

Inscriptions are legible, prominent public displays intended for reading. Two major groups of pseudo-inscriptions are identified: disguised inscriptions, which, at first glance, do not convey a text but appear to be real things such as embroidery or pearls, and proper pseudo-inscriptions, which may have clearly delineated individual letters that taken together, make no sense.

A study of Renaissance pseudo-inscriptions could uncover little-known facets of the encounter between East and West. That Venice and the Netherlands were, respectively, centers of Arabic and Hebrew pseudo-inscriptions coincides with the scholarly publishing concerns which they were known for during the Renaissance.

Some Oriental Pseudo-Inscriptions in Renaissance Art

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It is with some diffidence that I have chosen the topic of this talk. I have never worked on inscriptions, though, like every art historian, from time to time, I have had occasion to puzzle over one. But I have always been attracted by the problem of ambiguity in art, and I should like to think that meditating over pseudo-inscriptions may help us to better understand that broader problem. I hope I may dispense with the ritual of an introduction, and with establishing a “framework,” without which, we are often told, no lecture can make sense. Pseudo-inscriptions may belong to the realm of the ambiguous, but the questions they pose are obvious. And the first one, of course, is simply: what is a pseudo-inscription? Or to be more explicit: what are the criteria that make us define a combination of letters or words as a pseudo-inscription?

I shall begin with a well-known example, the wooden doors of the Cathedral of Le Puy (figure 1). Le Puy was an important stop on the road to Jerusalem. As early as the eleventh century, the monks of a neighboring abbey (Savigny-en-Lyonnais), which straddled the *via podiensis*, were given the right to collect donations from pilgrims on their way to Le Puy, Saint-Gilles, Rome and Jerusalem. The wooden doors of Le Puy are remarkable for many reasons, not least for the ornamental border in Kufic script. Even today, I am told, the doors are called *portes arabes* or, in a vaguely oriental sense, *portes de cèdre*. The ornamental border is a short inscription, continuously repeated. It has long attracted attention, and the few scholars who have studied it have proposed different readings.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a French scholar deciphered the involved and sharply-cut script as meaning “There is no other God beside Allah,” the Muslim profession of faith. In 1934, another scholar suggested a different reading: “This is what Allah desired,” a formula used to ward off ill-luck and the evil eye, and therefore, as Walter Cahn noted, particularly well suited for a doorway. A few years later, still another

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FIGURE 1

Wooden doors, Cathedral of Le Puy



Photograph by the author.

scholar offered a third reading, namely “All power to Allah.” It is totally beyond my powers to form an opinion as to which reading is correct; I have enough trouble in simply following the arguments of those scholars (some as involved as the lettering itself).

Detail of wooden doors, Cathedral of Le Puy



Photograph by the author.

Yet without being able to read the inscription, and only on the basis of discussions, I am bound to reach two conclusions. The first is quite simple: the interlacing pattern of the door in Le Puy does make literal sense. It is an inscription. No one who has studied the doors has suggested that what we see here is “just an ornament,” as nowadays we are so often fond of saying. And even without being a specialist, you can recognize in these borders of the doors the sign for “Allah” (figure 2), which we know also from other works of European art of the same period.

The second conclusion is less simple: it is a hypothesis rather than a reading. It seems impossible that the artist who carved the doors, and the public which accepted them, could read, or make sense, of the sharply-cut, complex shapes. Le Puy, we remember, was a center along the Crusader road, where those warriors of the faith might rest and pray. The period to which the doors belong is a turbulent one of religious tensions in the southeast of France, which gave full impetus to the Crusader imagination. Can we imagine a sermon against the infidel being preached in the Cathedral of Le Puy while praises of their god are so openly flaunted on its very doors? I know, of course, that in the late-eleventh century, people were not entirely ignorant of the fact that Kufic is a form of script and not just a brilliant ornament. Yet I cannot but agree with Walter Cahn that the very substance of the Le

FIGURE 3

Albrecht Dürer, detail of the title page from
St. Jerome's Letters, 1492



Puy inscriptions practically excludes the possibility that they were understood by artist or public.

I cannot discuss this example in detail, fascinating as it is. We must ask ourselves: is the Kufic inscription on the door of Le Puy a pseudo-inscription? Had a learned Muslim by chance reached Le Puy, he would have knelt down in prayer. But Christians, unable to read it and yet aware that these were letters (or shapes derived from letters), would have assumed that it was an ornamentation based on some kind of script. To put the question more broadly: is our inability to understand an inscription a sufficient reason to declare it a pseudo-inscription?

