

Set in Stone Signing Carlo Crivelli of Venice

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Abstract This article explores how and why the fifteenth-century Venetian painter, Carlo Crivelli (1430/5-c. 1494), signed his pictures. Until recently, Crivelli's work has received comparatively little critical attention; this is ironic given that he was acutely aware of his reputation and artistic legacy, an awareness that is expressed through his signatures. Whether carved into fractured stone, or emblazoned in gold on an affixed label, Crivelli's signatures contemplate his role as a creator of religious images that would outlive him. While the carved inscription signifies permanence and durability, labels, sometimes crumpled and appearing as if about to fall away, suggest transience and ephemerality.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Early characteristics. – 3 Stone. – 4 Memorial. – 5 Labels. – 6 Intellect. – 7 Conclusions.

Keywords Parapet. Devotion. Illusion. Memorial. Permanence.

1 Introduction

The frequency with which Carlo Crivelli signed his paintings warrants special attention. Of his surviving works, over 80% are signed, a proportion that is greater than that of other contemporary Venetian painters.¹ Yet the recent surge of interest in Crivelli's work has largely neglected his signing practice.² Often repetitive and faithful to tradition, it could be argued that Crivelli's signatures, in which the letters "OPVS CAROLI CRIVELLI VENETI" tend to be carved onto a stone parapet or inscribed onto an affixed label, require little interpretation. As Louisa Matthew stated in her survey of signatures in Venetian Renaissance pictures, "Carlo Crivelli's signatures are solidly Venetian in terms of their frequency, form and

placement" (1998, 624). But, as art historians are beginning to deepen their understanding of Crivelli's images, through close looking and thinking, so too do his signatures have a story to tell. As well as commenting upon the nature of painted representation, Crivelli's signatures can inform us of how he perceived his own role, both in the making and afterlife of his work. For a painter about whose life and person we know relatively little, such indications are of great interest.

The purpose of this article is, therefore, to explore how Crivelli signed his pictures, and why. Due to limitations of space, it does not engage in a discussion of possible metaphoric or iconic signatures in Crivelli's work, which Thomas Golsenne has already explored in

1 Of the 33 works by Crivelli of undisputed authorship, 29 are signed; however, given how consistently Crivelli signed, it is likely that signatures missing particularly from altarpieces were located on original frames, now destroyed. For example, the polyptych for Porto San Giorgio, which is now dispersed throughout collections in North America, Poland and the United Kingdom, was signed and dated on its original frame, now lost. Cf. Zampetti [1961] 1986, 312. This figure represents separate commissioned works and not cut down fragments, such as the *Madonna di Poggio di Bretta*, which probably once bore a signature. Instances where altarpieces are signed twice, such as the altarpiece for Montefiore dell'Aso, were counted once. The figure is based on Pietro Zampetti's catalogue (1986), with the addition of the *Madonna della Misericordia* made for the Church of the S.S. Annunziata in Ascoli Piceno (Dania 1998), the *Saint Francis Collecting the Blood of Christ*, whose signature was uncovered in a recent restoration (cf. Daffra 2009, 257-9), and without the *Madonna and Child* now attributed to Nicola di Maestro Antonio (cf. Mazzalupi 2008, 289-91). According to Louisa Matthew's survey, 37 of Giovanni Bellini's firmly attributed 61 works are signed, and 50 of 90 entire works in good condition by Cima da Conegliano are signed (Matthew 1998, note 40).

2 For example, Daffra 2009; Campbell 2015; Golsenne 2017. There have been very few attempts to analyse Crivelli's signatures, which are mostly noted by authors in passing. Bernard Aikema's is the most direct attempt (2003, 197-8), but in his brief analysis, Aikema does not describe the form of Crivelli's signatures. Instead, he cites two examples, those of the *Madonna and Child* in the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo and the *Annunciation with Saint Emidius* in London's National Gallery to suggest that the function of Crivelli's signatures was to show that the 'veracity' of the image was a result of the painter's work.

some detail.³ Rather, this article focuses on the form and placement of Crivelli's inscribed signatures, suggesting ways in which the themes of permanence and fragility are evoked, both through the simulation of different materials and the liminal location of the parapet. It will emerge that the parapet, in particular, is Crivelli's domain. Not only does it bear his name, but it is a site of illusion where acts of mimesis are performed, which make possible the interaction between the viewer and the sacred figures depicted.⁴

2 Early characteristics

Many of the characteristics that define Crivelli's signing practice were already in place when he painted his earliest surviving work, *The Virgin and Child with Infants Bearing Symbols of the Passion*, now in the Museo di Castelvecchio in Verona and dating to c. 1460 (fig. 1). *OPVS KAROLI CRIVELLI VENETI* is emblazoned on the marble parapet in white Roman lettering beneath a red silk cloth, upon which the Christ Child and the Holy Innocents, the first martyrs for Christ, are positioned.⁵ This was the wording that painters and sculptors had used in their signatures for decades prior, such as Giotto's *OPVS JOCTI FLORENTINI* on the original frame of the *Stigmatisation of St Francis*, now in the Louvre and usually dated c. 1300.⁶ Crivelli continued to use this wording, with occasional variation, for his signatures throughout his career.⁷ As is often noted, the reference to a painter's native town in his signature is common

in works made for other destinations or during a period of activity elsewhere (Matthew 1998, 624; Goffen 2001, 308). The fact that Crivelli signed the Verona *Virgin and Child* as a Venetian therefore suggests that the painting, which is usually offered as the main evidence of Crivelli's contact with Francesco Squarcione's *studium* in Padua, was in fact made when he had already left the Veneto at some point after 1457.⁸ Initially, Crivelli's Venetian origins may have served as a mark of quality for prospective patrons, who would have associated them with Venice's prestigious cultural heritage. But his insistence on signing as a Venetian long after he had left his native city, when he had achieved considerable fame in Le Marche, suggests that Crivelli's origins were inseparable from his identity as an artist.

Unlike later signatures, which tend to be carved into the parapet, the white letters of the signature on the Verona panel are slightly raised, casting a shadow upon the variegated marble. Crivelli only used white letters on one other occasion: the *Virgin and Child* now in the San Diego Museum of Art (fig. 2), whose dating was pushed forward to the 1470s by Lightbown (2004, 185-6). However, this unusual feature, shared with Crivelli's earliest surviving painting, supports the traditional, earlier dating of the panel. The San Diego panel is the only occasion where Crivelli used the more humble medium of wood, with knots and growth rings meticulously observed, for the parapet. This lowly material may have been used to draw attention to Christ's humanity, which was of particular relevance for the private devotional use to which the painting was made, alluded to by the note at-

3 Golsenne (2015; 2017, 155-9) argues that cucumbers, which are seen in almost every work by the painter after 1473, the date of the polyptych for Ascoli Piceno's cathedral, act as Crivelli's 'signature', and a figure of the artist himself.

