

1-1-2015

Arabic Pseudo-Script And The Italian Renaissance

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PSEUDO-ARABIC SCRIPT AND THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

by

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THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

2015

MAJOR: ART HISTORY

Approved By:

Advisor

Date

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DEDICATION

To my mother and father.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without certain individuals, this project could not have been possible.

To my advisor, Dr. Jennifer Olmsted who worked with me through the process with patience and invaluable guidance.

To Dr. Dora Apel, who has served as a brilliant source of inspiration and encouragement throughout my graduate career.

To Dr. Catherine R. Carver, whose captivating lectures remind me why I love art history.

To Dr. Petra Richterova, my mentor and whose friendship I am infinitely grateful for.

To my father, Dr. Hashim Al-Tawil, who has done everything listed above.

To my mother, Eman Aljawherji, who has instilled patience in me that has been pertinent in this process.

And to my friends and family who continue to support and encourage me in all that I do. I am deeply grateful.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The abundance of pseudo-Arabic script found on Italian artworks, architecture and objects ranging from the early to late Renaissance periods possess an overt set of implications. The incorporation of pseudo-scripts into Italian religious artworks of the period was not a new technique, with the basic analysis of these scripts stating that their incorporation was meant to symbolically represent a text or figure of ancient or eastern origins. The use of eastern texts worked to evoke the lands from which they were derived, therefore communicating to the contemporaneous viewer not only the artists' knowledge of history and Christian roots, but further associating Christianity with the eastern holy land of Jerusalem.¹ Such is the case in Giotto's *Madonna and Child* (fig. 1) in which Mary's headdress is adorned with golden pseudo-Arabic writing. Adornment such as this, found namely in the haloes and garments of religious figures are typical, and can also be found in sculpture such as in the sleeve of Donatello's *The Prophet*, (fig. 2).²

The idea that the use of pseudo-Arabic script in works of religious subject matter relayed a sense of the East, however, is not the only understanding extracted from the works. Italian paintings as well as objects such as metals, books, garments and other textiles were adorned with pseudo-Arabic script from this period—and furthermore, the pseudo-script appears on architecture and

¹Rosamond E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002): 51

²Alexander Nagel, "Twenty-five notes on pseudoscript in Italian art," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 59/60 (2011): 229-30.

sculpture. The use of the script is prevalent but also confusing and raises a number of questions—where did the artists see the script? What was the Italian understanding of Arabic? How was Arabic interpreted by the viewer?³ Pseudo-Arabic script found in Italian works from the Renaissance period provides clear evidence that Italy and the Arab world were in close cross-cultural contact and dialogue during the periods before and during the production of the works.⁴ At the very least, the proximity of the two cultures to one another alone provides evidence of inevitable contact amongst cultural groups.⁵ Trade between North Africa, Europe and Mesopotamia was abundant—port cities such as Naples and Genoa contain remarkable traces of contact with the Arab-Islamic world due in part to trade routes with the Arab East. It is clear that Arab-Islamic relations and influence occurred all over the Mediterranean. Furthermore, limiting the understanding of the origins of pseudo-scripts to simply symbolizing the roots of Christianity disregards an up to 800-year presence of Arabs and Muslims on the European continent.⁶ If Arabic and other foreign scripts were only meant to elicit the origins of Christianity in the viewer of Renaissance art, the question arises: Why did they only suddenly appear in the 13th century? It is important to note that previous to the early Renaissance, pseudo-Arabic script was not found in religious Italian artworks.⁷ With this in mind, it affirms that the influx of pseudo-

³ Silvia Pedone et al, “The Pseudo-Kufic Ornament and the Problem of Cross-Cultural Relationships Between Byzantium and Islam,” *Opuscula Historiae Artium* 62 (2013): 125.

⁴ Stephen O’Shea, *Sea of Faith: Islam and Christianity in the Medieval Mediterranean World* (New York: Walker & Company, 2006): 7-9.

⁵ Oleg Grabar “Islamic Architecture and the West: Influences and Parallels,” *Islam and the Medieval West*, ed. Stanley Ferber (Binghamton: State U of NY Binghamton, 1975) 62-64.

⁶ Francesco Gabrieli, *The Arabs: A Compact History* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963) 138.

⁷ Nagel, 229.

Arabic script beginning in the proto-Renaissance period found in Italian art, textiles and objects reflects a significant relationship with the Arab-Muslim world, one which preceded the art, and furthermore, explicitly reveals a direct Arab-Muslim influence that permeated the region.

The origins and reasons for the inclusion of pseudo-script have been discussed and often debated by scholars.⁸ Generally speaking, it has been concluded that at the very least, inscriptions are used particularly in religious subject matter in order to invoke a connection to Jerusalem and the Semitic peoples.⁹ The question of whether the inclusion of pseudo-Arabic is substantiating religious subject matter does not take away from the understudied issue of cross-Mediterranean hybrid cultural tendencies. If the variety and complex adoptions of the calligraphy in Italian Renaissance art reveals any one thing, it is that the areas where these works were produced reflect strong interactions amongst cultures. The fact that there is an apparent lack of research on the particular subject matter does not reflect a lack of evidence to be researched. The discourse on cross-cultural relations between East and West historically has been either omitted or marginalized for various geo-political reasons.¹⁰ Racist ideologies and other realms of thought built on the notion of cultural superiority have contributed to the omission of historical narratives involving the triumphs and contributions of the eastern worlds. This historical extension of cultural superiority is most easily understood through visual examples found during art movements such as Orientalism and Primitivism.

⁸ Grabar, 60.

⁹ Mack, 52.

¹⁰ O'Shea, 9.

These movements involved western constructions of fantastic otherworlds: the Arabian Peninsula and the African and Oceanic cultures, respectively. Orientalism and Primitivism illustrate the exoticized “other” by placing the concept in visual context. Vague renderings associating themselves with exotic otherworlds perpetuate stereotypes, driving a wedge between otherwise related cultures. Rather than interpret the world as a bridged community in dialogue, Orientalist understandings of the East separate and divide as a result of racist undertones that are ingrained over time. The end results are inaccurate, isolationist understandings of humanity which historically exclude the realities of broad cultural mixing and borrowing pertinent in areas such as the Mediterranean. These cultural mixings and borrowings however, expose themselves regardless—in this case, as pseudo-Arabic script in Italian art—and must be interpreted using a globalized historical understanding in the effort to clarify and reinterpret the past in order to show the significant role that Arab and Muslim culture played in Italian Renaissance art.

The Arab-Islamic relationship with Europe during the Medieval period through the Renaissance is an area of research rich with possibilities. From Andalusia and Palermo to the ports of Northern Italy-- trade, education, philosophy, science, art, and language from the Arab-Islamic world penetrated the cultural fabrics of the West. The importance of these trades alone mirror the Italian fascination with Arab-Islamic style in early movements such as the International style, Visigoth architecture, and Italian Renaissance paintings, among others. The explicit preoccupation with and adoption of Arab-Islamic

styles mirror the significant cultural exchange that was taking place between East and West. These cultural exchanges are evidenced by the strong Arab-Islamic influence that is expressed as artistic and architectural adoptions in the western worlds, such as the art of Gentile da Fabriano, whose work visually encapsulates the rich trade occurring between cultures (fig. 3). Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi*, for example, features a rich use of color and fabrics as a result of trade with the eastern world. The peculiar haloes surrounding figures such as Mary brilliantly express the use of pseudo-script. These details, alongside the abundant use of gold as well as features like ornamented arches framing the piece suggest a uniquely Eastern signature on the work.

The question remains, why did Arabic pseudo-script appear in early Italian Renaissance art? The answer rests with the specific literary and poetic nature of Arabic, beginning in pre-Islamic times, but most importantly, in the birth of humanism as cultivated by the Islamic empire. Islam spread across the majority of the known world, bringing with it a new humanist view which provides the missing link to understanding Arabic pseudo-script in Italian artworks of the Renaissance. The Islamic world based its success in an ideological culture of *humanism*: that is, it propagated an unyielding program of education, scientific inquiry, Greek philosophy and logic and utilized Arabic as its primary communicative tool. As Arabic wisdom and literary tradition permeated the Islamic empire, it not only became the official administrative language but the officiating language of the birth of humanism through Islam. This association was recognized and understood by the neighboring western world which was not only

in constant contact and overlap with the East, but openly drew influence from it until its own Renaissance was realized. This new Italian Renaissance, based in humanism and the ideals of the ancient Greco-Roman world, was met only by way of the Islamic intermediary culture which preserved, translated, and cultivated humanist principles into a widespread cultural mentality. Just as the Italians incorporated Greco-Roman canons into their aesthetic culture to reflect their insistence on a renewed humanist Italy, they also incorporated the decorative Arabic script to substantiate this newfound humanist interest. The results are an Italian Renaissance world which exalted the Greco-Roman Classical heritage as well as recognized the Arab-Islamic role in transmitting the ancient ideals, and therefore humanism, to Renaissance Europe.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The current state of research regarding Arabic pseudo-script in early Italian Renaissance art leaves ample room for interpretation. Scholars have leaned towards a very broad and at times simplified reasoning for the occurrence of Arabic script in Italian art, relying on the presumption that the script was largely an emulation of *tiraz* textiles—Islamic honorary royal garb—and their textual formula as inspiration for Renaissance art.¹¹ For example, the honorary mantle of King Roger II of Sicily was specifically designed in Arab-Islamic form after *tiraz* royal garments (fig. 4). The Arabic *kufic* text, which is a stylized, squared script, is found on Roger's cape.¹² The text is authentic and legible, stating praise for the Sicilian ruler and reflects a conscious adoration of Islamic-Arabic court tradition.¹³

A major proponent of the argument of imitative script being largely without underlying cultural connotation is Rosamond E. Mack in her comprehensive text on Arab-Islamic relations with the West, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600*. Published in 2002, Mack's book gives a convincing analysis of the origins of Arabic pseudo-script in Italian art of the period, in line with established scholarship describing periods of increased interactions with the Mediterranean world which produced an influx of Islamic textiles, pottery, metals

¹¹ Mack, 54.

