

The Lion, The Saint, The Artist – Sara Riccardi

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Picture this: one old man, weirdly inclined to befriend big wild cats, one artist and one art historian, united by a rather intense fascination with books, knowledge and concepts, and one city, The Eternal City — plus magnificent Florence as a special guest. These are the main characters of the story behind this exhibition, informed by a fortnight of walks, encounters, discussions, and a couple of ice creams in between.

As I (the art historian) and Nicola Dale (the artist) set out for a research trip in Rome (The Eternal City) we had a simple plan to hunt down as many artistic representations of Saint Jerome (the old man with weird habits) as we could find. As an artist interested in knowledge and its transmission, Dale had decided to focus on Jerome, a scholar in the early Christian Church who produced a translation of the Bible in Latin that would then become canonical, from medieval to modern times, exerting 'an incalculable influence not only on the piety but on the languages and literature of Western Europe'.¹ We did not know exactly what to expect, nor had we any precise idea of what would result from the trip. This exhibition is a part of the outcome but, as it often happens in Dale's work, the various elements of the story behind it are reshaped through layers of personal interpretation and conceptual translation.

S I think the weird iconography, in terms of facial features, depends on the culture of the artist [...] some elements, that are those needed to actually make the communication work, are still there, but others are freely re-elaborated.

N And that's actually one of the things that I've really enjoyed, just how many different men represent him, apart from the actual use, apart from the style of painting, just all the different faces, different men, every time.

The above conversation happened in front of a small head-and-shoulder painting of Saint Jerome from the sixteenth century, in the beautiful Galleria Borghese. The artist is named as 'Unknown master from Northern Italy'. The bust's status as an arguably minor example, when compared to those by the likes of Ribera or Mantegna, and its very simple iconography offered us the opportunity to reflect on the 'many different men' that represent Jerome. When everything else — artistic quality, composition, interpretation of the subject matter — was stripped back, we could still appreciate the aspect of the representation of an individual. As the work in the exhibition manifests, Dale has been evolving that initial thought, expressed in front of the small portrait, resulting in the series of 'different faces' found in *Figurehead*.

Artists have long been fascinated by the multiple aspects of Jerome: through his life he came to embody many aspects of Christian spirituality, 'from ascetic meditation to preaching and anti-heterodox activity',² and his iconography reflects this multiplicity. Although our research in Rome put us in contact mainly with Southern-European examples from the fifteenth to nineteenth century, with an obvious prevalence of Italian ones, we came across all the various typologies of Saint Jerome's image.

Jerome was a Christian in fourth-century Italy. After developing a passion for Latin literature, he later devoted himself to the study of Christian writing, and in his early thirties he retired to the Syrian desert to spend time in penitence, vowing to abandon once and for all the study of pagan texts and the luxuries of his youth.

In front of Federico Barocci, 'Saint Jerome in Prayer', second half 1590s, oil on canvas, Galleria Borghese, Rome:

N So, he is holding his rock [...] and this time he's really staring at the Crucifix.

S Yes, he's almost crying. He has a very tormented attitude.

N Including the pose.

S [...] I can almost hear him asking for forgiveness [...]

N And he's a very old man.

The years in penitence in the desert inform the iconography of the Penitent Saint Jerome, where the man is set in a landscape — often beautifully described and not very desert-like³ — and is shown meditating in front of a Crucifix, beating himself with a stone. Although he was actually fairly young in his penitence years, he has been passed on in the visual tradition as an older man, authoritative and sorrowful, especially when seen physically suffering. The extreme thinness or a certain weakness of his body in some representations reflect the rigour of Jerome's ascetism, described in his letters, particularly in those addressed to a group of wealthy Roman widows who would refer to him for directions on how to lead an ascetic life — a tutelage that some members of the Roman clergy regarded with some suspicion.⁴

In front of Antonio del Massaro da Viterbo, known as Il Pastura, 'Saint Jerome in Penitence', part of the triptych with 'The Virgin bestowing the belt to Saint Thomas' and 'The Mass of Saint Gregory', left panel, 1497, tempera on panel, Musei Vaticani, Rome:

S It's the first time that we see the detail of the wound that he produces on his own body by beating himself with the stone [...] We always see him holding the rock in the stretched arm, while here there's blood on his torso, and there's blood on the stone as well — that's so realistic, and uncomfortable.

After becoming a priest and spending some years in Rome as Pope Damasus' secretary, Jerome spent the last thirty years of his life in Bethlehem, where he founded a male monastery and attended to the study and translation of the Bible, from the original Hebrew and Greek into Latin, producing the version that would become canonical for centuries. Some of the women he had been spiritually guiding in Rome followed him, living in a female monastery.

