic designs.

Mamluk brass platters and trays are of particular interest to the subject of Italian paintings with pseudo-inscriptions. Brassware dishes were a popular import due to their expensive materials and high quality craftsmanship. These plates, imported from Syria and Egypt, share an intrinsic similarity to the pseudo-inscribed haloes of Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi* and in selected works of his contemporaries. German professor of Islamic studies Fred Leemhuis (b. 1942) drew the connection between Gentile's haloes in the *Adoration of the Magi* and certain styles of dishware from Mamluk regions of Syria.¹⁷⁷ Circular brass platters were commonly decorated with Arabic inscriptions around the dish's circumference, divided into sections of text by florets or roundel designs. The design of these dishes are nearly identical to the haloes seen in Gentile's masterpiece. Instances of meaningless pseudo-Arabic appeared on metal dish work even in Islamic territories in Iran, Iraq, and Egypt on pieces created by local artisans in the eleventh century.¹⁷⁸ Schulz discusses these continuities between a luxury object such as a brass

¹⁷⁵ Mackie, "Toward an Understanding," 143.; Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts*, 63-67.

¹⁷⁶ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 95.

¹⁷⁷ Schulz, "Intricate Letters," 63.

¹⁷⁸ Grabar, "The Intermediary of Writing," 80-83.

platter and such an ephemeral thing as a halo.¹⁷⁹ Before delving into the theoretical connection between Mamluk brass objects and the depiction of haloes in Italian paintings, the visual similarities and differences between the brass platters and the pseudo-inscribed haloes must be analyzed.

As Schulz demonstrates, the round Mamluk trays are based on a radial design, with inscriptions arranged around their circumference.¹⁸⁰ This brass and silver philae dish from mid-thirteenth century Egypt or Syria shows the Arabic inscription inlaid in silver on the cavetto, just below the lip of the dish [Fig. 28]. The omphalos is adorned with a small floret surrounded by a six-pointed, interlocking geometric pattern encompassing vegetal motifs and water birds. The inscription on this particular tray encourages the owner to drink either water or wine from the dish.¹⁸¹ The inscription is interrupted by four ogival medallions. Two medallions hold an interwoven floral pattern, while two other medallions are filled with large birds. The raised lip of the philae dish has an inner band of animal interlace with lions heads between each overlapping vine. The outer ring of the lip is decorated with a simple geometric pattern of alternating diamonds and circles. This lip ornamentation is imitated in many pseudo-inscribed haloes by a simple ring of beaded indentations along the outer edge of the nimbus.¹⁸² In the painted haloes the inscriptions fill the surface of the circle, whereas the central design on the brass plates are usually smaller, decorating only the circumference.

¹⁷⁹ Schulz, "Intricate Letters," 63-64.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 63.

¹⁸¹ "Mamluk Philae Dish," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 11, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/655036?sortBy=Relevance&ft=mamluk+brass&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=1>.

¹⁸² Schulz, "Intricate Letters," 70.

Brass plates like the one described above were highly prized for their beauty in design as well as for their precious materials. The decorative elements of the trays were enhanced with inlaid gold and silver. Other examples of brasswares contain bitumen, a black, tar-like substance, rubbed into the indentations of the design to create more dramatic contrast between the bright, reflective colors of the precious metal and the black bitumen.¹⁸³ Often, the inscriptions were specifically highlighted on these objects by a use of contrasting metallic colors. For instance, as in the Mamluk philae dish, an inscription of inlaid silver stands out against a decorative background of brass [Fig. 28]. Bitumen defines the outlines of both the inscriptions and motifs.

This method of creating visual contrast between background and text was adopted in Gentile's reinterpretation of the Mamluk object as a nimbus. Gentile used only gold to adorn the haloes rather than using contrasting materials to emphasize the script. He applied different methods of tooling the painting's surface in order to produce various textures that would diffuse reflected light to set the pseudo-inscription apart from the background. This technique causes the lettering to appear darker than the bright gold background against which they are set. Schulz discusses how Masaccio used a similar technique in the Madonna's halo in the *San Giovenale* altarpiece [Fig. 21].¹⁸⁴

Gentile's haloes in the *Adoration of the Magi* show his knowledge of the Mamluk brass platters and their designs. It is clear that he paid close attention to the decorative motifs and inscriptions. The use of pure gold leaf in the haloes indicates Gentile's understanding of the precious materials used to create the platters. As can be seen in the Mamluk philae dish, the text

¹⁸³ "Mamluk Philae," The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

¹⁸⁴ Schulz, "Intricate Letters," 73.

on these plates is often divided into equal sections by decorative rosettes [Fig. 28]. Mary's halo is similarly divided into four sections of pseudo-inscription. Four small, six-leaved rosettes create shape of a cross through the nimbus. The rosettes align with the soft incline of Mary's head, instead of being placed evenly at the top, bottom, and two sides of the circle. Thus, the cross is shifted so that it is not straight up and down. The furthest right rosette aligns with the crown of Mary's head. As Schulz indicates in her analysis of the *San Giovenale* Madonna's halo, this slight diagonal shift of the cross creates a dynamism with Mary's inclined head, as if the nimbus were making the same motion towards the kneeling Magus as Mary.¹⁸⁵ The fourth rosette at the bottom of the nimbus, is aligned with Mary's eyes as if indicating the line of her gaze towards the Magus [Fig. 13].