¹² Isabelle Dolezalek, "Fashionable Form and Tailor-Made Message: Transcultural Approaches to Arabic Script on the Royal Norman Mantle and Alb," *Medieval History Journal* 15 (2012):246-7.

¹³ Mack, 60.

and other objects on the Italian peninsula.¹⁴ This frame of logic, though seemingly linear and coherent in derivation, does not necessarily account for the source of the textiles and their availability in the Italian world. Because *tiraz* textiles functioned as royal garments exalting their ruler with Arabic script, Mack draws a parallel between this use and the royal fabrics worn by Christ and the Holy Family in early Renaissance Italian artworks.¹⁵ The paintings in question tend to have bands of pseudo-Arabic script on the hems of the sleeves and robes—placements which cannot truly be proven to be precisely sourced from *tiraz* counterparts. However, *tiraz* textiles and their particular arrangements would not have necessarily been seen by the Italians to the extent to which they were copied in holy imagery. Furthermore, the exact *tiraz* robes that were seen by the Italians are unknown and only speculated upon. Finally, the *tiraz* explanation does not cover the breadth and variation with which Arabic pseudo-script is found on Italian artworks of the period. If Italian artists were aiming to evoke the “Eastern roots of Christianity” through inclusion of pseudo-Arabic script, why did the writing appear during the period beginning in 1300 and ending in about 1600? A proper response not only begs for but also requires further investigation.

Mack states that texts of apparently foreign or Eastern nature found in Italian painting were meant to be recognized rather than deciphered or read by the viewer.¹⁶ This point helps justify her notion that the pseudo-script was used primarily to reference the holy roots of Christianity, which evidently came from

¹⁴ Grabar, 60.

¹⁵ Mack, 60.

¹⁶ Mack, 51.

Jerusalem, a Semitic/Arab land,¹⁷ rather than to convey an “encrypted message,” as scholar Alexander Nagel of New York University mentions in his essay “Twenty-Five Notes on Pseudo-Script in Italian Art.” Nagel revisits this notion in his assessment of pseudo-script in Italian art of the same period. He notes that in Lippi’s *St. Benedict and St. Apollonia* (fig. 5), St. Apollonia is adorned with pseudo-Arabic calligraphy in order to recognize her Alexandrian roots, while the Italian St. Benedict is left unadorned.¹⁸ This observation justifies an Eastern association with script, though because it does not occur as an absolute trend, does not prove the notion. Furthermore, and perhaps most pertinent, Mack’s viewpoint assumes that the early Renaissance Italian world was ignorant of the fact that Arabic was not spoken in Jerusalem until the 7th century. While it may be feasible to assume the ignorance of common folk of the period, presumably those who were in the position to commission art also had access to education. Famed Renaissance artists held high status in Italy, while those in the position or power to commission art were among the ranks of government or religious institutions—needless to say, entities commissioning art during the Italian Renaissance were among the upper crust of society both as nobility and in a financial sense. Certainly powerful families such as the Medicis, or even more influential entities—the church itself—would not grant authorization of costly artistic or architectural endeavors without knowing the content or meaning of the final product. To state that the papacy, governing bodies, and wealthy branches of society were uninformed about Christian history, as well as the correct

¹⁷ Alicia Walker, “Meaningful Mingling: Classicizing Imagery and Islamicizing Script in a Byzantine Bowl,” *The Art Bulletin* 90 (2008): 44.

¹⁸ Nagel, 231-33.

languages used by neighboring cultures, does not pose a convincing argument. Moreover, it suggests an unlikely conception of world history as a group of isolated cultures that exhibited little to no interaction amongst one another. Ascribing to this inaccurate model, though not necessarily the intention of Mack or any contemporary historian, projects a certain attitude towards the West which tends to marginalize eastern interactions and influences.

The parallels drawn between royal Islamic garb and holy figures in the artworks are not inaccurate, though they do not offer a look at the broader picture at hand. Proposing an argument which relies on a single cause not only heightens the chance of deviance from the law formed, but also marginalizes societal, political and artistic trade and interactions of the periods contemporaneous with and prior to the Italian Renaissance. The Mediterranean region had been in continuous, rich dialogue for hundreds—even thousands of years prior to the Italian Renaissance, and those important relationships are left out of Mack's overall assessment. A simplified approach to looking at art does a disservice to both the eastern and western worlds of the period. For one, it reduces the genius of the early Italian Renaissance to being a period of loose, uninformed imitation. Moreover, it declines inquiry into the golden age of the Islamic empire which occurred during the Medieval period, leaving us with a less-than holistic approach to art historical investigation. Nagel's comprehensive list of pseudo-scripts work as reinforcement to this claim—the breadth and variety listed in his essay speak to the multitude of possibilities available for further exploration. The final result, then, is not so much a rejection of Mack's ideas, but

rather an insistence on a more finely tuned argument which takes a comprehensive look at the world in question.

Although it is probable that some characteristics of Italian artworks may have drawn decorative inspiration from an Islamic textile, to end the dialogue at this junction ultimately inhibits a chance at further analysis. This essay, then, is a humble attempt to connect those dots and reach a more complete understanding of the Mediterranean world and its substantial cross-interactions, which went on to cultivate unparalleled and curiously amalgamated expressions such as pseudo-Arabic script in Italian artworks of the early Renaissance period. The research in this essay aims not to reject contemporary research such as Mack's, but to expound upon her parallels as well as further investigate the cultural, historical, political and ideological aspects of the Mediterranean and Arab-Islamic Medieval worlds which subsequently helped shape the Italian Renaissance. Ultimately, in order to understand pseudo-Arabic script in Italian Renaissance art, one must first understand the rise and spread of Islam, its relationship to and use of the Arabic language, and the birth of humanism as being central to the ideological and cultural spread of the Islamic empire. These aspects, once properly surveyed, are pertinent to the main argument which proposes that Arabic script worked as a symbol of the Islamic empire which was itself based in humanism. Arabic script later shows up in Italian Renaissance art as recognition and visual indication of humanism, an ideal crucial to the development and mentality of the Italian renaissance itself. The Italians of the Renaissance were aware of the contributions the Arab-Muslim world had made to the world at that

point—and revered the culture that cultivated and inspired their own later Renaissance rooted in the same ideological standards of logic and reason.

CHAPTER 3

ARABIC LITERARY HISTORY

The importance of Arabic text began in pre-Islam—Arabic is rooted as a Semitic language alongside Hebrew and Aramaic. The language and script used in the 6th century is most closely linked to ancient Nabatean script which was found in the Syrian region in 2000 BCE. Before Islam arose in the 6th century, the Arab world was composed of polytheists as well as Christians, Jews, and so forth. Arabic was a language of love, poetry, and romance—Arabic expressions called *qasidas*, or poetic odes, adorned pre-Islamic pottery reflecting a pan-Arabian society with intimate relationships with writing and literature.¹⁹ *Qasidas*, available for public use as pottery decorations, consisted of poetry confronting the life and times of the contemporary pagan Arab.²⁰ A mix of story telling with poetic prose and structure was at the core of the Arab literary tradition which mostly focused on melancholic, humanized interpretations of existence.²¹ This existential theme expressed itself aesthetically and rhythmically—the script itself with its repetitive curves and lines juxtaposed with the spoken rhythm of the poetic meaning of the word. This tradition of Arabic spoken and written aesthetic duality continued after Islam converted the pagan Arabs to monotheism—in fact, the structure of the Qur’an is derived from the pre-Islamic *qasidas* both in style and poetic form. The *qasidas*, then, act as a reference to classical Arabic

¹⁹ Carl Ernst, “The Global Significance of Arabic Language and Literature,” *Religion Compass* 7/6 (2013): 191.

²⁰ Gabrieli, 13-14.

²¹ Ernst, 191.

literature.²² The highly rhythmic and structured Qur'an, not only continued the tradition of Arabic poetry, but implemented itself as the zenith expression of Arabic classical literature to date. The musical and mathematical arrangement of the spoken words, coupled with the perfected aestheticized script of the Qur'an, not only reflect the prominence of literary understanding and mastery to the Arabs, but also hinge on the understanding of Arabic text as a signifier of the Islamic civilization. It was not until the 7th century CE that Arabic was Islamicized—once it was, it became the mark of not only a religion, but a culture, mentality, and history. The essential embodiment of this idea is the Dome of the Rock, built in 691 in Jerusalem. The Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik envisaged Jerusalem as the new city of Islam and built the mosque as a testament to his vision.²³ The interior decorations speak to an authentic Islamic aesthetic culture of Arabic poetic verse, undulating and adorning the mosque to echo the call of the new religion (fig. 6).