4 Aikema (2003, 197) also notes that Crivelli's signatures are sites of illusion: "Ora, se è vero che sono i motivi illusionistici raffigurati in primo piano - o addirittura fuori dell'immagine dipinta - attraverso i quali lo spettatore può accedere allo spazio del dipinto, risulta altamente significativo l'accoppiamento proprio di questi elementi con il nome dell'artista".

5 On the Holy Innocents in this painting, cf. Campbell 2015, 146.

6 For an analysis of the use of *opus* in Renaissance signatures, cf. Boffa 2013, 35-42.

7 Crivelli varies the 'C' of his name to a 'K' on several occasions in his signatures, such as his two earliest paintings depicting the Madonna and Child in Verona and San Diego; the Latin conjugation of his name also varies throughout his career. In some instances, an error was corrected, perhaps even during Crivelli's lifetime, for instance in the signature of *The Vision of the Blessed Gabriele*, where the 'V's were turned into 'T's. Lightbown suggests that this was due either to Crivelli's limited understanding of Latin, or to the fact that his signatures were sometimes executed by an unlettered assistant (2004, 367). Indeed the reason for using a Latinised signature was to add *all'antica* flavour to his work, and so a correct conjugation may have been of less importance.

8 Zampetti 1986, 252; Lightbown 2003, 15-24; Gudelj 2011, 42 and Coltrinari, Delpriori 2011, 112 are also of the opinion that the Verona *Madonna* was painted away from Venice or Padua. On 7 March 1457 Crivelli was charged with adultery after having lived with a married woman, and was sentenced to 6 months in prison. If he entered prison on the day he was convicted, he would have left prison on 7 September 1457. Cf. Leopardi 2003. At some point after his release, Crivelli left the Veneto for Zadar, Dalmatia, where he is documented in 1463 and 1465, before settling in the Marches by 1468, when he signed and dated the Massa Fermana altarpiece.



Figure 1. Carlo Crivelli, *The Virgin and Child with Infants Bearing Symbols of the Passion*. c. 1460. Tempera on panel, 71 × 48.7 cm. Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona. © Verona, Museo di Castelvecchio, Archivio fotografico (photograph: Matteo Vajenti, Vicenza)

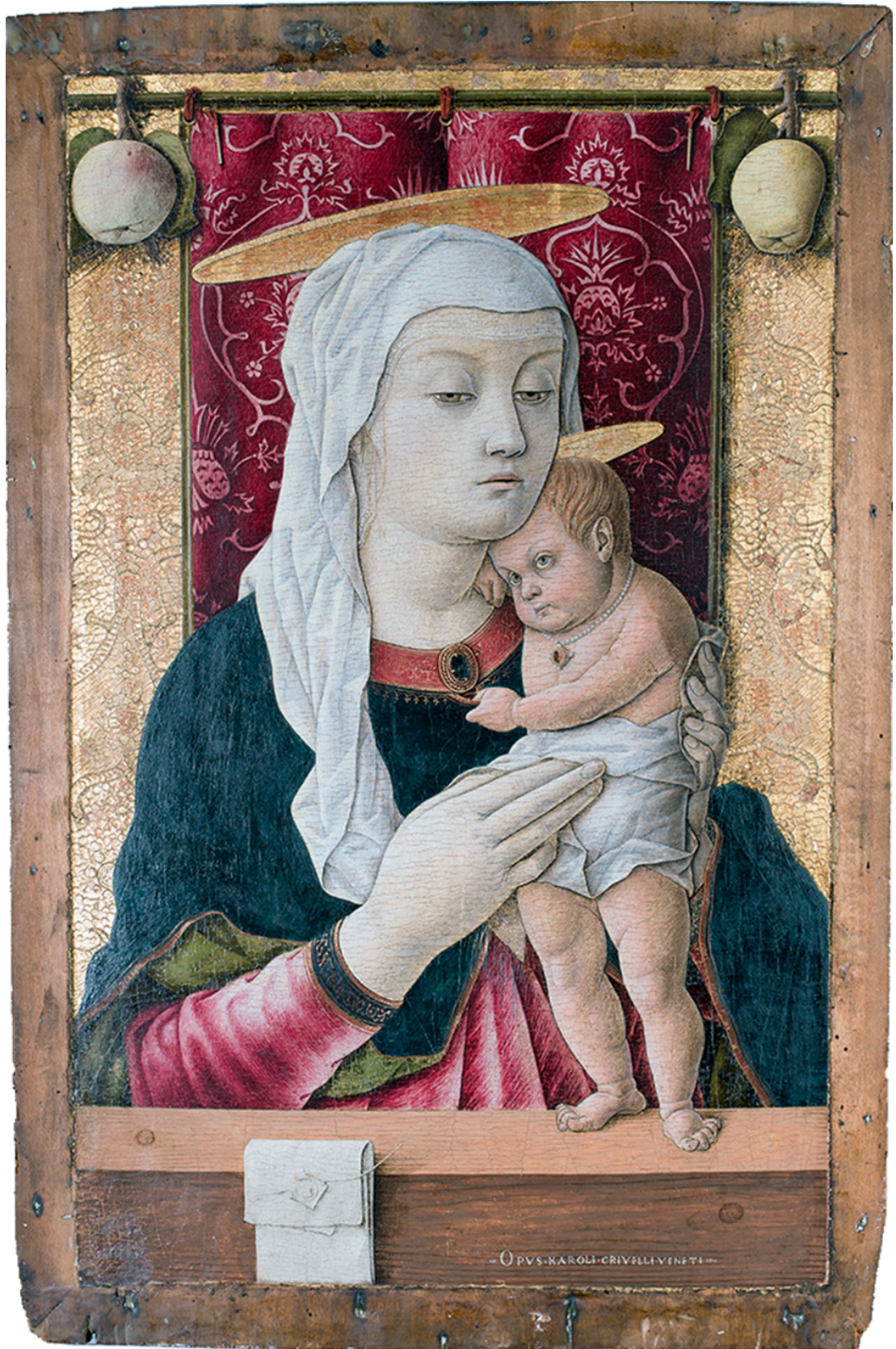


Figure 2. Carlo Crivelli, *The Virgin and Child*. c. 1468. Tempera and oil on panel, 62 × 41 cm. The San Diego Museum of Art. © The San Diego Museum of Art

tached to the parapet, bearing what is presumably the patron's seal.

