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Signing with Pseudoscript: Its Presence and Functions in the Oeuvre of Carlo Crivelli

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Abstract

This paper explores the striking presence of pseudoscript Carlo Crivelli's oeuvre. Its unchanged form testifies the artist's meticulous execution and clear intention to remain consistent in the depiction of script bearers, such as books and scrolls. He turns his pseudoscript into his personal "handwriting". But its appearance raises questions: how are we to deal with illegible script in contrast to a legible one? How does it interact with the figures? The article investigates these functions to underline Crivelli's ways to invent new artifices in his works and prove that the artist was well informed about what his coeval collogues did. As will be shown by means of reception aesthetics, certain functions can only be achieved if the script is illegible, while the materiality of the script bearers as well as the figures who interact with them always take up crucial roles in the creation of meaning around them.

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Il saggio esplora la sorprendente presenza della pseudoscrittura nell'opera di Carlo Crivelli. La sua forma immutata testimonia l'esecuzione meticolosa e la chiara intenzione dell'artista di rimanere coerente nella rappresentazione degli elementi portatori di scrittura, come libri e cartigli. L'artista trasforma la sua pseudoscrittura nella sua "segnatura" personale. Ma la sua apparizione solleva delle domande: come dobbiamo comportarci con una scrittura illeggibile rispetto a una leggibile? Come interagisce con le figure? Nell'articolo si indaga su queste funzioni per sottolineare i modi in cui Crivelli inventa nuovi artifici nelle sue opere e dimostrare che l'artista era ben informato su ciò che facevano i suoi colleghi. Come si dimostrerà attraverso l'estetica della ricezione, alcune funzioni possono essere raggiunte solo se la scrittura è illeggibile, mentre la materialità degli oggetti scritti e le figure che interagiscono con essi assumono sempre un ruolo cruciale nella creazione di significato.

Carlo Crivelli invented a unique way of depicting script "in" and "as" images by painting his own consistent type of pseudoscript into the script bearers, the books and scrolls of his figures. It interacts with readable script, mostly Crivelli's own signature, and shapes a constant motif throughout his entire oeuvre. Script and Pseudoscript attract the viewer's attention, involve them in the painting, so that the observation oscillates between viewing the picture as a whole and reading its parts – or at least attempting to read them. On the next level, Crivelli seems to depict exactly this process, for his figures are often immersed in their reading just like the viewer is trying to decipher them and their script bearers[1].

Crivelli's pseudoscript is a medium between image and script. Whenever it appears, methods of reception aesthetics become important, posing questions on the viewing situation, the size, and location of the painting combined with the viewing duration as well as the knowledge and education of the viewers. All these questions should be kept in mind when analyzing Carlo Crivelli's pseudoscript, its functions and the utility for further research on the artist.

Taking a close look at the depictions of his books and scrolls, Carlo Crivelli's pseudoscripts remain consistent throughout his oeuvre: in 1476, the artist executed the panels for the *High Altar* of the Dominican convent in Ascoli, depicting several saints with script bearers[2]. On the upper side on the left, St. Andrew

[1] The depictions of script bearers imply the question, how we are able to identify them as such: is it the fact that there is something to *read* in, that there can be something written in or that there *is* something written in? Regardless the answers, we recognize them easily by their outward appearance and *not* by their functions, even though these functions depend most crucially on their legibility. Legible books can show the screenplay of the biblical scene which is depicted, such as, when Mary reads the Gospel of St Luke. Their pages create a field with manyfold possibilities to evoke memories, tell stories, or simply to inscribe one's own name. Illegible books like those of Carlo Crivelli *represent* script by pseudoscript and challenge the viewers in deciphering attempts. These different functions will be explored in my current PhD-project: *Holy script and its bearers in the image of the Italian Renaissance*.

[2] The original arrangement of the panels cannot be reconstructed exactly. The viewing situ-

is seen engrossed in his reading (fig. 1a). At the opposite side of the altarpiece, Thomas Aquinas presents a large open book with a red binding as he looks humbly towards heaven (fig. 1b). It weighs heavier than the miniature church of *San Domenico* overgrown with plants in his left hand[3]. Already the ostentatious way, in which Thomas presents us 28 lines of Crivelli's pseudoscript, might serve as proof that this script invention plays a significant role within the painting. The "font face", rather: the image of the supposed script in the apostle's book, is identical to the open pages in front of the Doctor of the Church. The "letters" are unconnected, some are larger than others, overlapping the lines underneath while their spacing suggests words. Placed in one single column, curved wavy lines recall the lowercase "m" and alternate with "U"-patterns, "X"-shaped crosses, and dashes. These characters appear in the same way throughout the whole page, suggesting a consistent alphabet, while the "brush" or "pen" stroke becomes the artist's personal handwriting in a double sense. This closer look immediately reveals that Crivelli paints an illegible script, only supposed to resemble real script, for the characters repeat themselves too often and vary too little.

