



# "An Orientalizing fad of the Sienese": Reading Arabic Pseudo-Inscriptions from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century

Sarah Flitti

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# FINXIT

DIALOGHI TRA ARTE E SCRITTURA  
DAL MEDIOEVO ALL'ETÀ MODERNA



II - 2023



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## SOMMARIO

- 3      Con dannosa fatica e le sole mani.  
La rappresentazione del *labor* tra figurazione, scrittura e sostegni  
antropomorfi: osservazioni su qualche caso medievale (secoli XII-XIV)  
*Ilaria Matteoni*
- 29     La tavola di sant'Agata.  
Immagine devozionale, oggetto taumaturgico, opera d'arte  
fra tradizione storiografica e analisi documentaria  
*Mariella Morandi*
- 49     Dal manoscritto al muro.  
Immagini e scrittura degli affreschi nel chiostro del duomo a Bressanone  
*Antonina Tetzlaff*
- 81     *Astitit regina*.  
Corona regale e libertà repubblicana nel linguaggio figurativo e letterario  
della nobiltà genovese  
*Gaia Leandri*
- 109    «Ma seconde prétention»:  
la storia dell'incisione secondo Florent Le Comte  
*Lisa Battagliotti*
- 133    «An Orientalizing fad of the Sienese»: Reading Arabic Pseudo-Inscriptions  
from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century  
*Sarah Flitti*

## NOTE DI LETTURA

- 161    La memoria in tasca.  
Sui taccuini e il loro uso tra Medioevo ed Età Moderna  
*Eliana Carrara*



«An Orientalizing fad of the Sienese»:  
Reading Arabic Pseudo-Inscriptions  
from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century\*

SARAH FLITTI

In recent years, the issue of ornamental Arabic inscriptions in medieval and Renaissance Italy, a phenomenon often referred to as Arabic «pseudoscripts» or «pseudo-inscriptions» due to their alleged illegibility, has almost become a subgenre of text-image relations studies. While Romanesque examples dominated the discussion when scholars first took interest in Arabic pseudo-inscriptions in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, ornaments drawn from Islamic objects in Italian painting were thoroughly studied more recently. Among the most important contributions can be mentioned the works of Maria Vittoria Fontana, Sylvia Auld, and Rosamond E. Mack, and exhibitions such as *Eredità dell'Islam*, and *Venezia e l'Islam*<sup>1</sup>. Researchers started to focus on the specific graphic models available to artists during a period when objects bearing Arabic inscriptions circulated in the Mediterranean area, but also on the meanings and effects delivered by such graphic signs in a Christian context<sup>2</sup>. Recent studies led by Vincenza Grassi and Ennio G. Napolitano argued that the unreadability of the so-called pseudo-inscriptions is questionable in certain cases and that identifying the initial formula copied by a given artist remained possible through close examination of the distortion the writing suffered<sup>3</sup>. However, before the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the words «Kufic», a conventional designation for angular scripts in Arabic epigraphy, and «pseudo-Kufic», its illegible and decorative variant, were frequently used to refer to a very wide range of epigraphic ornaments perceived by art historians as both illegible and derived from Arabic script. In *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Erwin Panofsky mentions «ornamental Kufic inscriptions» as «an orientalizing fad of the Sienese which began to make headway in the North about 1400»<sup>4</sup>. The involvement in the debate of epigraphists and Islamic objects specialists like George Carpenter Miles and Richard Ettinghausen and, more recently, the rise of global methodologies such as cultural transfers led to more

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\* I would like to thank Anna Siebold and Silvia Marcheselli for their insightful comments.

<sup>1</sup> See Auld 1986; *Eredità dell'Islam* 1993; Contadini 1999; Fontana 2002; Mack 2001; *Venezia e l'Islam* 2007; Mack, Zakariya 2009; Fontana 2020.

<sup>2</sup> For the second perspective, see in particular Nagel 2011; Schulz 2015; Ead. 2016; Iafrate 2020. This approach, departing from pure formalist logics, also applies to Romanesque and Byzantine examples: see Pedone 2012; Walker 2015; Melvani 2018; Foletti, Kravčíková 2019; Ingrand-Varenne 2020.

<sup>3</sup> See Grassi 2007; Ead. 2013; Napolitano 2018; Id. 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Panofsky 1953, p. 84.



accurate descriptions of these graphic signs<sup>5</sup>. Despite many art historians pointing out the inaccuracy of the term «pseudo-Kufic» in certain cases, there still seems to be room for confusion<sup>6</sup>. The aim of this contribution is not to correct inexact uses of «Kufic» by art historians, but rather to understand why the term has been used so widely outside the realm of Islamic arts between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and the mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in French historiography particularly. This question will also shed light on conceptual exchanges and appropriations between different art histories: facing the challenge of finding proper words to categorize a type of writing that does not comply with the requirements of clarity and legibility of graphic communication, art historians turned to Islamic art terminologies, which led to misunderstandings in certain cases. What do Kufic and pseudo-Kufic mean for medieval and Renaissance art history? What are the reasons for the appropriation of the term and the broadening of its meaning? And, ultimately, how did Arabic pseudo-inscriptions in Tuscan painting emerge as a topic of interest?

*«Des lettres déformées»: the emergence of a topic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century*

When the first studies about ornamental uses of Arabic script in Christian context appear in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both medieval art history and Arabic paleography were in their infancy<sup>7</sup>. Yet, French archeologist and numismatist Adrien de Longpérier claims that the knowledge of Arabic calligraphy is now sufficient to appreciate the presence of Arabic script in Christian art<sup>8</sup>. Among the examples selected by de Longpérier are the *Beatus of Saint-Sever*<sup>9</sup>, the doors of Notre-Dame du Puy, a sculpture from Bourges now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon (figs. 1, 2), and the ciborium of Maître Alpais in the Louvre. De Longpérier's early attempt to demonstrate Islamic influence on medieval Christian art received harsh criticism, including accusations of disparaging the *génie* of French artists<sup>10</sup>. However, not only does de Longpérier collect the first *corpus* of ornamental uses of Arabic script in a Christian context, but he also lays the foundation for a method that enables and encourages comparison between Christian and Islamic artifacts. According to him, the ornaments from the *Beatus of Saint-Sever* imitate a style of writing typical of the Taifa period, and, though less convincingly, the

<sup>5</sup> Miles 1964; Ettinghausen 1976. Carpenter Miles named this kind of ornament «Kufesque», a combination of «Kufic» and «arabesque».

