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Infiltrating Artifacts: The Impact of Islamic Art in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Florence and Pisa

Vera-Simone Schulz

When [in antiquity,] Mummius captured Corinth by armed force, and sacked and burnt it to the ground, many of the statues of gold, silver, and bronze, once so plentiful in ancient Corinth, which somehow had escaped the hands of the conquerors, melted in the flames, so that the veins of all kinds of metals seemed to flow in one gushing stream. This was the origin of these priceless vessels, and from the ruins of a city luxury derived its name. The craze did not start in the city when it perished, but the material for the craze was prepared there. In this sense Corinth was the source of this madness. Now it is from Damascus that these vessels come and capture your eyes and your minds.¹

The Damascene vessels, which Petrarch praises so eloquently in these lines, in comparison with the most sought after metalwork in antiquity, were artifacts from the Islamic world, particularly from Mamluk Syria and Egypt. Made of bronze or brass and inlaid with gold and silver, these highly sophisticated items indeed caught much attention. When the Florentine Simone Sigoli visited Damascus on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1384 and 1385, he did not tire of describing the markets in the city, where “also [are] made a great deal of brass basins and pitchers and

really they appear of gold, and then on the said basins and pitchers are made figures and foliage and other fine work in silver, so that it is a very beautiful thing to see”. In awe, Sigoli exclaimed: “Verily if you had money in the bone of your leg, without fail you would break it off to buy these things”.² Wealthy merchants acquired them eagerly along with precious silks, glassware, ceramics, and carpets, and Mamluk metalwork circulated widely in and beyond the Mediterranean.

This paper discusses the impact of artifacts imported from the Islamic world on the image production of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence and Pisa. As trade articles, gifts, or loot, diverse objects arrived here from regions as distant as Al-Andalus, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. They stimulated local craftsmen; they were displayed on façades and in interiors; and they were represented in pictorial space. Yet, while Tuscany’s far reaching diplomatic, mercantile, and missionary networks have been thoroughly studied by historians, in the discipline of art history these artifacts were mostly dismissed as *exotica* and craft items,

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pertaining to the rubric of “applied” rather than “high arts”, and their crucial role in art production in late medieval and Renaissance Tuscany has been grossly underrated. What is more, Sicily and Venice still dominate the scholarly discourse regarding the impact of Islamic artifacts in pre-modern Italy.

In the following, this paper draws on the renewed interest in artistic interactions and exchange processes in the Mediterranean as well as in transcultural studies of artifacts and intersections of material and visual culture.³ The first case study will shed new light on the earliest known representation of an Oriental carpet in an Annunciation scene and discuss the impact of imported artifacts in junction and tension with that of a miraculous image. The second case study will focus on the poly-materiality of late medieval and early

Renaissance panel painting and examine visual and material references to Mamluk metalwork in the medium of the gold-ground of early fifteenth-century Tuscan painting.

I. In pictorial space: Oriental carpets in Annunciation scenes

The Florentine church SS. Annunziata houses an image of the *Annunciation* which has been venerated as a *semi-acheiropoieton* since the fourteenth century.⁴ According to a legend, the artist failed to represent the face of the Virgin, which was then miraculously painted by an angel. Still, whenever the curtains in front of the fresco were lifted, Mary’s face was not the only visual element that drew the beholders’ eyes, so did the imported Anatolian pile carpet at her feet (Fig. 1).

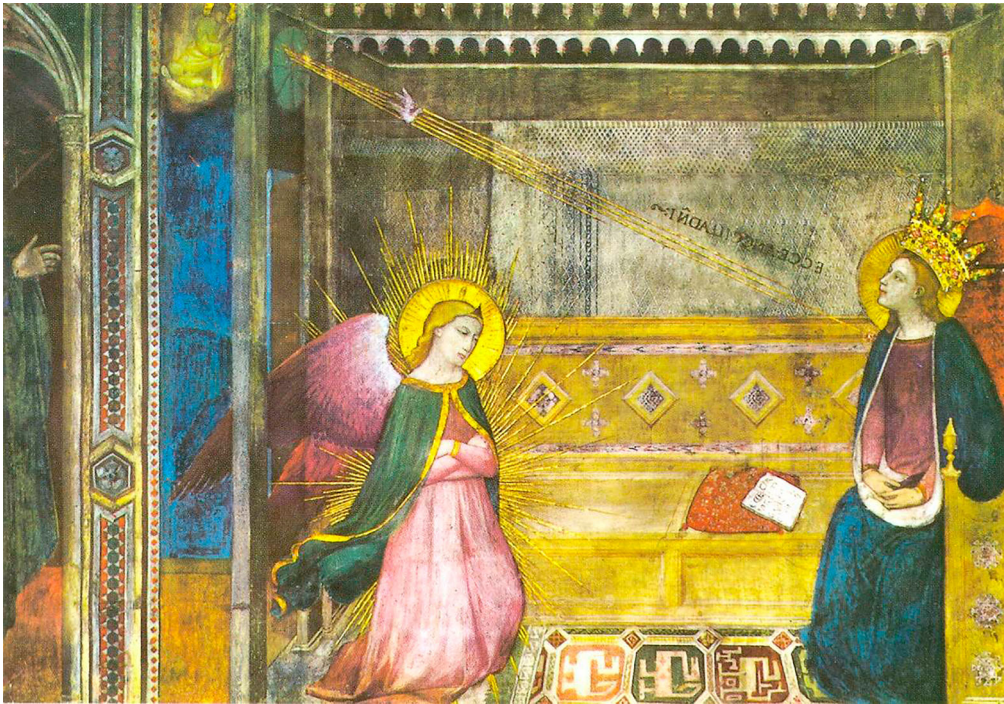


Fig. 1. Anonymous, Fresco of the Annunciation, ca. 1340, Florence, SS. Annunziata.



Fig. 2. Pile carpet with animal design, Anatolia, fourteenth century, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The rug shows a repetitive animal design in a grid-like structure; large white geometricized creatures are seen in profile against an orange, dark blue, and dark red ground. Although no exact model exists, animal patterns similar to this one are a common feature of fourteenth-century pile carpets from Asia Minor (Fig. 2). While Marco Spallanzani studied the importation of carpets to late medieval and Renaissance Florence and Siena, the depiction of Oriental rugs in fourteenth- to sixteenth-century Italian painting had already been pointed out by Julius Lessing, Alois Riegl and Wilhelm von Bode.⁵ Nevertheless, scholars have never reflected on the carpet in the fresco in SS. Annunziata from an art historical perspective,⁶ even though this artifact is particularly noticeable when considering its strong impact on later Annunciation scenes.

Once an image cult had developed around the *semi-acheiropieton*, it was widely

replicated, and so was the carpet. But while the placement of the rugs in these copies was at first more or less guided by the “original”, the choice of their specific design was apparently free. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there is only one accurate copy of the carpet, which can be found in S. Lucia sul Prato in Florence.⁷ All the other rugs represented in Annunciation scenes, based on the fresco in SS. Annunziata, differ in color, pattern, and length. Whereas the *Annunciazione* in S. Spirito in Prato shows a rather small rug featuring geometrical ornamentation beneath Mary’s feet (Fig. 3),⁸ a particularly long carpet with geometrical ornaments embellishes the Annunciation scene in the Florentine church of S. Maria Novella. Here, the carpet is spread out across the whole room, even going beyond it: its fringes extend across the threshold of the open door onto the grass (Fig. 4).

