'Carved in Stone, Captured on Canvas': On the Medial Transformation of Epigraphic Elements in 15th-Century Painting

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Abstract

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The painting of the 15th-century shows a significant increase in mimetic stone representations, appearing without inscription (Rath, 2019) and with epigraphic elements such as artists' signatures and dates on stone-imitating frames or architectural elements (Burg, 2007). Prayers or information about saints also appear as stone-carved inscriptions, logically integrated into the pictorial composition. These epigraphic elements, rendered in various types of stone, predominantly evoke the *Capitalis Monumentalis*, an ancient Roman lapidary script, thereby referencing a specific European memorial culture (Rehm, 2019).

A refinement of this pictorial tradition is evident in the epigraphic motifs of Jan van Eyck and Andrea Mantegna. Their works display not only a variation in the materials serving as text carriers but also an intricate diversity in the simulated techniques of textual inscription – ranging from meticulously chiselled capital letters to delicately scratched or carved minuscules to mural dipinti. The strategic topographical placement and deliberate language selection of these inscriptions fundamentally transform the semantic nuances they convey within the paintings' overall compositional schemes.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the medial transformation of epigraphic elements within the image and thereby to decode the polyvalent functions of painted stone inscriptions: as authenticating devices verifying pictorial narration through their materiality; as memory carriers contributing to collective remembrance; as communicative interfaces directly addressing the viewer; as references legitimizing the pictorial statement; as temporal markers; or as theological emphases. Painted inscriptions in 15th-century art that imitate stone thus emerge as complex media for articulating knowledge, faith, and identity.

Keywords

Painted epigraphic motifs; 15th-century panel painting; Jan van Eyck; Andrea Mantegna; reception aesthetic

1. Introduction

In the 15th-century, the presence of writing in panel painting increased significantly both north and south of the Alps. Particularly striking is the reference to established epigraphic design traditions and the pictorial evocation of materials and writing techniques. Stone as-sumes a special role as writing medium, with inscriptions appearing chiselled into surfaces and frames featuring painted stone imitations that evoke specific semantic connotations. This article examines the medial transformation of epigraphic elements in 15th-century painting. By this, I mean how inscriptions generate new meanings

through their visual form, illusion of materiality, and integration into the pictorial context: Painted inscriptions are far more than decorative elements or mere conveyors of information. They function as interfaces between text, image, and material, opening a complex field of meaning in which questions of authorship, memory, authority, and religious and humanist communication are negotiated.

In this context, three different case studies are presented, demonstrating the diverse ways in which epigraphic script motifs were employed in panel painting: The first group focuses on inscriptions with a stone-like appearance, containing either the artist's words or invocations and references related to the saints. A second group comprises paintings featuring stone-like inscriptions with an explicitly sepulchral character. The final group introduces works by Jan van Eyck (c. 1390–1441) and Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506), which – unlike the previously discussed examples – demonstrate a heightened diversity in the depiction of different stone materials and writing techniques. These paintings employ the material significance of stone and the deliberate use of language, typeface, and spatial placement to achieve a semantic intensification and precise modulation of meaning.

2. Methodical approach

The corpus comprises 15th-century panel paintings with three criteria: simulated stone inscriptions, conscious integration into composition, and reference to epigraphic traditions. Cases were selected to represent different manifestations and semantic possibilities. The investigation employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining art historical analysis with media-theoretical considerations. It is based on an analytical model developed in the author's dissertation on Van Eyck's inscriptions (Krebs, unpublished), which envisages five steps focusing on the nature and context of the script motifs, as well as on their relation to the subject matter and the reception by beholders.

This methodological approach ensures a representative and comparable recording and investigation of the various functions and levels of meaning that painted stone inscriptions could develop in 15th-century art.

3. Historical and material-iconographic contextualisation

Different meanings are attributed to the various stones in ancient, late antique and medieval sources (Mestemacher, 2021, p. 65; Wenderholm, 2021, p. 14–17; Venosa, 2005): White marble stands for purity and transcendence, whilst porphyry visualised imperial and papal power (Wagner, 2002, p. 103ff.). Moreover, the material stone is generally attributed with the properties of permanence, immutability, and simultaneously divine authorisation (Schäffner, 2009, p. 153). The mimetic representation of stone developed from Roman 'faux-marble' techniques, through Carolingian manuscript illumination and Trecento '*marmi finti*', and reached a high level of refinement in Quattrocento painting (Mestemacher, 2021, p. 75ff; Rath, 2019, p. 308). The "mimetic plausibilisation" (Rehm, 2019, p. 93 Orig. in German: „Mimetische Plausibilisierung") – understood as the rationally motivated placement of script within the pictorial space and the convincing imitation of different materials – reaches its peak in 15th-century panel painting: this is evident, for example, in the marbled reverse sides and frames (e.g. in Robert Campin), but also in the representation of different types of stone within the pictorial field, as seen for instance in Mantegna's *Circumcision* (1460/70).