The placement of the signature on the parapet was common during the latter half of the fifteenth century in Venetian paintings made for private devotion. As well as providing a flat surface upon which to inscribe lettering, the parapet ensures that the artist's name is at a respectful remove from the sacred space inhabited by the Virgin and Child, to whom the viewer directs their prayers. As several scholars have shown, the parapet represents a liminal space, somewhere between the sacred and worldly realm, as it appears flush with the picture plane and therefore separate from the painted representation (Goffen 1975, 499-501; Krüger 2014, 229-30). When figures, things or indeed words are placed on or over the parapet, they appear to trespass beyond the picture's threshold, since the eye reads them as on top of the flat support. In Crivelli's Verona *Virgin and Child*, the red silk cloth and the tip of the cushion that supports the Christ Child dangle tantalisingly over the parapet, making contact both with the picture's limits and its internal scene. The signature has no physical contact with the internal scene, even though it appears to be acknowledged by those who inhabit it. A network of glances involves the living viewer, the immortal personages and the fifteenth-century painter in a collective act of looking. The Christ Child's gaze is returned by the ominous goldfinch perched upon the perfectly concentric apple; the harp-playing *putto* seated within the central arch acknowledges the viewer's participation; and the Virgin directs her gaze to somewhere beyond as she contemplates her son's future Passion. That beyond just happens to be in the direction of the artist's signature, positioned, as it is, on top of the picture.

Since the late 1990s, scholars have paid greater attention to the meaning that Crivelli gives to ornament, which, beyond its symbolic significance, maps out different layers of reality within and beyond the painted image, demarcating

the transition from real to pictorial to sacred.⁹ The gaze, both that of the viewer and of the holy beings depicted, connects these layers of reality by crossing the threshold of its own domain, drawing the viewer one step closer to the heavenly realm. This phenomenon is often found in Venetian paintings made for private devotion, such as *The Virgin and Child* attributed to Lazzaro Bastiani (c. 1460-70, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), where the Virgin gazes beyond the picture to its frame, upon which a painted *putto* holding a cross looks back at her.¹⁰ Crivelli's *Virgin and Child* in the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 3) presents another example of the transgressive gaze, where the Virgin looks towards the life-size fly, which appears to have landed on the picture surface,¹¹ while the Christ Child looks towards Crivelli's signature on a *cartellino*, a fictive piece of paper attached to the painted panel, a signature-device to which we will return. The signature and, in particular, its support form part of the collection of liminal elements in Crivelli's work that help the viewer to navigate their journey from the earthly to the sacred.

Although, like the other elements, the signature's materiality matters, as this article proposes, it is not figurative; it is made up of letters, which communicate meaning through a textual rather than visual typology. The signature is, in this sense, foreign to the image and to the art of painting, and its presence is comparable to the tendency in twentieth-century Cubism where text with a printed typeface is shown in painting to signal that the canvas is a host capable of receiving different types of object. Similarly, when the lettering is in Roman majuscules, as it always is in Crivelli's signatures, it appears even more foreign to the image than if the script were cursive, which could feasibly have been written by the hand of a figure within the painted scene. The use of Latin, inscribed in uppercase Roman lettering, associates the signature with antiquity and the inscriptions carved onto classical sculpture. When Crivelli's signature is, simultaneously, engraved into stone, this association is stronger still.

⁹ Cf., in particular, Land 1996, 1998; Watkins 1998; Golsenne 2002; Aikema 2003; Campbell 2015; Golsenne 2017. Aikema (2003, 195), for example, notes that ornament is executed "non solo con una cristalina, quasi 'metafisica' precisione ma anche immancabilmente collocate o in primissimo piano o addirittura (parzialmente) fuori dello spazio pittorico vero e proprio, nella zona 'liminale' fra l'immagine e lo spettatore". For Campbell (2015, 29), Crivelli "treats the picture not as a diaphanous opening on to a receding space but as a transitional zone between real and painted worlds, in which objects rendered in trompe l'oeil, in *pastiglia*, or in wood seem to belong to both worlds".

¹⁰ For a description of this painting and the different levels of reality it engenders, as well as a reproduction, cf. Krüger 2014, 228-9.

¹¹ For flies in Crivelli's work, cf. Land 1996.



Figure 3. Carlo Crivelli, *The Virgin and Child*. c. 1480. Tempera on panel, 37.8 × 25.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

3 Stone

Fictive stone is, indeed, Crivelli's preferred support for his signature. At a time when theorists had begun to debate the relative merits of different art forms, a discourse known as the *Paragone*, the carved signature was an opportunity to simulate the materials and techniques of sculpture, and in doing so, to suggest that painting could also take on the aesthetic and physical qualities of sculpted mediums.¹² By associating his signature with the durability and permanence of sculpture, Crivelli seems to aspire for his name to endure through time and space, despite painting's relative fragility as a medium. His name is, at least figuratively, set in stone. Although Crivelli developed the theme of the stony signature in new ways, as we shall see, he did not invent it. Its origins are found in Tuscan painting, in the work of Duccio and Giotto (Goffen 2001, 311), but it did not catch on until the latter half of the fifteenth century, when it featured regularly in Venetian painting. Inscriptions carved into stone are often depicted in works by the Vivarini workshop, where Crivelli probably trained in Venice. Crivelli's assiduous signing habits may indeed have been inspired by the Vivarini, whose signatures are found on more surviving paintings than those of Jacopo Bellini and his shop (Matthew 1998, 620).

Unlike the signature on the *Verona Virgin and Child*, Crivelli's name is more often carved *into* stone, rather than emblazoned on top of it. This occurs in his first dated work, the polyptych of 1468 for the Church of SS. Lorenzo, Silvestro e Ruffino, Massa Fermana (fig. 4), and recurs in single and multi-panelled works for private and public destinations executed throughout his career, spanning almost forty years. In the Massa Fermana altarpiece, which was also probably Crivelli's first work for a patron in Le Marche, his signature is located on the stone parapet, close to the *Virgin and Child*, who are enthroned above.

Beyond reasons of symmetry, the choice of artists since the Trecento to place their signatures on the central panel of a polyptych below the Virgin has obvious devotional connotations, signalling both the artist's submission and veneration (Goffen 2001, 311).