<sup>6</sup> As an example of the extensive understanding of «pseudo-Kufic», a recently published glossary of ornament defines it as an «ornament imitating the ancient Arabic script» (my translation). The entry is illustrated with the 11<sup>th</sup>-century pyxis held in Narbonne cathedral bearing a legible inscription, and by a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Gallé vase with an inscription reading «Espoir» in French! See de Finance, Liévaux 2014, p. 188.

<sup>7</sup> As explained by Silvia Pedone and Valentina Cantone (2013, p. 125): «But notwithstanding the constraints of a largely incomplete knowledge of original materials, the classification work began to point out forms that we may call 'of contact', the outcome of a reciprocal stylistic influence between artists of different cultures».

<sup>8</sup> De Longpérier 1846.

<sup>9</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), Mss. Latin 8878.

<sup>10</sup> Pedone, Cantone 2013, pp. 125-126.

meaningless characters («des lettres arabes qui ne donnent aucun sens») on the sculpture from Bourges are related to the inscriptions on the Pisa griffin (Pisa, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo). On the rim of the ciborium of Maître Alpais, de Longpérier also notices «un genre d'écriture architecturale qui consiste à élever certains jambages deux à deux au-dessus des autres lettres, en découpant l'extrémité supérieure de ces jambages en forme de fleurons» – a type of ornament later qualified by Ettinghausen as the «tall-short-tall syndrome»<sup>11</sup>. The origin of these patterns is simple: ignorant artists copied inscriptions for their aesthetic qualities, unaware that these *arabesques* were writing; if not, why would they associate sacred history with the language of Muslims?<sup>12</sup> The article makes no specific reference to Kufic, speaking instead of deformed Arabic characters and letters («des lettres arabes très défigurées», «des mots arabes très défigurés»), but draws comparative examples from the *Seconda Opera Cufica* of Michelangelo Lanci<sup>13</sup>. As an Orientalist, de Longpérier seems familiar with the distinction between angular and rounded scripts when he observes that «neski»<sup>14</sup> characters are used in a book of hours thought to have belonged to king René of Anjou (1409-1480): during René's time, artists had started to imitate the curvilinear scripts featured on Mamluk and Nasrid objects<sup>15</sup>. This accuracy is not always observed. In 1876, Louis Courajod, renowned for emphasizing the «international» character of the art of 1400, publishes a brief series of notes on the *Klosterneuburg Altarpiece*. The pattern on the edges of the characters' garments is alternatively called «pseudo-Arabic», «Arabic inscriptions», and «Arabic designs»<sup>16</sup>. The following year, in an article entitled *De l'ornementation arabe dans les œuvres des maîtres italiens*, Henri Lavoix notices the graphic ornament on the halo of the Virgin in Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* (figs. 4, 5):

These characters, angular at the top and elongated at the base, are surprising and unusual in their appearance. But a careful examination soon reveals that their altered form is an imitation, rather than an exact reproduction, of those beautiful Kufic letters that the Orientals employed with such great skill in their epigraphic monuments in the Middle Ages<sup>17</sup>.

Like de Longpérier, Lavoix is an Orientalist and numismatist with knowledge of Arabic – he published an article on 'Muslim arts' and several catalogues of Islamic coinage held by the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris<sup>18</sup>. Still, his remarks remain general

<sup>11</sup> Ettinghausen 1976. For a critical appraisal of this idea, see Redford 2021, pp. 84-85.

<sup>12</sup> De Longpérier 1846, p. 699.

<sup>13</sup> Lanci 1846.

<sup>14</sup> «Neski» refers to *Naskh* or *Naskhī*. From the verb «to copy» in Arabic, it is used to cover cursive scripts. According to Sheila Blair, cursive scripts first appear in monumental epigraphy in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Kufic lost its preeminence in monumental epigraphy during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. See Blair 1998, pp. 88-91. «Curvilinear» is nowadays often preferred to «cursive», misleading in the case of Arabic.

<sup>15</sup> De Longpérier is certainly alluding to the *Diurnal of René II* (Paris, BnF, Mss. Latin 10491).

<sup>16</sup> Courajod 1876.

<sup>17</sup> Lavoix 1877, p. 16 (my translation).

<sup>18</sup> Lavoix 1887-1896.

and sometimes full of contempt. Lavoix expresses that he does not consider this matter an important one: it is a testimony of a common taste for the «ornementation capricieuse propre aux Arabes», the only *génie* of Arabs, along with architecture!<sup>19</sup> The reference to Kufic is as elusive as it is questionable. Researchers have shown that the lettering of the halo is related to Mamluk metalwork. It is evocative, in particular, of plates and trays bearing radiating inscriptions in a thick script called *thuluth*, rather than of Kufic, the angular style<sup>20</sup>. As this new topic emerged, so did the difficulty of naming it, for it meant labelling an imitation, a simulacrum of writing that was not always considered suitable for paleographic expertise.

*Oriental influence against the historicity of Islamic ornament*

From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onward, the paradigm of influence dominates the issue. This illustrates the acceptance of Islamic influence, but raises a number of epistemological issues. The focus on Romanesque art probably originates from the national inflexions of French art history, but also from the diffusion of the pseudo-Kufic ornament during the period. Emerging general art history syntheses begin to address the question of Islamic influence, whether in André Michel's *Histoire générale de l'art*, in which Marquet de Vasselot devotes two chapters to «oriental influences» in Merovingian, Carolingian and Romanesque art, or in Gaston Migeon's *Manuel des arts musulmans*, which concludes with the subject<sup>21</sup>. Marquet de Vasselot also points out the «Kufic pseudo-inscriptions» in Limoges enamel<sup>22</sup>. After the publication of his trilogy on medieval art, Émile Mâle wrote about the «Arab influences» on Romanesque in rather emphatic terms<sup>23</sup>. Impressed by the mosque of Cordoba he visited in 1911, Mâle observed similar features in the decor of churches in Auvergne. The doors of the *Infancy of Christ* at Notre-Dame du Puy, whose oriental features had long been noted, are framed by letters which, according to Mâle, read like an invocation to Allah («On croit y lire une invocation à Allah»)<sup>24</sup>. Following Mâle's intuitions, Egyptian art historian Ahmad Fikry undertakes a dissertation on the «Islamic influences» on the monuments of le Puy under the supervision of Henri Focillon at the Sorbonne. The problem is now acknowledged within academic circles, and observations on oriental

<sup>19</sup> Lavoix 1877, p. 18: «Pendant tout le Moyen Âge, en effet, l'Italie tributaire des industries et des arts de l'Orient s'était inspirée, dans son industrie et dans ses arts, de cette ornementation capricieuse propre aux Arabes et qui fut, avec l'architecture, le seul génie de ces peuples dans les arts linéaires».