By the 7th century CE, the Arabian Peninsula was amidst a religious conversion to Islam which spanned the entire peninsula. By the year 691, the Caliph Abd al-Malik implemented Arabic as the official language of the Islamic government. Those who had previously utilized Greek, Persian, and Syriac now had an official administrative language which unified and coalesced the empire into a singular coherent political society.²⁴ Later, this cultural unification catalyzed by the implementation of a common core language acted as a prominent factor in

²² Ernst, 192.

²³ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1973) 49.

²⁴ Ernst, 192.

the ease and swiftness with which the Islamic Renaissance occurred.²⁵ Non-Arabs and non-Muslims alike learned the new language of commerce while maintaining their local vernaculars. Municipal and public servants quickly adopted Arabic despite its multifaceted literary nature, which in turn created a society accustomed to the advanced virtuosity of the Arabic language.²⁶ Furthermore, this broad understanding of Arabic subsequently produced a comprehensive understanding of Islamic law, as it applied to the governed bodies of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. With this administrative Islamic language came a familiarity with the Qur'an and its classical literary tradition, as well as knowledge of Arab-Muslim culture, with both aspects quickly penetrating the societal fabric of the empire.²⁷

The reality of this new multi-cultural Islamic society based in a singular heritage of Arabic classical text meant that common knowledge was far more advanced. For one, Arabic wisdom, poetry, and allusions found their way into everyday use by both the court and population. When the entire Islamic empire adopted a unified language rooted in a classic literary tradition, the result was a highly literary society produced and cultivated by the knowledge sphere embodied by the Islamic empire.

Adoption of a new centralized language meant the amalgamation of Arabic culture and wisdom with Islamic thought and understanding. Therefore, the importance of text as it pertained to the Arabs of pre-Islam now transferred to

²⁵ Ehsan Naraghi, "The Islamic Antecedents of the Western Renaissance," *Diogenes* 44 (1996): 76.

²⁶ Ernst, 192.

²⁷ Ernst, 193.

the Islamic world by way of Arabic tradition. Arabic and Islamic artistic and literary elements coalesced to create new, mixed expressions. It must be noted that the transfer and integration of specifically Arab cultural values into the multi-cultural Islamic empire was by and large due to the Islamic penchant for the written and spoken word—hence the use of Arabic as the main transmitter of the religion.²⁸ This literary fixation runs deep into the nuanced framework of Islamic theology: according to the Qur’an which includes portions of the Old Testament, New Testament, and life of the Prophet Mohammed, the first words spoken to the Prophet as the Qur’an was being revealed to him by God was *iqra*, or “read! (Qur’an 96:1)”²⁹ This moment forms the foundation of the Islamic religion. Furthermore, upon revelation, the Prophet Mohammed, previously believed to be illiterate, instantly became fully literate in reading and writing and furthermore, of none other than classical Arabic language. Both symbolically and literally, the most profound story in the Qur’an—its revelation to the Prophet Mohammed—describes a divine moment made distinct by the acclamation of *literacy*. Moreover, this moment sanctified and glorified the written and spoken language of classical Arabic, setting in motion a philological standard for the Islamic empire for hundreds of years to come.

Classical Arabic was not limited to Muslims in the Islamic empire. Because Islam allowed other religious groups, including Christians and Jews, to practice their respective religions, Arabic was learned by people of all backgrounds. The mastery of classical Arabic became both a necessity and an opportunity for non-

²⁸ W. Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1972): 12.

²⁹ Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an* (Brentwood: Armana, 1992) 1672.

native Arabic speakers to garner any amount of recognition or significant reverence in their respective fields of inquiry.³⁰ Those who mastered the Arabic language were deemed well-rounded enough for consideration by contemporary scholars and intellectuals. No matter the level of intellect or research conducted in one's field, and as advanced and prominent as the individual may have been, lack of a firm grasp on the Arabic traditional language meant their work was considered inadequate. An anecdote described by Carl Ernst involves the world-renowned philosopher Ibn Sina (Latin: Avicenna), responsible for continuing the work of Aristotle in the 9th century. Ibn Sina was criticized for his lack of Arabic comprehension despite his prominence as a writer, philosopher, and scientist. Ibn Sina spent several years dedicated to the mastery of Arabic, producing a book of *qasidas* written with a grand understanding of the language which in turn garnered apologies from his original critics.³¹

The demand for Arabic coupled with the unbounded educational advances of the Islamic world during the period subsequently produced a constituency of scholars non-native to Arabic or Islam, called *Shuubiyaa*, who mastered literary classical Arabic and furthermore grew superior in their fields. Of these minority groups Persians and Jews were abundant— as well as responsible for fields that arose such as Judeo-Arabic literature featuring classical Arabic literature written in Hebrew script.³² The desire to excel in Arabic fostered a field with sole focus on Arabic grammar and lexicographic study, as well as Qur'anic interpretation and *muqama*, a form of "literary word play" utilized in Qur'anic verse and hadith

³⁰ Ernst, 193.

³¹ Ernst, 194.

³² Ernst, 193.

which Muslims and non-Muslims alike grew familiar with.³³ Non-Arab and Arab scholars of the Arabic language alike studied literary grammar and structure, as well as “Islamic law, theology, and hadith” in an effort to better understand the profound mechanisms of the poetry-based language.³⁴

These profoundly diverse developments which occurred during the Arab-Islamic renaissance were contingent upon the Islamic proponent of the Arabic language both as a unifying and educating force. This dramatic period, marked with a convergence and cultivation of academic inquiry, subsequently called for a massive program of translation of ancient and foreign texts. Science, philosophy and literature of the ancient worlds otherwise left to be buried in the sands of history were translated into Arabic for further investigation and development. What followed was the remarkable birth of the desire for continued scientific inquiry, reason-based logic through the platform of education which exposes the nascence of humanist ideology—preceding the Italian Renaissance by 600 years. Islam had rooted itself as the authority in scholastic prominence--the development of humanism was the aim, and the literary realm of Arabic was the game.

³³ Watt, 12.

³⁴ Ernst, 194.

CHAPTER 4

THE ISLAMIC GOLDEN AGE

The Italian Renaissance marked a rebirth of widespread critical inquiry according to the timeline of western history. This rebirth was based upon the principals of humanism, a set of ideals which stressed primarily the importance of education and reason. Furthermore, these ideals were rooted in the ancient Greco-Roman worlds, which were credited with the instilment of highly rational, idealized societies with an emphasis on civic duty and personal achievement as being the cornerstones of human development and advancement. Prior to this, the European world moved slowly into a cultural dark age where the philosophies of the Greeks were buried; abandoned for the church and replaced by the fear of a Christian god. However, contemporaneous with the dark ages of Europe was the Muslim empire, beginning in the 9th century and spanning all the way from Spain to China, which preserved the philosophies of the past, continued their investigations, and cultivated a cultural renaissance to be contended with. It was the true birth of humanism—and it occurred over half a millennium prior to that of the Italian Renaissance period.

The importance of this discovery relies on the fact that a humanistic society of powerful world influence later finds itself expressed numerous times in Italian Renaissance art by the use of pseudo-Arabic inscriptions. These inscriptions were exquisitely rendered by renowned artists and done for high-paying commissions. More often than not, these inscriptions found themselves decorating art and architecture of Christian nature. The implications of these

inscriptions are profound, especially after proper understanding of a humanistic Islamic world is familiarized.

The ideas and theories which defined the European Renaissance indicate a turning point in the western narrative of world history which marks the second great period of material and intellectual innovation next only to the ancient Greeks. The ideas transmitted during the intermediary period of the Arab-Islamic world, however, are the key to understanding the European Renaissance. Furthermore, this “golden age”, which occurred in the centuries leading to the European Renaissance, also marked an increased European awareness and admiration of the Arab-Islamic world of luxury, sometimes loosely referred to in art history texts as the “international style” of art. In fact, the reverence of Arabic script is owed to the Islamic golden age which in its innovations created an East-West fixation on the art of the written word. Arabic script plays a much bigger role than purely holding aesthetic value. It is symbolic of a broader cultural narrative of education and learning—a pillar of the new religion of Islam which began its expansion in the 8th century CE.

The Islamic-Arab Renaissance occurred at a critical period in human history. More specifically, it fell under the period referred to as the Dark Ages, or Medieval European era. As the name “dark ages” suggests, this period of European history was nothing short of an oppressed society—education was replaced by the fear of God, and learning institutions were abandoned for the church. With an over ninety-five percent illiteracy rate, to say society suffered a decreased quality of life would be an understatement. But, as the plague

consumed the health of millions of Europeans, the Arab-Islamic Empire was in the midst of a full-blown cultural Renaissance. This new religion brought with them the promise of cultured living—education was fundamental to the empire and the birth of humanism was under way.