This, of course, is manifestly wrong. There are hosts of inscriptions which most of us cannot read, yet no one would doubt that they are indeed inscriptions. Moreover, artists have often produced perfectly legible inscriptions which they themselves could not read. When Dürer in 1492 designed the woodcut for the title page of an edition of *St. Jerome's Letters* (figure 3), he juxtaposed the Latin translation of Genesis I:1 with the Septuagint Greek and the Hebrew original. Dürer's knowledge of Latin was modest indeed, and he knew neither Greek nor Hebrew. But he was so precise in copying the model which some learned adviser must have provided him that a Hebrew paleographer can reconstruct—

mainly on the basis of the ligatures—the type of script that served him as a model. Similarly Carpaccio, who also knew no Hebrew, carefully and precisely copied a sentence from Job in his *Meditation of the Passion*; it is a sentence which has been interpreted as an Old Testament prophecy of Christ's death. Neither the artist's ability to make sense of the words copied, nor the inability of almost all of his spectators, makes us doubt that we have a genuine inscription in front of us.

To attempt a definition of a pseudo-inscription we must recall for a moment what a proper inscription is. John Sparrow, in his study *Visible Words*, defines an inscription as a sequence of words designed to be read with the eye. If we just grasp a sentence (for instance, by having it read aloud) without visually perceiving how it is displayed, we have missed something that is essential for an inscription. For the purpose of defining a regular inscription, Sparrow's formulation will do. But if one wishes to outline the domain of the pseudo-inscription, one must look for additional characteristics of the proper inscription. The pseudo-inscription differs from the proper one not with regard to visibility—both are addressed to the eye. The differences between them will become manifest when we consider other features of the regular inscription.

One feature, quite manifestly, is legibility. An inscription, whether commemorative or explanatory (the two major types), must be legible. An illegible commemorative inscription, for instance on a tombstone, does not commemorate; an illegible explanatory inscription, such as may be found on a medieval *titulus*, does not explain.

Another feature is less measurable, but it is not less crucial in evoking in our minds what we normally associate with an inscription. A regular inscription, as we have learned in the course of European history, is something public, meant to be seen and easily grasped. It is placed to be immediately seen and identified as an inscription. On a Roman arch of triumph, the dedicatory inscription is to be found on the continuous surface above the archway, a surface undisturbed by any external form and attracting our glance by its elevated position. On a Renaissance tomb, as on Leonardo Bruni's by Bernard Rossellino, the inscription is carved on a highly visible plaque which, in this case, is even held by angels. Prominence of display and at least the intention of legibility seem essential features. An inscription is usually paraded.

FIGURE 4

Poussin, *Et in Arcadia Ego*



Photograph by the author.

The same principles are at work in the pictorial representations of inscriptions in paintings. In Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* (figure 4), the gestures of the figures, the direction of their gaze and even the pointing finger of a figure approaching the tomb direct the spectator's attention to the inscription. The letters may be weather worn, but it is obvious that they were meant to be easily seen and grasped. If the inscription appears on a scroll, as in Pontormo's portrait of Cosimo de Medici "il vecchio," it is also highly visible (though, in this particular case, not easily explained). And there are, of course, depictions of the very medium of the word—the book—bearing an inscription. In Botticelli's *Madonna of the Magnificat*, the open book, prominently placed in the composition as well as in the coloration (the white pages attracting the spectator's attention), bears the legible inscription of the very verse that gives the picture its name.

I should like to distinguish between two major groups of pseudo-inscriptions, characterized by their specific deviation from the norms of a regular inscription. In reality the two groups frequently overlap, yet conceptually, as types, they should be kept apart.

FIGURE 5

The Ghent Altarpiece



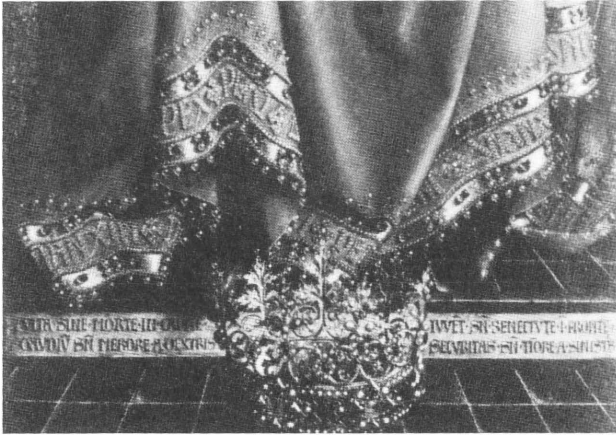
Photograph by the author.