Crivelli's lapidary inscriptions vary in their degree of illusion. The letters of the Massa Fermana signature are painted in stark black and back-lit consistently with white, producing a graphic effect which suggests the use of a stencil (fig. 5),¹³ while the signature of *The Dead Christ supported by Two Angels* in London's National Gallery, once part of the altarpiece for the Franciscan convent in Montefiore dell'Aso (c. 1471-3), exploits the qualities of stone, its texture and colour, to a greater degree (figs. 6, 7). The optical effect of light, which infiltrates the crevices of the carved lettering of the London signature, accurately conveys the cold hardness of stone and suggests that Crivelli may have copied inscriptions on sculpture, perhaps making drawn studies inspired by the antique, which might have resembled those made by Jacopo Bellini.¹⁴ As well as their different dates of execution, one reason for the stylistic variations between these signatures may be the relative desire and need for legibility.¹⁵ The Massa Fermana signature, situated on the central panel of the altarpiece, would have been clearly visible from the high altar of the parish church of SS. Lorenzo, Silvestro e Rufino, while the London signature, smaller in size and located on the upper tier of the altarpiece, was possibly not intended to be seen, and was perhaps added for reasons personal to Crivelli, as is suggested below. The signature on the central panel of the Montefiore altarpiece depicting *Virgin and Child*, now in Brussels, is equally modest in size, and may have been appropriate to the Franciscan setting for which the altarpiece was painted; as Alison Wright noted recently, the ornament and colour scheme of the Montefiore altarpiece is also

¹² Filarete was the earliest Italian theorist to address such debates. In his *Trattato di Architettura* [c. 1464] (1965, 309), Filarete argued that artistic skill is to be judged according to the level of illusion it achieves, the highest being when the eye is tricked into believing a depiction is real. The medium of painting, through which the skilled artist can imitate any material, is deemed superior to sculpture, which cannot depict an object in any material other than its own, thereby compromising illusion.

¹³ Macro images of Crivelli's signature for the Massa Fermana altarpiece taken by an independent department of the Università di Camerino, Applicazioni di Restauro, Tecnologiche e Conservative (A.R.T. & Co.) in June 2017, show broad diagonal brushstrokes that continue across different letters, strong evidence of the fact that a sheet with the letters cut out was placed on top of the panel and painted over with a broad brush. The white highlights that back each letter have finer brushstrokes that follow the line of each letter, suggesting they were painted individually afterwards, without a stencil.

¹⁴ For Bellini's interest in antiquity, and reproductions of such drawings, cf. Fortini Brown 1992.

¹⁵ I would like to thank Anna Koopstra for encouraging me to think about the beholder in this instance.



Figure 4. Carlo Crivelli, *The Virgin and Child with Saints*. 1468. Tempera on panel. Church of SS. Lorenzo, Silvestro e Ruffino, Massa Fermana. © Applicazioni di Restauro, Tecnologiche e Conservative (A.R.T. & Co.), Università di Camerino

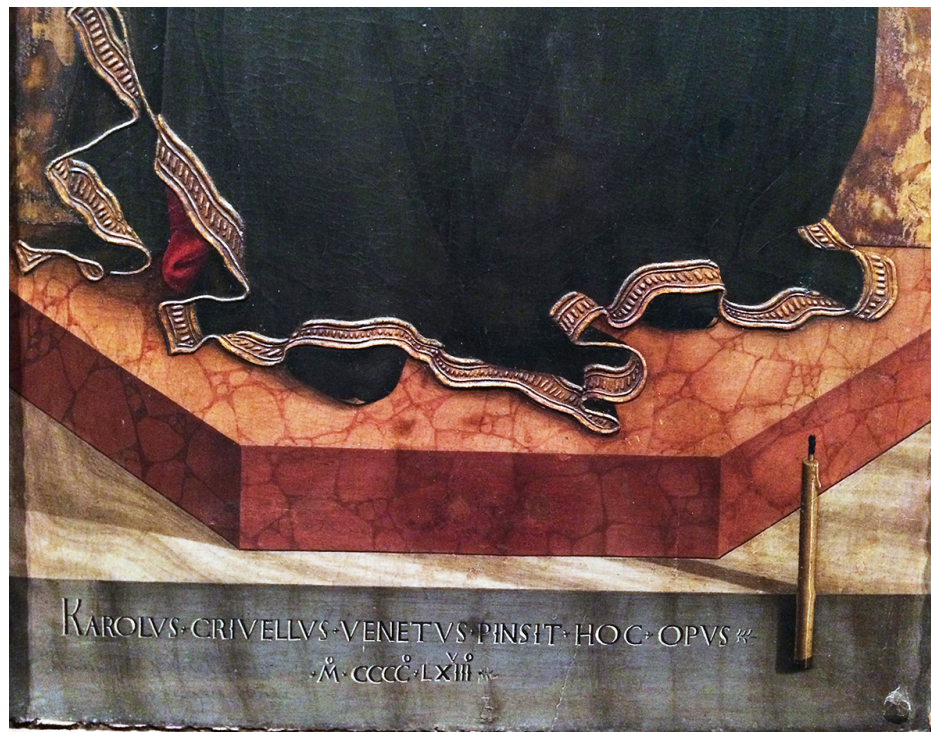


Figure 5. Carlo Crivelli, *The Virgin and Child with Saints*, detail. 1468. Tempera on panel. Church of SS. Lorenzo, Silvestro e Ruffino, Massa Fermana. © Author's photograph



Figure 6. Carlo Crivelli, *The Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels*. c.1470-3. Tempera on panel 72.4 × 55.2 cm. The National Gallery, London.
© The National Gallery, London



Figure 7. Carlo Crivelli, *The Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels*, detail. c.1470-3. Tempera on panel 72.4 × 55.2 cm. London, The National Gallery.
© The National Gallery, London

more restrained than that of the polptychs Crivelli painted for the Dominicans of Ascoli Piceno (1476-9) and Camerino (1482) (2015, 66). Although the Massa Fermana altarpiece also contains Franciscan imagery, as we shall see, it was located in a parish church rather than the more secluded and erudite environment of a convent. Moreover, the Massa Fermana altarpiece marked Crivelli's debut in Le Marche, and the signature's prominence was therefore of special importance; the fact that the Latin is more extensive than any other signature, stating "Carlo Crivelli of Venice painted this work", with numbers also written in Roman numerals, supports this idea.

Whereas carved signatures by other painters tend to be depicted on the base of the throne at some distance from the picture plane, and thus appear integrated within the painted scene,¹⁶ Crivelli's stony inscriptions are almost always flush with the picture plane, positioned, as they are, on the liminal space of the parapet, and could, therefore, give the impression of being carved into the panel's surface.¹⁷ When *pastiglia* and other types of relief are present, as seen in the *Virgin and Child* in the Victoria and Albert Museum (fig. 8), this creates an unusual play on surface texture and undulating relief.¹⁸ In this case, the stone parapet bearing the signature ruptures, cracking both what appears to be the picture's surface and the receding ground behind it that supports the Christ Child. A part of it dislodges from the rest of the stone, jutting outwards and complicating the play on two and three dimensions further.