The pseudo-inscriptions within the haloes are partially visible above the crowns of the heads of both Mary and Joseph. Parts of the inscriptions are obscured by their heads as the figures gently incline towards the eldest Magus. Unlike Mary's halo, the inscription on the nimbus encircling Joseph's head is not disrupted with decorative rosettes. The pseudo-inscription wraps around his head and disappears from view behind his inclined head. A single floral motif is placed at the nape of his neck, just visible above the yellow robe bunched at his shoulder [Fig. 13]. The differences between the composition of Joseph's and Mary's haloes begs the question of whether the broken inscriptions held a specific meaning in context of each of the two figures.

Another potential material influence on inscribed haloes are the North African *bacini*, or basins, that were repurposed by Pisan architects as decorative elements on the exteriors of

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 60, & 66-69.

Christian churches. In her article "Other Peoples' Dishes: Islamic Bacini on Eleventh-Century Churches in Pisa" Karen Mathews addresses how the collection of such spolia represented the victorious campaigns against and the city-state's power over Muslim of North Africa.¹⁸⁶ Some *bacini* were decorated with vegetal designs while others feature Arabic writing.¹⁸⁷ Mathews refers to the writing on some of the *bacini* as "an approximation of [Arabic writing]."¹⁸⁸ The reinterpretation of secular objects for a Christian use might be viewed simply as decorative spolia without political implication. Mathews speculates that their use in certain churches may have been an "economical alternative" to the creation of expensive new marble medallions.¹⁸⁹ If the *bacini* were viewed as highly valuable items from a rival empire their placement of display on the facades of cathedrals turns them into a statement of power. However, the friendly interactions between the Italian peninsula and North Africa must also be considered. It is possible that the use of *bacini* represented the Pisans' prowess as both crusaders and as trading merchants, acting as both trophies of war and as symbols of the city-state's far-reaching relationships of trade to the wealthy regions of North Africa.¹⁹⁰

Brass platters, ceramic *bacini*, and textiles were not the only material objects with which Westerners would have associated Arabic inscriptions. It was a common practice of Medieval Islamic armies to adorn battle shields, weaponry, and armor with inscriptions.¹⁹¹ This practice would have been familiar to Westerners through military clashes with Islamic armies. Images of

¹⁸⁶ Karen Rose Mathews, "Other Peoples' Dishes: Islamic Bacini on Eleventh-Century Churches in Pisa," *Gesta* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 16.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18-20.

¹⁹¹ Schulz, "Intricate Letters," 78.

pseudo-inscribed shields became part of the visual language used in Western depictions of the crusades.¹⁹²

For Italian painters, this association of Arabic inscriptions with shields and armor extends to representations of warriors in Italian paintings. In many depictions of scenes of Christ's Passion Roman soldiers are depicted with pseudo-inscriptions on their armor and clothing. The scene of the *Crucifixion* in the Upper Church of San Francesco in Assisi shows two Roman soldiers to the right of the crucifix with bands of pseudo-inscription on the hem of their garments [Fig. 29]. Giotto's frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel (1304-1306) in Padua depict Roman soldiers with bands of pseudo-Arabic inscriptions incorporated into their armor. The panel depicting the scene of the *Kiss of Judas* shows a crowd surrounding Christ and Judas, with a single Roman soldier visible in full to the right of Judas [Fig. 30]. Two bands of inscriptions painted in gold are visible on the lower section of his tunic. This single Roman soldier is the only individual whose garments are embellished with pseudo-inscription, despite the composition being crowded with the figures of Christ's followers. Also in the Scrovegni Chapel, the scene of the *Resurrection* exhibits use of pseudo-Arabic inscription on the garments of two of the four sleeping soldiers [Fig. 31]. Unlike the *Kiss of Judas*, each figure in this scene have bands of gold pseudo-inscription on their robes.

In Italian paintings with religious subject matter, in addition to appearing in haloes and on the clothing of Mary, pseudo-Arabic inscriptions appear very often in representations of angels. For example, in the frescoes depicting scenes from the New Testament in the Upper Church of San Francesco in Assisi, pseudo-inscriptions appear on the clothing of numerous

¹⁹² Ibid., 79.

angels in each of the scenes. The language of heaven was being contemplated during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.¹⁹³ Angels may have been associated with the languages spoken in East, mistaken for the languages of the Holy Land during the Biblical era.

The *Resurrection* in the Scrovegni Chapel shows two angels who oversee the rising of Christ. Both of the angels have inscriptions on the hem of their white vestments. Christ wears a white robe, similar to those of the angels, with bands of inscriptions at his neck, wrists, shoulders, and hem. Mary Magdalen's crimson robe shows a band of inscription along the hem, as well. The robes of the two angels and Mary Magdalen are solid in color, without any decorative elements save for the gold painted bands of inscriptions. In contrast, the clothing of the sleeping soldiers are decorated with vegetal motifs, in patterns of curling vines with delicate flowers and leaves [Fig. 31]. These textiles are reminiscent of Islamic-inspired designs than the plain robes worn by Christ, Mary Magdalen, and the angels. Like in Gentile's *Adoration*, the figures from the Holy Land wear plain robes, while the "visitors", or the Magi and the Roman soldiers, wear Eastern textiles to differentiate them as the "other" in the Biblical stories.

The use of pseudo-inscriptions on the garments of Roman soldiers in paintings of Christ's Passion raises the issue of whether the use of pseudo-inscriptions held purely positive connotations. Were the Romans simply being labeled as foreigners in the Holy Land? Giotto, a Florentine artist, would likely not have considered Rome to be a foreign land. Perhaps the Arabic script was associated with any group of people who were not Christians. In that case, the pseudo-inscriptions would have denoted the Romans' pagan religion. Although this

¹⁹³ Ibid., 83.

interpretation does not justify the presence of pseudo-inscriptions on the garments of angels, the Holy Family, or Christ's followers.