4. Case studies

The following case studies explore the spectrum of painted stone inscriptions through characteristic examples from 15th-century painting. Three thematic groups reveal different functional levels: initially, inscriptions are examined that primarily serve authentication or religious invocation, followed by examples with explicitly sepulchral semantics, before finally investigating the complex systems of reference found in Van Eyck and Mantegna. Each case study concentrates on specific aspects of the medial transformation of epigraphic elements and demonstrates how the imitation of stone materiality opens new levels of meaning that extend beyond mere textual information. Through this graduated analysis, it becomes evident how painted stone inscriptions developed from functional elements into complex media of meaning production.

4.1 First case study: Artists' statements and inscriptions as invocations

Even in the 14th and 15th centuries, there is a tendency to imitate different types of stone within the image and to furnish them with inscriptions. These inscribed motifs primarily comprise artists' signatures and dates: they are often found on frames or illustrated frames on the pictorial surface. Pietro Lorenzetti's *Christ as Man of Sorrows* (c. 1340–1345) shows early painted marble frames with artist signatures (Cämmerer-George, 1967, p. 70; Oertel, 1961, p. 69). But the writing does not yet show any epigraphic writing technique such as chiselling, carving or scratching (Berti et al., 2015a, 2015b). Most frequently, however, architectural elements and simulated frames or balustrades appear within the pictorial field. The inscriptions often appear as if engraved into the stone material, creating the illusion of permanence.

A striking example can be found in Bellini's late work *Madonna and Child* (1510): The artist's signature IOANNES BELLINVS MDX appears on a marbled stone slab at the lower edge of the painting. The inscription is executed in elegant Roman capitals that harmonise perfectly with the veining of the simulated marble. Particularly noteworthy is the placement of the signature: it is positioned at the viewer's eye level and to the right side of Christ. It almost appears as though Christ is blessing this inscription. Through this positioning, the artist's authorship is not only asserted but also legitimised through sacred association.

Additionally, prayers to or information about depicted saints appear as inscriptions carved in stone, logically integrated into the pictorial composition, as for example in Masolino's and Masaccio's *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* (c. 1424–1425). In the greenish stone of the base on which Mary's throne stands, a gilded inscription appears that contains the text of the 'Ave Maria' prayer. Also remarkable here is the positioning of the inscription at the lower edge and thus decidedly installed for the viewers as an invitation to prayer.

These examples demonstrate how simulated stone materiality creates three key effects: authentication through the metaphorical transfer of stone's permanence to artistic statements; temporal-cultural positioning through ancient epigraphic traditions; and elevation through precious stone types (porphyry, marble). This authentication pattern applies throughout the following case studies.

4.2. Second case study: Sepulchral symbolism

A particularly striking group of epigraphic elements is found in connection with sepulchral symbolism. Examples of this include Masaccio's *Trinity* in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, the outer wings of the triptych by the so-called Master of Frankfurt, and Hans Holbein's *Dead Body of Christ in the Tomb* from 1521/22 in Basel.

Masaccio created the fresco of the *Trinity* (1425–1428) in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella (Kemp, 1986, p. 48). Within an architectural frame showing the *Throne of Grace*, God presents the crucified Christ with the Holy Spirit above, flanked by Mary, John, and donors below. Beneath the main scene, a second register of the fresco is visible: here, beneath an altar table supported by small columns, lies a sarcophagus containing a recumbent skeleton. Above the skeleton an inscription may be discerned, appearing as though chiselled into a recessed stone niche. The text reads: IO FV G[I]A QUEL CHE VOI S[I]ETE EQUEL CHISON[O] VOI ANCO[RA] SARETE ('I once was what you are, and what I am you also shall be').

This refers to the legend of *The Three Living and the Three Dead*, in which three young men encounter three corpses. The legend alludes to the vanity and transience of human life on earth (Galderisi & Vincensi, 2018). The stony materiality of the inscription itself serves as an inverted bearer of meaning, setting the fleeting nature of life in stark contrast with the permanence of stone.