<sup>20</sup> Kufic did not disappear under the Mamluk rule, and some objects could associate the two styles. Forstner 1972 reads the inscription on the halo as the first part of the *shabāda*, a reading also mentioned by Grabar 1982. On the connection between inscribed haloes and Mamluk objects, see in particular Auld 1986; Grassi 2007; Schulz 2016; Ead. 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Marquet de Vasselot 1905; Migeon 1907, pp. 459-464. In 1896, Marquet de Vasselot completed a thesis at the École du Louvre on the «oriental influences» in 11<sup>th</sup>-century French sculpture and illumination, under the supervision of Louis Courajod.

<sup>22</sup> Marquet de Vasselot 1941, pp. 115-127.

<sup>23</sup> Mâle 1923.

<sup>24</sup> Ivi, p. 325.

influence are accompanied with attempts at reading the inscriptions on the doors: «mā shā' a Allāh» («God willed it») according to Fikry, soon corrected by French orientalist Georges Marçais as «al-mulk li-llāh» («Dominion belongs to God»), a common pious phrase (fig. 3)<sup>25</sup>. The formalist approach that prevailed was based on describing forms and identifying sources by means of comparison.

In the 1920s, Renaissance examples are taken up by Archibald H. Christie in his study of ornament derived from Arabic as well as Gustave Soulier in his *Influences orientales dans la peinture toscane*, which includes a chapter entitled *Caractères confusques*<sup>26</sup>. Christie's approach connects Islamic, Romanesque and Renaissance examples and shifts the focus from the description of script to the production of ornament deriving from Arabic script (it is worth mentioning that Christie was an artist, and not a historian or archeologist). Ornament is seen as a historical process: the copying of Islamic fabrics in Islamic lands, then in Italy, and finally the copying of copies by painters and sculptors led to the loss of the initial «information-giving purpose» because of the aesthetical qualities attributed to writing in these different contexts. Albeit briefly, the problem of the meaning of illegible graphic signs emerges with the examples of Fra Angelico's *Last Judgment* and the frame of the *Marriage of Boccaccio Adimari and Lise Ricasoli*, also known as the *Cassone Adimari*, both in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence (fig. 6):

In both of these, lettering is reduced to meaningless scribbles that serve as light, informal enrichment, and suggest, probably intentionally, an unknown, mysterious language. To these examples, if any, the term “simulated Arabic” might apply; if, indeed, it is Arabic that is simulated, for sometimes the subject of the picture implies that Hebrew is intended<sup>27</sup>.

For Christie, the reproduction of Arabic is not only intentional, but also serves an iconographic purpose, that is, visually evoking the unknown language of the heavenly court assisting Christ at the Last Judgment. However, Christie ignores the chronological gap between the Fatimid textiles with ornamental Kufic he mentions and the «meaningless scribbles» of Fra Angelico<sup>28</sup>. Without any detail regarding their composition and style, the examples are only used to illustrate «various stages of the degeneration of Arabic inscriptions»<sup>29</sup>. Soulier, on the other hand, adopts a rigorous chronological approach, with no regard for what the inscriptions may signify. According to Soulier, the phenomenon started with the narrative cycle of San Piero a

<sup>25</sup> Fikry 1934, p. 263; Marçais 1938, p. 154. De Longpérier (1846, p. 701) suggests as a reading the beginning of the *shahāda*. On the signification and visual effects of the framing inscriptions of Notre-Dame du Puy, see Foletti, Kravčíková 2019. On the use of the phrase «al-mulk li-llāh» in Christian and Islamic contexts, see Redford 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Christie 1922; Soulier 1924, pp. 185-194.

<sup>27</sup> Christie 1922, p. 291.

<sup>28</sup> The Fatimid fabric Christie refers to seems to be the *chasuble of Saint-Sernin* (Toulouse), made of a silk of the Almoravid period. See C. Partearroyo, in *Al-Andalus* 1992, pp. 318-319, no. 87.

<sup>29</sup> For a recent assessment on the frame of the *Cassone Adimari*, see Iafrate 2020.

Grado near Pisa, painted by Deodato Orlandi (figs. 7, 8)<sup>30</sup>. The shrouds of Peter and Paul are made of an oriental striped textile decorated with cursive inscriptions («ornées d'inscriptions cursives»). The pattern then spreads and appears in the cloths of honor in Cimabue's *Maestà di Santa Trinita* and the Louvre *Maestà*, in Duccio's *Madonna Rucellai*, in which the fabric presents a «bordure à entrelacs coufiques», and finally in the frescoes of the Scrovegni Chapel, which feature «Kufic» edges in the garments. The beginning of the *Quattrocento* sees a revival of the pattern with Kufic characters («caractères coufiques») in the paintings of Lorenzo Monaco, Fra Angelico and in the *Adoration of the Magi* by Gentile da Fabriano. Toward the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the graphic signs tend to resemble knots, as in the carpets depicted by Ghirlandaio. Surprisingly, Soulier employs «Kufic» and cursive interchangeably, but seems aware of their difference:

Art historians have become accustomed to generalizing and classifying inscriptions as *Kufic characters* that in fact belong to two forms of writing: proper Kufic script, mainly used in monumental epigraphy, and *naski*, the cursive writing of manuscripts. The term was extended to include Western imitations that are often only approximations attempting at most to reproduce the character of the drawing of letters and are meaningless. For greater convenience, we will use the term in its broadest sense, as what matters for our study, is only the imitation of Oriental inscriptions for decorative purposes<sup>31</sup>.

Soulier understands «Kufic» as a synonym for ornamental Arabic script. It is one of the first attempts of chronological assessment of this ornament on the basis of a coherent corpus. Yet, enlarging the corpus does not yield any new insights, since oriental stuffs («étoffes orientales») are repeatedly mentioned as a model for inscriptions. Soulier fails to see the paradox of his own demonstration: he describes the evolution of the so-called Kufic ornament from Cimabue to Ghirlandaio but identifies a unique model for the whole period. Forms seem to have a life of their own, moving from one artwork to another, at the will of the artist's imagination and invention. This conception is rooted in the notion of influence, crucial at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>32</sup>. As demonstrated by Michael Baxandall, this model can result into creating a superficial relation between two objects by distancing effects from causes: one object is attributed supremacy on another without the precise nature of their relation being revealed<sup>33</sup>. Thus, the modalities and reasons for the borrowing of Islamic ornament were hardly ever addressed<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> Soulier 1924, p. 188. The author dates the frescoes of San Piero a Grado from 1275, which is why he places them before Cimabue in his chronology. The frescoes were rather painted around 1302. On the iconography of the murals, see Pinkus, Ozeri 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 186 (my translation).