Or was the use of pseudo-inscriptions on the Romans' armor an association specific to foreign soldiers, solely of the battle arms of Islamic warriors? It is unlikely that the use of Eastern textiles and pseudo-Arabic inscriptions were meant to have the same implications of wealth and power on the Roman soldiers as they did on the Magi. The Romans were the villains of the Passion of Christ. They would not have been awarded the same prestige as the pious Magi or as the Holy Family. Therefore the pseudo-inscriptions on their clothing and armor must be present due to the association of inscriptions on the armor of Eastern armies.

Section V:

Palla Strozzi, Humanist Florence, & the Commission of the Strozzi Altarpiece

During the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries the Republic of Florence was emerging from its previous militant feudal state and evolving into the forerunning city in the humanist movement of the early Renaissance.¹⁹⁴ The power of the feudal lords who had held control over the region eventually gave way to the power of the merchant bankers of Florence. The major banking families, the Strozzi, Medici, Bardi, and Albizzi families held more of the city's wealth and power than the rest of Florence's population combined.¹⁹⁵ These families became known as burghers, a wealthy class from which city officials were elected. The wealth of these families gave them significant power in the local government. These banking families were able to live lives akin to those of the aristocracy due to their fortunes and lucrative mercantile business opportunities.

Palla Strozzi (1372-1462) was born in Florence to the notable banking family. His father, Onofrio (d. 1417), was successful in his business ventures. Onofrio's most profitable investments were in the French and English wool trade.¹⁹⁶ Onofrio was closely involved with local politics and held high positions in the government.¹⁹⁷ Palla had less interest in the high

¹⁹⁴ Robert Baldwin, "Gentile da Fabriano (c.1390-1427): International Style and Court Culture," *Social History of Art*, last modified 2007, accessed February 26, 2018, <http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/>. 2.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

¹⁹⁶ Heather Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage and Pre-Medicean Florence," in *Patronage, Art and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. F. W. Kent and Patricia Simons (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 209.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

politics of the Republic of Florence than his father.¹⁹⁸ His focus was on scholarly pursuits.¹⁹⁹ He devoted his time to academia, religion, and charity. Palla's devotion to the church and his involvement with a local confraternity dampened his interest in finances and business.²⁰⁰ His sole investments were in banking, which he left largely under the direction of his son, Lorenzo.²⁰¹ Palla still lived well above his financial means, spending excessively, and bringing in very little revenue.²⁰² He spent exorbitant sums on charitable donations and artistic commissions, eventually draining the fortune Onofrio had built.²⁰³

My intention is not to paint Palla Strozzi as an irresponsible man, spending without consideration for his accounts. Based on a letter Palla wrote to a family member, Simone Strozzi, he faced many hardships in the maintaining his fortune. The letter illustrates the financial crisis Palla faced due to his father's death:

At the present time, if I make a full account, between the funeral of Nofri and in building and decorating the chapel, and losses which I have suffered, and dowries which I have had to pay, and other things, since Nofri died to the present time, I am the worse off, and altogether thirty thousand florins have gone.

From this excerpt it is clear that Palla felt compelled to complete Onofrio's funerary chapel.²⁰⁴

The price of Onofrio's funeral, for which no expense was withheld, put immense strain on

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 211.

¹⁹⁹ Darrell D. Davisson, "The Iconology of the S. Trinita Sacristy, 1418-1435: A Study of the Private and Public Functions of Religious Art in the Early Quattrocento," *The Art Bulletin* 57, no. 3 (September 1975): 332.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 332.

²⁰¹ Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage," 212.

²⁰² Baldwin, "Gentile da Fabriano," *Social History of Art.*, 2-3.

²⁰³ Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage," 212. 211-212.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 213.

Palla's finances.²⁰⁵ Palla commissioned the *Adoration of the Magi* despite his financial difficulties, indicating how important the altarpiece was as a familial obligation.

Palla was for a time considered to be the richest and most affluent man in Florence before the bankruptcy of the family fortune.²⁰⁶ In the first quarter of the Quattrocento, Palla was Florence's preeminent supporter of the arts and sciences. He helped to usher in the humanist movement in Florence by encouraging the study of foreign languages. He was educated in Greek and Latin, and brought scholar and teacher Manuel Chrysoloras (1355-1415) to Florence to teach the Greek.²⁰⁷ Palla collected rare manuscripts that were previously unavailable in Italy. He was even known to transcribe texts himself.²⁰⁸ His collection of manuscripts was the largest in existence in the early Quattrocento.²⁰⁹ He had Manuel Chrysoloras bring copies of Greek manuscripts to Florence, and had the teacher send texts to him from Constantinople.²¹⁰ He established the first library of Greek and Latin texts in the city.²¹¹ Palla's personal collection of manuscripts was intended as a foundation for a polylingual library that he was financing in the Santa Trinita prior to his exile.²¹²

His contributions to the arts were significant. His greatest contribution to the arts of Florence was in his patronage of the Strozzi altarpiece (1423), a work by Gentile da Fabriano (c. 1370 – 1427). Gentile's altarpiece depicting the *Adoration of the Magi* was commissioned for

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 209 & 213.

²⁰⁶ Keith Christiansen, *Gentile Da Fabriano* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 23-24.; Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, 137.

²⁰⁷ Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage," 203, 205, & 210.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 216.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 215.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 205.

²¹¹ Davisson, "The Iconology," 324 & 330.; Baldwin, "Gentile da Fabriano," *Social History of Art*. 4.

²¹² Davisson, "The Iconology," 323.; Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage," 215.