The carpet in the Annunciation scene in SS. Annunziata could hence be replaced in the copies by another type, which might have been known to the painter or owned by the commissioning church or monastery. For example, a rug such as the one featuring stylized animals with feelers and tentacles, kept in Istanbul (Fig. 5),⁹ might have inspired the copies made by Gentile da Fabriano and his workshop which include carpets with long-beaked birds, many-legged animals and a robot-like creature with antennae on top of its head, staring hypnotically at the beholder (Fig. 6).

Yet, the relationship between actual and painted carpets was not restricted to one inspiring the other. When positioned on the floor, rugs delimit an area, access to which can be highly regulated – one need only think of the red carpet treatment or of the denotations of carpets in ruler contexts.¹⁰ In

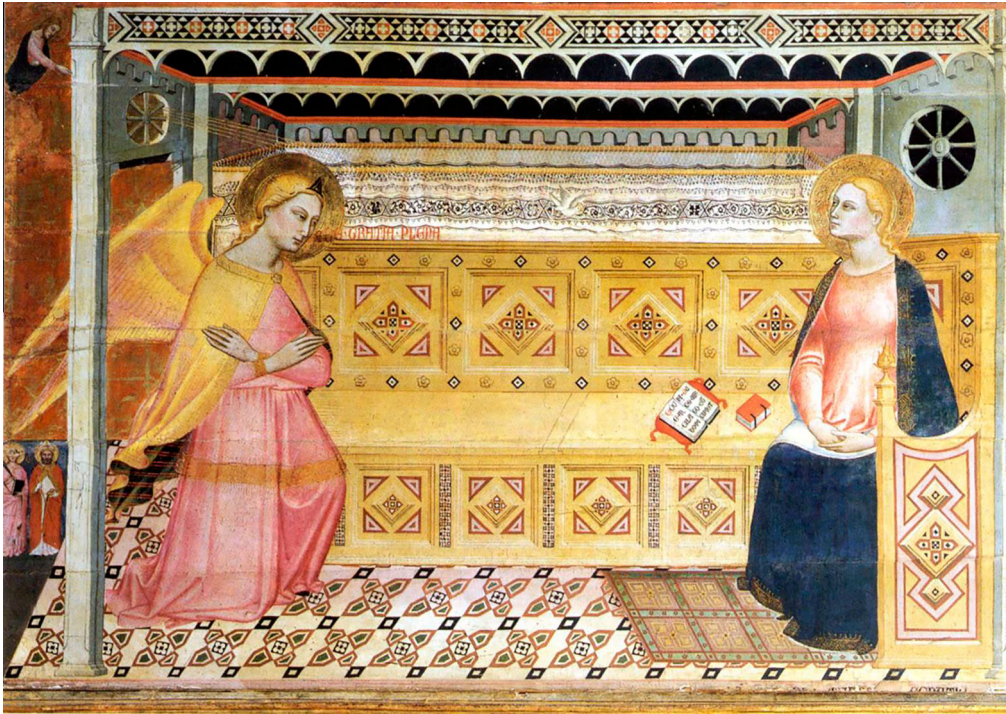


Fig. 3. Jacopo di Cione, *Annunciation*, ca. 1360, Prato, Santo Spirito.

the fresco, the rug connecting Mary with the angel indicates the sacred territory on which and across which the miracle of the Annunciation occurs. But it is very likely that, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there would also have been actual carpets in front of the altars underneath the images, carpets that linked the beholder with the Annunciation scene. Rugs are frequently documented in late medieval and Renaissance church inventories, also for the tabernacle of the *Annunciation* in SS. Annunziata.¹¹ In a Christian context, their use was not only practical, but it was even ascribed symbolic meaning. William Durandus defines carpets in his *Rationale divinorum officiorum* first as “cloths that are spread out under foot, specifically for walking on with feet”, and then

specifies: “especially for the feet of bishops who must walk over worldly things with their feet”.¹² As the passage shows, carpets were considered to be luxury items representing riches in general, and bishops were obliged to renounce these (symbols for) worldly goods by trampling on them (“pedibus calcare debent”).

The Anatolian carpet in the Annunciation scene in SS. Annunziata in fact brings the world and the manifold interchanges between Florence and the world into the church, and so do the rugs in the numerous copies of the fresco. Yet, they could also provide room for marginal images, a zone for artistic imagination, their patterns could be transformed, adapted, or invented by the artists, and they could even negotiate the means of painting.

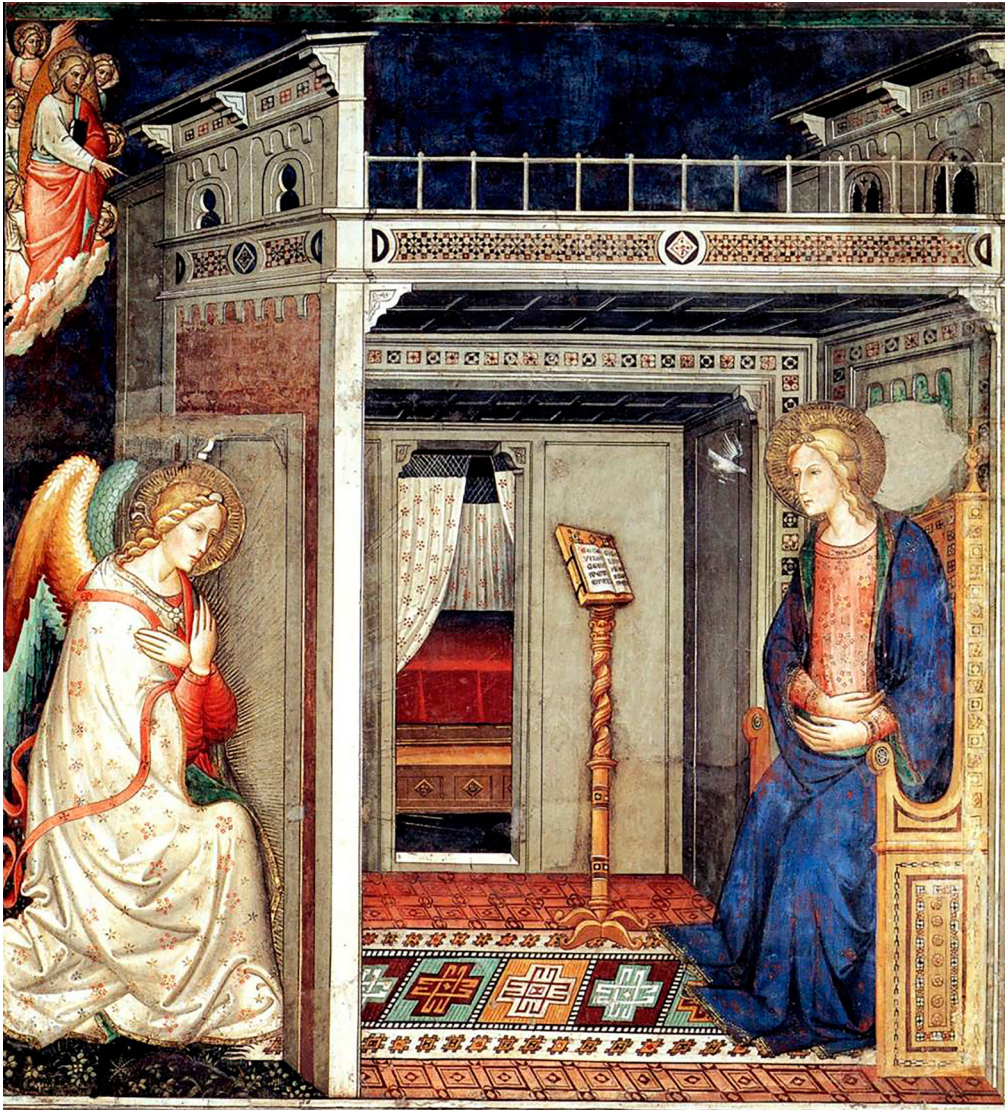


Fig. 4. Jacopo di Cione, *Annunciation*, ca. 1370, Florence, Santa Maria Novella.