Disguised Inscriptions

The first type of pseudo-inscription I should like to consider here poses an interesting problem of definition. It is perfectly legible, and its contents are what you would expect from a regular inscription. Why, then, should we call it pseudo-inscription? It should be counted among pseudo-inscrip-

FIGURE 6

Detail of *The Ghent Altarpiece*



Photograph by the author.

tions, I believe, because it does not appear as an inscription, but as something else; ostensibly it is not meant to be read—its primary function, at a first glance, is not to convey a text.

Let me start with an example from a work of art not less famous than *The Ghent Altarpiece*. Around the head of God (figure 5) there are three rows of inscriptions. The lettering is paraded; the lines are meant to be read, though to many of us they may not be easily legible. But on the embroidery of God's stole we also find an inscription; it spells out the Old Testament epithet for God, SABAWT. On the mantle of the same figure, we notice on the embroidered borders an inscription reading, in the abbreviations current in van Eyck's period, the phrases **PEX PEGV, ΔNC ΔNAVXIN** (translated: *Rex regorum, Dominans dominatum*) (figure 6). These inscriptions are, in fact, more easily legible than the proper ones arranged in three rows around God's head. And yet they are inscriptions only in a very particular sense. Only if you disregard what they profess to be, namely embroidery, do you discover that they are inscriptions. Modifying slightly Panofsky's seminal concept of "disguised symbolism," we may here speak of "disguised inscriptions." As disguised symbolism, in Panofsky's words, is "the disguising of symbols under the cloak of real things," disguised inscriptions are the disguising of inscriptions under the cloak of such real things as embroidery, pearls, etc.

Early Netherlandish painting abounds in examples of disguised inscriptions. In the depiction of the musical angels of *The Ghent Altarpiece*, the floor tiles also bear abbreviated inscriptions; the letter M for the Virgin Mary, the letters IHS, W and YECYC for Christ, and the cabalistic inscription ΑΓΔΑ. Another painting by Jan van Eyck, the Berlin *Madonna in the Church*, provides a further example. The richly marked border of the Virgin's magnificent red robe contains, embroidered and partly visible, the favorite Mariological text of the van Eyck brothers. (It appears also in *The Ghent Altarpiece*.) Panofsky suggests that this text, based on the Book of Wisdom, VII; 29, 26, explains why the light is here streaming from the north. But whether we here follow Panofsky or not, there can be no doubt that what we see is a disguised inscription.

I shall not go on adducing further examples; those we have seen clearly show, I believe, what the type of inscription is that I have in mind. There are, however, some broader questions which, if I cannot answer them, should at least be asked. The first and most obvious is this: do we find disguised inscriptions where we find disguised symbols? Or, to put it differently: is the late medieval realism which produced the disguising of traditional symbols under the cloak of real things also the origin of disguised inscriptions? Are the motives for both the same? From a modern point of view, it seems easier to accept a disguised symbolism than a disguised inscription. Symbols, we may feel, need not be paraded; they may be slowly discovered, even by later generations, without ceasing to be symbols. (Some Renaissance scholars would even have argued that only those symbols that are difficult to unriddle are true symbols.) But can an inscription, which is so obviously meant to be public and which so openly addresses itself to the spectator-reader, be hidden and disguised without losing its very character? I can offer no simple answer to these questions. What seems obvious to me is that the motives for disguised inscriptions need closer study than what has yet been given them.