The second example similarly references the legend mentioned above: when closed, the outer panels of the *Crucifixion Triptych with Donors* by the so-called Master of Frankfurt (c. 1500–1508) reveal a stone niche made of reddish stone with a rounded arch. Two words appear on the stone, bracketed by punctuation marks and appearing to be carved into the surface: '*Cogita Mori*'. Both the suggested technique of inscription and the typeface, together with the punctuation, recall the tra-

ditions of ancient sepulchral inscriptions, as Rehm aptly observed: thus this inscription simultaneously appears as the initial impulse for the appellative character of the entire image (Rehm, 2019, p. 76). Within the niche, on white draperies as well as on a white stone bier, lies a corpse. In the relatively large empty space above the dead figure floats a wildly convoluted scroll bearing the text from the legend: *VOS ♦ QVI ♦ TRANCITIS ♦ NOSTRE ♦ MEMORES ♦ ROGO ♦ SITIS ♦ QVOD ♦ SVMVS ♦ HOC ♦ ERITIS ♦ FVIMVS ♦ ♦ QVANDOQVE ♦ QVOD ♦ ESTIS* (Städel Museum, 2025).

Here again the beholders are directly addressed and reminded of their own transience. The shorter stone inscription directs attention towards a cultural practice of commemoration of the dead (Rehm, 2019, p. 75ff.), and once more the interplay of image and inscription is bound to the depiction of the crucified Christ on the central panel of the triptych.

Both examples demonstrate how the inscription in combination with the carrier of writing in this case stone is feigned as a central medium of the *'memento mori'* message: it confronts the viewer with their own mortality while simultaneously pointing to the hope of salvation through faith. At the same time, the materiality of stone acquires particular significance, as it opposes the body's perishability to the presumed permanence of an enduring medium, thus intensifying the tension between the earthly and the transcendent.

4.3. Third Case study: Temporal experience and cultural reference
Both Van Eyck and Mantegna excelled in imitating diverse stone types throughout their works (Kemp, 1995). That both painters also perfect the imitation of script, which seems to be logically chiselled or carved into the stone according to the material, is particularly shown by two works. Subsequently, therefore, Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man* (1432, fig. 1) in London and Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian* in Vienna (c. 1457/59, fig. 2) shall be examined in relation to their stone inscriptions.

In the earlier work by Van Eyck, it is the portrait of an unknown man wearing a dark green chaperon, a typi-cal head covering in the 15th-century Burgundian period. The figure is situated behind a stone balustrade, which shows clear signs of age. The edges are chipped in many places, and the stone shows cracks and dents. On the balustrade, three inscriptions can be deciphered, which were applied to the imitated stone using different evoked techniques. The most conspicuous inscription is in the centre of the balustrade, is considerably larger than the others and is written in Roman capital letters. Two words can be read in French, LEAL SOVVENIR, which means something like faithful remembrance. Below this, in whitish script, is the painter's signature and date in Latin. The different writing technique is also shown in the legibility of the two inscriptions: whilst the LEAL SOVVENIR is clearly recognisable and readable, the underlying text requires more attention to decipher the words.

The legibility becomes even more difficult with the last inscription, which is found above the LEAL SOVVENIR: very faintly or very old, two words in Greek letters seem to have been scratched into the stone, with the last letter disappearing in a chip of the stone. The Greek words can be transliterated into Latin, a method that Van Eyck used frequently (Jones, 2017a), whereby TYM • THEOS can be read, which can be translated as 'Then God' (Borchert, 2020, p. 42; Paviot, 1995).

Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man* develops a complex dialectic between permanence and transience through the depiction of a stone, but damaged, parapet: Whilst stone traditionally stands for eternity and imperishability, Van Eyck's simulated stone shows clear signs of decay, which demonstrate the power of time over all carriers of memory. The balustrade could thereby consciously convey several meanings: it could thus allude to the transience of man and the inconstancy even of stone (Campbell, 1998, p. 222). The cracks and fissures become visual metaphors for the erosion of time, which spares not even the most durable material. The inscription LEAL SOVVENIR with its appeal for loyal remembrance thus acquires a tragic dimension, since the loyalty of memory is challenged by the materiality. This is also shown in the representation of the inscriptions themselves: a large crack runs between the two words LEAL and SO-

VVENIR (Campbell et al., 2008, p. 98). The other two inscriptions, by contrast, are greatly subdued; executed in white paint, they appear only as if scratched into the stone and already weathered. Both the signature and the Greek inscription are thus depicted in a less permanent technique: The depicted spatial depth stratification of the inscriptions in the stone thus corresponds with the temporal permanence of the inscription techniques: what is more deeply anchored in the stone is meant to endure longer.