Islam's preoccupation with education was abundant and by the 9th century CE, new university-hospitals had been built in every major city of the empire. Among the most important subjects in the educational curriculum was the field of humanities and foreign sciences. Specifically, the foreign sciences focused on the areas of ancient Greek investigation such as medicine, astronomy, and of course philosophy—a highly coveted intellectual science that coalesced easily with ancient Arab wisdom.³⁵ A page from an original 13th century Arabic manuscript exhibits an example of the plethora of translated Greek texts (fig. 7). Here, we see Nasir ad-Din at-Tusi's translation of Euclid's proof of the Pythagorean theorem, copied in the late 12th to early 13th century. Thousands of example such as this illustrate the humanist program which occurred during the intermediary Islamic golden age. Key to the rapid and successful spread of Islam was not only its culture of tolerance—Jews and Christians were allowed to practice their religions—but also for their predilection for something Christianity had not been offering: literacy. Text was a major pillar of Arab-Islamic culture and pertinent to the understanding of the spread of calligraphy to the European Renaissance. In its nascence, the Qur'an itself was spread through the use of written word—which is in high contrast to the pictorial and visual campaign of the

³⁵ Watt, 13.

Christian worlds.³⁶ In fact, as early as 700 CE, there had been established a scholarly school aiming to interpret the word of the Qur'an. This literary enchantment followed a long history of Arab thought, wisdom, and poetry, which subsequently became a core Islamic feature as the religion took its course on the Arab and non-Arab populations. Furthermore, the literary play of words which finds itself embedded into the Qur'an is called *muqama*. The arrangement and syntax in which the Quran was written was believed to have been so pure in its original form of Arabic that the exact translation could not actually be reached. Arabic text was considered sacred and the pursuit of understanding and decoding it garnered an entirely new but highly in demand lexicographic field of study in the Arab world.³⁷

The Islamic expansion program was markedly different from that of the familiar Christian church. Islam had a new mascot, and that mascot was the written word. Arab culture revered the art, aesthetic and poetry of the word, and when the Arabs became Muslims, so did their literary culture. The ideas transmitted during the Medieval period in the Arab-Islamic world are key to understanding the European Renaissance and hence the fascination and reverence of Arabic script. This minor detail reveals an admiration not only in aesthetics, but is symbolic of a broader cultural narrative marked by education and learning—the very basis of the humanist movement which later prevails in the European renaissance.

³⁶ Watt, 11.

³⁷ Watt, 12.

The Arab-Islamic empire cultivated a world of high culture: science, art, mathematics, literature, philosophy, astronomy, and medicine, among other avenues became the standards of learning.³⁸ By the 9th century Baghdad had become the center of intellect and pillar of education—led by Caliph al-Ma'mun, Baghdad exemplified the Arab-Muslim thirst for knowledge. Under Ma'mun was instituted the first *Dar al-Hikma*, or House of Wisdom—a unique university-hospital in which all areas of inquiry were investigated and opened after the School of Athens had officially closed.³⁹ Al-Ma'mun was known for his tolerant and open-minded approach to the humanities and sciences. Ehsan Naraghi writes of the cultural capital of Baghdad under the Abbasid Dynasty which worked to both extend and rival the genius cultivated under the Umayyads of Andalusian Spain.⁴⁰ With Arabic instilled as the official language, a new tradition of “thinkers and writers” gathered in Baghdad to exchange ideas.⁴¹ Baghdad was especially conscious of the importance of tolerance in thought and scientific inquiry—something the contemporaneous European Christian world lacked.⁴² Al Ma'mun aided in this mentality of tolerant inquiry by hosting scholars in all areas and from all walks of life—Indian, Persian, Greek, and others were welcomed to *Dar al-Hikma* to debate and discuss their respective fields. For example, the philosophy of Averroes (Ibn Rush'd) would be debated against that of Baghdad thinker Ghazali. In fact, it was Ibn Rush'd who reexamined and expounded upon

³⁸ Gabriele Crespi, *The Arabs in Europe* (New York: Rizzoli Int P, 1986) 307.

³⁹ S. D. Goiten, “Between Hellenism and Renaissance—Islam, the Intermediate Civilization,” *Islamic Studies* 2 (1963): 224.

⁴⁰ Crespi, 58.

⁴¹ David Levering Lewis, *Gods Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570 to 1215* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008) 367-8.

⁴² Naraghi, 75-6.

the philosophies of Aristotle which led began the birth of humanism and revitalization of the classical texts in the Arab-Islamic world. This junction of intellect and broad educational programming made Baghdad the “city of salvation” as it became known to the outside world.⁴³ Perhaps a humble example of the Arab-Islamic development of the ideas of the Greeks was early 14th century astronomer and engineer Ibn ash-Shatir, who continued the work of Ptolemy’s theory of planetary motion (fig. 8).⁴⁴

⁴³ Naraghi, 76.

⁴⁴ Abdelhamid I. Sabra, “The Exact Sciences,” *Genius of Arab Civilization: Source of Renaissance*, ed. John R. Hayes (Cambridge: MIT P, 1978) 126-128.

CHAPTER FIVE

ISLAM AND THE BIRTH OF HUMANISM

Humanism, in terms of the ancient Greco-Roman world, derives from a predilection for the study of humanities in every sense of the word. Humanism in general refers to the philosophical school of thought that centers on Aristotelian reason, as well as the implementation of educational programming and scientific inquiry into society. By the 14th century, humanism had fully been embraced by the Italian Renaissance and was understood to represent the ideal mode of existence in Italian society.⁴⁵ The tenets of this intellectual and artistic mentality, however, were rooted in the Islamic golden age, which occurred centuries prior.

The vastly expanding and multicultural Islamic empire of the 9th century naturally called for the understanding of people of all backgrounds. Islam had spread from the Spain through the Arabian peninsula, past India and through to China. With Arabic uniting the Islamic world in communication, reading, and writing, it was a natural development to broaden understandings of all of humanity. This humanistic approach lent itself to humanism in two ways—on one hand, it was a result of a preoccupation with humanity. On the other hand, it developed as a result of the translation of Greek texts into Arabic, which opened a new world of intellectual and philosophical literary reasoning to the Arab-Muslim empire. Before long, an educational program was implemented in the

⁴⁵ Hans Daiber, "Humanism: A Tradition Common to both Islam and Europe," *Filozofija I Društvo* XXIV 1 (2013): 293.

Muslim world entirely based on the Greek model of *paedia* (“mind and character”) and *polis* (community of citizens).⁴⁶

The Qur’an’s use of classical Arabic *fusahi*, or classical Arabic, served as inspiration to members of the new religion to discover their literary roots. Because Arabic was the administrative language of the empire, consequently many thousands of non-Arabic speakers had the task of learning the new language. Not only did this produce generations versed in the classical lexicon, but it made possible for a Spanish Muslim to communicate effectively with a Hindu Muslim, and so forth. This coherence of the empire drew inspiration from the Greeks, who the Muslims believed were united by language, but more importantly, empowered by intellect and education.

The desire to achieve a full understanding of the Arabic language was partly a result of the fascination with lexicographic study of the Qur’an and its literal and figurative meanings. But it was also a conscious emulation of the classical Greek model of a common core language. As intellectuals in the Muslim world strengthened their Arabic, they chose to broaden their skills in deciphering the Qur’an by consulting pre-Islamic texts, namely poetry, which the Qur’an’s prose and poetic structure was evidently modeled after. Interest in this field of lexicography spilled over into another scholastic development which aimed to decipher Islamic law, and soon, entire universities were built for the purpose of studying Islamic theology, law, as well as Arabic and Qur’anic text and grammar.

⁴⁶ Joel L. Kraemer, “Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: A Preliminary Study,” *Journal of American Oriental Society* 104 (1984): 136-144.

This development, occurring in the 8th century, formed the earliest notion of the scholastic movement, which occurs later during the middle ages in Europe.

Beginning in what is loosely referred to as the classical age of Islam, or the Islamic Renaissance, the 8th and 9th centuries cultivated two important intellectual movements which go hand in hand—that of scholasticism and of humanism.⁴⁷ The preoccupation with the literary understanding of the Qur'an manifested the first ever, doctoral level study of law, specifically designed to interpret Islamic law and mandate judicial practice based on completion of the program. This doctoral program is described as having taken place in a special law guild, and furthermore, required mastery of area studies through undergraduate and graduate programs which are still practiced around the globe today.⁴⁸ The early Islamic guilds were referred to as *madhabs* and over time underwent changes which tightened rules of membership, making the guild an exclusive professional entity which required permission and the strict abidance of rules. As the guilds became more refined, so did the realm of religious thought, which over time integrated the realm of Greek philosophy, among others, into their interpretations.⁴⁹

By the 9th century an intellectual field of religious rationalists emerged aiming to rationalize the Qur'an based on their training in the Greek sciences.⁵⁰ The groups were so thoughtful and adamant in their claims that a counter-field of traditionalists built their own school of thought to contest the *Mu'tazileen*, as they

⁴⁷ George Makdisi, "Scholasticism and Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West," *Journal American Oriental Society* 109 (1989): 175.

⁴⁸ Makdisi, 176.

⁴⁹ Makdisi, 177.

⁵⁰ Lewis, 368.

were called. Greek rational philosophy had become standardized into Islamic studies and a cultural openness and awareness of difference of opinions became normalized.⁵¹ Though called radicals and heretics by opposing thinkers, the *Mu'tazileen* and the Traditionalists had little difference between them in terms of modes of thought. Both groups extolled Greek rationality and utilized it to the fullest degree—though one group ultimately attempted to disprove the divine origin of the Qur'an, while the other attested to divine revelation of the book.⁵² Ultimately, these intellectual groups represent the early Islamic interest in Greek rationality and reason, coalesced with an understanding of Islamic theology. Moreover, they indicate the highly developed intellectual schools of thought which did not oppress, but rather encouraged inquiry of foreign thought. The Islamic empire had the aim to project itself as a fertile ground for scholastic development, as they were fully aware of the power that came with an educated empire.