Proper Pseudo-Inscriptions

The other type of inscription I should like to present here may be called a proper pseudo-inscription. It is frequently a disguised inscription, though sometimes it may appear also in undisguised form. Its characteristic feature is that it is not legible. The individual letters may be, and usually are, clearly outlined. But taken together, they do not make sense. Hav-

FIGURE 7

Mantegna, *Triumph of Minerva*



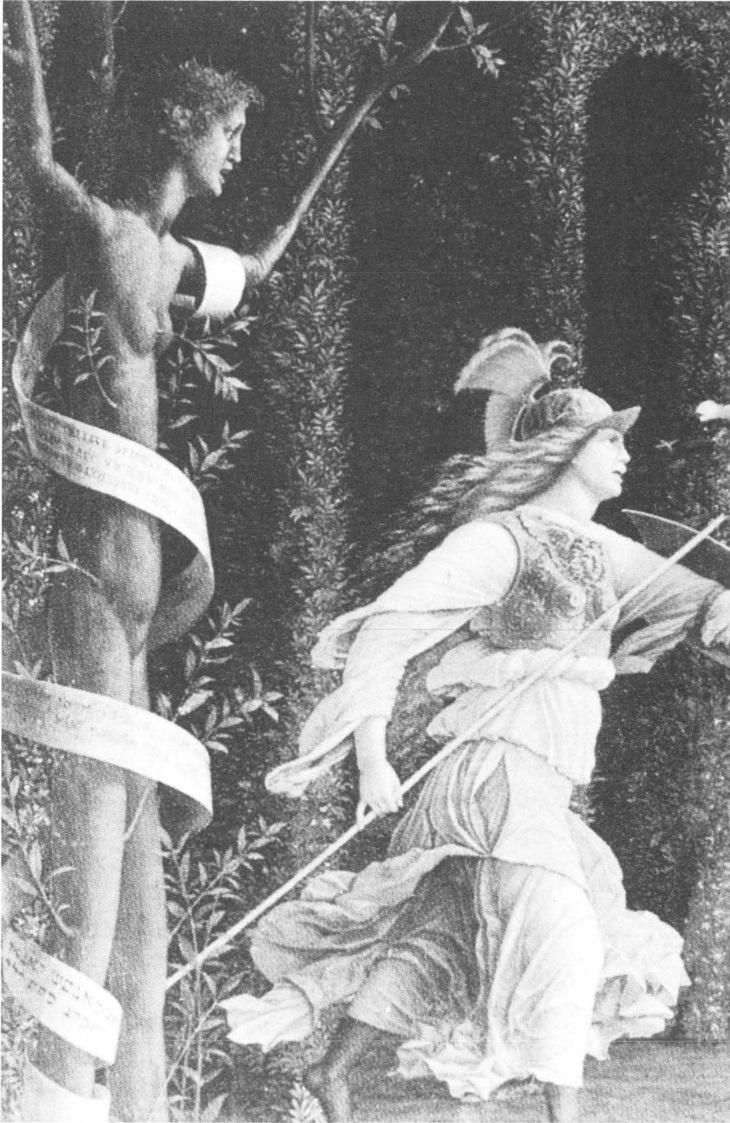
Photograph by the author.

ing Sparrow's definition of an inscription in mind, we should say that a pseudo-inscription of the latter kind is *perceived* by the eye, but it cannot really be *read*, let alone read aloud.

Our first example, of great interest in many respects, is Mantegna's *Triumph of Minerva*, in the Louvre (figure 7). The painting so much abounds in inscriptions that one cannot help feeling something of the spirit and tradition of the medieval *titulus* continuing its life here. It is not surprising that most of the inscriptions identify figures or pronounce their virtues, and, accordingly, are fully legible. The *virtus deserta* at the extreme left of the picture is a laurel tree with a woman's head. A ribbon wound around the trunk of the tree bears a trilingual inscription—in the three holy languages: Latin, Greek and Hebrew (figure 8). The Latin is legible, but the Greek and, particularly, the Hebrew do not seem to make sense. The square Hebrew letters stand out more clearly than those of the other languages, and we can identify every single one. But, in spite of many efforts, I could not make a word or meaningful sentence out of them. After much hesitation I have to conclude, then, that they are just a collection of Hebrew letters intended to look like an inscription. This is particularly interesting since Mantegna was an epigrapher of sorts. The copies of ancient inscriptions rendered in his paintings were judged sufficiently reliable to be included in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. As to

FIGURE 8

Detail of *Triumph of Minerva*



Photograph by the author.

his knowledge of Greek, one must have serious doubts, and he certainly knew no Hebrew. It seems unlikely that he was copying an existing inscription, and he probably did not have a good adviser. Why did he paint these letters?