In S. Maria di Cortenuova near Empoli, where the carpet is represented as a material, pliable object, leading down one step from the Virgin to Gabriel, the pattern was changed to fluttering birds, placed in squares as if they were in cages (Fig. 7).¹³ Moreover, in the Florentine church of S. Marco, the carpet shows birds

which in their vivacity indicate the virtuosity of the painter's brush rather than a design that could actually have been knotted (Fig. 8 and 9).¹⁴

From around 1400, painters no longer confined their creative approach to carpets in representations of the Annunciation to a change



Fig. 5. Pile carpet with animal design, Anatolia, fifteenth or sixteenth century, private collection.

of pattern. Now, rugs “wandered” in the scenes. In the *Annunciation* attributed to Giovanni di Pietro da Napoli and in another one by Fra Carnevale, dated around 1445, the carpet is not shown beneath the Virgin’s feet, but rather seems to have been used as a “landing surface” by the angel (Fig. 10).¹⁵ Furthermore, carpets appear in these images according to their specific functions in Renaissance Italy. In Andrea Previtali’s *Annunciation*, a carpet links Mary and the angel spatially, but it does so while covering a table behind them instead of lying on the floor (Fig. 11).¹⁶ As highly expensive commodities, Oriental carpets were in fact only rarely laid out on the ground. More often, they were arranged on banks, tables, and benches; or they were hung over balconies.¹⁷ The latter is expressed in Piero Pollaiuolo’s *Annunciation*

in which the perspective dynamics of the strongly aligned lines entice the beholder’s gaze into the background of the interior, where one encounters a window opening on the left (Fig. 12). Diverted from all the poly-colored marbles, it still takes some effort to detect the carpet: it hangs over the balustrade of the terrace outside the window – next to a peacock and a view of the city of Florence (Fig. 13). Given the many and manifold representations of rugs in *Annunciation* scenes since the first representation in SS. Annunziata, from the late fourteenth century onwards, devotees almost expected to see a carpet in an *Annunciation* scene, particularly in Florence. Pollaiuolo played with these viewing expectations. By the fifteenth century, the Oriental carpet had in fact been “Florentinized” through painting. In Florence, it signified both: a local reference to the miraculous image incorporating a carpet in the *Annunziata*, and the Mediterranean networks of this city, rich through and proud of its trade.¹⁸

II. In gold: Mamluk metalwork as the Virgin’s nimbus

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, direct and indirect contacts between Tuscany and the Islamic world were indeed multifarious. Merchants, pilgrims, missionaries, and diplomats travelled back and forth, and interactions increased in the early Quattrocento, following the conquest of Pisa in 1406 and the acquisition of Porto Pisano and Livorno in 1421, when Florence gained direct access to the sea and when it sent several official embassies to Cairo.¹⁹

In a seminal study based on archival records, preserved artifacts, and representations in painting, Marco Spallanzani traced the importation of Islamic metalwork



Fig. 6. Gentile da Fabriano and workshop, *Annunciation* around 1420, Vatican City, Pinacoteca Vaticana.

described as *da* or *di Domascho* to fourteenth- to mid-sixteenth-century Florence.²⁰ Yet, Spallanzani also drew attention to a paradox, namely to the fact that, despite the high appreciation of metalwork from Mamluk Syria and Egypt, these objects were only rarely represented in Italian art. They appear in Giovanni da Milano's *Stories of the Life of Mary Magdalen* in the Cappella Rinuccini in S. Croce and in Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Birth of the Virgin* in S. Maria Novella, both of them in Florence, whereas in Carpaccio's *Dream of St Ursula* in Venice a Mamluk brass bucket is discernable on the left wall where it hangs from a cupboard. Anna

Contadini pointed out that it clearly resembles a Syrian bucket that has been preserved in the Cathedral of Treviso.²¹ The general imbalance between the presence of Mamluk metalwork on the Apennine peninsula on the one hand, and its scarce representation in the arts on the other, is even more noticeable when compared with the abundant representations of other imported goods such as carpets.²² This paradox, however, can be solved by not only searching for representations of Mamluk metalwork produced by the painter's brush, but also by the painter's gold leaf.

Though Masaccio's *Pisa Polyptych*, painted in 1426, is now dismantled and partly lost, its



Fig. 7. Cenni di Francesco, *Annunciation*, around 1400, Cortenuova, Santa Maria di Cortenuova.

central panel is housed in the National Gallery in London. Measuring 135×75 cm, the latter features the enthroned Virgin and Child surrounded by four angels: two play musical instruments in the foreground and two have their hands raised in prayer in the background

(Fig. 14).²³ Mary is clad in a dark red gown covered by a voluminous blue mantle and her monumental figure with the Christ Child eating grapes on her lap, clearly dominates the composition. She sits on a massive *all'antica* throne with a strigillated pedestal evoking

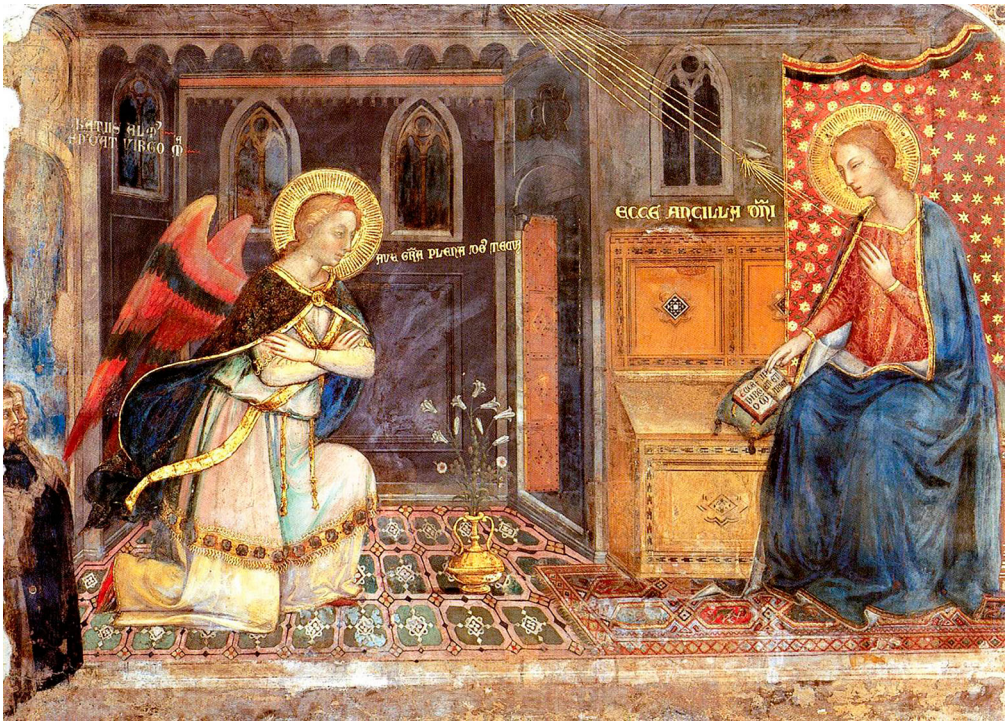


Fig. 8. Jacopo di Cione, *Annunciation*, ca. 1365, Florence, San Marco.

antique and early Christian sarcophagi, an architectural structure built up of columns with Corinthian and Ionian capitals. Yet, it is the haloes in this image that we will now focus our attention on.