<sup>32</sup> Around 1800, «influence» alludes to the action imputed to stars on human destiny. It acquired a metaphorical meaning in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See Naïm 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Baxandall 1985, pp. 58-62.

<sup>34</sup> Marquet de Vasselot addresses this limit (1905, p. 896): «Il serait particulièrement intéressant de chercher à déterminer pour quelles raisons certaines provinces ont été plus soumises que d'autres à ces

The lack of historicity in the conception of Islamic arts observed in these studies is particularly striking. They tend to be reduced to an indefinite reservoir of ornaments available to Western artists, be it in medieval or modern times. For Marquet de Vasselot, the high degree of «stylization» of Islamic arts, unable to reproduce the complexity of nature, attracted Romanesque artists because it provided designs that were simple to imitate<sup>35</sup>. Although Mâle considers Islamic art in a more positive light, he nevertheless treats it as a repertoire of ornaments<sup>36</sup>. The ambivalence becomes evident when Mâle states that French 12<sup>th</sup>-century architects could not resist the charm of Arabian decor but had little to learn when it comes to construction techniques<sup>37</sup>. Fikry, on the other side, shows that the borrowing of forms does not only involve surfaces, but is also structural, by engaging in a series of comparisons between the cupolas of Notre-Dame du Puy and Islamic examples<sup>38</sup>. Most of the scholars (De Longpérier, Courajod, Christie, Marçais...) presented their examples of debased Arabic scripts in the form of black-and-white drawings and plates (fig. 3)<sup>39</sup>. This approach allowed for the comparison between patterns and provided a means to avoid the technical challenges of reproducing such small details, but made technical and material properties disappear. Cutting out images also meant that the meaning and function of the ornament in relation to iconography were hardly ever considered. Widespread in both decorative arts and scientific culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the use of plates and drawings made the organization of ornamental forms visible. The fashion for ornamental grammars reflected the distinctive desire of that period to make the arts of the peoples of the world legible, and medieval art was not exempt from this vision<sup>40</sup>. It is no coincidence either that Marquet de Vasselot calls «decorative art» («l'art décoratif») the part of Romanesque art that was subject to Islamic influence<sup>41</sup>.

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influences: mais ce serait aussi une tâche très délicate, que l'état actuel de nos connaissances ne permettrait pas de mener à bien».

<sup>35</sup> Marquet de Vasselot 1905, p. 896: «Il semblerait, en effet, que les décorateurs romans aient été attirés vers l'art musulman à cause de sa stylisation très prononcée. Son parti pris de disposition symétrique dut leur plaire parce qu'il n'exigeait, pour être compris, presque aucun effort d'imagination, et parce qu'il ne demandait pas, pour être reproduit des mains bien habiles».

<sup>36</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, repertoires of ornament such as Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* displayed various reproductions of Islamic manuscripts and monuments (Jones 1856).

<sup>37</sup> Mâle 1923, p. 342: «Voilà ce que l'Espagne arabe a donné à l'art roman de la France. Ce ne sont, on le voit, que quelques ornements. Les Arabes, qui ne voulaient pas leurs mosquées, n'avaient pas grand-chose à apprendre à nos architectes du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle, déjà si savants. Mais les Arabes avaient le génie du décor, et ils savaient mettre dans leurs gracieuses fantaisies un charme irrésistible. La France leur emprunta quelques-unes de leurs lignes sinueuses». According to Mathieu Beaud, Mâle's perception of the relationship between East and West goes beyond the borrowing of forms, but shapes his narrative of the making of Christian art. See Beaud 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Fikry 1934, pp. 115-119.

<sup>39</sup> A problem Max van Berchem (1894, p. XVIII) was well aware of: «L'étude des monuments arabes est si peu à la mode que j'ose à peine plaider ici en sa faveur. Si les formes et la décoration, qui font l'admiration des gens de goût, ont été vulgarisées par de belles reproductions, la science des matériaux, de la construction, des plans, de la destination, et l'évolution des méthodes et du style n'ont produit que des essais isolés et moins connus».

<sup>40</sup> For the lack of historicity in the perception of Islamic ornament in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see *Purs décors?* 2007, and in particular, Necipoğlu 2007. On the dematerialization of ornament and the desire of legibility see Labrusse 2016 and Id. 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Marquet de Vasselot 1905, p. 896.



Decorative arts certainly contributed to the perception of Islamic art as a repertoire of ornaments, while at the same time archaeological discoveries and scientific publications provided new models. Hence Soulier's constant reference to oriental fabrics to explain the presence of «Kufic characters» in Tuscany: like the modern artist, the Renaissance painter admires and appropriates Islamic ornament which consequently appears unchanged across the centuries.

*Orientalism as an «Italianism»: the International style in France*

«At the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Orientalism seems to have regained even greater favor in France» writes Paul Durrieu<sup>42</sup>. Whether this «Orientalism» stems from an Italian influence is debated among the art historians committed to the recognition of 'French Primitives' in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Louis Dimier, a strong «Italianism» develops under the reign of Charles VI, a consequence of the Avignon Papacy bringing Italy to France. This taste is evident in the *Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry* (Chantilly, Musée Condé, Ms. 65) showing similarities with Taddeo Gaddi's frescoes in the Baroncelli Chapel in Santa Croce, Florence<sup>43</sup>. Louis Réau notes a «taste for exoticism» and a «penchant for orientalism» in the manuscript (poorly suited, in his view, to the architectural backgrounds depicting medieval Paris), but still considers it a French innovation. Since the illuminations were painted before Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi*, the Limbourg brothers «didn't borrow their turbans, bulbous domes and exotic menagerie of camels and cheetahs from the Italians»<sup>44</sup>. Réau deliberately ignores that these elements already appear in the painting of the *Trecento*. Further proof of the autonomy of the «Franco-Flemish school», the accounts of the duke make no mention of Italian artists, says Réau – although this does not demonstrate the duke did not own Italian artworks<sup>45</sup>. Réau does not deny the Italian influence, but its importance has been exaggerated in his view. The re-discovery of the so-called 'Primitives' was also part of a discourse on the artistic role of each nation. As demonstrated by Michele Tomasi, Courajod's initial recognition of the international character of the art of 1400 is also a way to position French artists as major protagonists in shaping the Renaissance to come<sup>46</sup>. This idea is central to Réau's narrative:

The truth is that the art that flourished at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century at the courts of the Duke of Berry and his brother the Duke of Burgundy was international in character. There were some Italian and Flemish elements, but the French element prevailed. Miniatures tended to become more

<sup>42</sup> Durrieu 1904, p. 98 (my translation).