Onofrio Strozzi's funerary chapel in the Basilica Santa Trinita in central Florence. Santa Trinita was founded in the eleventh century and is a church of the Vallombrosan order. The chapel was dedicated to the patron saints of Palla's father and elder brother Niccolo, St. Onophrius and St. Nicholas, respectively.²¹³ After Onofrio's death in 1417, Palla continued to commission artworks for the chapel under the supervision of the Abbot of the church Don Antonio Gausparre.²¹⁴ The Strozzi chapel includes works by a number of highly regarded artists including frescoes and an *Annunciation* altarpiece by Lorenzo Monaco, paintings by Fra Angelico, Lorenzo Ghiberti, and possible works by Donatello.²¹⁵

Art historian Darrell Davisson claims that the Abbot of Santa Trinita, Don Antonio Gausparre, had great influence on the *Adoration of the Magi*. He claims that the Abbot's mark is visible in the *tiraz* inscription on the arm of the youngest Magus. Davisson states that this inscription is a reference to the Abbot, who worked closely with Palla Strozzi on his patronage of the chapel.²¹⁶ According to his article "The Iconology of the S. Trinita Sacristy, 1418-1435: A Study of the Private and Public Functions of Religious Art in the Early Quattrocento" this cryptographic inscription is a series of mirrored Greek letters which, when reversed, read Gasp[ar] or Gausp[ar].²¹⁷ The name Gausparre, likely an adopted religious name, is the Italian version of the name Gaspar, the name traditionally associated with one of the Magi.²¹⁸ Davisson claims that the presence of this inscription serves to identify this Magus as Gaspar, as well as being a symbol of propriety of the Abbot Gausparre.

²¹³ Davisson, "The Iconology," 315.; Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage," 209.

²¹⁴ Davisson, "The Iconology," 330-331.; Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage," 210.

²¹⁵ Christiansen, *Gentile Da Fabriano*, 25.

²¹⁶ Davisson, "The Iconology," 330-331.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 331.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 330-331.

The Magi go unnamed in the Biblical account of the Adoration. Names only began to be associated with each of these Biblical figures by the early Middle Ages in Europe.²¹⁹ These names were based on kingdoms of supposed origin of each Magus. Melchior was the king of the Persians, Gaspar the king of the Hindous, and Balthasar the king of the Arabs.²²⁰ Having names gave the church the ability to canonize the Magi as saints. Thus, relics of the Magi began to appear in churches throughout Europe.²²¹ Visual depictions of the Magi rarely corresponded with the early Middle Ages legend of their kingdoms of origin. Nor did the Magi's names consistently correspond to their ages or appearance. Thus, it is often difficult to assign regions of origin or names to the three Magi in Western art. I do not believe that Gentile had any intention of portraying the Magi as the kings of the Persian, Hindu, and Arabian kingdoms in the *Adoration of the Magi*. It is my opinion that Gentile wished to represent the Magi as rulers of Eastern kingdoms that would have been recognizable to the laity. This is why Gentile depicts the Magi wearing garments distinctly influenced by Mamluk textiles and courtly vestments. All viewers would have recognized the Mamluk styles and understood them to originate in the east, near the Holy Land, or in North Africa.

Merchants of early Renaissance Italian city-states were afforded many opportunities to travel. They were highly educated and due to their wealth and power within their cities, often held political positions. Palla was somewhat active in local politics, attending meetings of the *consulte e patriche* in the years before to his exile.²²² Palla traveled throughout the

²¹⁹ Grigson, "The Three Kings of Cologne," 30.

²²⁰ Ibid., 30.

²²¹ Ibid., 30-31.

²²² Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage," 210-211.

Mediterranean in his position as an ambassador of the Florentine state.²²³ He was sent to Pisa in 1404, and his diplomatic appointments included Florentine ambassador to the Kingdom of Naples, to the Marquis of Ferrara, to Siena, the orator to Venice, and war commissioner to Volterra.²²⁴ Palla also acted as a papal representative in 1424 on behalf of Pope Martin V, a close acquaintance of the Strozzi family.²²⁵ Palla was a member of the *Dieci di balia* periodically through the 1420's. The *Dieci di balia* was a committee dedicated to the execution of criminal judicial affairs in Florence. Palla owned an estate near the city of Prato, one of Tuscany's two primary production centers of luxury textiles.²²⁶ When Florence gained access to the sea through Pisan ports in 1407, opportunities in mercantile investments increased exponentially, allowing the wealth and power of merchant families to grow.²²⁷ Florentine merchants finally had direct access to major international trade ports in the Mamluk empire. Palla Strozzi's education and worldly knowledge was likely supplemented by all of his travels and trade contacts throughout the Mediterranean.

Patronage was an important aspect of bergher life in Florence in the Quattrocento.²²⁸ The importance of donating to the city and to the Church through support of the arts grew as humanist and early Renaissance values spread.²²⁹ Patronage and donations were a means of

²²³ Davisson, "The Iconology," 332.; Baldwin, "Gentile da Fabriano," *Social History of Art*. 3-4.

²²⁴ Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage," 210.

²²⁵ Davisson, "The Iconology," 332.; Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage," 210.

²²⁶ Baldwin, "Gentile da Fabriano," *Social History of Art*. 3.

²²⁷ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 23.