It is the exact same pattern we face in St. Andrews book (fig. 1d). Yet, the pseudoscript of the apostle's book seems slightly less refined than Thomas' (fig. 1c). Black lines underneath the red letters shine through. These rubricated majuscules indicate that the script is to be read from left to right. Thus, it is not supposed to represent a script that run from right to left, such as Hebrew, but likely an imitation of a Latin or Greek writing. Bordered by a thin black rectangle framing the script image, the rubricated sections of the book might represent the liturgical instructions of the pericopes written in black. Since rubrication was used frequently in many different types of books, however, it cannot help to define its nature at this point.

Thus, it becomes tricky to ask which kind of book exactly it is, that Crivelli intended to show in Thomas' hands, but it is this question which reveals the different functions. Scholars have not been reluctant to identify Crivelli's books as bibles, missals, gospels, or the Apostolic creed[4]. Yet, how can we

ation for lay people was complicated by a rood screen, while the clergy sat close in the choir and could inspect the altar for several hours a day. See Lightbown 2004, pp. 217-225; Campbell 2015.

[3] A detail within this church rewards those who look closely: right behind the doors of the miniature church, a tiny friar talks to another person seen from the back (fig. 1b). A detail so small that it was impossible for the lay people in front of the altar to see it. Still, Crivelli gives this attribute its own dimension and inherent story telling apart from the ones of Thomas Aquinas. For a detailed analysis of this attribute, in which she refers to the Parergon, see Degler 2012, pp. 132-137. This detail gives an impulse to have a closer look at the depiction of small-scaled pseudoscript, which thus must be regarded seriously as a pictorial message.

[4] Lightbown states on the figures in the *Demidoff-Altar*: «He [St. Andrew, GCM] bends his head, his brows corrugated in intent study of an open Gospel, whose leaves of thick parchment are as usual skillfully simulated», p. 220; «In his right hand Stephen holds the Gospel he preached, on his left a martyr's palm», Lightbown 2004, p. 224.

know if the content is deliberately disguised? Even though the books appear illegible to the viewers, it would be absurd to assume that they are illegible to the figures as well. Thus, they create their own, inner-pictorial legibility. Moreover, the books appear to be made in the same manner for the apostle living in antiquity as well as for Thomas living in the Middle Ages. How could St Andrew read the same form of letters as Thomas, if both figures are separated by more than 1000 years and how could Andrew have read a book at all, since bookbinding was invented in Christian monasteries long after his death? Anachronistic settings, such as architecture, or clothing are easier to reveal, than the anachronism of the most familiar attribute of all: the book. Taking the inner pictorial dimensions seriously, Crivelli's illegible script bearers transcend time and space in two ways: first, by their form, their supposed materiality as a codex or a scroll, and second, by the content of their pages, the unchanged form of Crivelli's pseudoscript.

One way to identify the book's supposed content is to draw conclusions from the figures holding them: Thomas' book and the miniature church are balanced and refer to each other. The book most probably represents a Vulgate version of the Bible, or a book written by Thomas Aquinas himself. Yet, it remains only a *representation* of a book. Above all, it emphasizes Thomas' role as a doctor of the Church and serves as a symbol for his authority and referential importance[5].

Taking the book as an apparently illegible painted object, Crivelli playfully translates a theological theory into an image: Starting from Gregory the Great there is a long tradition of considering images as the books of the illiterates[6]. Thomas Aquinas himself wrote that images in churches «serve as the instruction of simple people because they are instructed by them as if by books […]»[7]. The pseudoinscribed book turns the writing into the image of itself, making it understandable for the illiterate lay people, who take images as their books. It gives them access to "read" a book without reading its letters, but its ab-

[5] See Lightbown 2004, esp. p. 225: «In his left hand he holds up an open book – an open book, it will be remembered, was a symbol of the truth – whose heavily rubricated leaves figure the great theological works with which he has supported the Church». Compare Crivelli's depiction of *St Augustine* in the *San Lorenzo in Castel San Pietro Altarpiece* (1468), in which the Church father carries three stapled books in his left hand, while he leans on his crozier and watches knowingly the center of the altarpiece with his large almond-shaped eyes.

[6] Discussed by Duggan 1989.