When representing haloes, i.e. circles of divine light, in the medium of painting,

artists faced a number of problems: regarding their shape and decoration, their materiality, visibility and invisibility, as well as their spatial disposition. As has been frequently noted, in the *Pisa Altarpiece* these issues are evidently at play in the representation of the Child's cross nimbus which is not only



Fig. 9. Detail of Fig. 8.

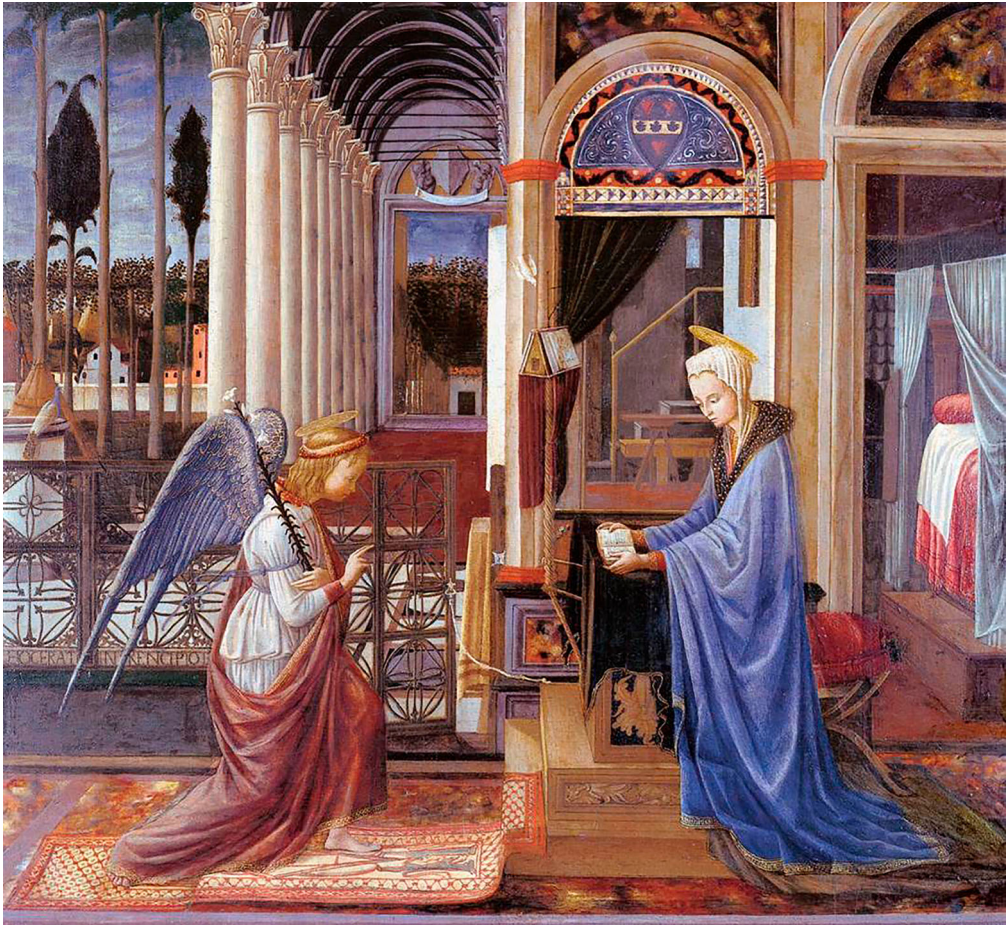


Fig. 10. Fra Carnevale, *Annunciation*, ca. 1445, Munich, Alte Pinakothek.

rendered three-dimensionally and in perspectival foreshortening but even reflects the Christ Child's head and blond curls.²⁴

Masaccio's bold approach can be contextualized in an artistic setting which was characterized by the testing of ever more experimental solutions for haloes. For example, in Altichiero da Zevio's wall paintings in Padua (1385), St. George, kneeling and about to be beheaded, carefully balances his nimbus like a metal disk on the back of his head. Once conceived as a material object, the question of the halo's

ornamentation arose, to which Paolo Uccello found a particularly stylish answer in his *Madonna and Child* (c. 1431–35), now in the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin: the Virgin's and the Christ Child's haloes match their intricate hairdos in color and design (Fig. 15).²⁵ As is well-known, artistic experiments with haloes were not confined to the Apennine peninsula. Robert Campin, for example, positioned the Madonna in front of a fire screen whose round shape, though made of yellow straw in wicker technique,



Fig. 11. Andrea Previtali, *Annunciation*, ca. 1508, Ceneda (Treviso), *Santa Maria Annunziata del Meschino*.

evokes a nimbus. Yet, it is Francesco del Cossa who can be credited with the most audacious pictorial creation in this context. In the *Dresden Annunciation* (1470–1472) he not only equipped Gabriel with a halo but also with a holding device for it: a kind of helmet consisting of four brackets attached to a ring (Fig. 16). In the painting, the nimbus is thought to share both the quality of weight and exposure to the effects of gravity with other worldly objects, and hence requires an instrument in order not to fall to the ground. As Roland Kanz pointed out, del Cossa’s provocatively outspoken and accurately fitting construction clearly refers to late medieval theater props and prevented the angel from losing his halo “no matter how fast he flew

or how heavy the turbulences on his way to Mary through the sky might have been”.²⁶

Returning to Masaccio’s *Pisa Polyptych*, the latter can be called an artistic arena for displaying diverse kinds of haloes. Whereas the Child’s nimbus distinguishes itself from all other haloes in the central panel in terms of both its design with a cross and its foreshortened instead of flat appearance, in the predella scenes, haloes are represented in full- and in three-quarter-profile views, and in the martyrdom of St Peter the nimbus is even placed on the floor and serves as the base for the saint’s crucifixion upside-down. The halo of the greatest size and most elaborate ornamentation, however, graces the Virgin.

The nimbus frames Mary’s head and partly overlaps the throne behind her (Fig. 17). Through its conspicuous decoration it is clearly discernable from the plain gold-ground in the background. Two small bands with repetitive round punches enclose a larger band featuring an Arabicizing inscription. The Arabic and pseudo-Arabic letters are positioned against a hatched and granulated background and are hence visible from near and afar.