²²⁸ Robert Gaston, *Liturgy and Patronage in San Lorenzo, Florence, 1350-1650*, ed. F. W. Kent and Patricia Simons (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 201.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

establishing political and social power. Patrons could secure the support of powerful families and parishes through their donations to chapels.²³⁰

The struggle for political and economic power between burgher families resulted in a lengthy feud between Palla Strozzi and Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464).²³¹ Merchant families were in fierce competition for political power and mercantile opportunities offered by international markets.²³² The political rivalry between Palla and Cosimo eventually led to Palla's exile from Florence in 1434.²³³ Cosimo and Palla's feud was grounded, in part, in political disputes. The Medici faction wished Florence to declare war on Lucca, an issue in which the Strozzi family remained neutral.²³⁴ Palla did not support Cosimo's bid for control of the governance of the Florentine Republic in the 1430's.²³⁵ Contemporary chronicler, Vespasiano da Bisticci (1421-1498), speculated that Cosimo exiled Palla out of jealousy.²³⁶ It is possible that Cosimo, who lived extravagantly and publically, was threatened by support for Palla by other influential families. Many families favored Palla because of his piety and his reputation for funding philanthropic projects. Palla had anti-Medicean ties through marital connections to the Albizzi faction, prominent rivals of the Medici.²³⁷ The Albizzi faction led a *coup d'etat* against Medicean rule of the Republic in 1434.²³⁸ Palla's respected influence in local politics and association with the Albizzi faction were threatening to the Medici faction's governance of the

²³⁰ Ibid., 124-125.

²³¹ Davisson, "The Iconology," 323.

²³² Baldwin, "Gentile da Fabriano," *Social History of Art*. 3.

²³³ Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage," 211.

²³⁴ Baldwin, "Gentile da Fabriano," *Social History of Art*. 3.

²³⁵ Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage," 211.

²³⁶ Davisson, "The Iconology," 323.

²³⁷ Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage," 211.

²³⁸ Ibid., 211.

Republic. These were contributing factors to his exile in 1434. The pro-Medicean *balia* declared Palla's exile in 1434.²³⁹

Palla's commission of the *Adoration of the Magi* was one of his most important personal projects. From 1418 to his exile from Florence in 1434, Palla continued to finance the construction and decoration of the chapel of St. Onophrius that his late father had begun.²⁴⁰ The chapel in Santa Trinita was a monument to Palla's vast knowledge of the arts. It also attested to the progressive humanist ideals of Palla's Florence. The story of the *Adoration of the Magi* was a testament to humanism's virtues of worldliness and of Palla's own ideals of piety. The Magi represented the height of devotion as men who traveled from far and wide to witness the birth of Christ and the beginning of the Christian religion. Gentile's contact with his contemporary artists and scholars like Palla certainly influenced the artist's creation of the altarpiece.

Palla Strozzi was a very charitable man. The story of St. Onophrius, his father's patron saint, encouraged charitable work and reproached the pursuit of earthly pleasures.²⁴¹ Palla was also involved with the *Compagnia de' Magi*, a Florentine confraternity dedicated to the Magi.²⁴² Rab Hatfield determines in his article "The Compagnia de' Magi" that another Florentine confraternity called the "[*Compagnia del Zampillo*] and the *Campagnia de' Magi* must have been identical" due to the contexts in which they are both mentioned in historical documents²⁴³. Hatfield also claims that *Compagnia del Zampillo* was a confraternity that, for some time prior to

²³⁹ Ibid., 211.

²⁴⁰ Keith Christiansen, *Gentile Da Fabriano*, 24-25.

²⁴¹ Davisson, "The Iconology," 321.

²⁴² Rab Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 33 (1970): 126-127.; Davisson, "The Iconology," 325-326.

²⁴³ Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 126-127.

the 1470's, held its meetings in the Santa Trinita.²⁴⁴ Davisson discusses the strict code by which members of the *Compagnia del Zampillo* lived by, and their societal roles as benefactors to the poor.²⁴⁵ The *Compagnia de' Magi* undoubtedly had similar values of charity and benefaction.²⁴⁶ Palla was a member of *Compagnia de' Magi*, therefore he certainly followed its code of conduct. As well as paying for the completion of his father's reconstruction of the Strozzi family chapel, Palla patronized the hospital administered by the Church of the Santa Trinita.²⁴⁷

Palla Strozzi's patronage of Gentile's altarpiece had great influence on the painting. The altarpiece in many ways reflects the interests and values held by Florentine society in the early fifteenth century. The cult of the Magi was growing in importance in Florence during the Quattrocento.²⁴⁸ The *Compagnia de' Magi* performed an annual pageant in the city, called the *Festa de' Magi* on the Feast of the Epiphany, the date dedicated to the Magi.²⁴⁹ The day was celebrated by the members of the confraternity dressing as the Magi and participating in a procession. The parade began from the town hall to the church of San Marco. The procession was meant to symbolize the journey of the Magi from the palace of King Harod to Bethlehem.²⁵⁰ The Santa Trinita played a role in other festivities, as well. The basilica represented the "Temple of Jerusalem" in the procession enacted for the annual Vallombrosan festival on the Feast of the Holy Trinity.²⁵¹ The confraternity attracted the many members of Florence's elite families. It had profound impact on religious, social and political life of the Florentine society. Hence, the

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 126-127.

²⁴⁵ Davisson, "The Iconology," 326-327.

²⁴⁶ Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 126-127.

²⁴⁷ Davisson, "The Iconology," 327.

²⁴⁸ Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 107.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 108.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 109.

²⁵¹ Davisson, "The Iconology," 325 & 328.

Adoration of the Magi became one of the most commonly explored themes in Florentine painting.²⁵²

Pageantry was a major aspect of the festival put on by the members of the *Compagnia de' Magi*. The *Festa de' Magi* was an opportunity to satisfy the nostalgia for the proto-Christian aesthetic.²⁵³ This inspired much of the fascination with Orientalism in Florentine high culture during the first decades of the Quattrocento.²⁵⁴ It was also a manner in which the wealthy members of confraternities were able to fulfill their desire for extravagance and flamboyant dress that was restricted in Florence by sumptuary laws.²⁵⁵ Although the *Festa* was outwardly an ostentatious production, it allowed the brothers to assume the roles of the Magi and their company. Through dressing as the Magi, members were able to personify the virtues of the holy figures and placed themselves in the Biblical and historical context of the beginning of the Christian religion.²⁵⁶

The growing interest in humanism in Florence undoubtedly had an impact on the popularity of the cult of the Magi. The representation of the Magi as kings was a fairly recent alteration of the Biblical story in the Quattrocento.²⁵⁷ Through the *Compagnia de' Magi's* reimagining of the brief Biblical account, the Magi came to represent the proto-Christian aristocracy.²⁵⁸ They had previously been depicted as poor pilgrims wearing pants and phrygian caps rather than as the opulently dressed Eastern noblemen seen in Gentile's work.²⁵⁹

²⁵² Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 107.