[7] Thomas Aquinas comments on Peter Lombard's *Book of Sentences*, 3.9. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentum* in IV. Sent., lib. III, dist. IX, art. 2, sol. 2 ad 3um, in *Opera omnia*, 7 (Parma: tipis Petri Fiaccadori, 1857), p. 109. See Duggan 1989, p. 232: «There were three reasons for the institution of images in churches. First, for the instruction of simple people, because they are instructed by them as if by books. Second, so that the mystery of the Incarnation and the examples of the saints may be the more active in our memory through being represented daily to our eyes. Third, to excite feelings of devotion, these being aroused more effectively by things seen than by things heard».

straction: letter-like lines. In this way, Crivelli visually translates the medium of script into the "more accessible" medium of the image. One might even say that the artist turns the very idea of writing into a venerable form, an altarpiece, representing the general cultural technique of script by a pseudoinscribed book and its author.

In this context it is interesting to note that there is only one book depiction, in which Crivelli combines legible and illegible script: St Paul's book in the main altarpiece of the Duomo in Ascoli (fig. 2a)[8]. The Saint is firmly studying the viewer, his left foot overlaps the pedestal, while his dangerously long sword contrasts with the open codex in his left hand. On top of the book, we can read the rubricated beginning of the epistle to the Romans 13, 11 by the abbreviated words (fig. 2b): «[Fratres] Scientes quia hora est iam nos de somno surgere»[9]. The text is then followed by Crivelli's typical pseudoscript.

Twenty years later, in 1493 at the end of his career, Crivelli executes the *Pala di San Francesco a Fabriano* (fig. 3)[10]. In it, three books bear the same image of script as Thomas' and St Paul's books[11]. The shapes of the "characters" underline the visual consistency of Crivelli's pseudoscript and reveal more functions: in the Pietà at the top, an open book with a clasp stands next to a candle and a quill as if to underline, that the event next to it follows the words written in this very moment (fig. 4). The Pietà next to it creates the liturgy, which manifests in the book's pages to become the Holy Scripture itself. This serves as another indication that books cross different layers of time and space within the painting.

Two panels of the former predella at the bottom of the altarpiece show open books as well: John Chrysostom is holding his hand above his chest, while in the other one, he holds an open tome. His finger on his mouth, St Romuald inspects it closely from his point of view – maybe intrigued by its content or frightened that it might fall out of John's hands, who seems distracted by the happening above him. In the center of the predella *Christ blessing* interacts

[8] Lightbown states about the Pauline Epistle: «The rest of the passage [...] simply a scribble, is the Apostle's famous exhortation [...]». Lightbown 2004, pp. 156-157.

[9] «Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed». Romans 13,11, English Standard Version.

[10] Lightbown 2004, pp. 449-461, with a discussion of the original arrangement, pp. 455-456.

[11] There are more paintings that testify the same "handwriting" of Crivelli. His personal pseudoscript appears in the book of St Jerome, who instructively lifts his right hand next to St Katharine in the formerly left lunette of the *Polittico di Porto San Giorgio* (1470, Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa). Furthermore, St Peter is given reading glasses to study a large codex next to St Paul in the *Polittico del Duomo di Camerino* (after 1490, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan). St Domenic, originally positioned directly left to them, guides his eyes with his index finger, following the pseudoscript in his book.

with a large, open book as well (fig. 5). His gesture refers not only to the viewer, but also to the salient tome, on which his wounded hand rests[12]. Building a visual bridge to the open book of the *Pietà* above, it again emphasizes the authority of the written word. Just like Thomas Aquinas' book in the *High Altar of San Domenico*, the ones in the *Pala di San Francesco a Fabriano* can be interpreted as "abstract pictures" of the bible.

Further illegible examples prove that Crivelli applies his pseudoscript on all kinds of "sacred" script bearers: the Apostle, once part of the predella of the *San Francesco di Montefiore dell'Aso Altarpiece* (fig. 6b), lifts a scroll, which Crivelli painted with such a dynamic brushstroke that it seems to repeat the gesture of the Apostle's finger pointing at the sky. Again, Crivelli's unique set of well-composed pseudoletters occurs. Larger letters at the left indicate the beginning of the lines. The spacing suggests separated "words". The pseudoscript remains entirely black[13], has no framing lines, and seems to have been written with increasing haste the further one gets to the bottom of the scroll, where it ends with a large blank space to indicate the Apostle's ecstatic way of writing. The direction of writing points to the form of a *rotulus*: following the width of the scroll, *rotuli* were written horizontally parallel to the rod, while *volumina* were written in vertical columns following the length of the scroll (fig. 6a). Contrasting the books, the artist adds a layer by reflecting the different historical media of scrolls and codices.