In the fifteenth century, the phenomenon of Arabicizing script in Italian painting was not new. Still mostly overlooked as “decorative ornaments”, Arabic, Arabicizing, and pseudo-epigraphic characters that resemble other Oriental scripts appear in a large number of late medieval Italian artworks.²⁷ With pseudo-script, artists explored the boundaries and sounded out the areas of tension between letters and lines in the margins and thresholds of their paintings, that is on hems, haloes, and frames. In many cases, these inscriptions were instigated by inscribed artifacts imported from various regions in and beyond the Mediterranean. For the haloes featuring pseudo-Arabic script

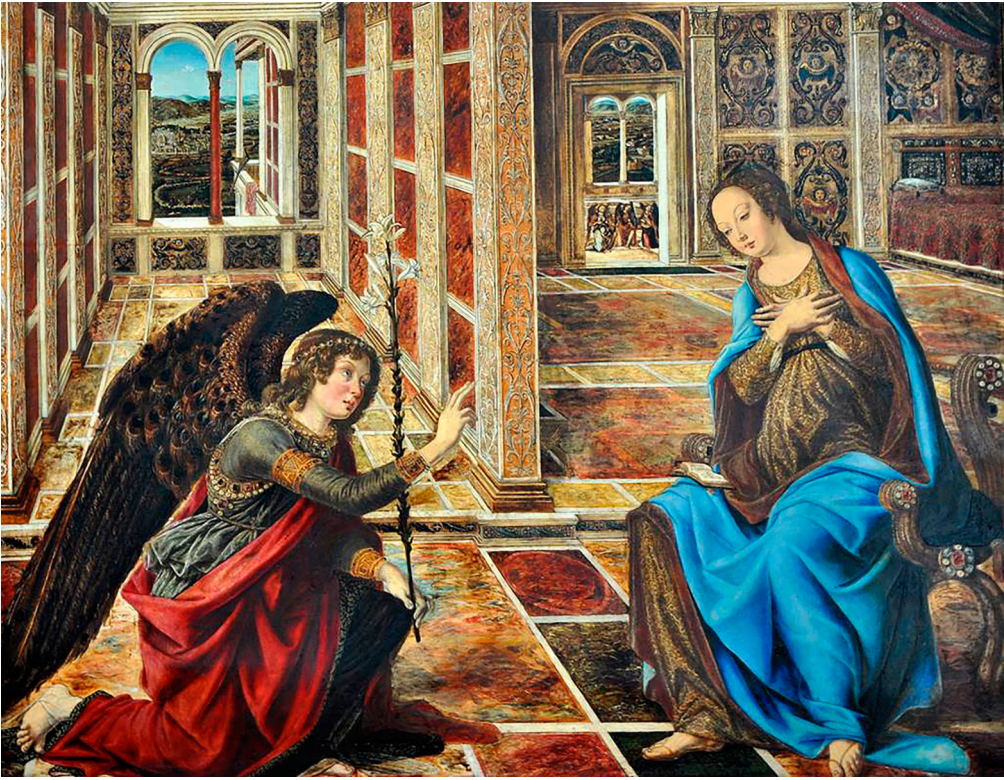


Fig. 12. Piero del Pollaiuolo, *Annunciation*, ca. 1470, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.

in early Quattrocento painting, even a specific type of object has been proposed as a source of inspiration: Mamluk brass plates (Fig. 18).²⁸ Still, Fred Leemhuis' ingenious suggestion has not had much effect on art historical scholarship.

Gold-backs and haloes of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries have been well-studied, most prominently by Erling Skaug, Mojmir Frinta, Joseph Polzer, and Bastian Eclercy.²⁹ Fifteenth-century haloes, in contrast, stood more in the shadow.³⁰ It is as if scholars had taken Leon Battista Alberti's rejection of gold in panel painting more seriously than Quattrocento artists who still very consciously and creatively used the gilded parts of their paintings: not least to incorporate into them

clearly visible references to artifacts imported from the Middle East; a practice which can be witnessed in works of art by Masaccio, Gentile da Fabriano, Fra Angelico, Giovanni di Francesco Toscani, and other painters.³¹

Masaccio's *Madonna* was commissioned by the wealthy Pisan notary ser Giuliano di Colino di Pietro degli Scarsi (1369–1456) for his funerary chapel in S. Maria del Carmine in Pisa, the Tuscan port city with her own and long-reaching history of numerous artifacts imported or looted from the Islamic world: the famous bronze griffin on the roof of Pisa Cathedral, ascribed to Al-Andalus, Mallorca or Iran; the marble capital from Madinat-az-Zahra near Cordoba; or the *bacini*, glazed ceramic bowls from Tunisia,



Fig. 13. Detail of Fig. 12.

Al-Andalus, Fatimid Egypt and other regions around the Mediterranean Sea, which decorate the façades of so many Pisan churches.³² Yet, in 1426, when the altarpiece was installed, Pisa had already lost her independence and the control of her harbor to Florence. The first Florentine embassy to Mamluk Cairo, led by Felice Brancacci and Carlo Federighi, had left from Porto Pisano in 1423, and Florentine galleys sailed in the Mediterranean.³³

The central predella scene from the *Pisa Polyptych*, now in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, features the *Adoration of the Magi* who bring the Christ Child precious gifts from “the East”.³⁴ Right above this scene, the Virgin’s nimbus in the central panel, donated by ser Giuliano di Colino di Pietro degli Scarsi, presents an “Eastern” artifact to the beholder: the evocation of a brass plate from Mamluk Syria or Egypt. Before Masaccio embellished the Madonna in the *Pisa*



Fig. 14. Masaccio, central panel of the *Pisa Polyptych*, 1426, London, National Gallery.

Polyptych with a nimbus inspired by Mamluk brasswork, he had already done so in the *San Giovenale Altarpiece* (1422).³⁵ In fact, in both cases, the Virgin’s nimbus not only features Arabicizing lettering, which is clearly visible against a hatched background, but even the *chinoiserie* motif of the lotus blossom, a popular ornamental device in Mamluk metalwork of the time: it separates the pseudo-inscriptions on the haloes at regular intervals, in the case of the *Pisa Altarpiece* right above the Madonna’s forehead.³⁶

The fact that a Florentine artist, when representing a halo in his altarpiece destined for a



Fig. 15. Paolo Uccello, *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1445, Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland.

church in Pisa, took inspiration from metalwork imported from the Mamluk Empire, which itself comprised motifs from other regions, such as, in this case, lotus blossoms introduced from China, testifies to the highly complex trans-urban, trans-regional, and transcultural networks, different levels of proximity and distance, short-distance and long-distance relationships, their entanglements, stratifications, and superimpositions, which were at play and negotiated in the arts. These overlaps, tensions, and concomitances of references to sites near and far are even more pronounced in the Annunciation scenes based on the fresco in SS. Annunziata in which the represented carpets establish a link to the miraculous image in Florence with its painted carpet on the one hand, and

to actual Oriental carpets, their trade routes, marketplaces, and production centers in the Mediterranean, Asia Minor, and the Middle East on the other.

III. Concluding remarks: Mediterranean entanglements and intersections between visual and material culture

The *Annunciation* fresco in SS. Annunziata and Masaccio's *Pisa Madonna* have already been studied extensively by art historians regarding matters of "agency": the former in connection with practices of copying miraculous images and with its *ex voto* cult; the latter vis-à-vis the reception of antique architecture and sculpture in the early Quattrocento.³⁷ The comparison and juxtaposition of the two case studies, presented in this paper, enhanced these discourses by shedding new light on the Mediterranean dimensions of these artworks as instances of a cross-cultural and transmedial "agency of things".³⁸

The comparison of the two case studies has been revealing in regard to the diverse ways in which imported artifacts were incorporated into fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Tuscan painting: they infiltrated both pictorial spaces and the gilded parts of the images. Until now, the artistic reception of Islamic artifacts represented in Italian painting has been primarily studied in order to acquire new insights into these artifacts. Our knowledge about Oriental carpets before 1400, for example, relies to a large extent on their representations in Italian painting because so few fourteenth-century rugs have been preserved. The aim of this contribution, however, was to highlight the opportunities and challenges these objects posed to painters: their colors or metallic



Fig. 16. Francesco del Cossa, Detail of the Annunciation, 1470, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie.