The composition also consciously evokes the character of ancient grave monuments and thus a specific form of European memorial culture. Panofsky, Campbell and Jones describe the balustrade in connection with Gallo- or Germanic-Roman gravestones (Panofsky, 1953; Campbell, 1998, p. 222; Jones, 2017b, p. 138). This sepulchral dimension also brings a fundamental temporality into play: grave monuments are primarily media of memory that are meant to survive death and carry the memory of the deceased into the future. The possibility of a "posthumous, thus painted memorial image after death" (Campbell, 1998, p. 222) considerably strengthens this temporal dimension: The stone imitation would then not only simulate permanence, but the specific permanence of the memory of the dead. In this sense, the Greek inscription TUM OTHEOS could also be understood, which is now predominantly translated as 'Then God'. Thus, the portrayed person, but also the painter, would commend themselves into the hands of God.

In any case, this inscription must be seen as a reference to an ancient tradition, whereby the humanistic claim of the work is shown, which appears more often in Van Eyck's works, especially in his device ALS IXH XAN, which is shown, amongst others, on the frame of his potential self-portrait in London.

Van Eyck composes in the *Portrait of a Man* different temporal levels and memory strategies into a complex overall structure that establishes the temporality of human Memoria as a central theme. The French inscription evokes personal memory and fidelity in the here and now, whilst the Greek inscription refers to learned, humanistic Memoria, which extends over centuries and connects to ancient traditions. However, the stone imitation with its signs of decay fundamentally problematises both forms of memory by thematising their inevitable erosion through time.

In contrast, Mantegna's representation of Saint Sebastian in Vienna (1457–1459) develops an even more complex temporal dialectic than Van Eyck's portrait through the conscious staging of ancient architectures: On a narrow panel, dominated by a reddish marbled column, Saint Sebastian stands in the centre of the picture. His gaze is directed towards heaven, distorted with pain. Although this is one of the first representations of Saint Sebastian in which the suffering and pain inflicted upon him are depicted so plastically, the gaze is distracted by many different motifs. The saint himself stands on a white marble block, around which fragments and pieces of statues lie. Beside the column to which the martyr is bound, the only undestroyed motif is a representation of Victory in a spandrel relief, which extends the direction of the saint's gaze. To the left of the saint appears a Greek inscription, which seems to be scratched or chiselled into the stone. Here too the letters appear with the typical V-shaped incisions and cast shadows that suggest chisel work. Written from top to bottom, thereby copying the column, one can read TO • ΕΡΓΟΝ • ΤΟΥ • ΑΝΔΡΕΟΥ • [?] (TO • ERGON • TOU ANDREOU • [?]), translated as 'the work of Andrea'. The last letters, however, are cut off by stone remains (Arasse, 2014).

The striking ruinous character enables the viewers to have a specific temporal experience: The shown ancient architecture must have been still intact during Sebastian's lifetime. Mantegna, however, presents it in the decayed state of his present and thereby makes visible a historical distance that simultaneously conjures an actuality that still belongs to the saint's martyrdom (Blume, 2019, p. 28). Moreover, this temporal complexity manifests itself in the material presence of the past itself: the past shows itself on the one hand through the minutes that have just passed, which can be read from Sebastian's condition and the disappearing archers, on the other hand through the decades or centuries that have passed before, whose effect can be read from the signs of decay of the once mighty building – now a ruin

(Blumenröder, 2008, p. 119). The composition orchestrates these different temporal levels through a symbolic stratification: whilst the old world literally crumbles at Sebastian's feet, the goddess of victory in the lunette field above announces the dawn of Christianity. The relief with the wine harvest scene on the wall serves as a symbolic hinge between old and new order, as it on the one hand refers to ancient sarcophagus reliefs and on the other hand through the wine harvest motif to the Passion and thus to Christ (Brown, 2013, p. 22ff.). As material memories of the "prehistory" of the church, the decayed stone reliefs, the fallen idol and the winged Victoria simultaneously recall their renewal in the present (Blumenröder, 2008, p. 165). In this structure, the inscription takes on a remarkable position: it appears almost in the centre of the picture and directly next to the saint's body as a chiselled inscription on the ancient pillar: in Greek, one can read „the work of Andrea" (Blume, 2019, p. 29). Here too, the Greek letters can be transformed into Latin letters – using the same transcription code as Van Eyck. It is the Graecised version of the Latin phrase OPUS ANDREAE MANTEGNAE, which he had applied to earlier works.