Even though it is illegible, Lightbown has no doubt as to the content of the Apostle's scroll: it is supposed to be the Apostle's creed, deducting the content of the pseudoscript from the figure itself[14]. Is it the same Apostle's creed *St Luke* (fig. 7) is reading next to him[15] in his pseudoinscribed scroll? The scrolls writing runs like a *rotulus* as well, but St Luke reads it, as if it was a *volumen*. After all, we don't know the content, for there is none – only pure "form". Yet, we can deduct by the figures, which content it is meant to represent.

In the predella of the *High Altar of the Duomo in Ascoli* St John holds quite a similar scroll (fig. 8) to the ones of St Luke and the Apostle of the *San Francesco di Montefiore dell'Aso Altarpiece*. This time the script runs in four black lines horizontally following the form of a *volumen*, but it lacks the columns

[12] Lightbown 2004, p. 458: «[…] he holds open on the ledge before him the red-bound book of his Word, which he has left for the instruction of mankind in the way of salvation. Durandus explains that when he holds an open book, it is so that "all may read therein that he is the Light of the World and the Way, the Truth and the Life, and the Book of Life"».

[13] Rubricated scrolls could consist of either papyrus or parchment and reach back into the Early Antique, see e.g.: Papyrus Sallier II in the British Museum. The tradition was kept up during Roman times well into the Early Middle Ages (e.g.: Gesta Municipalia, Ravenna, see Brandi 1913) until it found its ways as a fundamental element of codices.

[14] Lightbown 2004, p. 202.

[15] Considering the reconstruction of the original arrangement of the *San Francesco di Montefiore dell'Aso Altarpiece*.

and St John holds it up vertically, as if it was a *rotulus*[16]. We might assume, that Crivelli was not primarily interested in the depiction of historical correctness, since the function of the script bearers gains importance by their interaction with the figures: St John turns his back to the viewer as if he wants privacy. Literally crumpling the scroll, he lifts it, stretches it and points to heaven as if the scroll itself was the means to lift the saint up into the sky. Considering that it is by the material remains of the written artefact that Christians are enabled to remember John as a saint, Crivelli points out the scroll's materiality to underline its memorial function and religious importance. That is why the scrolls must be illegible as well: if their content was legible, they would contain a concrete message. However, Crivelli's intention is more abstract: with his pseudoscript he can create a visualization for the general idea of writing and reading, and makes it venerable within the context of sacred art.

The book in the *Annunciation of St. Emidius* (fig. 9) in front of Mary is more subtle, but its visible parts appear in the same style as the other books mentioned[17]. This painting turns out to be all about reading: Mary's eyes rest on the book pages, while she kneels in front of her prayer desk (fig. 9e)[18]. In it and on top of the shelf behind her, other precious tomes with red and green bindings suggest her parallel readings, which make the Virgin Mother appear even more erudite (fig. 9c)[19]. Again, Crivelli opposes the pseudoscript in the book with his legible signature on the wall to the left of Mary, the prominent spot that separates her from Archangel Gabriel (fig. 9d). Confidently, Crivelli places himself right in between. Golden letters in Roman capitals state: «OPUS · CAROLI · CRIVELLI · VENETI»[20]. This contrast is emphasized anew by adding the largest writing in the picture: «LIBERTAS ECCLESI-

[16] Consciously or not, Crivelli did distinguish his depictions between *rotulus* and *volumen*. With all the historical knowledge we assume the artist possessed, Crivelli's figures are not depicted in the way they would have to read the scrolls.

[17] Lightbown 2004, pp. 333-344.

[18] The upper part of her reading is rubricated, and the live area is again framed by black rectangular lines.

[19] Lightbown 2004, pp. 336-337: «[…] four costly books, two of them bound in red Morocco and gilt-edged […] All these objects are chosen to illustrate the Virgin's modest domestic simplicity and her love of the Divine Word, shown as usual in volumes magnificently bound to honor its heavenly doctrines». Some painters depict Mary reading a verse of the Old Testament, Isaiah 7:14, that announces the Messiah. For the origins of the Iconography of Reading St. Mary, see Sollors 2020, pp. 37-74. Crivelli playfully combines the books with objects of everyday life. In the transparent vase – Lightbown detects white wine in it – he is demonstrating his skills and knowledge of mimetic Flemish painting, which he might have seen in Filippo Lippi's works as well. See Degler 2015, p. 101, as well as her interpretation on p. 103.

[20] He paints his "I"s in his name with a slight horizontal stroke in the middle. Lightbown calls this central ring Lombardic form. Lightbown 2004, p. 374. Parerga such as the mimetic apple and the cucumber assign his trademark.