Cracked parapets occur often in Crivelli's work in proximity to a range of saints, as well as the *Virgin and Child*, but they are seen rarely

in the work of his contemporaries.¹⁹ Decaying architecture and sculpture, with their obvious connotations to antiquity, was a theme that interested Mantegna in works such as *St Sebastian* (1458-9, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), and Squarcione in the *De Lazara Polyptych* (ca. 1449-52, Museo Civico, Padua). Perhaps inspired by such works, Crivelli depicted a crumbling wall in his *Verona Virgin and Child* (fig. 1), which Stephen Campbell has recently suggested signals "the revelation of a mystery, of the divine nature of Christ, the immanence of a 'real' beyond the merely painted..." (2015, 148). As well as an opportunity for Crivelli to display his skill in painting illusions with a crispness that rivals contemporary Netherlandish art, fractured stone implies the fragility of that painted illusion. This contrasts both with the viewer's enduring faith and the truth of Christian salvation, recalling the maxim affixed to the candle at the lower right of another *St Sebastian* by Mantegna in the Galleria Ca' d'Oro, which reads, "Nothing but the divine is stable; the rest is smoke" (Bolland 2014). The cracked stone parapet differs from a crumbling monument, as it is both the ground upon which holy figures stand and the location of the picture's spatial threshold. However, both might represent the downfall of the pagan world, which was superseded by the Christian one; while this is clear in the depictions of crumbling antiquities in religious paintings, such as Mantegna's Vienna *St Sebastian*, in Crivelli's work, the parapet (often decorated with *all'antica* friezes) literally cracks under the weight of Christian truth, represented by the sacred figures.²⁰

It might be more than just coincidence that

16 See, for example, Giovanni Alemagna and Antonio Vivarini's *Trittico della Carità* (1446, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice), or Nicola di Maestro Antonio's *Madonna and Child with Saints Leonardo, Jerome, John the Baptist and Francis and a donor* (1472, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh).

17 Exceptions are the signature on the *Virgin's* throne, which is at a distance from the picture plane, in the smaller altarpiece for San Domenico, Ascoli Piceno (after 1476, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest) and the signature on the column in *The Annunciation with Saint Emidius* (1486, National Gallery, London). However, these are not 'carved' signatures, but are inscribed in gold leaf onto stone or marble.

18 For the effect of relief in this work, see Motture 2007.

19 Fractured parapets appear very occasionally in the work of Crivelli's circle. Juraj Čulinović (called Giorgio Schiavone), probably Crivelli's colleague from Padua, painted a one in his depiction of Saint Jerome (c. 1460, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo), while Pietro Alemanno, who described himself as Crivelli's 'disciple', painted a cracked parapet in the panel depicting Saints Catherine and John the Baptist in his polyptych for the Franciscan church in Montefalcone Appennino (c. 1470-5, Museo Comunale, Montefalcone Appennino). The significance of the cracked parapet in Crivelli has been little considered in the literature. Lightbown (2004, 147) suggested that the crack in the *Virgin's* parapet in the Fermo altarpiece of 1472 could be regarded "as part of a symbolism of sin and redemption"; but this argument is not sustainable, since cracks appear in the parapets of personages other than the *Virgin*.

20 I would like to thank Marika Leino for suggesting this idea. She also notes that placing the pagan below the Christian also occurs in Venetian tomb monuments of the period, where mythological scenes were placed on the very lowest register



Figure 8. Carlo Crivelli, *The Virgin and Child*. c. 1480. Tempera on panel, 46 × 33 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Crivelli's earliest surviving work for Le Marche, where earthquakes were and still are a threat to the locals, is also the first appearance of a fractured parapet, which reads as unstable ground upon which figures stand. In the Massa Fermana Altarpiece, Saint Laurence stands on a marble parapet, which cracks into two jagged pieces, just missing his left foot (fig. 4). Ruptures in the parapets that support Crivelli's saints recur throughout his work for Le Marche, such as the panel depicting Saint Peter in the altarpiece for Ascoli's cathedral. In Crivelli's day, natural disasters were believed to be caused by God's wrath, provoked by human sin (Lightbown 2004, 34). Crivelli's Marchigian viewers may, therefore, have associated the fractured parapet with seismic tremors and, by extension, with their sins, which might be atoned through confession and invocations to the intercessory beings depicted in Crivelli's altarpieces. Indeed, the cracking of holy ground could suggest an association with the earthquake that took place at the Crucifixion, as reported in Matthew's gospel (1998, 27, 51-54), which woke dead saints from their graves and led an onlooking centurion to fear, "Truly this was the Son of God".²¹

4 Memorial

The fractured parapet's close proximity to the signature has additional connotations. When seen in relation to the Latin inscription in Roman lettering, the crack suggests deterioration with the passing of time and brings to mind antique tomb monuments with inscribed epitaphs, such as those imagined by Jacopo Bellini in his sketchbook. Interpreted in this light, the cracked parapet bearing the engraved signature becomes a personal memorial, both to Crivelli's artistic genius and, perhaps, to his soul. And where better place than the parapet, replete with multiple layers of illusion, to pay tribute to the painter himself? That Crivelli viewed the parapet in this way is suggested by its dual role as Christ's sepulchre in images of the *Pietà*, which, like the *Dead Christ supported by Two Angels* (fig. 6), were on occasion signed, despite belonging to larger ensembles that already bore

of the tomb structure, below Christian ones.

²¹ I would like to thank Chloë Reddaway for suggesting the link with this passage in Matthew's gospel.



Figure 9. Carlo Crivelli, *The Virgin and Child (Madonna della Candeletta)*. After 1489. Tempera and oil on panel, 219 × 74.5 cm. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. © La Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan



Figure 10. Carlo Crivelli, *The Virgin and Child (Madonna della Candeletta)*, detail. After 1489. Tempera and oil on panel, 219 × 74.5 cm. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. © La Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

signatures in close proximity to the Virgin.²² It has been suggested that Crivelli's motivation for signing images of the *Pietà* was due both to his special devotion to the subject and, consequently, to the particular care he took in rendering it.²³

Moreover, marble, often the very material of Crivelli's parapets, recalls the material of a tomb, particularly when it is red or veined in

red, the colour of blood, as Thomas Golsenne noted recently (2017, 93-6). The marble Stone of Unction, upon which Christ's body is said to have been prepared for burial and venerated in Jerusalem since the Middle Ages, features in several fifteenth-century paintings, most famously Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ* in the Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan (1470-4). Crivelli

22 Another signed *Pietà* that would have surmounted a signed *pala* is in the Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome. The *Pietà* in the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston, is also signed. The presence of a signature on the Boston *Pietà* could imply that the work was conceived as an individual commission, an idea that Stephen J. Campbell explored recently (2015, 190). But the fact that Crivelli was inclined to sign other images of the *Pietà* that belonged to larger ensembles weakens this possibility.

