

INFILTRATING ARTEFACTS

‘ORIENTALIZATIONS’ AND TEXTILE AESTHETICS IN FLORENCE AND TUSCANY,
1200 – 1450

1. Summary

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, medieval studies were characterized by an increased interest in the mobility of artistic modes of expression, forms, styles, and the role of ornament on a global scale, attention to arts and crafts, and to the relationship between European art and non-European, particularly Asian and Islamic artefacts. Recently, artistic transfer practices have come back into awareness in discourses on Mediterranean, transcultural, and ‘global’ interactions in the pre-modern period. While Sicily, Southern Italy and Venice have long been in the center of scholarly attention, other regions on the Italian peninsula also offer rich material for study. This dissertation project concentrates on Tuscany, particularly Florence, and seeks to shed new light on the migration of objects from al-Andalus, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia Minor to this location between 1200 and 1450.

The dissertation investigates how imported objects, particularly textiles, invoked a variety of artistic responses in different media, and it examines the intricate relationship between imported and locally fabricated artefacts as well as their ‘imitations’, evocations and representations in architecture, sculpture and painting. Through selected case studies, Florence is brought to the forefront as an important example in the debates concerning the artistic impact of cross-cultural interaction, enriched by comparisons with other cities in Tuscany as well as other regions both on the Italian peninsula (e.g. Campania, Venice), in the Mediterranean world (e.g. Egypt, the Crusader States, Cyprus) and beyond (e.g. Iraq, Central Asia).

With this focus, the dissertation deviates from recent studies of artistic ‘Orientalisms’ in Tuscany, which either highlight the cross-cultural role of the medieval port city Pisa or which analyze ‘global Florence’ rather in the context of the Council of Florence (1439) and the collection practices of the Medici family, i.e. from the mid-fifteenth century onwards. By drawing new attention to Florence and Tuscany before 1450, the project aims to reassess

earlier art-historical studies of cross-cultural translation processes (e.g. Bode, Soulier, Puzino). Taking into account and critically reflecting on both earlier discourses and new approaches in Mediterranean and transcultural studies, as well as recent concepts of ‘global art histories’, this project will further our understanding of the various economic, diplomatic, religious, intellectual and artistic networks in which Florence and Tuscany were involved in the Late Middle Ages, and it will show how imported objects shaped and became an intrinsic part of the region’s complex visual and material culture.

2. Narrative of the project

“Through studying [Oriental carpets], we realize the significance of carpets for Occidental art besides Oriental silk weavings; not only for the arts and crafts, but even for the high arts. [...] Within a few decades, a previously art- and colorless mode of painting developed into the greatest coloristic school of art. Anyone who is familiar with fifteenth-century carpets will recognize how principally the Venetian masters of this period demonstrate the same sense of color in choice and combination.” This famous statement by Wilhelm von Bode exemplifies the crucial role that scholars around 1900 ascribed to ‘Oriental’ artefacts as aesthetic inspiration for European artists. To put it bluntly, one could say that for Bode, the masterpieces by Titian and Giorgione would not have been possible without the impact and the artistic reception of colorful Anatolian carpets by these and other Italian painters.

This dissertation project investigates the artistic reception of Islamic artefacts in different media in Tuscany for the most part in the major cities Pisa, Lucca, Siena and Florence. Due to active and far reaching trade connections as well as diplomatic, missionary and cultural contacts with regions in the Mediterranean and beyond, a high number and variety of imported goods reached Tuscany, which was characterized by particularly dynamic and multilayered artistic interactions with these artefacts. As trade items, gifts, or loot, imported objects stimulated local craft production; were displayed on façades and in interiors; were ‘imitated’ and evocated in architecture, sculpture, objects of material culture, and painting; and were represented in pictorial space.

Owing to their light weight, easy portability and high value, textiles rank among the most mobile artefacts in the pre-modern world. In Tuscany, precious silk weavings, linens, and carpets were imported on a grand scale and they played a particularly significant role in the region’s visual and material culture. From early on, Tuscany had been a center of local textile

production, first wool, then silk, and weavers creatively responded to imported luxury fabrics regarding their materiality, technique, color schemes, and patterns. Furthermore, sculptors, painters and other artisans were inspired both by imported textiles and by their local ‘copies’ and transformations. Stone pavements and pulpits were designed to resemble silks, late medieval painters explored the boundaries of the use of perspective, color, and the representation of different materials by including Oriental carpets as visual elements in their artworks. Simone Martini even changed his painting technique in order to represent a certain type of silk, *nasīj*, which had been brought into worldwide circulation by the Mongols. And, through the reception of textiles with Arabic and other Oriental inscriptions, artists sounded out the areas of tension between letters and lines in the margins and threshold areas of their paintings, i.e. on hems, haloes, and frames.

Through case studies, this dissertation project aims to take a fresh look at the monuments themselves and it closely analyzes the artistic practices that are evident in the reception of Islamic artefacts. This endeavor would not be possible, however, without a critical discussion of earlier approaches to this topic. The project hence reassesses the art-historical literature of the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century by such scholars as Wilhelm von Bode, and Gustave Soulier’s *Les influences orientales dans la peinture toscane* (1924) (which in spite of its title is also concerned with detail analyses of a variety of media ranging from architecture, and sculpture to painting and other objects of material culture), Ivan V. Puzino’s *La Chine, l’Italie et les débuts de la Renaissance (XIIIe-XIVe siècles)* (1935), or Rafique Jairazbhoy’s *Oriental influences in Western art* (1965). Furthermore, it questions scholarly approaches to artistic connectivity such as the notion of a *lingua franca* in the Mediterranean during the later Crusader period; Oleg Grabar’s concept of a common court culture in the medieval Mediterranean and its relation to the visual culture of cities in Tuscany; and recent approaches regarding the study of objects, thing-theory, materiality, and Mediterranean, transcultural, and global art histories.

Through detailed study of textiles, their reception in other media, their representation in painting and discourses on the textile medium between 1200 and 1450, the aim of this project is to test whether a conceptual framework that has proven fruitful in the sub-discipline of Islamic art could be transferred to a non-Islamic region, and to consider it in relation to other methodological approaches. In 1988, drawing on Oleg Grabar, Lisa Golombek coined the concept of ‘textile aesthetics’ for the (trans-)Mediterranean Islamic world. According to Golombek, Islamic societies distinguish themselves by the crucial function and high value of

textiles in various aspects of life, a dominant role which at times even led to ‘an aesthetic judgment through textiles’ when artefacts were described and estimated with explicit reference and in comparison to cloth. Given the close diplomatic and mercantile connections with the Islamic world, the great number of imported fabrics and the significant role of the local textile production in Tuscany, this dissertation investigates whether Golombek’s concept might be applied to late medieval Tuscany as well. In this regard, the project negotiates this notion for instance with Michael Baxandall’s concept of a ‘period eye’, definable as the habits of seeing of a particular people in a particular time and its relationship to social practices.

The dissertation hence aims to give new insights about the artistic reception of Islamic artefacts, concentrating on the narratives, origin stories, and myths that are connected with these objects, on artistic approaches to their materiality, technique, and patterns, on issues of transmediality and transmateriality, on image-object-relations, and on issues of transculturality in pre-modern Tuscany, particularly Florence. It will provide a new perspective on the multilayered economic, diplomatic, religious, intellectual and artistic interactions of Tuscany with regions in the Mediterranean and beyond, and it will hence contribute to the study of dynamic translation processes in the Late Middle Ages.

Vera-Simone Schulz