ASTICA»[21] – the title of the Papal bullet, that granted Ascoli Piceno its own municipality and independence from the Holy See's administration. It is this bullet Crivelli hints at in the upper part of the painting, where a man dressed in black receives the news in a letter. The sheet of paper bears black lines that shine through indicating script. The messenger bows in front of him, his right hand is raised as if to underline the importance of the letter, while a small wooden cage indicates that the letter was brought by a dove. Stressing the motif of reading, Crivelli paints an open book in front of the men lying on a mimetically painted Anatolian carpet[22]. Its pages flutter in the wind (fig. 9b). Discussing friars and a man looking up into the sky searching for messages further emphasize the events. Right above the men, a dove as the symbol for the Holy Spirit flies in a diagonal golden beam of light into the red gem of Mary's tiara. Perceiving messages by reading and listening plays a crucial role within the Annunciation, which Crivelli visualizes by books, letters, and apparently "talking" figures. He parallels a historical happening, Ascoli's administrative independence from the papal state, with a biblical happening, the Annunciation, the incarnation of the Word. Both messages are brought by a dove. As the man reads the news of the letter brought by the dove, Gabriel announces to Mary that she will have a son. Here, the dove represents a word as well, the divine logos and makes Mary "hearing" her conception.

After having shown the presence of pseudoscript and its contrast with legible script, *The Annunciation of St Emidio* adds another functional layer: Crivelli paints the process of reading, which immediately contrasts the actual process of viewing the painting as a whole. Thus, he reflects on the medium of painting by testing out different ways to show the interaction with script bearers, such as books and letters, script on architecture, and the depiction of spoken words.

All in all, Crivelli does not only combine plainly legible scripts with illegible ones, but his books prove that he stay true to his ambiguous *stylus* when he carefully executes his very own pseudoscript in the same, consistent way. It can even become a valuable instrument for matters of attribution especially in comparison to the paintings of his brother Vittore (fig. 10a), as can be seen in his *Madonna with two angels* executed in 1481-82: even though Vittore uses rubrication and framing lines, too, he does not indicate initials with larger characters. His wavy lines seem less refined and are easy to distinguish from Carlo's "U"-, "m"- or "X"-shapes of his pseudo-alphabet (fig. 10b). Thus, Carlo's "handwriting" sets him apart even from his brother. As mentioned before,

[21] The multilayered Latin phrase «Libertas ecclesiae» used to refer in the Middle Ages to the «freedom *of* the church» from warlords after the Carolingian decentralization. Now in Crivelli's painting it becomes a «freedom *from* the church», when Ascoli Piceno became independent from the administration of the Papal state by a Papal bullet bearing the same title.

[22] Lightbown 2004, p. 336. See Schulz 2018.

his pseudoscript becomes his personal signature, a way of inscribing his style in the otherwise blank space of script bearers.

Another book with Crivelli's illegible letters plays a crucial role in *The Vision of Blessed Gabriele Ferretti in Ecstasy* executed around 1489 (fig. 11a)[23]. It bears a red binding, rubrication, framing lines, the same set of pseudoletters and stiff gilt-edged parchment leaves. While Lightbown states: «its purpose is as usual to honor the sacred text which we are to suppose it contains», Gabriel's book reveals another function of its pseudoscript: its contrast with legible script. Right next to the open book, Crivelli paints his legible signature into the dried out ground (fig. 11b)[24]. In this case, the artifice serves as a humorous comment, a visual pun on vanity, since the supposed materiality of the earth would soon make his name vanish like dust in the wind, while the actual material, oil on panel, and its context, sacred art, "eternalize" his name[25]. Writing the signature into the ground is an artifice that Pisanello already used in the *Madonna with St. Anthony and St. George* (fig. 12a). To the feet of the saints, Pisanello's name shimmers between plants and dirt (fig. 12b)[26]. Crivelli takes this artifice a little further, when he contrasts his legible signature with the pseudoinscribed book and emphasizes both types of his "signatures" by which he can be recognized: his name and his pseudoscript[27].

[23] The «Shadows on the Sky» behind the fruits at the top gave name to the most recent exhibition and indicate Crivelli's delicate reflection of the medium of painting. See Hilliam, Watkins 2022.