23 Lightbown (2004, 187) suggests that signatures on images of the *Pietà* that belong to larger ensembles including signed panels may indicate that Crivelli had a 'deep personal devotion' to the subject, as well as 'a particular pride' in rendering it. Gill Dunkerton (Dunkerton, White 2000, 76) suggested that Crivelli's signing on both the main panel of the *Virgin and Child* and on the *Dead Christ* of the Montefiore dell'Aso polyptych indicates that he recognised the 'exceptional quality' of the latter panel. Lightbown also notes that the signature on the London *Dead Christ* is painted with greater care than that of the Brussels *Virgin and Child*, with its meticulous lettering simulating a real inscription. Unfortunately, this author has not yet had the chance to examine the signature on the panel in Brussels to be able to offer judgement. In the past, the presence of a signature on both the London *Dead Christ* as well as the *Madonna and Child* belonging to the same altarpiece led scholars to suspect that the signature belonging to the former had been added later, perhaps for commercial purposes (cf., for example, Davies [1961] 1986, 153-4). However, the conservation of the panel at the National Gallery in 2000, during which an original varnish was discovered over the signature, dispelled such doubts (cf. Dunkerton, White, 2000).



Figure 11. Carlo Crivelli, *The Vision of Blessed Gabriele Ferretti*. c. 1489. Tempera on panel, 141 × 87 cm. National Gallery, London. © The National Gallery, London

may have wished to recall veined marble's associations with flesh, as well as the Stone of Unction, in his frequent representations of this cold, hard and costly material. These associations are explicit in Crivelli's depiction of the Resurrection in the predella panel of the Massa Fermana altarpiece. Scholars agree that Crivelli's altarpiece engages in the contemporary theological debate about the blood of Christ, which, according to a Franciscan belief that was promulgated by Giacomo della Marca, who Crivelli depicted on several occasions, was not united with Christ's divinity during the Passion and the three days before the Resurrection.²⁴ In Crivelli's altarpiece (fig. 4), Christ's tomb changes from white in the *Pietà* to red in the *Resurrection*, in line with this Franciscan ideology. The role of marble in the Massa Fermana altarpiece therefore charges Crivelli's other representations of the material, most often seen in close proximity to the signature on the parapet, with notions of Christ's suffering and Resurrection.

The Eucharistic association between the parapet and the altar, whereby the Christ Child, viewed upon the parapet in the altarpiece, represents an embodied figure of the Host, taken at the altar, allows us to make a final association between parapet and tomb. When books or cloths of honour are draped over the parapet, this recalls the location of the altar, which was adorned with furnishings such as frontals made of costly woven fabrics. As Golsenne noted recently (2017, 132), the association between tomb and altar is one of the essential principles of Christian liturgy, since from the beginning, each altar was consecrated with a relic (Williamson 2004). Golsenne goes on to suggest that this association is made stronger still when a candle is present on the parapet in Crivelli's work, as it alludes to the actual practice of offering a votive candle at an altar or tomb, as well as to the idea of the candle acting as a figure for Christ himself, representing His body (wax), spirit (wick) and divinity (flame). When the candle is extinguished in Crivelli's paintings, such as the tapers seen on

the parapets supporting the Virgin and Child in the Massa Fermana Altarpiece (fig. 4) and the *Madonna della Candeletta* (fig. 9), as well as in images of the *Pietà*, including the lunette in the Pinacoteca di Brera, according to Golsenne this represents Christ's death, an argument that was also advanced by Lightbown.²⁵ The presence of votive offerings, such as flowers, fruit and paper-based messages, on Crivelli's parapets – as seen, for example, in *The Madonna della Candeletta* (fig. 10) – take on an added significance in this context, as they resemble the ephemeral objects placed on graves by mourners.

Crivelli's signatures engraved on the stone parapet, with its connection to a tomb monument, could, in this light, be interpreted as the engraved name of a deceased person. As well as to encourage future viewers to remember Crivelli's soul in thanks for his role in facilitating their spiritual dialogue with personages depicted, such signatures could lead to entire works, the fruits of Crivelli's earthly endeavours, being interpreted as monuments to the painter's artistic genius. Such ideas of death are compatible with the role of Christian painting in encouraging the pious viewer to contemplate mortality through Christ's sacrifice, leading to human redemption.

5 Labels

The *cartellino*, a fictive piece of paper inscribed with the artist's name, promotes artistic skill in a different way from the sculpted signature. While the carved inscription signifies permanence and durability, the *cartellino*, which is often crumpled and appears as if about to fall away, suggests transience and ephemerality. Seemingly left by the artist or viewer on the picture as an afterthought, it is a modest identification of authorship, quite different from the explicitly self-promoting sculpted signature. Although the *cartellino* was more widely used among Venetian painters than the carved inscription, it only appears in Crivelli's work on three occasions and

²⁴ See Gioia Mori (1983, 17-27), and most recently Golsenne (2017, 94-6).

²⁵ Lightbown (2004, 85) argues that the extinguished taper is a symbol of Christ's entombment after his death on the cross, acting as a reminder, therefore, of Christ's Passion that would lead to human redemption. He suggests two Christian references that might support the idea: first, the Gospel's account that Christ was entombed "when evening was come" so that candles used during burial were subsequently left behind by His tomb, extinguished; second, the office of *Tenebrae*, during which all candles are extinguished to signify the darkness that engulfed the world for the three hours that Christ hung on the cross. Lightbown notes that Marco Zoppo's *Pietà* in the National Gallery, London (c. 1465), also depicts a taper at the right-hand corner of the casket into which Christ's body is lowered.

not until his maturity. All single-panelled works, the Rijksmuseum's *Mary Magdalene*, the Louvre's *San Jacopo della Marca* and The Metropolitan Museum's *Virgin and Child* (fig. 3) each bear an unfolded strip of paper inscribed "OPVS KAROLI CRIVELLI VENETI",²⁶ which appears attached to the parapet with drops of red wax. Only *San Jacopo della Marca* bears a date, that of 1477, but the other panels are close in style and must, therefore, derive from the same period.²⁷ Given Crivelli's taste for illusion, it is curious that the *cartellino* appears only now, when the artists of his formation had been using it since the late 1440s, such as Mantegna in *St Mark in a niche* (c. 1448-51, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main). The *cartellino*'s reference to classical antiquity, which, unlike the sculpted signature, also recalls a literary tradition, suggests that these panels were intended to be viewed by a discerning audience.²⁸