²⁵³ Ibid., 143.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 143.

²⁵⁵ Hoeniger, "Cloth of Gold," 154 & Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 47.

²⁵⁶ Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 143.

²⁵⁷ Baldwin, "Gentile da Fabriano," *Social History of Art.*, 2.

²⁵⁸ Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 142.

²⁵⁹ Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, 250-251.

Historically, the Magi had been viewed as the “wise men” whom Matthew describes in his gospel.²⁶⁰ In response to the development of a wealthy mercantile class, the Magi were transformed into kings. Their image was altered to metaphorically represent the Florentine burgher class.²⁶¹ The confraternity members also wished to represent themselves as the Magi, taking on their piety and dedication. This change may also have been a response to the city’s restrictions on the private expenditures of the wealthy Florentine residents. The *Compagnia de’Magi*’s interpretation of the Biblical figures as kings, in a way, fulfilled high society’s desire for opulence. The procession enacted on the *Festa de’Magi* made the ostentatious dress acceptable due to the devotional nature of the confraternity. The cult of the Magi in Florence reimagined the Magi, not only as wealthy kings, but as Renaissance philosophers and philanthropists.²⁶² By commissioning Gentile to paint the *Adoration of the Magi*, Palla continued to donate his wealth to Santa Trinita, a church dedicated to the poor, further enhancing his relationship to the role of the Magi as donors to Christ.

Palla Strozzi’s patronage of the altarpiece was also a statement of his status. At the time of its creation, the Strozzi altarpiece was the most expensive painting commissioned in Florence, costing Palla 300 florins.²⁶³ Palla directed Gentile to use ample amounts of the most expensive materials available. Blues and reds dominate the color scheme of the altarpiece. Indigo pigments were amongst the most highly priced colors, as indigo did not grow in European climates and therefore had to be imported.²⁶⁴ The large and ornate frame is gilded in gold leaf,

²⁶⁰ Matt. 2:1-12. (RSV).

²⁶¹ Davisson, "The Iconology," 324.

²⁶² Baldwin, "Gentile da Fabriano," *Social History of Art.*, 6.

²⁶³ Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, 250.; Baldwin, "Gentile da Fabriano," *Social History of Art.*, 3.

²⁶⁴ Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts*, 61-62.

with copious amounts used throughout the painting itself. The extravagant use of such expensive materials was a conspicuous display of charity by Palla. The richness of the materials and the price of the commission of the altarpiece are the visual culmination of the vast amounts of money Palla spent on the family chapel, and his donations to the Church of the Santa Trinita. Palla's large donations and expensive commissions for the chapel supported his image as a pious and generous man.

The altarpiece was a symbol not only of Palla's wealth, but of the power and prestige of the whole Strozzi family. Throughout the altarpiece are references to the family. Gentile even included two coat of arms of the Strozzi family on the lower corners of the frame. The commission of the altarpiece was Palla's first deed in the continuation of his artistic patronage of his father's chapel.²⁶⁵ In many ways, he was attempting to make a statement of status in relation to his late father. The altarpiece includes two portraits, although some scholars debate the identities of the depicted men. Vasari identified the painter, Gentile, and Palla Strozzi himself in the panel painting.²⁶⁶ Davisson disagrees, claiming that the portraits are of Palla and of his father.²⁶⁷ Davisson claims that the portraits of the father and son were meant to be recognizable figures representative of sinful men who follow in the path of the faithful Magi in pursuit of piety.²⁶⁸

I am inclined to agree with Davisson's interpretation, that the men depicted in the central panel of the painting are Palla and his father Onofrio Strozzi. Onofrio stands behind the Magi, visible between Gaspar and the young man who wears the inscribed sash [Fig. 32]. He is dressed

²⁶⁵ Christiansen, *Gentile Da Fabriano*, 22-25.

²⁶⁶ Davisson, "The Iconology," 324.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 324.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 324.

in a turban of braided blue and gold fringe, and a vestment of crimson and dark indigo, almost black. His clothing are an indication of wealth as the dark blue fibers had to be dyed many times in the expensive indigo dye to create such a deep color.²⁶⁹ He is represented as a falcon trainer, a falcon perched on his extended, gloved wrist. This bird of prey was a symbol of the Strozzi family. The name Strozzi is derived from the Italian term *strozziere*, meaning falcon trainer.²⁷⁰ Falcon training was a hobby for the wealthy. Beside him stands Palla, staring straight out of the painting, meeting the viewer's gaze, declaring his own important role in the narrative. Palla is mostly obscured by his father and by Gaspar. Only his face and a sliver of his torso are visible. He wears a burgundy turban and a black garment with gold leaf rosettes.

By placing an image of himself in the painting, and in such close proximity to the Holy Family and the Magi, Palla Strozzi is asserting his own status as on par with the Biblical figures depicted in the panel. The inclusion of the patron and his father alludes to Palla's membership of the *Compagnia de'Magi*, and his participation in the early processions of the *Festa de'Magi*. This portrait was another way in which Palla could place himself in the Biblical narrative, much like the *Compagnia de'Magi* processions. Palla's request that Gentile include his portrait in the altarpiece places him in the historical and Biblical context of Christ's birth. The portraits create an association of the Strozzi family with the Christian religion from its very beginning. This is a statement of familial power and status. It is a claim that Palla and his father held the same role in history as the Magi.