[24] Lightbown 2004, pp. 376-377, p. 367: Lightbown analyses Crivelli's later corrections of his spelling from «Carolus Crivellus» to «Caroli Crivelli». Yet, Lightbown writes the first names with a "C", even though Crivelli writes his name in this painting with a "K". Crivelli frequently changes the initial letter of his signature throughout his oeuvre. Regarding Gabriele's book, see Ibid. p. 372: «Like all books of the kind in fifteenth-century art it is a rich volume, bound in red boards with stiff gilt-edged parchment leaves, closely written in painter's scribble and with rubrication. Although such richness was incompatible with the simplicity of the Observant library, its purpose is as usual to honor the sacred text which we are to suppose it contains». Identified by Franz Drey as a missal without explanation, see Drey 1927, p. 139. Unfortunately, Lightbown does not mention the book's illegibility. Norman E. Land instead states that Gabriele «is an unlikely candidate» to have written Crivelli's name into the soil and asks: «why would he identify the painting as Crivelli's?» He concludes by quoting Pietro Bembo that «"Crivelli wandered at will" through his paintings». Land 1998, p. 19; Bembo 1987, I, p. 209, no. 225.

[25] See Land 1998, pp. 18-21. Furthermore, there is a reference to the New Testament in this: Jesus writes the names of the Pharisees into the sand, when they try to deceive him, to indicate that their souls are terminal in contrast to those souls whose names are written in the book of life. John 8, 3–11 and Rev. 3,5. Compare this to Filippo Lippi's contrasting pseudoscripts in the *Annunciation* (ca. 1443-45, Alte Pinakothek, Munich), which might bear his signature in the bedspread. See Tilghman 2021, pp. 111-115.

[26] Pisanello makes use of the same contrast of script bearers when he depicts an empty scroll right underneath *his* trademark: the mimetic representation of animals. In the case of *The Vision of St Eustache* (ca. 1438–1442, National Gallery, London) a lean, grey hound bows his back, repeating the scroll's form. Gordon 2001, p. 189.

[27] In addition, he puns on the supposed materialities as well, because his illegible signature occupies the precious parchment of the book, giving it more value than his legible signature the

An equally humorous, as well as traditional artifice appears in a detail of Crivelli's signature underneath the *Madonna Lenti* (fig. 13). Like his "fading" signature in the sand of the *Vision of Blessed Gabriele*, it puns again on the materiality and vanity of writing supports. Crivelli attaches a *cartellino*[28] with red waxen dots on the "surface" of the painting and writes his common signature: «Opus Karoli Crivelli Veneti»[29]. At first glance it appears that the *cartellino* is attached onto the yellow drapery. Yet, when the life-size fly to the left catches our eyes, Crivelli's trompe-l'oeil can be transferred to the sheet of paper. The wax at its right bottom is missing – only some red flickers are left as if to indicate, that the *cartellino* drops down at some point. Crivelli borrowed this artifice from Andrea Mantegna, who attaches a creased *cartellino* on the balustrade in front of *St Mark* (fig. 14a)[30]. St Mark's *cartellino* seems still better fixed than the one in Colantonio *St Jerome in his study* (fig. 14b), which shows a "falling" *cartellino*, as well, but without any signature. Yet, it is detached from the wax at the bottom right. Colantonio's student Antonello da Messina paints a similar, illegible *cartellino* prominently onto the wood furniture in the study chamber of his *St Jerome* (fig. 14c). Partly detached as well, it casts a prominent shadow on the wooden reading desk[31].

Crivelli proves, that he knew these contemporary inventions. But since his *cartellino* plays with the dimensions of the viewer's and the figures space, it takes their inventions a little further. By bearing his signature and by seeming-

dust. As Giulio Dalvit and Patricia Rubin show, «signatures are one of the crucial *loci* where the relationship between the work and its context is regulated – their position and phrasing suggesting ways to look at and derive meaning from the artwork». Dalvit 2022, p. 166. See also: Rubin 2006.

[28] *Cartellini* are a heavily researched iconographic element of the Italian Renaissance. See the pioneering work by Dario Covi 1958, pp. 227-230; recently and most profoundly investigated by K. Rawlings in her dissertation 2009.

[29] See Rawlings 2009, pp. 182-183. Compare a similar *cartellino* oscillating between the pictorial and viewer's sphere in Crivelli's *Pala Ottoni* (1490–1492, National Gallery, London). This trick in turn has a long tradition and goes back to Filippo Lippi's *cartellino* with waxen dots to the feet of the much earlier *Tarquinia Madonna* (1437, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome), which is the first of its kind. Rawlings 2009, pp. 12-18.

[30] The example of Mantegna's "falling" *cartellino* in *St. Mark* and the use of the "material fatigue" of the wax are based on Pliny the Elder's accounts in his *Natural History* and the artworks therein, which were «inscribed with a temporal title» («pendenti titulo inscripsisse»). Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Preface, 26. Mantegna applied this widely known textual source on his paintings stressing the ephemerality of the sheets. Rawlings, pp. 47-50. See also: Debra 1997, pp. 138-139 and Fowler 2017, p. 23. Lightbown underlined Mantagna's inspiring role for Crivelli in his Paduan times in the 1450s, Ibid. 2004, pp. 6-7, p. 295.