Perhaps the artistic embodiment of an Islamic humanist world lay within an Arabic translated copy of the *Book of Antidotes*. The frontispiece of the manuscript depicts portraits lauding nine Greek physicians, each labeled and carefully illustrated (fig. 9). The manuscript itself was one of the most popular scientific catalogs of the 13th century in Baghdad and represents the deeply ingrained and highly revered teachings of the Greek sciences that resonated with Islam.⁵³

⁵¹ Franz Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 9-12.

⁵² Rosenthal, 13-14.

⁵³ Sami K. Hamarneh, "The Life Sciences," *Genius of Arab Civilization: Source of Renaissance*, ed. John R. Hayes (Cambridge: MIT P, 1978) 145-49.

The fields of law and the doctorate pursued in the early guilds of the 8th century provide us with the cornerstones of the Islamic scholastic and humanist programs which the Italian Renaissance later adopted.⁵⁴ This intense law guild programming first made its way to Europe during the Middle Ages amidst a tense and even oppressive time in which the Christian church controlled the little educational programming that existed across Europe. The influence of the university structure, curriculums and programs proved to hold weight, however, and slowly overtook the secular units of the European world.⁵⁵ Before long, the doctoral program had become institutionalized into the West and was specifically modeled after the Islamic law guild tradition that had been put into place centuries before. Parallel schools of Christian theological studies sprang forth, as well as those in medicine and the arts. In succession, once the field of scholastics had traveled to Europe, shortly thereafter Islam became preoccupied with the realm of the humanities.

Humanism, to a certain extent, had already had its seeds woven into the Muslim cultural fabric in the 8th century—hence the scholastic aspiration to counter an extreme rational philosophical mentality which would possibly deconstruct the nature of Islamic theology.⁵⁶ The 9th century wave of humanism in the Islamic world began its infiltration by focusing efforts on the literary, linguistic tradition of pre and post-Islamic Arabia coupled with a predilection for classical Greek literature. The ancient classical worlds stood as inspiration during the golden age of Islam, which was marked by vast translations of ancient and

⁵⁴ Makdisi, 177.

⁵⁵ Lewis, 369-70.

⁵⁶ Makdisi, 179.

foreign texts into the Arabic language. George Makdisi mentions this fondness as an interest in the eloquence of prose of the Greeks, as well as a desire to emulate and create that eloquence. Eloquence, he states, is part of the broader definition of humanism as it was understood by the Muslims. As mentioned, the 9th century period of translation, led by Caliph al-Ma'mun of Baghdad, as well as the immense campaign to preserve ancestral Arabic writings and poetry necessitated a level of tolerance of the foreign world. Not only were scholars trekking away from educational epicenters practicing *fusahi*, and into otherwise unfamiliar Arabian territory, they were also being asked and hired specifically to translate the texts of Hindu, Greek, and Persian sciences and philosophy into the Arabic language. This required a society already open to an understanding of the idea of humanity as being broad, different, and furthermore—equal in individual potential to excel. What followed was a highly developed, acutely aware furtherance of Greco-Roman society, philosophy, and intellectual cultural mentality.⁵⁷

What defines the Islamic golden age as being humanist, besides the awareness of and fondness for the classical Greco-Roman world? The ideals which bond the Islamic world with the Greeks of Hellenism portray a specific brand of humanism. Articulately stated by Joel L. Kraemer, humanist Islam was emulating a Greco-Roman humanism which was based on the “conception of the common kinship and unity of mankind; the adoption of the ancient classics as an educational and cultural ideal in the formation of mind and character (paedeia);

⁵⁷ Kraemer, 135.

and humaneness, or love of mankind (*philanthropia*).⁵⁸ According to Kraemer, the Islamic world had all the tools it needed in order to engender a powerful and influential empire. For example, the diversity of the Muslim world, bound together by the language of Arabic, paralleled the Hellenistic Greek language common to those under the ancient Greco-Roman rule. Kraemer continues to draw parallels with the ancient world, stating that society after Alexander the Great had not so much been bound by ethnic (Greek) origins, but by common “language, education, culture and general life style.”⁵⁹ The realm of the Greek world, specifically under Alexander the Great and following his death, was a vastly diverse empire spanning to the Near Eastern lands. This fact alone necessitated that a union and brotherhood be instilled on the basis of mentality rather than heredity. Idealized living was described as requiring “human kinship”. Hellenism fostered a profound interest in the idea of human relationships, resulting in philosophies from thinkers like Menander and Isocrates who wrote extensively on the issues. Ultimately, what is learned from the Hellenistic period is that thought and intellect as well as humanity, or *philanthropia* were valued. Therefore, the ideal man, according to Hellenism, depended on the individual potential met. Kraemer outlines Cicero’s *humanitas* which purveyed both common human compassion and kinship, as well as a dedicated educational training and interest in self-realization.⁶⁰ The cornerstone of this educational training in the Hellenistic world was philosophy.

⁵⁸ Kraemer, 136.

⁵⁹ Kraemer, 137.

⁶⁰ Kraemer, 139.

The philosophical trademark which defined Hellenism tied into Arab wisdom and Islamic theology with ease and openness. Many historians have either denounced or outright rejected the claim that Islam was an extension of a Hellenistic humanist society. Among other arguments, many turn to the conclusion that the world of the “orient” was incapable of adapting the culture of Hellenism. Not only was culture considered to be “invented” by the Hellenistic world, the people of the orient, otherwise called the Semites, were not considered sophisticated or versed in the human empathy required to cultivate a humanistic reality. These ethno-centric and otherwise xenophobic views agreed that Arabs and/or Muslims were (and still are) specifically irrational, and therefore could not have adopted such opposing modes of thought.⁶¹

The realities of the Islamic golden age prove otherwise, as Kraemer, Makdisi, and others have outlined in great depth. Pertinent to the argument rests on the notion of commonalities between Hellenistic and Islamic humanism. Kraemer cites three major criteria: “affirmation of man as the norm of value, exaltation of reason...and the idea of human progress.” Neoplatonism played an important role in transference of humanism to the Islamic world.⁶² Generally speaking, it was expressed as the field of philosophy which prevailed in Islamic studies, called *filisafa*, as well as the adaptation of the idea of human potential and the preoccupation with the perfect man, or *insan al-kamil*.

Greek philosophy was no newcomer to the Arab world—it had been established as core curriculum in Alexandria, and by the 10th century under

⁶¹ Kraemer, 144.

⁶² Kraemer, 145-6.

Islam, the university in Baghdad had effectively preserved Greek literature by way of translation. In Baghdad, known as “the city of salvation”, people of all faiths and walks of life converged in order to reach heightened intellectual discoveries, where critical philosophical breakthroughs were made, such as that of Ishaq al-Kindi. Al-Kindi, a Muslim who investigated Aristotelian logic, embodied the Islamic world’s propensity for “research...effort...and the industry of man.”⁶³ Al-Kindi’s work clearly reflects not only the open attitude of Islam towards foreign thought, but the influence and admiration of Greek philosophy as well as a prioritization of scientific inquiry.⁶⁴ Writers like Miskawayh stressed the qualities of the perfect man (in terms of Islamic humanism) as mainly practicing good ethics (*adab*) and possessing a holistic education.⁶⁵ This derives directly from the Hellenistic model which, as discussed, preferred human character, above lineage, in determining their value as a man. Muslim writers versed in *fihsafa* wrote extensively on Aristotle, Plato, and the philosophic equation of education and ultimate happiness. The goal of the contemporary Muslim, then, was to utilize knowledge and philosophy, reach their personal potential alongside exhibiting good habits, and ultimately achieve personal happiness—all whilst contributing to society and maintaining a positive collective bond amongst men. When compared in detail by Kraemer, the curriculum which embodied Greek learning was modeled almost if not fully identically by the Muslim-Arab world down to

⁶³ Kraemer, 149.

⁶⁴ De Lacy O’Leary, *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs* (New Delhi: Goodword Books, 2002) 176-8.

⁶⁵ Kraemer 149-51

order of priority.⁶⁶ The Muslims added studies in Arab wisdom and sciences, appropriate addendums, but other than that adhered to the ancient Greek order of operations.

The Muslims understood the significance of being human and therefore possessing the ability to reason. This point was reinforced by Islamic theology, likely derived from Arab wisdom, and by the 9th century was asserted wholly into academic life by way of Greek science and philosophical studies. Before long, the tenets of being a good citizen, i.e. educated, logical, and ethical—were pillars administered not only in the Abbasid court but understood by common society, though naturally more so practiced by the elite.⁶⁷ The Muslim world had effectively nurtured the rebirth of humanism on an international scale.