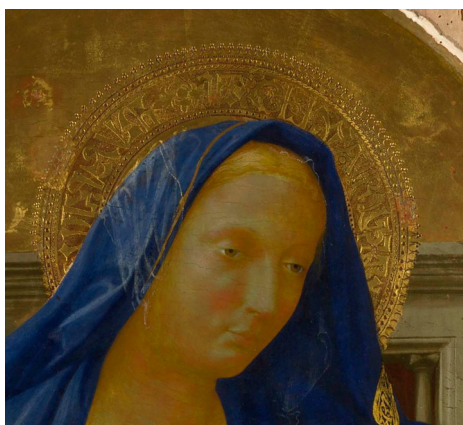


Fig. 17. Detail of Fig. 14.

glaze, their materiality, shape, surface structure and ornamentation.

Both case studies elucidated the intersections between material and visual culture in Florence and Pisa from a Mediterranean perspective. In the *Annunziata* fresco and in its various copies, we witness the frictions between the dynamics of a miraculous image on the one hand, and the impact of carpets recently imported from the Islamic world on the art production of late medieval and early Renaissance Tuscany on the other. This analysis has shown that the appearance of Islamic artifacts in Italian painting cannot be grasped



Fig. 18. Inlaid metal tray, Syria or Egypt, 1330–1360, London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

as a mere “Orientalization” of pre-modern Italian pictorial spaces, when wealthy merchants and travelers could recognize luxury objects such as the ones they had acquired in the bazaars of Cairo and Damascus or as imported goods in Florence and Pisa in Italian paintings of the time, but that imported artifacts could also be “localized” and gain new meanings through their incorporation into paintings which had their own interrelations, particularly in the case of miraculous images. What is more, Masaccio’s *Pisa Madonna* as one of a number of early fifteenth-century paintings with Arabicizing inscriptions in the haloes of the Virgin, Christ or saints elucidated that imported artifacts were not only introduced into the pictorial spaces of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Tuscan painting, but also represented by means of applied gold. Analyzing the artistic reception of Islamic artifacts, their incorporation into the syntax of the images, and their negotiations through the materiality of these images – which comprise both painted and metal surfaces – can thus

enhance our understanding of fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Tuscan painting itself.

To conclude, let us take a second look at the lines by the Aretine poet, quoted at the beginning. Petrarch’s statement is in fact remarkable on many levels: his description of the “genesis” of a type of artifact, a notion which is even more conspicuous if we think of the traditional associations of metalwork as “living matter”;³⁹ and the implied geographical “origin stories”, denoting the provenance of contemporary metalwork in comparison with the provenance of metalwork in antiquity, thereby also attesting that humanists were very aware of the Mediterranean exchange processes ancient Rome had already been involved in. The relationship between the Italian reception of antique works of art on the one hand, and of artifacts from the Islamic world on the other, and the interwovenness of references to artifacts geographically and/or temporally distant, is indeed a vibrant field of inquiry which, so far, has only marginally been touched upon in art historical scholarship.⁴⁰ Yet, it is the artworks themselves that bring up these questions: in the case of the *Pisa Madonna*, for example, we encounter Masaccio’s receptivity of and artistic response to antique architecture, taken up by his contemporary Filippo Brunelleschi in these very years, in the design of the Virgin’s throne; to the works of local sculptors such as Nicola and Giovanni Pisano, and Donatello, as can be seen in the monumentality of the represented figures;⁴¹ and to artifacts recently imported from the Islamic world. Within the image, however, they are rendered very differently: the architectonic throne made of grey stone is seen in perspectival foreshortening in pictorial space, whereas the Mamluk plates are presented

parallel to the picture plane, “merged” with the gold-ground.

In the sub-discipline of Italian art history, the study of artistic responses to antique art and architecture is highly developed. Artistic receptions of Islamic artifacts, in contrast, have only recently received more attention. Yet, precisely because artists such as Masaccio creatively negotiated both, even in the same artworks, it is necessary to study both together; to draw methodologically from studies regarding the reception of antiquity, which have dealt with matters of artistic transfer, practices of copying, imitating, and the creative transformation of pre-existent models,⁴² in order to sound out the similarities, differences, and areas of tension between antique and Islamic artifacts when represented in painting, and their diverse temporal layers, and to experiment with and investigate new methodological approaches. According to Petrarch, Mamluk metalwork filled Italians with such awe that it even rivalled the role Corinthian metalwork had once had in antiquity. In fact, from the second half of the fifteenth century onwards, Italian craftsmen sought to imitate the imported goods as a market response when they created what scholars long termed “Italo-Saracenic metalwork” which was then exported, not least to the Islamic world, and when Giorgio Vasari elaborated on Damascene metalwork and Italian imitations of it.⁴³ Masaccio’s *Pisa Madonna* precedes this moment. Elucidating the dynamic interrelations between the visual and material cultures in a Mediterranean setting, it brought the circulation of Mamluk metal plates from Syria and Egypt to Italy and their use as sumptuous tableware to a halt when they were represented vertically in the gold-grounds, though not as luxury platters but rather transformed into “reified” divine light.

Notes

1. “Mummius, dum Corinthum armis captam direptamque flammis absumeret, aureis simulque argenteis atque eneis quaecumque victorum forte manus evaserant stautis, quarum abundantissima olim illa urbs fuit, pari unco liquefactis, omnium metallorum vene ibi uno torrente fluxerunt unoque ex omnibus iam nobiliore metallo; et pretiosioribus vasis exordium et a clade Urbis nomen luxurie partum fuit, non quod is furor in ea urbe consurgeret que ruebat; sed venture furore material parabatur. Ad hunc modum tunc Corinthus huius fons fuit insanie, nunc Damascus: inde hodie vasa mittuntur vestros captura oculos animosque”, Francesco Petrarca, *De remediis utriusque fortune* [1354–66], 1.42: *De vasis corinthis*. The English translation is quoted from *Petrarch’s remedies for fortune fair and foul. Book I*, trans. by Conrad H. Rawski, Bloomington, 1991, p. 135.
2. The English translation is quoted from Sylvia Auld, “Master Mahmud and Inlaid Metalwork in the 15th century”, in: *Venice and the Islamic World, 828–1797*, exh. Cat. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), ed. by Stefano Carboni, New Haven, 2006, pp. 212–225; 215. See also Ulrike Ritzerfeld, “Mamlükische Metallkunst für mediterrane Eliten. Grenzüberschreitungen in Luxus und Machtrhetorik”, in: *Integration und Desintegration der Kulturen im europäischen Mittelalter*, ed. by Michael Borgolte et al., Berlin, 2011, pp. 523–539; Rosamond E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza. Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300–1600*, Berkeley, 2001, pp. 139–147.
3. Attention to this topic had already been drawn by Gustave Soulier, *Les influences orientales dans la peinture toscane* (Paris, 1924). For recent discussions, cf. Avinoam Shalem, *Islam Christianized. Islamic Portable Objects in the Medieval Church Treasuries of the Latin West* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996); *idem*, “The Portraiture of Objects. A Note on Representations of Islamic Objects in European Painting of the 14th–16th Centuries”, in: *Europa e Islam tra I secoli XIV e XV*, ed. Michele Bernardini and Clara Borrelli, 2 vols., vol. 1. Naples, 2002, pp. 497–521; Gerhard Wolf, “Alexandria aus Athen zurückerobern? Perspektiven einer mediterranen Kunstgeschichte mit einem Seitenblick auf das mittelalterliche Sizilien”, in: *Lateinisch-griechisch-arabische Begegnungen. Kulturelle Diversität im Mittelmeerraum des Spätmittelalters*, Berlin, 2009, pp. 39–62; Catarina Schmidt Arcangeli and Gerhard Wolf, eds. *Islamic Artefacts in the Mediterranean World. Trade, Gift Exchange and Artistic Transfer*, Venice, 2010; Lieselotte E. Saurma-Jeltsch and Anja Eisenbeiß eds, *The Power of Things and the Flow of Cultural Transformations. Art and Culture Between Europe and Asia* (Berlin, 2010); Barry Flood, David Joselit, Alexander Nagel, Alessandra Russo, Eugene Wang, Christopher Wood and Mimi Yiengpruksawan, “Roundtable. The Global Before Globalization”, *October* 133, 2010, pp. 3–19; Hannah Baader, “Universen der Kunst, künstliche Paradiese der Universalität. Florenz, seine Sammlungen und Global Art History I”, in: *Kritische Berichte* 40.2, 2012, pp. 48–59.