[31] Antonello probably saw this invention in the Neapolitan workshop of his Master Colantionio, that he entered in 1450. See Martin 2021 and Degler 2015, p. 107. Compare the frequently used *cartellini* in his whole oeuvre, e.g.: the three *Ecce Homo* paintings (ca. 1470, MET, New York; ca. 1470, Galleria nazionale di palazzo Spinola, Genova; 1473, Galleria del Collegio Alberoni, Piacenza) and the *cartellini* at the upper edges of Andrea Mantegna's *Ecce Homo* (ca. 1500, Musée Jaquemart-André, Paris) all attached by red wax and seemingly at risk of falling.

ly falling of the surface, he not only reflects the medium of painting, but the role of names and ephemerality. Self-mockingly he asks, what happens, if the *cartellino* drops down one day: would it still be a painting by *his* hand, without a clear signature to resolve our matters of attribution? By signing a poorly fixed *cartellino*, he playfully combines the vanity of a depicted writing support with the actual timelessness of his pictorial media: a *cartellino*, momentarily loosely and yet eternally attached.

A last example of Crivelli's fascination for the material aspect of script bearers is the folded letter attached to the wooden parapet that separates the *Madonna Huldschinsky* (fig. 15) from the viewer. Already leaping into the viewer's space, Crivelli eternalizes the wish to read the message of this rectangular sheet of paper. Looking closely however, it is not necessary to open it: the coat of arms it bears, subtly painted in white on white, indicates that the work was made for «a noble claiming chivalric descent, for the shield is of tournament form, that is to say with an indent in the top left for a lance»[32]. Crivelli proves again, that only the image of the script bearer is enough to transmit a message – without any legible signs.

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[32] Lightbown 2004, p. 185: «By a conceit typical of the fifteenth century's delight in ingenious tricks of illusionism, the ownership of the picture is indicated on an epistle which is stuck against the parapet. It is closed by a lozenge-shaped parchment seal over the string that was customarily employed in late medieval sealing, and on the seal is stamped a circular impression of the writer's coat of arms, evidently that of a noble claiming chivalric descent, for the shield is of tournament form, that is to say with an indent in the top left for a lance». In the following, Lightbown speaks of the importance of the Epistles by St Paul and «the epistles of Christ. Written by the spirit of the living god». Lightbown further "reads" the Incarnation and the Death of Christ as «glorious letters».

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Appendix

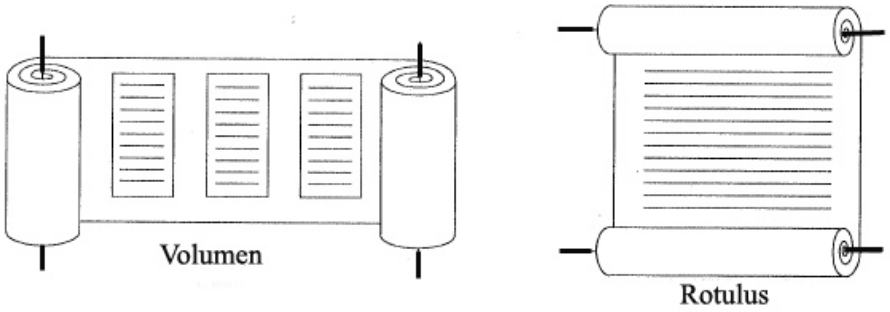
Fig. 1. Carlo Crivelli, *Demidoff Altarpiece*, *St. Andrew* (left), *Thomas Aquinas* (right) with respective details of the books, 1476, tempera on poplar, 60.5×39.5 cm, London, The National Gallery

Fig. 2. Carlo Crivelli, *St. Paul*, extreme right main panel of the *Polittico di Sant'Emidio*, 1473, 136×39 cm. Ascoli Piceno, Duomo, Cappella del Sacramento

Fig. 3. Carlo Crivelli, *Pala di San Francesco a Fabriano*, 1493, tempera and gold on panel, 194.3×93.3 cm (possible reconstruction), Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera and other locations

Fig. 4. Carlo Crivelli, *Pala di San Francesco a Fabriano*, 1493, tempera and gold on panel, detail

Fig. 5. Carlo Crivelli, *Pala di San Francesco a Fabriano*, *Christ blessing*, 1493, tempera and gold on panel, 33×26.5 cm, detail