<sup>43</sup> Dimier 1925.

<sup>44</sup> Réau 1946, p. 166.

<sup>45</sup> Avril, Taburet-Delahaye 2004, p. 99.

<sup>46</sup> Tomasi 2006. See also *Primitifs français* 2004.

cosmopolitan, but retained the traditions of elegance and refinement of the great 14<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian school. They bear the seal of the Valois<sup>47</sup>.

Panofsky considerably revises this narrow vision by turning the painters working at the courts of Berry and Burgundy in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century into the originators of *ars nova*. The innovative conception of late medieval art defended in 1953 in *Early Netherlandish Painting* contrasts Italian and Flemish schools as two poles of a modern way of painting that pursue a similar objective by different means<sup>48</sup>. In the North, the new technique of oil painting served a «peculiar piety» and a vision of space that produced a «sense of intimacy», while the Italian Renaissance followed a more «formalistic» and rigorous path based on the «correct perspective construction»<sup>49</sup>. The scarcity of surviving panel paintings from this period explains the necessity of defining the filiation between the Master of Flémalle and Jan van Eyck on the one hand, and Jean Malouel, uncle of the Limbourg brothers, and Henri Bellechose on the other. But in the 1400s, the painters of the Duke of Burgundy, owing everything, as Panofsky argues, to their Flemish origin and almost nothing to Burgundy or Paris, are still strongly influenced by «Italianism», as seen in Henri Bellechose's *Martyrdom of St. Denis* (figs. 9, 10):

There is a decorative, almost heraldic spirit in the emphasis on embroidered and brocaded designs, flat areas of bright, clear colour, and undulating borders some of which bear ornamental 'Kufic' inscriptions – an orientalizing fad of the Sieneze which began to make headway in the North about 1400 and affected the workshop of the Boucicaut Master as well as many other schools of European panel painting<sup>50</sup>.

«Kufic inscriptions» appear to be one exemplary form of assimilation of Italian innovations by the North around 1400<sup>51</sup>. The misunderstanding regarding the meaning of «Kufic» may have come from Soulier's *Influences orientales dans la peinture toscane*, which is included in the references<sup>52</sup>. The patterns on the edges of garments can, indeed, barely be compared to Arabic script, at least not from a formalist or paleographical view. They can only be connected to Arabic script through a historical reconstruction

<sup>47</sup> Réau 1946, p. 168 (my translation).

<sup>48</sup> Panofsky 1953. On the originality and contribution of *Early Netherlandish Painting*, see Nash 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Panofsky 1953, pp. 3-9.

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, p. 84.

<sup>51</sup> A marginal note provides further examples of «Kufic» inscriptions, although they are writing simulacra hardly comparable to Arabic writing from a formal point of view: two illuminations attributed to the Master of Boucicaut (Paris, BnF, Mss. Latin 1161, f. 35, and New York, Pierpont Morgan Library and Museum, MS M.455, f. 73v, the latter now attributed to the Master of the Harvard Hannibal), the *Annunciation* from the *Niedervildungen Altarpiece* by Conrad von Soest (Bad Wildungen, Stadtkirche), and the *Resurrection* from the Altarpiece of *Saint Thomas of Canterbury Altarpiece* by Master Francke (Hamburg, Kunsthalle). About the artists at the court of Burgundy, Panofsky also mentions their use of «pseudo-oriental inscriptions». See Panofsky 1953, p. 84, n. 3; p. 85.

<sup>52</sup> The association of «Kufic» to this artistic milieu echoes in Meiss (1960, p. 236) and Barasch (1989, p. 182). For a recent analysis of these patterns, see Nash 2022 and de Bruijn Kops 2022.



that considers the taste for Islamic artefacts at the court of the duke, the adoption in 15<sup>th</sup>-century France of ornamental devices developed earlier in Tuscany, and finally, models circulating within the atelier, since similar motifs appear in Malouel's painting, predecessor of Bellechose as the duke's painter.

### *Naming resemblance: Kufic and pseudo-Kufic*

The recurring of «Kufic» and its declinations for 15<sup>th</sup>-century painting in these publications is striking and has resulted in recent exhibitions dedicated to early 15<sup>th</sup>-century painting in France and the Low Countries referring to the «pseudo-Kufic» ornament as a characteristic of Malouel and his entourage<sup>53</sup>. This is certainly because the application of Arabic paleography terminology to Christian lands and its epistemological implications have not been questioned when the topic first raised interest. The distinction between a written document, an epigraphic decor on an object, and the specificity of writing in images was not addressed either. Therefore, approximation prevailed and, as we have seen, some historians used the term «Kufic» for both angular and curvilinear script imitations (fig. 11).

Arabic paleography only emerged when comparisons started to be made. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its forerunners attribute the name «Kufic» to early Quranic manuscripts<sup>54</sup>. Kufic originally refers to Kufa, located south of Baghdad, a prosperous city and intellectual center during the first centuries of Islam. Tradition mentions a calligraphic style named after the city (*kufi*), but it remains difficult to know precisely what ancient sources acknowledged as such<sup>55</sup>. With the expedition of Egypt and the missions led abroad by orientalist during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which sparked interest in monumental inscriptions, Kufic was extended to include monumental angular scripts<sup>56</sup>. It is in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Max van Berchem, who is considered the founder of Arabic epigraphy and Islamic art history as a Western discipline with his idea of «Arab archaeology», bring about a synthesis of the scattered studies on inscriptions<sup>57</sup>. Conscious of the threats to Islamic heritage, he developed a method for photographing buildings and describing inscriptions. Unfortunately, van Berchem's handbook on the paleography of monumental inscriptions was never published, but

<sup>53</sup> *The Road to Van Eyck* 2012; *Johan Maehvael* 2017.

<sup>54</sup> This usage occurs in Carsten Niebhur's *Description de l'Arabie* (1774), and Jacob Georg Christian Adler's *Museum Cuficum Borgianum Velitris* (1782), but preexisted. Adler thought Kufic was the ancestor of all Arabic scripts. François Déroche observes several biases in the first developments of Arabic paleography: Orientalists would seek information from ancient sources like calligraphy treatises with no critical distance, or from calligraphers themselves, without always being aware of geographical and historical variations. For a historical review of the development of Arabic paleography, see Déroche 1980; Id. 1996; Id. 1998.

<sup>55</sup> See Sourdél-Thomine 1978; Blair 1998, p. 76; Ead. 2006, p. 104.

<sup>56</sup> In his *Paléographie Arabe*, Marcel (1828, p. 8) writes: «On rencontre encore dans tout l'Orient un assez grand nombre de monuments sur lesquels subsistent des inscriptions koufiques». On the emergence of Arabic epigraphy as a discipline and its epistemological challenges, see Sourdél-Thomine 1962 and Ory 1998.