When considering the European reception of Arabic script, it is easy to bypass important iconographic details which transparently reveals the expanse that the Islamic humanist world influenced the West. One such undermined piece by an unknown artist of the early 14th century depicts Saint Thomas Aquinas in a seat of victory presiding over Ibn Rush'd (fig. 10), the 11th century Muslim philosopher responsible for translating Aristotle's work into Arabic and further expounding upon his work. In this piece, Ibn Rush'd, also known as Averroes, is depicted in Eastern headdress at the very foot of his throne, bowing in submission to the word of the saint. St. Thomas Aquinas, who was a theologian hired by the Catholic church of the early Renaissance, opposed the philosophies of Ibn Rush'd and considered his ultra-rational doctrines to be heresy. The book

⁶⁶ Kraemer, 154.

⁶⁷ Kraemer, 158.

opened in St. Thomas' lap exhibits pseudo-Arabic script to signify Ibn Rush'd's writings, apparently overpowered by the biblical Latin text shown open to the viewer. St. Thomas is flanked by Aristotle and Plato, who form a triangle with Ibn Rush'd, therefore linking the three together as philosophical counterparts. This heavily copied image alone communicates the significant influence of Islamic humanist philosophy which permeated Europe to the point of visual contestation from the religious factions. Furthermore, it ascertains the Islamic world as the continuation of ancient Classical intellect.

Although the Islamic-Arab empire spanned from Spain to China, the specific Islamic decorative and aesthetic style spoke a common language. This language, though not necessarily revealing of exact location, did allow for immediate identification of the Muslim mark.⁶⁸ Across the empire, different genres of craft such as metalwork, pottery, and textiles reached their apex in respective regions. This influx of high achievement and transmission of decorative arts across the world was due to the harmonious and economically stable environment that the empire cultivated.⁶⁹ Islamic decorative elements, though diverse, tended to require elements of geometric designs, intricately ordered floral motifs, and of course, Arabic calligraphy. The non-figurative arts of the Arab-Islamic world were not, however, limited to Islamic purpose. These elements were so widely utilized and interwoven into the Arab cultural and visual aesthetic fabric that they were incorporated as decorative features in secular

⁶⁸ Richard Ettinghausen, "Muslim Decorative Arts and Painting: Their Nature and Impact on the Medieval West," *Islam and the Medieval West*, ed. Stanley Ferber (Binghamton: State U of NY Binghamton, 1975) 5.

⁶⁹ Ettinghausen, 7.

objects.⁷⁰ In fact, even the assumed “Islamic” nature of Arabic script was not an exclusively religious tool—script was used everywhere as a secular decorative feature: ceramics such as dinner plates, in royal palaces, in paintings, etc. Furthermore, it has been found that even amongst the Arab producers of decorative script, the writing is merely imitation or pseudo-script, meant to evoke a sense of the Arabic letter but not necessarily to transmit a message.⁷¹ The pertinent issue at hand is that the use of pseudo-script certainly existed in the Arab world as well as the European world. This fact alone augments the argument that Europe was not merely rendering a style of writing thought to be Eastern. Instead, it follows a tradition of pseudo-script for decorative use and purpose.

Trade between the East and West reached a high point in the 9th century CE. The period saw a great influx of trade and migration from across the Mediterranean world in part due to a fantastic story of St. Mark’s body being essentially smuggled to Venice from Egypt (Carboni, 13-14).⁷² The introduction of St. Mark’s body by way of Alexandria in the 9th century marked a turning point—Venice had secured itself as a powerful European port site—rich with diversity, new pilgrimage routes, and therefore a great deal of eastern transmission of ideas and art.⁷³ Venice, as with other port cities in Italy, was a model in that it welcomed and encouraged eastern relations. Venice appreciated its own identity as a sort of crossroads to the holy land and marked itself as the new Alexandria.

⁷⁰ Ettinghausen, 6-8.

⁷¹ Ettinghausen, 7-8.

⁷² Stefano Carboni, “Moments of Vision”, *Venice and the Islamic World, 828-1797* (Cambridge: MIT P, 1978) 145-49.

⁷³ Carboni, 15.

CHAPTER SIX

VENICE, TRADE, AND THE EAST

With a humanist Islamic world in mind, the question of how Italy received Arabic-Islamic decorative elements is raised. Furthermore, to what extent was Italy exposed to Arabic script? Certainly there are many unique situations, but on a broad level, knowledge of the Arab-Islamic world—both cultural and visual—was made possible through education and trade. When it came to trade with the Arab-Islamic eastern world, Italy was no stranger. Certain port cities such as Venice and Florence held some of the longest standing and familiar relationships with the Islamic world. By the time of the Renaissance in Italy in the period ranging from 1300-1600, the region had already experienced profound exposure to and interaction with the Arab-Islamic world. Trade with the East, especially in the Mediterranean region, had begun to increase between the 9th and 11th centuries. This period marks the same time that the Islamic world had been experiencing the first major wave of their cultural golden age. Of the port cities with significant interest in trade with the East were Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, who chose to uphold diplomatic ties regarding commerce with Muslim leaders. Major imports from the Arab-Islamic world were: “spices, silk, sugar, ceramics, glass, metals, and precious stones...bacini, wool, hide, furs...gold dust”.⁷⁴ By the time of the Mamluks, trade between Italy and the East was a strong and symbiotic relationship which both sides equally valued. Italy and the Mamluks each viewed their trade partners as a diplomatic and commercial opportunity to remain connected with a neighboring high civilization. In fact, even during periods of

⁷⁴ Mack, 15.

political rifts, for example--the papacy limited trade with the East in the late 11th century—Venice and other port cities willingly overrode such a decree and continued their prosperous partnerships. Venice’s defiance of the pope’s orders for the sake of diplomacy and commerce with the East is just one example of the vigorous and multifaceted, interconnected bond it had developed with the Arab-Islamic East. The highly rendered and influx of Arabic pseudo-script found in works by Giotto of the early 1300s are examples of the consistent flow of information and materials occurring between East and West of the time (fig. 11). Namely, Giotto’s haloes and decorative bands reflect an exposure to Arabic writing, probably found on brassware imported from Syria.⁷⁵ Later, this tradition continued when 15th century Renaissance artist Gentile Bellini was hired by the Ottoman court of Mehmet II as resident artist for two years. Consequently, Bellini brought back with him an even more intimate knowledge of the eastern world and aided in the continued tradition of incorporating those elements into Italian art for the next century.⁷⁶

The city of Venice exhibited a certain level of diplomacy and peacekeeping with the Eastern world which made it both the ideal trading partner and an international crossroads. Venice, among other cities, acted as a sort of model for international dealings and business. By the early Renaissance, the city had become a regular post for delegates from the Islamic world to visit. What became of Venice was a “direct, sometimes intimate knowledge of Muslim

⁷⁵ Mack, 65.

⁷⁶ Carboni, 23.

customs, religion, philosophy, science...technology...and arts.”⁷⁷ This point alone accounts for the profound level of *information*, alongside material objects, which was passed to Renaissance Italy from the Muslim world as a result of trade culture. Stefano Carboni asserts that Eastern influence found on Italian art and decoration of the period cannot be simplified as “merely an orientalist angle”. To expand, Carboni rejects the idea that the Italian desire to emulate and include Arab-Islamic decorative elements in art, such as script, during the Renaissance were not merely uninformed appropriations of otherworldly forms. On the contrary, the Italian understanding of the Arab-Islamic world was vast and it would be inaccurate to conclude that their inclusion in Italian art was either negative or Orientalizing.⁷⁸ Venice’s relationship with the East was so highly familiar that it points to the idea that other port cities closer in vicinity to North Africa and al-Andalus held comparable relationships. For example, it is appropriate to assume that areas such as Naples and Genoa, which had similar trade culture and even closer ties with regions such as Tunis, experienced the same sort of exposure to the culture of the Islamic world. This notion is substantiated by certain events and decrees administered by the papacy resulting from the close ties. As mentioned, Venice overrode orders from the pope to limit trade with the East during times of political unrest. At one point, both Genoa and Venice were deemed “excommunicated” by the pope for such behavior. Venice embraced the “exotic” nature of the East, incorporating culture, material, and artistic elements into that of their own. In regards to culture, Venice

⁷⁷ Carboni, 16.

⁷⁸ Carboni, 17.

was highly receptive to the humanist Islamic program that was cultivated by the golden age of Islam.⁷⁹ This positive, open reception of the neighboring eastern world put Venice at the forefront of incorporating Arabic pseudo-script into their Renaissance period art.

The unique trade culture of Venice and other Italian port cities accounts for much of the objects and artworks displaying Arab-Islamic influence. The *kufic* stele in San Pietro crafted to fit the backrest of the bishop's seat poses an interesting issue. Dating from the 11th-12th century, the "chair of Saint Peter" openly displays Arabic *kufic* inscriptions as well as Islamic design (fig. 12). Believed to function as *spolia*-- or a sort of war spoil which demarcated victory over another culture--this seat also registers as an example of Italian admiration and inclusion of Arab-Islamic elements into decorative religious elements. Placed in such a prominent position, the *kufic* writing demarcates the Arab-Islamic presence in Italy—culturally, historically, and aesthetically speaking.

Other port cities such as Florence exhibited comparable expressions of pseudo-Arabic script in art. Verrocchio's sculpture of David (fig. 13, 14) provides an excellent example. In line with commissioning statues of David as the symbol of Florence, the Medici family saw themselves as the first family, and therefore, associated themselves with the figure of David. Verrocchio's David, completed in the 15th century, exhibits pseudo-Arabic highly rendered in *thulth*-style cursive forming inscriptions on clothing and boots.⁸⁰ Pertinent is the point that Florence actively competed with Venice as a pioneer city-state of Renaissance Italy.