Figg. 6a e b. Carlo Crivelli, *Apostle*, *San Francesco di Montefiore dell'Aso Altarpiece*, ca. 1471-1473, tempera and gold on wood, 32.1×23.2 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum

Fig. 7. Carlo Crivelli, *St. Luke and reading Apostle*, *Polittico di San Francesco di Montefiore dell'Aso*, ca. 1471-1473, tempera and gold on wood, 32.1×23.2 cm, Banbury (Oxfordshire), Upton House

Fig. 8. Carlo Crivelli, *St. John the Evangelist*, *High Altar of St. Emidio*, ca. 1473, tempera and gold on wood, 32.1×23.2 cm, Ascoli Piceno, Duomo, Cappella del Sacramento

Fig. 9. Carlo Crivelli, *Annunciation with St. Emidius*, 1486, egg and oil on canvas, 207×146.7 cm, London, National Gallery

Fig. 10. Vittore Crivelli, *Madonna with two angels*, ca. 1481-1482, tempera and gold on wood, 55.6×40.6 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, detail

Fig. 11. Carlo Crivelli, *The Vision of Blessed Gabriele Ferretti in Ecstasy*, ca. 1484-1489, tempera on wood, 141×87 cm, London, National Gallery (with detail)

Fig. 12. Pisanello, *Madonna, St. Anthony and St. George,* 1445, tempera on wood, 47×29 cm, London, National Gallery (with detail)

Fig. 13. Carlo Crivelli, *Madonna Lenti*, 1473, tempera and gold on panel, 38×23 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 14a. Andrea Mantegna, *St. Mark the Evangelist*, ca. 1448-1451, tempera on wood, 82×63,5 cm, Frankfurt/Main, Städel Museum

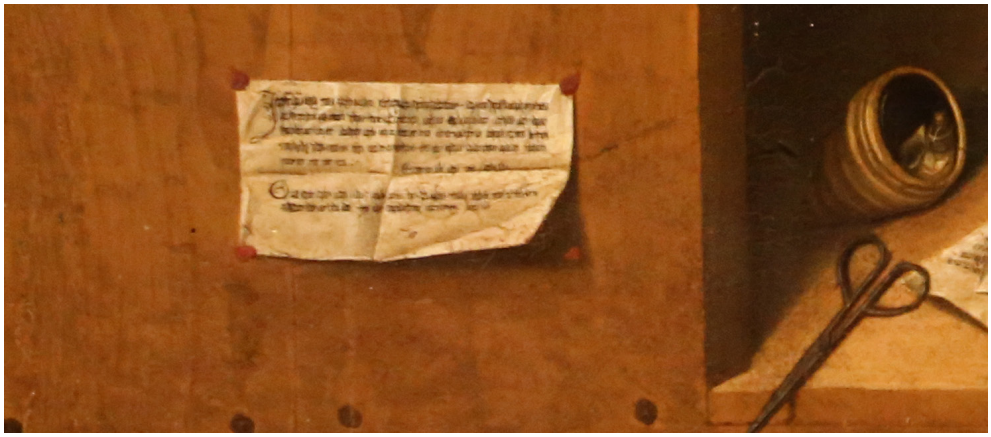


Fig. 14b. Colantonio, *St Jerome in his study*, ca. 1455, oil on wood, 151×178 cm, Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, detail

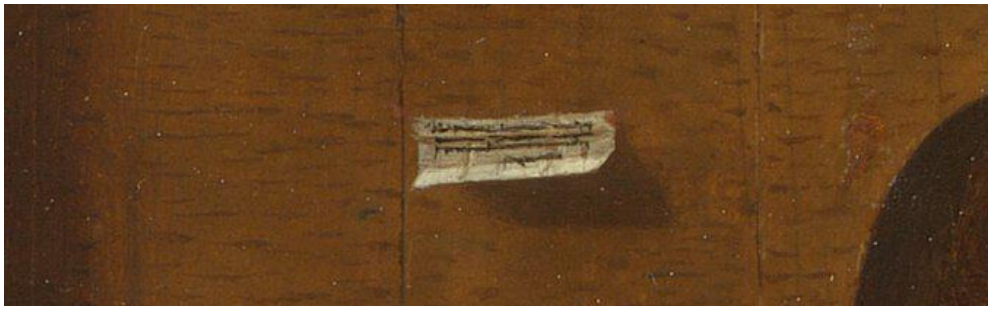


Fig. 14c. Antonello da Messina, *St Jerome in his study*, 1474, oil on wood, London, National Gallery, detail

Fig. 15. Carlo Crivelli, *Huldschinsky-Madonna*, ca. 1468, tempera and oil on panel, 62.23×40.96 cm, San Diego, San Diego Museum of Art

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