Kandice Rawlings (2013) has shown how Mantegna's use of the *cartellino* evokes his relationship with the ancient past, both through the medium of the written inscription on parchment, recalling his engagement with epigraphy and paleography, and through the relationship with Pliny the Elder's discussion of artist's signatures in the *Natural History*. According to Rawlings, the wording of Pliny's description of the temporary signatures on Greek paintings and sculptures – "pendenti titulo inscripsisse" – which implied that the work was unfinished and imperfect, thus expressing the artist's humility, suggests that he was referring to a 'label' or 'hanging' (28). Rawlings suggests that since *cartellini* are labels, often shown partially detached or hanging from the

picture surface, it is possible that painters, in using them, were attempting to visualise ancient signatures.²⁹ The existence of a *cartellino* on a Greek mosaic dating to the 2nd century BC (Pergamonmuseum, Staatliche Museen, Berlin), where the corners of the parchment are partially attached with red drops of wax, one of which has detached, confirms that this fictive signature-device was used by Greek artists and that Pliny was, as suspected, perhaps referring to an ephemeral label.³⁰ It is not yet clear whether Venetian painters knew of this Greek example, but it certainly has strong visual parallels with both Mantegna's and Crivelli's *cartellini*, which are also attached with drops of red wax and cast a shadow on the picture surface. Rona Goffen asserts that the red daubs of wax that attach Bartolomeo Vivarini's *cartellini* to his pictures were used to "drive the point home" that the painted representation is a fabrication. In doing so, Goffen states that Vivarini was "more literal-minded than his compatriot Bellini" (Goffen 2001, 315). However, if the *cartellino* attached with red daubs of wax was recognised as a reference to ancient signatures, then painters' reasons for using them may have been shrewder than the pure desire for illusion.

Crivelli's later signature-labels are not *cartellini* in the strict sense. From the triptych for San Domenico in Camerino, signed 1482, Crivelli began to use smooth strips of white, black or blue cloth or paper upon which to inscribe his name in gold leaf (fig. 10). Like his three *cartellini*, these strips are attached to the parapet with daubs of red wax, but they are in a pristine state of preservation, with the corners firmly attached and all wax daubs intact. This

26 *San Giacomo della Marca* is signed "CAROLI" with a 'C', as opposed to a 'K'. As Lightbown (2004, 85) notes, Crivelli alternated between signing his name with a 'C' and a 'K' throughout his career, for reasons that are unclear.

27 Zampetti (1986, 275) suggests a dating for the Rijksmuseum *Magdalene* to c. 1475, while Lightbown (2004, 273) proposes a dating of 1478-80. For the Metropolitan's *Virgin and Child*, Lightbown (264) suggests a similar dating to the Bergamo *Madonna* (1478-80) and Stephen J. Campbell (2015, 194) suggests a dating to c. 1480.

28 This was almost certainly the case with the Amsterdam *Magdalene*, which is believed to have been commissioned by the counts of Carpegna, a branch of nobility from which the Montefeltro counts and dukes of Urbino were also descended, for their altar dedicated to the Magdalene in the church of San Francesco in the town of Carpegna, Montefeltro. See Lombardi 1982. According to Lightbown (2004, 238), Crivelli's *San Jacopo della Marca* was paid for by the two noble lay donors kneeling at the Saint's feet, but the impulse behind the commission would have come from the Beato Pietro da Firenze, a friend of the Saint and guardian of the Observant convent of San Niccolò, Ascoli Piceno, for which the painting was made, before it was transferred to the church of the SS. Annunziata nearby. Nothing is known of the patronage of the New York *Virgin and Child*.

29 It is often noted that the increased use from the 1480s of *faciebat*, the imperfect and therefore continuous tense of *fecit*, which was used to imply the incomplete status of the artwork, comes from Pliny. For example, cf. Mc Ham 2013, 183; Matthew 1998, 638-9. Rawlings adds that the *cartellino* also resonates with the same passage in the *Ancient History*.

30 On artists' signatures in ancient Greece, see Hurwit 2015. For the signature in the Pergamonmuseum and a reproduction of it, see page 67.

defeats the *cartellino's* purpose as a modest sign of authorship, expressed by the crumpled paper about to fall off the picture surface. Moreover, Crivelli's name is inscribed with Roman majuscules in incorruptible gold leaf, the richest of metals; in sum, like the sculpted signature, here the acknowledgement of authorship is not exactly modest. The fact that most *cartellini* in Venetian painting are written in cursive script, which adds to their casual character, removes the Crivellian label further from this tradition. As the label is flush with the parapet, which is on occasion placed at a distance from the picture plane,³¹ it also means that the *trompe l'oeil* effect is lessened, making it appear safely integrated within the painted representation.

It is unclear why Crivelli switched to this type of label in his late career; perhaps the traditional *cartellino* was too temporary a solution for his taste, but he did not wish to abandon it entirely, with its antique connotations. This upgraded version complements the immaculate nature of Crivelli's painted representations, but it cannot pretend to permanence like the sculpted signature, since it is, nonetheless, an ephemeral object fastened to the parapet with wax. The contradiction between the word "OPVS" – which suggests completion, unlike *faciebat* – written with Roman majuscules in gold, and the transitory nature of the affixed label, resonates with the paradox of the seemingly durable sculpted signature carved into a fractured parapet. It is tempting to see a parallel in the contrast between fragility and permanence in the signature-device and the contrast between the mortal creator and his immortal legacy, embodied by the works of art that have outlived him.

6 Intellect

The sense that Crivelli was a self-conscious painter, aware both of his status as an artist and his own destiny, is borne out in other ways through his signatures. Perhaps the most direct instance is in his signing 'miles', meaning knight, on paintings after 1489. The title is expressed in different

ways: *St Francis collecting the Blood of Christ* in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum is inscribed "MILES VERVS", while the *Madonna della Candeletta* bears the words "EQUES LAUREATUS" (fig. 10) and Crivelli's paintings for Fabriano, Matelica and Pergola, are signed "VENETUS MILES". It is unclear who bestowed this title upon Crivelli, although arguments have been put forth to suggest that it was the duke of Atri (Lightbown 2004, 419-20), or a member of the aristocratic Ferretti family, for whom Crivelli painted at least three pictures (Di Lorenzo 2008, 314-6). Crivelli's knighthood would lead to him being named a *familiaris* of prince Ferdinand of Capua in 1490. The appointing of artists as knights and 'familiares' was not uncommon in the fifteenth century, and it was a distinction that they often referred to in their signatures: for example, Gentile Bellini was named 'eques auratus' in recognition of a portrait he had executed of Sultan Mehmet, a title he used in signatures on paintings after 1481, while Mantegna signed 'eques auratae militiae' on his decorations for the chapel in the Vatican Belvedere for Innocent VIII, now lost (1488/89-1500) (Ames-Lewis 2002, 62-4).