The best known tradition of illegible inscriptions is the so-called pseudo-Kufic. In many fifteenth-century paintings (and also earlier), one can see the beautiful, angular Kufic letters more or less faithfully copied. But while Mantegna's Hebrew pseudo-inscription is openly displayed, the Kufic inscriptions are usually disguised. An interesting and rich example is the *Martyrdom of St. Denis* by Malouel and Bellechose, in Paris. The draperies, painted in bright colors and pervaded by a decorative, almost heraldic spirit, have richly ornamented borders; on these borders, Kufic letters appear in brocade. As opposed to the Le Puy doors, where the Kufic letters are correctly represented and form legible sentences, the "Kufic" on the draperies of the *Martyrdom of St. Denis* is not precise, even as regards the shape of the individual letters; they certainly do not form legible sentences. They are *pseudo*-inscriptions. One cannot help asking why so much work, care and skill were invested in depicting these semi-words. Was there not a desire to "authenticate" the scene by lending it an oriental air?

To give an authentic oriental air to biblical scenes seems, in fact, to have been one of the reasons for depicting pseudo-inscriptions. An interesting example is provided by one of the most famous paintings in European art, *The Merode Altarpiece*. Ever since Panofsky published his *Early Netherlandish Painting*, in 1953, and made *The Merode Altarpiece* the center of his exposition of disguised symbolism theory, the discovery of submerged symbols in that painting has become a minor industry. It may also yield something to the subject matter of the present talk. The vase on the table of the central panel is decorated with an ornament which, on the vertical stripe, is a curious blend of Hebrew and Kufic letters. Some of the letters can be made out; others are more difficult to define. Surely, however, they do not form an inscription.

But while they do not make sense in a literal meaning, they may still have some significance. The theme of the famous *Annunciation*, as everybody knows, is the growing of the new out of the old, of the Christian gospel from the old law. Should we not interpret the Hebrew-like, orientalizing letters as indicating that the vase stands for the old law? That the white lily of the Virgin's purity blossoms forth from that vase may even be an additional dimension of the painting's overall disguised symbolism.

FIGURE 9

Detail of *The Merode Altarpiece*



Photograph by the author.

Once one's attention is focused on orientalizing pseudo-inscriptions, one discovers many of them, and one cannot help marveling at their variety. The Master of Flemalle himself (or somebody closely related to him) used a similar motif in the *Madonna of Humility Before a Grassy Bench*, in Berlin.

The Virgin sits on the ground, and her mantle is decorated with Hebrew, or Hebraicizing, letters. Two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, A (Aleph) and D (Dalet), can definitely be made out; others are not as clear. But again, the letters do not form a word or sentence. It is certainly unlikely that the square shapes of these individual Hebrew letters originated by chance only, or that they were “just a decoration.” Somebody, at some time, must have been aware of their meaning and embroidered them on the Virgin’s garment.

A most intriguing example, which so far has remained a mystery, can be found in Roger van der Weyden’s *Triptych of Jean de Braque*, in the Louvre, painted in 1451 or 1452. The three half-length figures of the central panel are flanked by St. John the Evangelist and Mary Magdalen. The whole work abounds in easily legible inscriptions, all but one taken from the Gospel of St. John. On Mary Magdalen’s turban, however, there is an inscription of a different nature, distinguished from the rest of the headdress not in color, but in texture. What is here “inscribed” is thicker and rougher than the cloth on which it appears. These signs can, therefore, be seen only in a raking light, and, so far as I know, they have never been properly photographed. F. de Mely, a scholar who combined great learning with a sometimes bold imagination, believed this inscription to be pseudo-Kufic and to read “Wijden.” De Mely’s reading has rightly been regarded with hesitation. Carefully looking at the Magdalen’s turban, I have become convinced that the quadratic shapes, which are so difficult to see, lack the rich floral ornamentation characteristic of Kufic script; they look much more like ritual Hebrew script than like flowering Kufic. Once I even believed I could read the inscription, but meanwhile I have become more skeptical. But to whichever group these features may belong, they are letters of sorts and form an altogether hidden inscription.

Different, and more complicated, forms of orientalizing pseudo-inscriptions are found in a large group of paintings by Giovanni Bellini and his workshop. They differ from the Netherlandish examples I have referred to both in the themes of the paintings and in the language of the inscriptions. All the paintings of the Venetian group represent the Presentation of Christ in the Temple or the Circumcision of Christ. The High Priest who appears in all these scenes usually wears a mantle closely related to the Jewish prayer shawl (*talith*). The actual prayer shawl normally has a brocaded

Vincenzo dalle Destre da Treviso, the *Presentation*

Photograph by the author.

edge, and in all the Bellini pictures this feature is, indeed, prominently displayed. It would be interesting to find out why the High Priest wears such a prayer shawl—whether this, too, is a means of authentication or just another example of “*Trachtenrealismus*” (as Hercules was depicted wearing the armor of a knight). However that may be, Bellini and his assistants could never have seen in reality the ornamental patterns painted on these borders. In the London *Circumcision*, the pattern of intricately interlaced bands with rounded endings, though alien to proper prayer shawls, reminds the beholder of complex Arabic calligraphy.