<sup>57</sup> On the foundations of Islamic art history, see Volait 2008.

the introduction of the *Matériaux pour un Corpus inscriptionum arabicarum* provides some lexical clarifications. Van Berchem distinguishes «coufique simple» for early inscriptions from «coufique fleuri» for the Fatimid period, and «coufique décoratif» for purely decorative inscriptions<sup>58</sup>. Rounded scripts, also named *Naskhi* are divided into Ayyoubid, Mamluk and Ottoman variants. Astonishingly, van Berchem himself questions the use of Kufic and *Naskhi* but accepts them as a conventional terminology to differentiate angular from rounded scripts<sup>59</sup>. In the 1920s, Samuel Flury distinguished varieties of Kufic for Persian epigraphy: simple, foliated, interlaced or plaited, bordered, and rectangular Kufic<sup>60</sup>. As for the decorative uses of Arabic script in Christian context, the clarification was provided by the English archeologist Spittle in the 1950s:

The robes with Cufic-pattern borders were the forerunners of those worn by the more important persons depicted in so many Italian paintings from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century; these border-patterns are frequently and erroneously called “pseudo-Cufic”, but they are in fact much closer to the more cursive Naskri [*šā’i*] alphabet which was in current use throughout Islam during that later period<sup>61</sup>.

In the same years, Erdmann offers a chronological catalogue of Kufic inscriptions in Christian art, arranged by country (France, Germany, England and Italy) and by technique, and notices that «cursive» scripts are imitated in Italy from the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>62</sup>. Erdmann’s formalist approach focuses exclusively on Kufic inscriptions, like the pattern on the cloth of honour in the *Coronation of the Virgin* from the Siena Duomo, a stained glass attributed to Duccio by Enzo Carli in 1946<sup>63</sup>. A broader perspective would have shown the diversity and evolutions of patterns derived from Arabic writing. While both contributions reflect the willingness of art historians to overcome the misunderstanding and to use the nomenclature with greater rigor, they focus on taxonomy and formal description rather than the functions and effects of ornament<sup>64</sup>. This global approach was necessary, as the aim was to compile the coherent corpuses.

<sup>58</sup> Van Berchem 1894, p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ivi, p. IV: «Pour la paléographie arabe proprement dite, la recherche des inscriptions est beaucoup plus essentielle. Elle éclairera surtout le problème des rapports du coufique et du naskhi; c’est ainsi qu’on appelle, assez improprement d’ailleurs, les deux grandes variétés de l’alphabet arabe».

<sup>60</sup> Flury 1939.

<sup>61</sup> Spittle 1954, p. 148.

<sup>62</sup> Erdmann 1953, p. 467: «Die Untersuchung beschränkt sich auf die Schriftzeichen des eckigen Duktus (*Kufi*). Die kursiven (*Naskhi*), die seit dem 14. Jh. über Italien einströmen, sind nicht berücksichtigt».

<sup>63</sup> Erdmann 1953, no. 143. It is worth mentioning the several restorations carried out on the stained glass during the modern era. On the latter, see Bellosi 2003.

<sup>64</sup> Spittle’s article however concludes with a brief remark on the meaning of Kufic lettering (1954, p. 152): «Possibly by adding these letters or by copying a complete word it was thought that the object became more closely associated with the Holy Land and the value consequently enhanced. This may be a fanciful explanation for the anomaly that Christian art accepted phrases from a faith to which Christendom was militantly opposed».

Several factors may explain the popularity of «Kufic» among non-specialists: the preponderance of Kufic as an ornamental style (illustrated by the classifications of van Berchem and Flury), even if curvilinear scripts also play a decorative role<sup>65</sup>, and the focus on the early times of Islam, favoring Kufic over other styles. The interest in historical inscriptions also prompted the pioneers of Arabic epigraphy to neglect repetitive inscriptions, even more so abbreviated or poorly executed ones. Logically, illegible and decorative inscriptions were not a priority for epigraphists when they first began to compile coherent collections: the ability of inscriptions to provide attribution and dating prevailed over their decorative value<sup>66</sup>. From this perspective, it is noteworthy that the surge of attention with regards to Arabic pseudo-inscriptions in non-Islamic contexts is responsible for the scholarly interest in the subject of writing as decoration<sup>67</sup>. Interest in ornamental inscriptions was nonetheless present among Islamic art specialists, for example with Flury's study of the deformations of the word *baraka* in ceramics, a consequence of the ignorance of potters, but also a proof of the mysterious aura of writing<sup>68</sup>.

Outside the realm of Islamic art, art historians tended to overlook the historicity of epigraphic styles that was evident, for example, in the debate among epigraphists surrounding the difference between foliated and floriated Kufic<sup>69</sup>, or in attempts to assess the transition from angular to cursive script in monumental inscriptions<sup>70</sup>. More critically, art historians neglected the chronological and geographical variations of «Kufic». The focus on Romanesque art in the first studies probably shaped the naming and perception of Islamic ornament in 15<sup>th</sup>-century painting. Here lies the core of the misunderstanding: since the first studies drew their examples from 11<sup>th</sup>- and 12<sup>th</sup>-century France, a period in which imitations of angular scripts were predominant, «Kufic» was applied to later artworks displaying ornaments rather related to Mamluk objects, be it directly or through other models. As for the term «pseudo-Kufic», it is fraught with ambiguity. Does it refer to an illegible inscription in angular style, or to a pattern that has to do with the Kufic style, but not sufficiently to be plainly considered Kufic? Confronted with an incredibly vast range of inscriptions, Arabic epigraphy coined a term to distinguish legible inscriptions from decorative and/or meaningless ones<sup>71</sup>. *Pseudo*, «false» in ancient Greek, thus referred to illegibility, as in «pseudo-inscription» or «pseudo-Latin inscription». But it is not always clear whether scholars examining Christian examples referred to illegible inscriptions, patterns resembling Kufic inscriptions, or imitations of Kufic inscriptions outside Islamic lands, and therefore, illegible. Certain uses of the term pseudo-Kufic were primarily means of avoiding the challenge of naming something that looks like writing

<sup>65</sup> Kratchkovskaya 1939. The author also points out the blending of the two types in specific contexts.

<sup>66</sup> Juvin 2021, pp. 173-174.

<sup>67</sup> Redford 2021, pp. 83-84.

<sup>68</sup> Flury 1924.

<sup>69</sup> Grohmann 1957, p. 184-188.

<sup>70</sup> Van Berchem 1894, p. 75.