4. Megan Holmes, "The Elusive Origins of the Cult of the Annunziata in Florence", in: *The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. by Erik Thuno and Gerhard Wolf, Rome, 2004, pp. 97–121; *eadem*, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, New Haven, 2013, pp. 239–247; Maria Husabø Oen, "The Origins of a Miraculous Image: Notes on the Annunciation Fresco in SS. Annunziata in Florence", in: *Konsthistorisk tidskrift* 80.1, 2011, pp. 1–22.
5. Marco Spallanzani, *Oriental Rugs in Renaissance Florence* (Florence, 2007); *idem*, *Rugs in Late Medieval Siena* (Florence, 2014); Julius Lessing, *Altorientalische Teppichmuster nach Bildern und Originalen des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1877); Alois Riegl, *Altorientalische Teppiche* (Leipzig, 1891); Wilhelm von Bode, *Vorderasiatische Knüpfteppiche aus älterer Zeit* (Leipzig, 1901); Kurt Erdmann, "Orientalische Tierteppeiche auf Bildern des XIV. und XV. Jahrhunderts", *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 30, 1929, pp. 263–294; Kurt Erdmann, *Europa und der Orientteppich* (Berlin, 1962); John Mills, *Carpets in Pictures*, London, 1975; Mack 2001 (note 2), pp. 73–93.
6. For a recent study of Oriental carpets in the paintings by Lorenzo Lotto from an art historical perspective, cf. David Kim, "Lotto's Carpets: Materiality, Textiles, and Composition in Renaissance Painting", in: *The Art Bulletin* 98.2, 2016, pp. 181–212.
7. Spallanzani 2007 (note 5), fig. 4.
8. *Ibid.*, fig. 17.
9. Belkis Balpinar and Udo Hirsch, *Teppiche des Vakıflar-Museums Istanbul. Carpets of the Vakıflar Museum Istanbul*, Istanbul, 1988, p. 191.
10. Avinoam Shalem, "Forbidden Territory. Early Islamic Audience-hall Carpets", *Hali* 99, 1998, pp. 70–77.
11. See the 1422 inventory: "It uno tappeto bello el quale donò alla Nuntiatia el nostro Reverendissimo priore generale, maestro Stephano dal Borgo Sancto Sipulcro", Eugenio M. Casalini, *Un inventario inedito del secolo XV*, Florence, 1971, p. 106. See also Howard Saalman, "Documenti inediti sulla Cappella della SS. Annunziata", in: *Scritti di storia dell'arte in onore di Ugo Procacci*, ed. by Maria Grazia Ciardi Duprè Dal Poggetto and Paolo Poggetto vol. I, Milan, 1977, pp. 226–235.
12. "[...] Tapeta etiam sunt panni qui pedibus substernuntur, quasi stratio pedum, et precipue episcoporum qui mundane pedibus calcare debent," Gullielmus Durandus, *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum I-IV*, ed. by Anselme Davril and Timothy M. Thibodeau, Turnhour 1995, book I, chap. 3, § 23. For a discussion of Durandus' statement in its late medieval intellectual context, see Vera-Simone Schulz, "Sultansprach im Papstpalast oder: Das Recht des Teppichs. Beobachtungen zu orientalischen Knüpfteppichen in der italienischen Malerei des 14. Jahrhunderts", *Eothen. Münchner Beiträge zur islamischen Kunst und Kultur* 6, 2014, pp. 302–336: 322f.
13. Spallanzani, 2007 (note 5), fig. 6.
14. *Ibid.*, fig. 5.
15. Enzo Carli, *Il Museo di Pisa*, Pisa, 1974, pp. 64–65.
16. Mack, 2001 (note 2), fig. 69.
17. Maria Catherine Ruvoldt, 'Sacred to Secular, East to West. The Renaissance Study and Strategies of Display', *Renaissance Studies* 20.5, 2006, pp. 640–657; Spallanzani, 2007 (note 5).
18. In August 1461, a new law was issued which required all Florentine galley commanders returning from the Eastern Mediterranean to donate 12 *fiorini d'oro*, so the Parte Guelfa could acquire Oriental rugs for the embellishment of the city, see Spallanzani, 2007 (note 5), 99ff.
19. Silvia Agnoletti ed., *I fiorentini alle crociate. Guerre, pellegrinaggi e immaginario orientalistico a Firenze tra medioevo ed età moderna* (Florence, 2007); Franco Cardini ed., *Toscana e Terrasanta nel Medioevo* (Florence, 1982).
20. Marco Spallanzani, *Metalli islamici a Firenze nel Rinascimento* (Florence, 2010). As outlined by Spallanzani, *da Domascho* is a general term that refers to Damascus as a marketplace for Islamic metalwork, not necessarily as a place of production. Persian inlaid metalwork, however, though of exceptionally high quality, was apparently only scarcely imported to Florence, cf. *ibid.*, 10.
21. Anna Contadini, "Artistic Contacts. Current Scholarship and Future Tasks", in: *Islam and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. by Charles Burnett and Anna Contadini, London, 1999, pp. 1–60: figs. 1, 2a and 2b. For examples in Florence, cf. Spallanzani, 2010 (note 20).
22. Spallanzani, 2010 (note 20), 5ff.
23. *Masaccio. The Pisa Altarpiece*, ed. by The National Gallery (London, 2001); Jill Dunkerton, "Il politico di Pisa. Certezze, dubbi e ipotesi", in: *Masaccio e Masolino. Pittori e frescantì. Dalla tecnica allo stile*, ed. by the Opificio delle Pietre Dure e Laboratori di Restauro di Firenze, Milan, 2004, pp. 199–213; John K. G. Shearman, "Altre proposte sul politico di Pisa", in: *Masaccio e Masolino*, pp. 215–222; Christa Gardner von Teuffel, "Masaccio and the Pisa Altarpiece. A New Approach", in: *eadem*, *From Duccio's Maestà to Raphael's Transfiguration. Italian Altarpieces and Their Settings*, London, 2005, pp. 1–71.
24. Dillian Gordon, "The altarpieces of Masaccio", in: *The Cambridge companion to Masaccio*, ed. by Diane Cole Ahl, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 123–137: 130.
25. Enio Sindona, "Una conferma uccellesca", *L'Arte* 9, 1970, pp. 67–107.
26. Roland Kanz, "Lachhafte Bilder. Sedimente des Komischen in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit", in: *Das Komische in der Kunst*, ed. by Roland Kanz, Cologne, 2007, pp. 26–58: 31.
27. See e.g. Kurt Erdmann, "Arabische Schriftzeichen als Ornamente in der abendländischen Kunst des Mittelalters", *Akademie der Wissenschaften und der*