The positioning of the signature develops a paradoxical temporality: it is placed in a location where it could not be seen when the building was still upright, namely between the joints of the richly decorated pillar. It is located inside the pillar, embedded in the material of the stone, and would have remained completely invisible had the building not fallen into decay. Only the decay into a ruin brings the artist's name to light and thus addresses a temporal experience that relates to the timelessness of true fame (Helke, 2010, p. 243ff.). This conception consciously evokes ancient anecdotes about artistic signature practices, such as those of Sostratos, the architect of the Lighthouse of Alexandria, and Phidias, who placed his self-portrait on the shield of Pallas Athena. The translation into Greek is also here a sign of humanistic scholarship, whereby both the painter and the patron could distinguish themselves (Helke, 2009, p. 32f.).

In conclusion, it must be established that Mantegna's signature does not come across as ephemeral, modestly written on a small piece of paper or at the edge of the pictorial event, as Mantegna himself had previously done and as his contemporary painter colleagues occasionally did. Instead, it stands out as if chiselled into the architecture of the arch to which the tormented Sebastian is bound, moreover in a core layer of the stone courses, which could only have become visible again through the partial destruction of the ancient monument. Thereby, the inscription becomes a "sign of conscious creative power" (Blumenröder, 2008, p. 119 Orig. in German). But this hint also has a temporal aspect, for only the decay of the revered antiquity brings the artist's name to light. The temporal experience thus shows itself in the timelessness of fame (Blume, 2019, p. 29), which stands contrary to the statement of the stone balustrade in Van Eyck.

The two works develop contrasting conceptions regarding time, Memoria and permanence, yet both employ the material fiction of stone as their primary means of expression. Despite their divergent temporal approaches, both artists share fundamental medial strategies: Firstly, there emerges a hierarchisation through material fiction, which also appeared in the previous case studies. Both utilise various simulated stone techniques for the semantic differentiation of their inscriptions. What appears to be engraved more deeply into the stone claims greater permanence. Secondly, the employment of Greek and Latin signals learned education, connects diverse cultural traditions, whilst also creating intellectual distinction.

In both instances, the inscriptions are deployed as integral components of complex architectural and temporal reference systems, explicitly addressing the conditions of artistic authorship and its relationship to time.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the examined case studies has shown that the staged stony materiality of inscriptions in 15th--century panel painting creates a hybrid medium between text, image, and materiality that generates meaning on multiple levels.
The imitation of stone opens semantic intensification:

inscriptions appear as permanently inscribed, authoritative testimonies of authorship, sanctity, or remembrance, while functioning as bearers of cultural and historical references that invoke both antique and Christian-sacral traditions. The fiction of materiality itself becomes reflexive – setting transience against permanence, presence against remembrance, earthly time against transcendent eternity.

The case studies highlight different focal points: epigraphic signatures and invocative inscriptions primarily negotiate questions of authority and sacrality, while sepulchral contexts foreground the dialectic of 'memento mori' and salvation. Van Eyck and Mantegna take this practice to new density, staging stone as a site of cultural and temporal stratification where individual Memoria, humanist erudition, and artistic authorship intersect. Painted stone inscriptions in the 15th-century thus represent a complex means of expression that draws on epigraphic traditions while forming an integral part of pictorial composition. In their interweaving of script, materiality, and image, they condense central themes of the period—from authorship and Memoria to questions of transience and permanence – in a particularly striking way.