⁷⁹ Carboni, 18.

⁸⁰ Rosamond E. Mack et al, "The Pseudo-Arabic on Andrea del Verrocchio's *David*," *Artibus et Historiae* 30 (2009): 157-8.

Furthermore, the wealthy and influential Medici family, were in a position to control their image very highly, and specifically chose Arabic script to accompany artistic commissions. This raises the unique argument that the Medicis, who presumably considered themselves both a Renaissance and a humanist family, would desire Arabic script in order to reinforce those attributes. Here, pseudo-script works as a visual association with humanism and places Florence—embodied by David himself—at the forefront of the Renaissance as well as a crossroads to the East. This concept is revisited with a peculiar expression of Arabic script, yet again commissioned by the Medici family. This time, it finds itself on the 15th century stained glass window of the Santissima Annunziata Cathedral in Florence (fig. 15).⁸¹ The window itself displays the insignia of the Medici family surrounded by an outer band adorned, again, in highly rendered *thulth* style Arabic script. Why would the Medicis, a family of prominence and high standing, adorn their family emblems with Arabic? It echoes the notion that the Medicis were indeed aware of the Islamic humanist world which stood for education, literacy, luxury and high-culture, pillars which would be considerably essential to the image of a family such as theirs. Proclaiming themselves as mainstays of the Italian and Florentine Renaissance, utilization of Islamic script would only raise this status by visually alluding to and reinforcing the idea of education and humanism in the new, visionary Italy.

⁸¹ Mack, “Verrocchio’s *David*,” 162-65.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FINAL THOUGHTS

Scripts in Italian Renaissance art, according to Mack, employed a decorative style called *thulth* as the Renaissance progressed. As discussed, Mack's interpretation calls for the understanding that the writing evoked the roots of Christianity by visually tying itself to the proposed language of Jerusalem. However, the vast amount of ornamental script which is found, among other places, in the halos and frames of religious images, were primarily Arabic pseudo-script. If in fact Italians hoped to evoke the holy land during the life of Christ and other biblical figures, why didn't they elect to use Hebrew as the primary indicator of Jerusalem? Although Hebrew was occasionally copied onto works of art, it was not employed nearly in the same capacity or variety as the Arabic script. Furthermore, Mack asserts "Italians correctly associated Arabic with the holy land but evidently did not know it arrived there in the 7th century as the language of Islam." This assessment does little for the awareness of the Italian Renaissance world, and furthermore, completely undermines the extensive diplomatic relationship fostered between East and West by way of merchant trade that occurred on the Mediterranean.⁸² The argument asserts that Arabic was "confused" as being an ancient eastern script and furthermore, likens the confusion of Arabic to an anecdote where crusaders mistook the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem for being Solomon's temple. This weak analogy must be contested because the crusaders, who are known to have originated in areas of France and Germany, had little to no contact with the eastern world and Islamic-

⁸² Mack, 52.

Arab empire during medieval times. Their knowledge of the Muslim-Arab world, therefore, was overtly ignorant which further exacerbated the crusade efforts themselves. French and German crusaders lived in isolation from their eastern neighbors, and therefore had no marked level of communication or understanding of the Arabs or Muslims.⁸³ With this in mind, the crusaders did not represent the Renaissance Italians, nor is it fair to assess their misidentification of a Muslim eastern site as analogous to a mistake Italians of the time would have made. In short, the crusaders were not in contact with the Arab-Muslim East and cannot represent Italian understandings of the world during the Renaissance—especially with the heavy cross-cultural interactions that occurred in Italy and vicinity.

The notion that Arabic was a mostly unknown foreign concept does not coalesce well with the evidence of its obvious weight within the European cultural fabric. For example, the conjecture that Europeans before the 14th century were not aware of the Semitic languages is refuted by the fact that the 12th century church formally approved Arabic as a language to be studied. As discussed, the medieval Islamic world translated ancient Greek texts into Arabic, and later from Arabic to Latin for use in the European world. This fact alone accounts for the idea that Arabic would have penetrated the literary realm of Europe regardless of geo-politics. Ultimately, it is the humanist tradition cultivated by the intermediary Islamic world, signified by the signature of Arabic script, which influenced Renaissance Italy. Works by Fra Angelico (fig. 15), Masaccio (fig. 16, 17), Giotto, and Fabriano (fig. 18), among other Renaissance artists, all employed the use of

⁸³ Watt, 13.

pseudo-Arabic script time and time again. One thing is for certain, and that is the abundance and clarity with which Arabic script occurs in Italian Renaissance art from 1300-1600 represents a level of awareness and openness to the eastern world which cannot be ignored. Merely proclaiming the works to be decorative or imaginative is not a sufficient analysis. What is known is that humanism and its intellectual centrality to the Islamic golden age and the subsequent spread of the ideology through the use of Arabic are pertinent to the understanding of Italian Renaissance art. Arabic script worked as a symbol of the Islamic empire which was itself based in humanism. Arabic script shows up in Italian Renaissance art as a form of recognition and visual indication of humanism, an ideal crucial to the development and mentality of the Italian Renaissance. The Italians of the Renaissance were aware of the contributions that the Muslim-Arab empire had made to the world at that point—and revered the culture that cultivated and inspired their own later Renaissance rooted in the same ideological standards of logic and reason.⁸⁴ This recognition expresses itself as the rendering of decorative Arabic-pseudo script in Italian art, and subsequently, bridges two neighboring cultures on the basis of intellectual cultural achievement and humanistic tradition and wisdom.

⁸⁴ George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (Cambridge: MIT P, 2007) 193-195.



Figure 1. Giotto Di Bondone, *Madonna and Child*, detail.
ca. 1310-1315, tempera on panel, 85.4 x 61.8 cm.
National Gallery of Art. (Photo: Museum).



Figure 2. Donatello, *Prophet*, detail.
ca. 1420, marble.
Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence. (Photo: Melissa Greenberg).



Figure 3. Gentile da Fabriano, *The Adoration of the Magi*.
ca. 1370-1428, tempera on wood, 300 x 282 cm.
Galleria Degli Uffizi. (Photo: WSU LUNA Imaging).



Figure 4. Coronation cape of Roger II, silk and embroidered.
ca. 1133-1134, Palermo.
Schatzkammer, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. (Photo: Museum).



Figure 5. Filippino Lippi, *St. Benedict and St. Apollonia*, detail. ca. 1457-1504, tempera glazed with oil on panel, 157.5 x 60 cm. The Norton Simon Museum. (Photo: Museum).



Figure 6. Dome of the Rock, East arcade.
ca. 691, mosaic.
Jerusalem. (Photo: WSU LUNA Imaging).

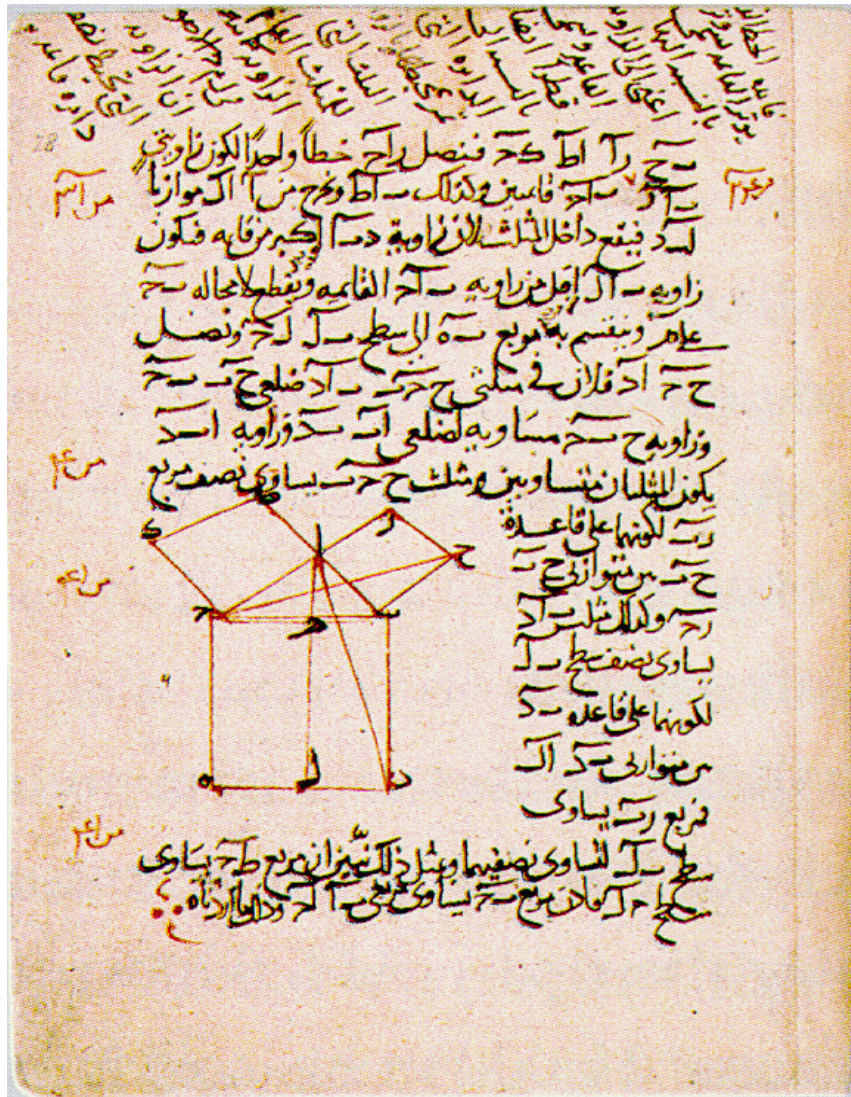


Figure 7. Nasir ad-Din at-Tusi, translation of Euclid's proof of the Pythagorean theorem,

ca. 13th century CE.