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28. Fred Leemhuis, “Heiligenscheine fremder Herkunft. Arabische Schriftzeichen in Aureolen der italienischen Malerei des frühen fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts”, in: *Der Islam. Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients* 77.2, 2000, pp. 286–306. Leemhuis’ suggestion was taken up by Mack 2001 (note 2), 65f. and Nagel 2011 (note 27), p. 230.
 29. Erling S. Skaug, *Punch Marks from Giotto to Fra Angelico*, 2 vols. (Oslo, 1994); Mojmir Svatopluk Frinta, *Punched Decoration on Late Medieval Panel and Miniature Painting*, 2 vols. (Prague, 1998); Joseph Polzer, “A Question of Method: Quantitative Aspects of Art Historical Analysis in the Classification of Early Trecento Italian Painting Based on Ornamental Practice”, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 49.1/2, 2005, pp. 33–100; Bastian Eclercy, ‘Nimbendekor in der toskanischen Dugentmalerei’, Ph.D. thesis, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität zu Münster (2007).
 30. Thought-provoking studies of the gold-ground, though mainly of paintings north of the Alps, have been presented by Ellen Beer, “Marginalien zum Thema Goldgrund”, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 46, 1983, pp. 271–286; Iris Wenderholm, “Aura, Licht und schöner Schein: Wertungen und Umwertungen des Goldgrunds”, in: *Geschichten auf Gold: Bildererzählungen in der frühen italienischen Malerei*, exh. cat., ed. by Stefan Weppelmann, Berlin, 2005, pp. 100–113; Claudia Blümle, “Glitzernde Falten: Goldgrund und Vorhang in der frühneuzeitlichen Malerei”, in: *Szenen des Vorhangs – Schnittflächen der Kunst*, ed. by Gabriele Brandstetter/Sibylle Peters, Freiburg im Breisgau, 2008, pp. 45–66; Barbara Baert, “Between Technique and Symbolism: Notes on the Meaning of the Use of Gold in Pre-Eyckian Panel Painting. A Contribution to the Comparative History of Art North and South of the Alps”, in: *Contributions to Fifteenth-Century Painting in the Southern Netherlands and the Principality of Liège*, ed. by Dominique Deneffe (Brussels, 2009), II, pp. 7–22. Christopher R. Lakey, “The Materiality of Light in Medieval Italian Painting”, in: *Medieval Materiality*, ed. by Anne E. Lester and Katie C. Little, Special Issue of *English Language Notes* 53.2 (2015), pp. 119–136.
 31. Examples can be found in Antonio Natali/Enrica Neri Lusanna/Angelo Tartuferi eds, *Bagliori Dorati: Il Gotico Internazionale a Firenze 1375–1440*, exh. cat. (Florence, 2012), cat. no. 74; Giovanni Sarti ed., *Trente-trois primitifs italiens de 1310 à 1500: du sacré au profane*, (Paris, 1998), cat. no. 14; Wolf-Dietrich Löhr, s. v. “Gherardo Starnina, der sogenannte ‘Maestro del Bambino Vispo’”, in: *An der Wiege der Kunst: Italienische Zeichnungen und Gemälde von Giotto bis Botticelli*, exh. cat. Dresden 2014, ed. by Judith Claus/Gudula Metz, Berlin, 2014, pp. 60–63.
 32. Marco Tangheroni ed., *Pisa e il Mediterraneo. Uomini, merci, idee dagli Etruschi ai Medici* (Milan, 2003); Graziella Berti et al., eds, *Il mare, la terra, il ferro. Ricerche su Pisa medievale (secoli VII–XIII)* (Pisa, 2004).
 33. Michael E. Mallett, *The Florentine Galleys in the Fifteenth Century*, Oxford 1967. For Felice Brancacci’s diary see Dante Catellacci, “Diario di Felice Brancacci ambasciatore con Carlo Federighi al Cairo per il Comune di Firenze (1422)”, *Archivio storico italiano* ser. 4, vol. 8, 1881, pp. 156–188.
 34. For the reconstruction of the altarpiece with its predella after Mario Salmi, see Gordon 2002 (note 24), pp. 26–131 and pl. 56.
 35. Caterina Caneva ed., *Masaccio: Il Trittico di San Giovenale e il primo ‘400 fiorentino*, conference proceedings Cascia 1998 (Milan, 2001).
 36. For a discussion of Mamluk elements in Masaccio’s San Giovenale Triptych, cf. Vera-Simone Schulz, “Intricate Letters and the Reification of Light. Prolegomena on the Pseudo-Inscribed Haloes in Giotto’s Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa and Masaccio’s San Giovenale Triptych”, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz* 58.1, 2016, pp. 59–93.
 37. The literature on the reception of antique works of art in Renaissance Italy is too abundant to be quoted here, see e.g. the revised edition of Phyllis Pray Bober and Ruth Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists & Antique Sculpture. A Handbook of Sources*, London, 2010. The ex voto practices at SS. Annunziata were first intriguingly touched upon by Aby Warburg in his study on the “Wachs-Voti in SS. Annunziata” in Aby Warburg, “Bildniskunst und Florentinisches Bürgertum”, in: *idem: Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike. Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der europäischen Renaissance*, ed. by Horst Bredekamp and Michael Diers, Berlin, 1998, I.1, pp. 89–126: 116–119.
 38. For the term ‘agency’ see Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency* (Oxford, 1998); Robert Osborne and Jeremy Tanner eds, *Art’s Agency and Art History*, Malden, MA, 2007; Susanne Küchler, “Ten Years After ‘Art and Agency’: What are the Big Questions Today?”, *Kritische Berichte* 39.3, 2011, pp. 87–92. For approaches to an ‘agency of things’, see also Grazyna Jurkowlaniec, Ika Matyjaszkiewicz and Zuzanna Sarnecka eds., *The Agency of Things in Medieval and Early Modern Art: Materials, Power and Manipulation* (New York, 2018).

39. On living matter, see Ittai Weinryb, "Living Matter: Materiality, Maker, and Ornament in the Middle Ages", *Gesta* 52.2, 2013, pp. 113–132.
40. See e.g. Flood/Joselit/Nagel/Russo/Wang/Wood/Yiengpruksawan (2010, note 3). The temporalities of artworks have recently been newly in the focus of attention, cf. Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York 2010. See also Gerhard Wolf, "Review: Anachronic Renaissance / Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood", *The Art Bulletin* 94.1, 2012, pp. 135–141.
41. Gordon 2002 (note 24), 131.
42. See e.g. the research agenda of the *Collaborative Research Centre 644: Transformations of Antiquity* at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Free University of Berlin and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science.
43. Sylvia Auld, *Renaissance Venice, Islam and Mahmud the Kurd. A Metalworking Enigma* (London, 2004); Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, ed. by Paola Della Pergola/Luigi Grassi/Giovanni Previtali, Milan 1962, I, chap. 33, 159f.

Summary

As cities with far-reaching diplomatic, mercantile and missionary networks, fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Florence and Pisa were characterized by the

impact of numerous artifacts imported from distant lands. This paper focuses on two case studies: The first one sheds new light on representations of Oriental carpets in the miraculous image of the Annunciation in the Florentine church SS. Annunziata as well as in its multiple 'copies', while the second one reflects on the impact of Mamluk metalwork from Syria and Egypt on late medieval and early Renaissance Italian panel painting. Contributing to recent art historical debates on transcultural dynamics, image-object-interrelations, and intersections between visual and material culture, this paper interrogates two site-specific cases of entanglements between the local and the global in the premodern period.

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