This may be only a general air, but another example is more specific. In the *Presentation* in Padua (figure 10), attributed to Vincenzo dalle Destre da Treviso, the High Priest wears a garment that seems to be a combination of a Jewish prayer shawl and the traditional drapery of a Christian saint. This garment also has a brocaded headpiece, and what we see on it is certainly Arabic script in a cursive hand. Reading from the bottom upwards, the first two letters that can be made out read “la” the Arabic ending for “ours.” The first letter of the next word in an “L.” It may be that further study, with better photographs, will uncover a real Arabic inscription.

Venice, as we know, was widely open to influences coming from the Islamic East, and the ties of the Bellinis with the

Orient are too well known to require further comment. Gentile Bellini's *Turkish Boy* clearly shows that the Venetian artist was familiar with Arabic script. But what could have been the motive for applying Arabic, or semi-Arabic, script to the High Priest's mantle? Was it the same reason that made Giovanni Bellini depict the High Priest in a Jewish prayer shawl (an object of much later origin), namely, the desire for authentication? (It is interesting to remember that, according to Sanuto, the Sultan's emissary who invited one of the Bellinis to Constantinople was a Jew.) Arabic inscriptions never appear on actual prayer shawls, but in Venice they may have been considered as a properly oriental feature, and were, therefore, combined with the prayer shawl.

The observations made are too fragmentary to warrant the drawing of any conclusions. They may have shown, that the study of pseudo-inscriptions in Renaissance art promises some insights into the history of art; they may also uncover an interesting and little-known facet of the encounter between East and West during the Renaissance. Even from our few examples, it seems, one can deduce that in the fifteenth century orientalizing pseudo-inscriptions appear mainly in two centers: in the Netherlands and in Venice. One can perhaps even discover some differences between the two centers, though this is a matter of impression only: in the Netherlands, Hebrew seems to prevail among the oriental languages, or alphabets; in Venice, Arabic is more frequent.

We know nothing of the actual origins and immediate background of these pseudo-inscriptions. Who were the advisors? What were the models employed? What did the patrons, and the public in general, think of these strange features? None of these questions can be answered satisfactorily. Of the general background, however, we know a little more. We remember, for instance, that both the Netherlands and Venice were at that time centers of scholarship in oriental languages and in the secret wisdom of the Chaldeans and related peoples. When the printing press emerged as a major cultural factor, texts in oriental languages, Hebrew and others, were published mainly in the Netherlands and in Venice. Pseudo-inscriptions in Netherlandish and Venetian paintings are never mentioned, so far as I know, in histories of printing, yet it does not seem too farfetched to assume that the same tradition of scholarship which made possible the first editions of oriental texts also shines through in the depicted pseudo-inscriptions.

We cannot help asking, why were these pseudo-inscriptions produced? What was the motivation behind these strange features, and what purpose were they meant to serve? We must resist the temptation to offer an answer. Even superficial study convinces one that the reasons must be as complex as they are fascinating. But much remains to be done before we can venture a generalization. Even now, however, we can say that they reveal an attitude. Oriental pseudo-inscriptions were obviously not conceived as a means of communication (even if a modern linguistic specialist is able to make sense of some shapes or letters). They were not meant to be read as a dedicatory inscription on a Roman arch of triumph was meant to be read. But they intimate a mystique that must have surrounded them—both as ancient documents and simply as text, as words carrying a symbolic significance beyond what they actually say. The very appearance of letters, particularly in ancient scripts, conveys the sense of symbolic confirmation. Even if illegible, they inspire the spectator with veneration for the word, for the text, a veneration which is so crucial for western culture in general and for the Renaissance in particular. They make us feel how powerful was the belief that “In the Beginning was the Word.”

This paper was originally presented as the opening lecture in a colloquium titled “Visibility and Readability” at Ben Gurion University in Beer-Sheva.