A title of nobility not only conferred high social standing, but also reflected the artist's intellect and genius, which could be admired figuratively in his work. Indeed, Crivelli's use of *trompe l'oeil* elements and visual irony, such as the festoon pinned from one end of *The Vision of the Blessed Gabriele Ferretti* (c. 1489, The National Gallery, London) to the next, which casts a shadow upon the painted sky, proves that he is worthy of his knighthood (fig. 11).³² The signature, at a remove from figurative representation and bearing, of course, the artist's name, was the ideal site to experiment with painted bravura. A case in point is the foreshortened signature of *The Vision of the Blessed Gabriele Ferretti*, which has provoked more scholarly interest than any other of Crivelli's signatures.³³

This painting is a *unicum* in Crivelli's oeuvre and required, therefore, a different solution for the signature. It is one of Crivelli's earliest *pale*, his only dedicated landscape and the only

31 This is the case in the triptych for San Domenico, Camerino, now in the Brera, and the *Madonna and Child enthroned with Saints Francis and Sebastian and a donor figure* in the National Gallery, where the parapet is at a distance from the foreground. In all other instances it is flush with the picture plane.

32 On this festoon and its effect, cf. Watkins 1988, 50 and Land 1998, 21.

33 For Patricia Rubin, it creates "a complex interweaving of viewing and vision" (Rubin 2006, 568), while for Norman Land, it "calls into question certain relationships between illusion and actuality that are important to our experience of the painting" (Land 1998, 19).

painting in which the Virgin and Child are of reduced scale, witnessed, as they are, in a vision. In the absence of a parapet or architecture in the foreground, and not wanting to relegate his name to the distant background, Crivelli inscribed his signature clearly on the ground in the right foreground, the letters receding in perspective with the painted scene. This is at odds with the festoon, the other 'added' or 'external' element of the painting, which refuses to be part of the painted illusion and maintains its status as an addition, casting a shadow on the sky and drawing attention to the flat picture support. There are few precedents for this type of signature in the fifteenth century, when dedicated landscapes were less common and architecture provided a convenient support for the artist's name. The landscape artist that wished to integrate their name into the painted scene, which was by now the preferred method, had to be inventive.³⁴

Crivelli's solution resembles Fra Filippo Lippi's in its conception. In the *Adoration in the Forest* (1459, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), Lippi wrote his name on a foreshortened axe, demonstrating his mastery of this perspectival difficulty (Rubin 2006, 573-6). At a time when linear perspective was viewed as science, mastered through years of study, the foreshortened signature could be read as an emblem for artistic skill itself. Written in black Roman lettering and perfectly aligned to the right of the friar's open prayer book, almost as a continuation of the only other textual component of the painting, which also happens to be a sacred text, Crivelli's name is simultaneously external and internal to the painted scene; the graphic, majuscule letters are foreign to the art of painting, and to the naturalistic landscape, and yet they recede with the landscape. Like the festoon, the signature acts as a visual pun on the dual nature of painted representation as both object and image, but in the opposite sense, for the festoon is figurative and yet denies the painted illusion. Since this is a painting about experiencing a vision, it is appropriate that Crivelli should have paid special

attention to the way in which his signature was seen.³⁵ The coexistence of multiple levels of reality within Crivelli's painted image – that of the flat panel, and of the internal scene, that of the earthly, located in the naturalistic landscape, and of the sacred, contained in the vision of the Virgin and Child – transforms the picture into a layered image replete with meaning.

7 Conclusions

Let us return to Louisa Matthew's statement: "Carlo Crivelli's signatures are solidly Venetian in terms of their frequency, form and placement" (Matthew 1998, 624). The large number of signed works by Crivelli, and his repeated use of both the stone and paper support, are indeed typically Venetian. Crivelli himself never failed to remind us of his prestigious origins in his signatures. But Matthew's statement is unnecessarily reductive, particularly bearing in mind the fact that Crivelli's paintings were made far from Venice in the remote towns of Le Marche, largely for the Observant mendicant orders. In that environment, his Venetian identity would have meant something different, and the repeated use of "*OPVS CAROLI CRIVELLI VENETI*" became a trademark that guaranteed not only the quality Crivelli's art, but also its efficacy. When the signature itself was an emblem for skill, then the viewer knew that they could accept the painter's invitation to illusion. Having accepted and made contact with the holy beings represented, they might feel inclined to thank the artist had that made such a vision possible, by remembering his soul in their prayers.

Indeed, Crivelli's signatures, expressed with painterly bravura, were not merely for his viewers' benefit. With little rivalry from local painters, Crivelli could afford to work in a way that would also satisfy his own interests; his *Venezianità* was a touchstone from which to cultivate his artistic persona, that of the artist-genius, who was capable of working "miracles of painting" (Alberti [1435] 2012, 1: 41). Whether

³⁴ Giovanni Bellini, perhaps the most prolific Italian landscape painter of the fifteenth century, often attached a *cartellino* bearing his name to a branch in the foreground, as he does in *The Transfiguration* (c. 1480, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples) and *St Francis in the Desert* (c. 1476-8, The Frick Collection, New York). In the absence of a flat support, Pisanello imaginatively rendered his name as foliage growing out of the ground in *The Virgin and Child with Saints Anthony Abbot and George* (1435-41, The National Gallery).

³⁵ I do not agree with Lightbown's suggestion (2004, 368) that the receding letters were designed to enhance their legibility from below, attractive as this idea is. In my view, the signature's perspective would actually mar viewing from below, and if Crivelli had intended this, he would have depicted the letters flush with the picture's surface, not the landscape.

carved into fractured stone, or emblazoned in gold on an affixed label, Crivelli's signatures contemplate his role as a creator of religious images that would outlive him. The juxtaposition of ephemeral and durable materials further comments on the paradox between life's fragility and eternal salvation. This is particularly evident in the signature carved into the stone parapet, which resembles a tomb with an inscribed epitaph, and by extension functions as memorial to the artist. Patricia Rubin has noted that, unlike other types of painting, devotional works by Italian Renaissance artists were mostly signed, and that they can, therefore, be viewed as "offerings to the glory of god" (2006, 566). Indeed, Mantegna never felt the need to sign his secular paintings (Matthew 1998, 622). In light of this, it is hard not to see Crivelli's signatures as bound to the religious significance of his paintings, particularly when strategically placed near the body of Christ, as seen in the London *Dead Christ*. While their painted bravura solicits the prayers of the viewer, the omnipresence of Crivelli's signatures expresses the painter's desire to be close to the sacred.

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