Figure 1. Jan van Eyck, Portrait of a Man (Léal Souvenir), 1432, London, The National Gallery, 33.3 x 18.9 cm, oil on oak wood.
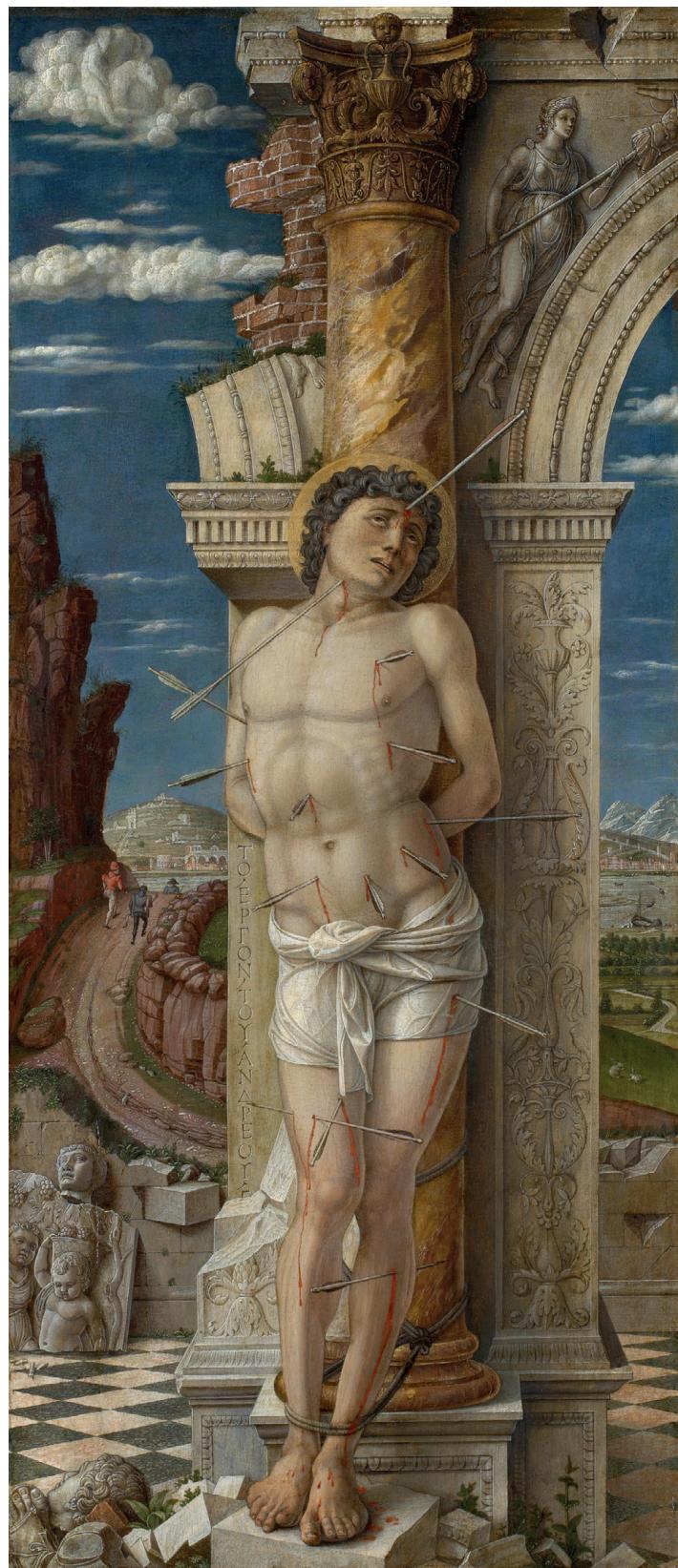© The National Gallery, London

Figure 2. Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Sebastian, c. 1457-59, Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 68 x 30 cm, Oil on poplar wood. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien*

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Andrea_Mantegna_-_St._Sebastian_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests. The author also declares full adherence to all journal research ethics policies.

About the Author

Anna Elisabeth Krebs studied Historically Oriented Cultural Sciences and General Art History at the universities of Saarbrücken, Siena and Bochum. In 2020, she received the University Prize for excellent theses for her master thesis on Romanesque capital sculptures. In the same year she started her PhD thesis under Prof Dr Ulrich Rehm at Ruhr University Bochum on the topic 'Schrift im Bild. Eine künstlerische Neubestimmung durch Jan van Eyck'. In October 2021, she was awarded a doctoral scholarship by the 'Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes' (National Academic Foundation). In 2023 and 2024, she worked for several months as a visiting researcher at KIK IRPA (Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage) in Brussels. Since January 2025, she has been an associate member of the DFG Graduate School 2945 at Ruhr University Bochum.

In addition, she was recently invited to present her research at conferences in Paris (Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France and the Université Paris Nanterre) and Cambridge (HNA Conference 2024: Britain and the Low Countries: Cultural Exchange Past, Present & Future) as well as at various work-shops (including the Museum for Fine Arts (MSK), Ghent).

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