<sup>71</sup> This use occurs in numismatics when dealing with poorly executed inscriptions. See for example, about the «imitation» of Arab coinage in the Latin East, Schlumberger 1878, pp. 130-143.

but is not, as it conveyed the ideas of similarity, illegibility and oriental provenance all at once.



Fig. 1 – François-Alexandre Hazé, drawing of an archivolte fragment, in Adrien de Longpérier, *De l'Emploi des caractères arabes dans l'ornementation chez les peuples chrétiens de l'Occident*, in «Revue Archéologique», 2, 1846, p. 702

Fig. 2 – *Archivolte fragment (The juggler)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts (photo: Sarah Flitti)



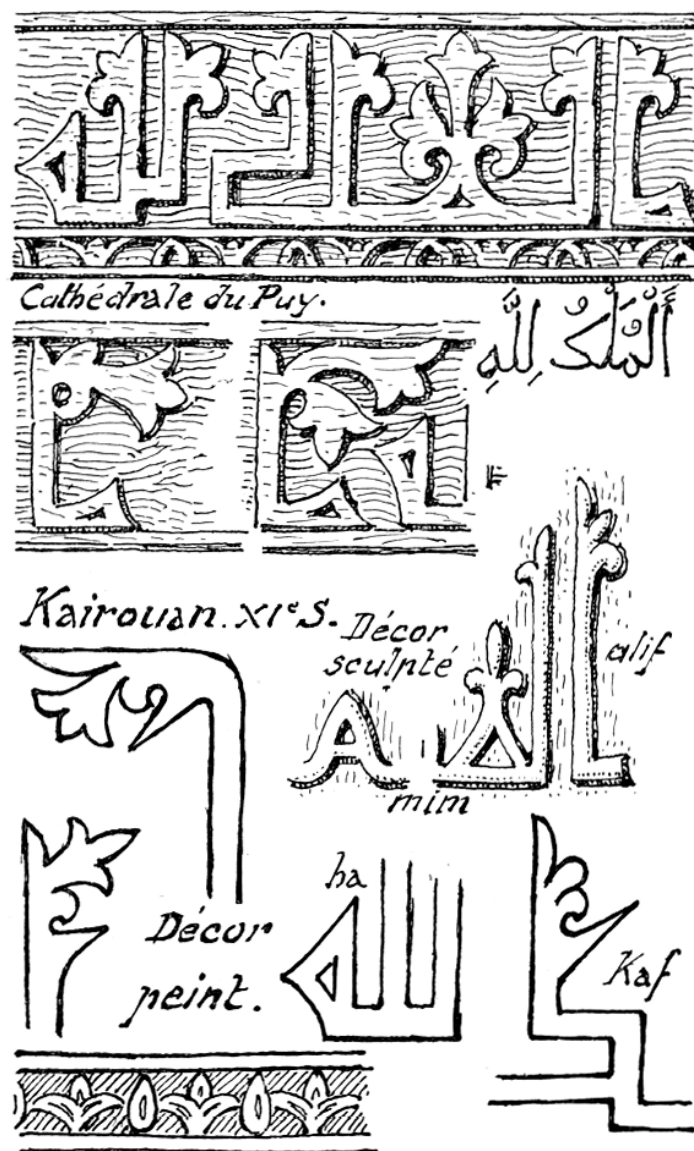


Fig. 3 – Plate comparing the inscriptions of Notre-Dame du Puy and the Mosque of Kairouan, in Georges Marçais, *Sur l'inscription arabe de la cathédrale du Puy*, in «Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres», LXXXII, 2, 1938, p. 158



Fig. 4 – Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi* (pala Strozzi), 1423, 301,5×283 cm, Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi (photo: Ministero della Cultura – Gallerie degli Uffizi)



Fig. 5 – Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi* (pala Strozzi), detail, 1423, Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi (photo: Ministero della Cultura – Gallerie degli Uffizi)

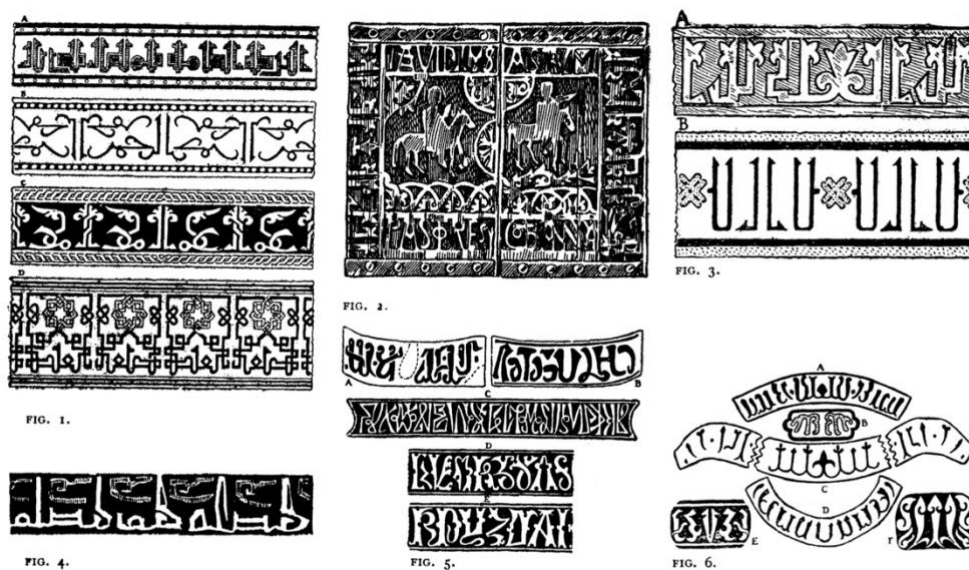


Fig. 6 – Plate comparing the inscriptions on the Chasuble of Saint-Sernin (1A), Notre-Dame du Puy (2), the *Last Judgment* by Fra Angelico (6B) and the *Cassone Adimari* (6C), in Archibald H. Christie, *The Development of Ornament from Arabic Script*, in «The Burlington Magazine», XL, 231, 1922, p. 288





Fig. 7 – Deodato Orlandi, *The Theft of Peter and Paul's Bodies by the Greeks*, ca. 1302, Pisa, San Piero a Grado (Photo: Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut; photographer: Roberto Sigismondi)



Fig. 8 – Deodato Orlandi, *The Theft of Peter and Paul's Bodies by the Greeks*, detail, ca. 1302, Pisa, San Piero a Grado (Photo: Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut; photographer: Roberto Sigismondi)



Fig. 9 – Henri Bellechose, *The Martyrdom of St. Denis*, 1415-1416, 162×211 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre (photo: © RMN-Grand Palais / Tony Querrec)