The artistic climate of Quattrocento Florence had significant impact on Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi*. Gentile's exposure to humanist ideals and the Florentine interest in

²⁶⁹ Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts*, 61.

²⁷⁰ Baldwin, "Gentile da Fabriano," *Social History of Art.*, 5.

foreign cultures is evident in the altarpiece. The painter was clearly influenced by Tuscan painters from the Trecento who explored the use of pseudo-inscriptions and Eastern textiles. However, I believe that nothing had such a strong influence on the artist as did Palla Strozzi. Through his commission of the *Adoration of the Magi* Palla communicated his family's mercantile power throughout the Mediterranean, as well as his own personal legacy as a supporter of humanism and education in Florence. He asserted his preeminence over his rivals by placing his portrait in a Biblical context. The incorporation of pseudo-scripts showed Palla's scholarly prowess and his knowledge of foreign cultures, arts, and histories.

Appendix:
Images



Fig. 1. Lippo Memmi,
*Madonna and Child with
Saints and Angels*, c. 1350.
Tempera and gold leaf on
panel. 26 ¼ x 13 in. The
Metropolitan Museum of
Art, New York.



Fig. 2. Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1423. Tempera and gold leaf on wood. 120 in × 111 in. The Uffizi Gallery, Florence.



Fig. 3. Gentile da Fabriano,
Adoration of the Magi,
detail of frame and journey
to Bethlehem.



Fig. 4.
Gentile da
Fabriano,
*Adoration of
the Magi*,
detail of
predella
scene the
Nativity.



Fig. 5.
Gentile da
Fabriano,
*Adoration of
the Magi*,
detail of the
predella
scene *Flight
into Egypt*.



Fig. 6.
Gentile da
Fabriano,
*Adoration of
the Magi*,
detail of the
predella
scene the
*Presentation
at the
Temple*.



Fig. 7. Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail of the left lunette, Magi observing the star.



Fig. 8. Gentile da
Fabriano,
*Adoration of the
Magi*, detail of the
procession.



Fig. 9. Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail of the woman wearing a pseudo-inscribed mantle.



Fig. 10.
Gentile da
Fabriano,
*Adoration of
the Magi*,
detail of the
Magi.



Fig. 11. Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration
of the Magi*, detail of the inscription of
the Magus's garment.