(Photo: *The Genius of Arab Civilization: Source of Renaissance*. Ed. John R. Hayes. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1978. Pg.123).



Figure 9. The nine Greek Physicians, frontispiece of *The Book of Antidotes* (Photo: *The Genius of Arab Civilization: Source of Renaissance*. Ed. John R. Hayes. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1978. Pg.147).



Figure 10. Unknown, *The Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas Over Averroes*
 ca. 1330, tempera on panel, 375 x 258 cm.
 Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa. (Photo: *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade
 and Italian Art, 1300-1600*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2002).



Figure 11. Giotto di Bondone, *Coronation of the Virgin* from the *Baroncelli Polyptych*.

c. 1334, tempera on wood, 185 x 323 cm.

Baroncelli Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence. (Photo: The Web Gallery of Art).



Figure 12. Chair of St. Peter.
ca. 11th-12th century CE, marble and sandstone, 1.4 m x 74.5 cm
Church of San Pietro di Castello, Venice. (Photo: The Qantara Project Imaging).



Figure 13. Andrea del Verrocchio, *David*, detail.
ca. 1465-70, bronze, 122 cm.

Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence. (Photo: Antonio Quattrone, Florence).



Figure 14. Andrea del Verrocchio, *David*, detail.
ca. 1465-70, bronze, 122 cm.

Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence. (Photo: Antonio Quattrone, Florence).



Figure 15. Stained glass window of Santissima Annunziata.
ca. 1464.
Santissima Annunziata, Florence. (Photo: Maria Vittoria Fontana).



Figure 16. Fra Angelico, *Annunciatory Angel*.
ca. 1450, gold leaf and tempera on wood panel, 33 x 27 cm.
Detroit Institute of Arts. (Photo: Museum).



Figure 17. Masaccio, *Madonna with Child and Angels*.
ca. 1426, egg tempera on poplar, 136 x 73 cm.
National Gallery, London. (Photo: Museum).



Figure 18. Masaccio, *Madonna with Child and Angels*, detail.
ca. 1426, egg tempera on poplar, 136 x 73 cm.
National Gallery, London. (Photo: Museum).

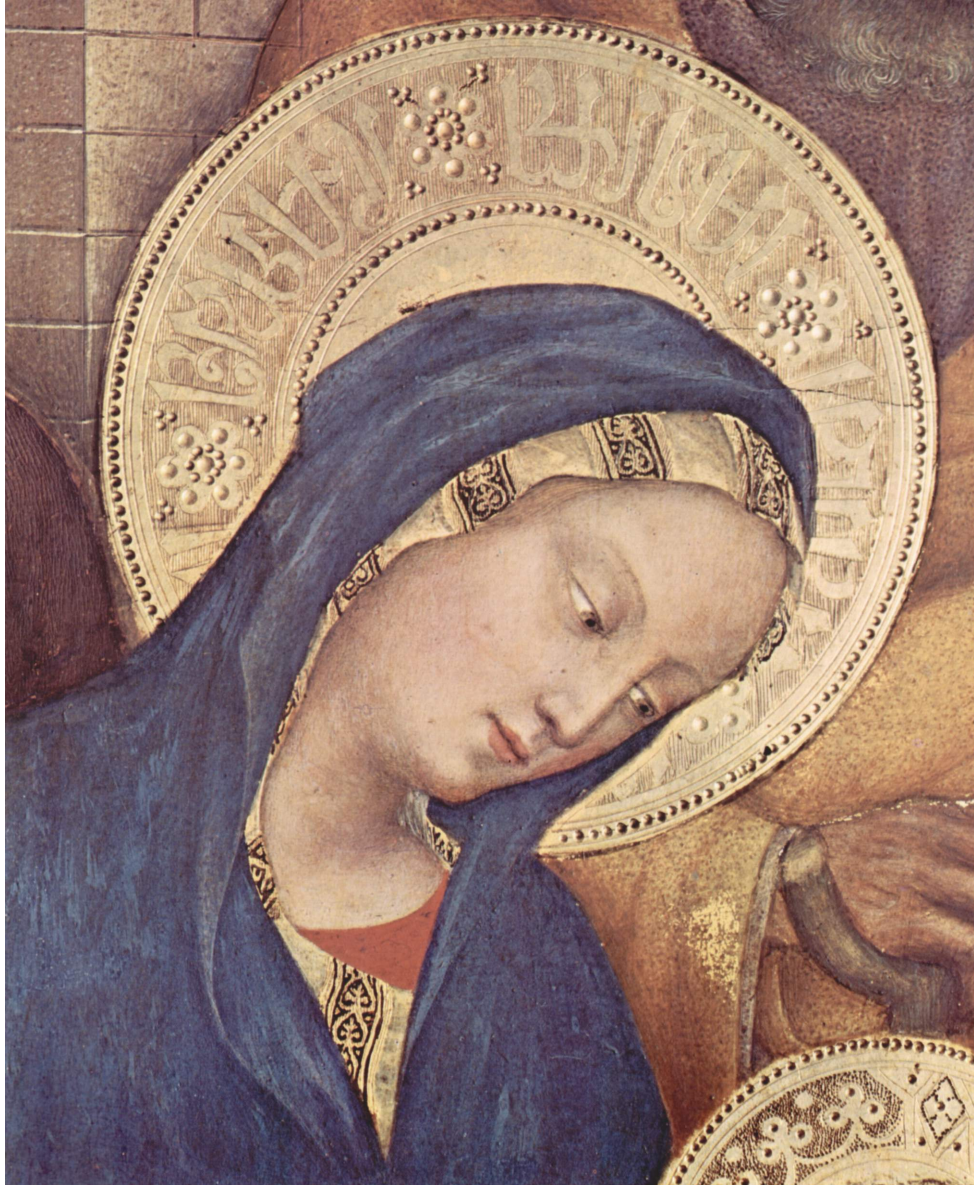


Figure 19. Gentile da Fabriano, *The Adoration of the Magi*, detail.
ca. 1370-1428, tempera on wood, 300 x 282 cm.
Galleria Degli Uffizi. (Photo: WSU LUNA Imaging).

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ABSTRACT**ARABIC PSEUDO-SCRIPT AND THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE**

by

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The curious pseudo-Arabic script found on artworks of the Italian Renaissance period provide art historians with an interesting challenge. Through the teachings of western-based perspectives of history, it has come to be accepted that pseudo-Arabic was included in religious artworks chiefly as a visual tool which referenced the eastern roots of Christianity. This essay proposes an alternative model of interpretation, however, which explains the inclusion of pseudo-Arabic script as a visual indication of humanism—an educational mentality born and cultivated during the Islamic golden age.

The Italian Renaissance propagated a humanist ideology rooted in the study of Greek philosophy, among other things. In fact, humanism was a central tenet of the Renaissance and pertinent to the understanding of the art produced during the period. Prior to the Renaissance, however, was the Islamic golden age—an 800-year period of scholastic achievement in all areas of academic inquiry. Above all, the Islamic golden age birthed the field of humanism up to 600 years prior to the Italian Renaissance, effectively nurturing a philosophic,

scientific and cultural standard inspired by ancient Greek texts which were translated into Arabic. This essay proposes that the intermediary Islamic civilization of the 8th-12th centuries—represented by Arabic language and script and marked by the cultivation of humanism—was met with great reverence by the Renaissance Italian world. Furthermore, the inclusion of pseudo-Arabic script acted as a conscious recognition of the humanist Islamic world, therefore aligning the Italian Renaissance with the same humanist ideals which prevailed Islam and made their way to Europe through the rigorous translation of texts.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

As the daughter of Iraqi artist immigrants, Wihad Al-Tawil's unique upbringing has heavily influenced her interest in the field of the arts. While attending one of her father's art history lectures during her undergraduate years, Wihad's eyes were opened to the rich world of Arab-Islamic and European relations throughout history. In 2007, she visited Palermo, Sicily and was able to view firsthand the magnificent architectural results of those cultural interactions. Watching her father spend hours on scaffolding to research the Arabic writings on the ceiling of the Capella Palatina ultimately piqued her interests, and she returned to school with a newfound admiration for the critical study of art history. She received her Bachelor's degree with honors in art history from the University of Michigan—Dearborn in 2010. Wihad spent most of her graduate career at Wayne State University studying in-depth the alternative models of history, with special interest in the field of Arab-Islamic cultural influence during the Medieval and Renaissance periods. Wihad believes her knowledge in the reading and writing of both Arabic and Spanish help aid in her investigations of the field, which she wishes to pursue at a doctoral level. Wihad received her Master of Arts in art history from Wayne State University in May 2015.