Fig. 10 – Henri Bellechose, *The Martyrdom of St. Denis*, detail, 1415-1416, Paris, Musée du Louvre (photo: © RMN-Grand Palais / Angèle Dequier)

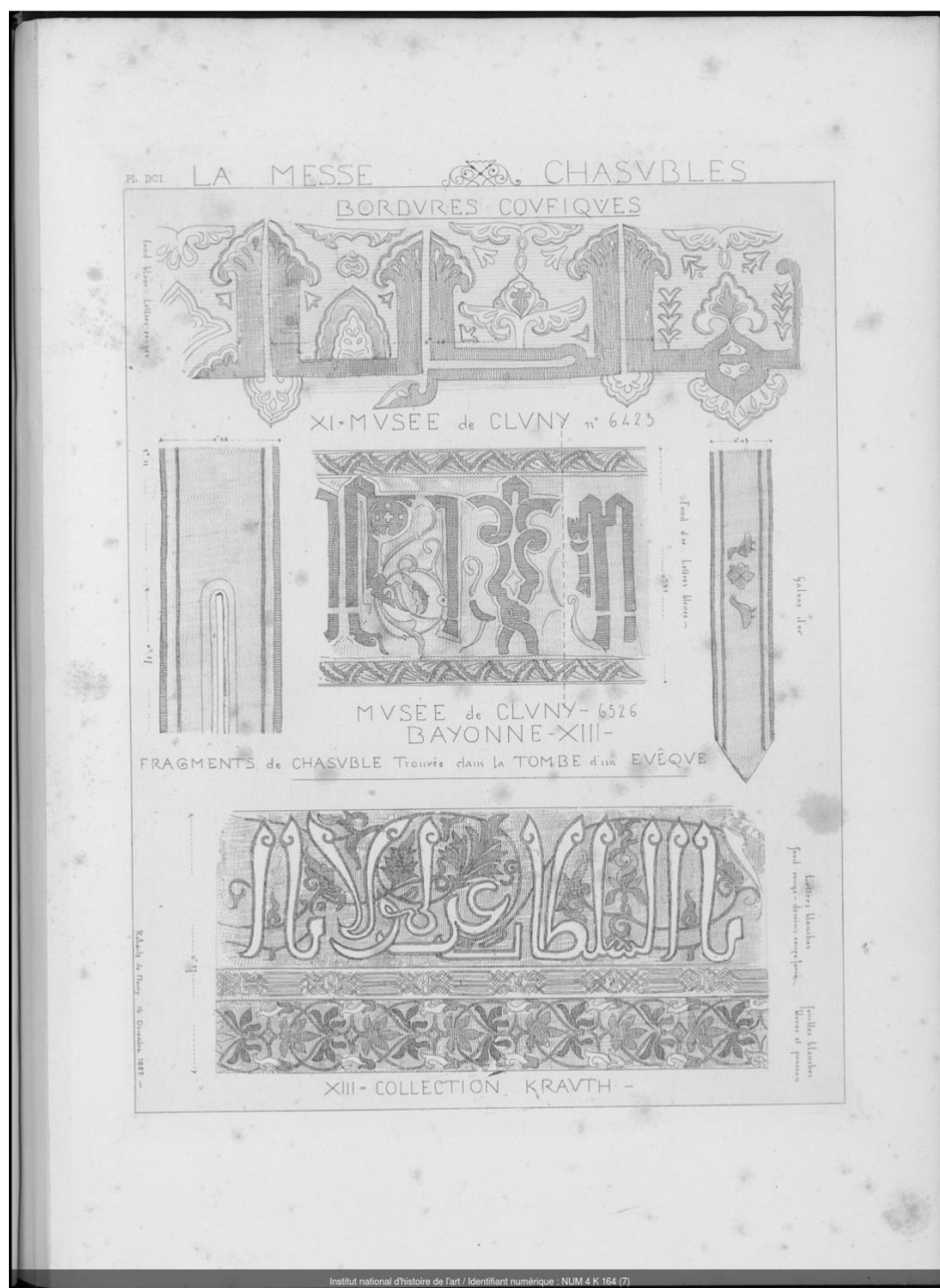


Fig. 11 – «Bordures coufiques», in Ch. Rohault de Fleury, *La messe, Études archéologiques sur ses monuments*, Paris 1887, plate DCI (foto: © Bibliothèque numérique de l'INHA, collections Jacques Doucet). The third inscription is not in Kufic but shows a textile from the Nasrid period reading «izz li-mawlānā al-sultān» («Glory to our lord the Sultan»).



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## ABSTRACT

Questo contributo passa in rassegna gli studi sulle pseudo-iscrizioni arabe tra la metà del XIX e la metà del XX secolo. Il metodo formalista, basato sull'utilizzo di disegni in bianco e nero per illustrare le caratteristiche degli ornamenti, ha spesso portato a trascurare il significato, gli effetti visivi, e le proprietà tecniche dei motivi. Attraverso esempi specifici, l'articolo tenta di spiegare l'uso dei termini «cufico» e «pseudo-cufico» per designare un'ampia varietà di segni grafici. L'attenzione particolare rivolta all'arte romanica nei primi studi potrebbe essere in parte responsabile dell'applicazione della parola «cufico» a esempi posteriori ispirati alle scritture corsive. L'ampio utilizzo del termine «pseudo-cufico» e il paradigma dell'«influenza orientale» rispondevano così alla difficoltà di denominare e spiegare la presenza di lettere arabe nell'arte cristiana, sottovalutando però la storicità dell'ornamento e degli stili grafici.

This essay reviews different readings of Arabic pseudo-inscriptions between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The formalist approach, relying on drawings and black-and-white plates to highlight the characteristics of ornament, often led to overlook meaning and visual effects, as well as mediums and technical properties. Through specific examples, this article attempts to explain the common use of the words «Kufic» and «pseudo-Kufic» to name a wide range of graphic signs. It is possible that the initial focus on Romanesque art is partly responsible for the application of «Kufic» to later examples taken from Italian painting and rather related to the so-called cursive scripts. The extensive understanding of Kufic and the paradigm of «oriental influence» responded to the challenge of naming and explaining Arabic lettering in Christian art, but sometimes resulted in overlooking the historicity of ornament and graphic styles.

## PAROLE-CHIAVE

Storiografia; ornamento; pseudo-iscrizioni arabe; pseudo-cufico; arte romanica; pittura italiana; Gotico internazionale

## KEY-WORDS

Historiography; ornament; Arabic pseudoscripts; pseudo-Kufic; Romanesque art; Italian painting; international Gothic