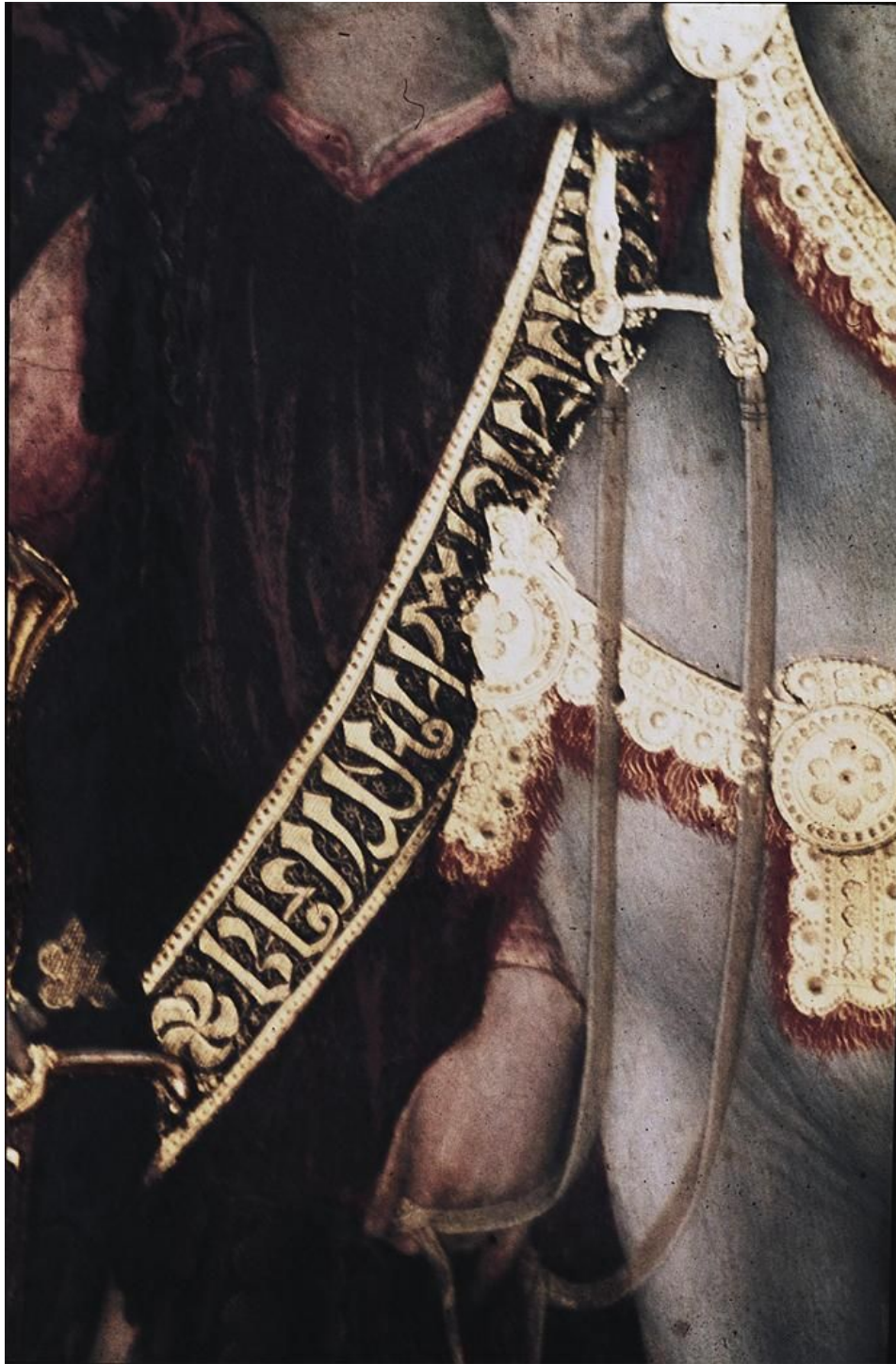


Fig. 12. Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail of the groom's pseudo-inscribed ornamentation.



Fig. 13. Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, detail of the Holy Family.

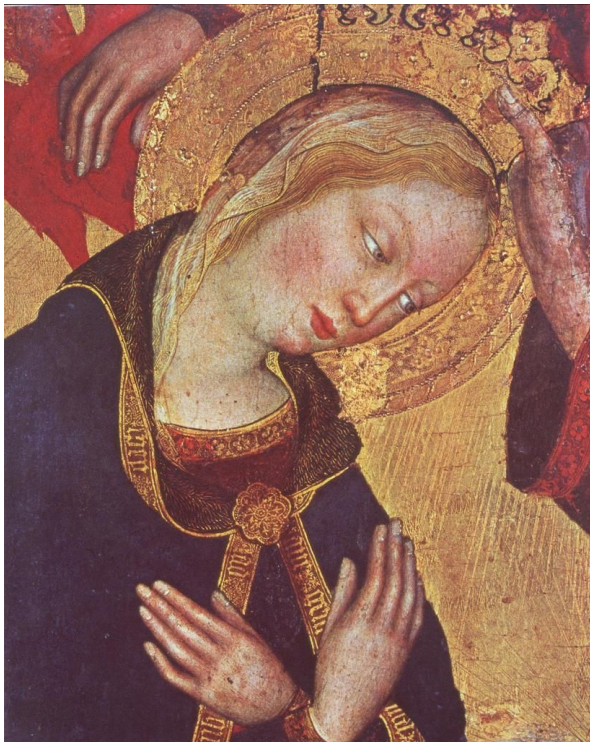


Fig. 14. Gentile da Fabriano, *Valle Romita Polyptych*, c. 1410-12. Tempera and gold on panel. 110 in × 98 in. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.



Fig. 15.
Lorenzo Monaco,
Moses, c. 1408-10.
Tempera and gold on
wood. 24 1/2 x 17 1/2
in. The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New
York.



Fig. 16. Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi, *Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus*, 1333. Tempera and gold on panel. 120 in × 104 in. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.



Fig. 17. Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi,
Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus, detail of Archangel Gabriel.



Fig. 18. Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Rucellai Madonna*, c. 1285. Tempera and gold on panel. 180 in × 110 in. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.



Fig. 19. Giotto di Bondone, *Scenes from the New Testament*, detail of the *Nativity*, c. 1315-20. Fresco and gold leaf. Upper Church of the Basilica San Francesco, Assisi.



Fig. 20. Giotto di Bondone, *Scenes from the New Testament*, detail of the *Presentation at the Temple*, c. 1315-20. Fresco and gold leaf. Upper Church of the Basilica San Francesco, Assisi.



Fig. 21.
Masaccio,
*San
Giovenale
Triptych*,
detail of the
Madonna and
Child, 1422.
Tempera and
gold on
panel. Museo
Masaccio,
Florence.



Fig. 22. Michelino da Besozzo, *Marriage of the Virgin*, c. 1435. Tempera on panel, 25.6 in × 18.7 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 23. *Towel*, c. 1500, Perugia, Italy. Cotton, 42 1/2 x 20 1/2 in. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.



Fig. 24 *Woven textile*, c. 1300-50, Central Asia. Pattern woven silk with gold gilded tanned leather, 23 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 21 in. The Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Fig. 25. *Mantle for a statue of the Virgin with lotus blossoms and medallions*, c. 1430, Spain, Nasrid period. Silk and gilt-metal thread, 27 3/4 x 43 3/4 in. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.



Fig. 26.
*Textile
fragment, c.
1500, Egypt,
Mamluk
period. Silk,
24 x 14 3/4
in. The
Metropolitan
Museum of
Art, New
York.*



Fig. 27. Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Maestà*, 1308. Tempera and gold on wood, 84 in × 156 in. Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana del Duomo, Siena.



Fig. 28. *Mamluk Philae Dish*, c. 1345-60, Egypt or Syria, Mamluk period. Brass inlaid with silver and gold, 1.5 x 11.4 in (diameter). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 29. Giotto di Bondone, *Scenes from the New Testament*, detail of the *Crucifixion*, c. 1315-20. Fresco and gold leaf. Upper Church of the Basilica San Francesco, Assisi.



Fig. 30. Giotto di Bondone, *Scenes from the New Testament*, detail of the *Kiss of Judas*, c. 1315-20. Fresco and gold leaf. Upper Church of the Basilica San Francesco, Assisi.



Fig. 31. Giotto di Bondone, *Scenes from the New Testament*, detail of the *Resurrection*, c. 1315-20. Fresco and gold leaf. Upper Church of the Basilica San Francesco, Assisi.



Fig. 32. Gentile da
Fabriano, *Adoration of the
Magi*, detail of Palla and
Onofrio Strozzi.

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