In front of Domenico Ghirlandaio, 'Saint Jerome in the study', 1480, fresco, Church of Ognissanti, Florence:

N This feels like a real study, with the objects on the shelf, his reading glasses, and two different inks, the black and red ink on the side [...] and did you see the red and black ink have got little spatters of ink around them on the wood? Like he's been dipping his pen and as he's dipped in it, it sprayed [...] so, this is obviously Jerome the scholar, writing, translating, but taking a moment to look at the viewer.

Jerome the Scholar is then a different iconography, which focuses on the Saint's contribution to theology and mainly on his Bible translation work. Often though, the different iconographies merge and he is represented with both his books and the penitence attributes, bare-chested and set in caves or in the wilderness, especially in the Italian and Spanish tradition.⁵ In some cases, these scenes present the additional element of a trumpet, blowing from the sky and interfering with the scholar's work — a reference to a mystical vision experienced by the Saint, in which he could hear the sound of the trumpets of the Last Judgement.

In front of Lionello Spada, 'Saint Jerome', 1615, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale Palazzo Barberini, Rome:

S So, apparently this is the most popular iconography, the one that actually brings together different elements of his life [...] because again, he's the hermit, but he's working.

Jerome died in Bethlehem in 419, leaving a radical mark in his time, not only with his scholarly work but also through his active engagement in the politics of the Church and the fight against heresy. The corpus of his letters and his theological writings gained him the title of Doctor of the Latin Church.⁶

In front of Andrea Lilli, 'St. Jerome', after 1585, fresco, Chapel of St. Nicholas of Tolentino, Church of Sant'Agostino in Campo Marzio, Rome:

S Stood on a cloud...

N ...with the lion at his feet [...]

S [...] And he has got a huge book.

N [...] He's with a halo, which we have seen less often, but he's in Heaven.

S Yes, he's in Heaven and he is one of the four Doctors [...]

N He's wearing red, and he's not bare-chested because, again, he is up there.

S And he's a Doctor, and not the hermit or the penitent.

The lion and the colour red are two of the most recognisable features of Jerome's iconography, and often identify him when represented in the 'Four Doctors' group. Interestingly enough, they both come from popular tradition, and are, historically speaking, incorrect. Red garments are meant to signify Jerome's status as a Cardinal, but the institution of the Cardinalate as a position in the Church's hierarchy was created only after Jerome's times.⁷ Still, to clad the figure in Cardinal robes or to prop a Cardinal hat next to his cave in the desert was an easy way (for artists working in a time when the institution was instead well established) of identifying him as someone who, in life, had been only one step below the Pope — a reference to his role as Pope Damasus' secretary.

As for the lion, the episode of Jerome extracting a painful thorn from the animal's paw while in Bethlehem, gaining its eternal loyalty and friendship, is a legendary one. It shows that even the wildest beasts recognised Jerome's exceptional status as a Saint: 'in a Christian perspective [...], the holy man who tames a lion by removing the thorn from its paw possesses divine powers'.⁸ And yet, literary sources from the seventh century tell the story in connection to another Saint, an abbot called Gerasimus. It is only with later accounts, from the ninth century onwards, that the episode is found in the life of Saint Jerome. The similarity between the two Latin names (Gerasimus/Hieronymus) is most probably the reason for the confusion in the first place, but then the mistake was repeated in hagiographic literature and the association between Jerome and the lion became canonical. Biographers of the Saint from the sixteenth century were aware of the mistaken association, and yet one of them defended its inclusion regardless, arguing that 'without the animal the faithful might not recognize the saint'.⁹

In front of Venetian School, 'St. Jerome', 16th century, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale Palazzo Corsini, Rome:

S What do we have?

N Okay, so we have the visual attributes we'd expect: the Cardinal's hat, the red robe, the beard, the bald head, the Crucifix, the lion and stone and the skull, but there's also an hourglass [...] reminder of time and death, and life and all bits in between

So, the traditional iconography of Saint Jerome is based on his life, but also on conventions, mistakes, traditions, and never-ending combinations of all the elements that characterise him. One man, many faces. One Saint, many roles. One subject, many attributes.

In front of Andrea Lilli, 'St. Jerome', after 1585, fresco, Chapel of St. Nicholas of Tolentino, Church of Sant'Agostino in Campo Marzio, Rome:

N I've just realised he's not actually looking at the book, he is looking away.

S No, again, he has that swirling position [...] more than all of the other three [Doctors]!

N It's a strange attribute to describe, but it is an attribute, that his gaze is always, well, not always, his gaze is often...

S ...yes! Yes! Yeah, very often his face is not in line with the rest of his body: there's a torsion that sometimes starts from the shoulders, sometimes starts from the waist, but often there's a movement...

N ...there's a twist. Although we've noticed it before, it's the first time I thought of it as an attribute — but it is one, isn't it? It happens so often.

S Yes, and I'm realising it feels like something that helps me recognise him [...] it feels familiar that he is in that position, and now that I look at the other three, they are not.

The above fragment of conversation represents a pivotal moment in the re- search trip: the identification of what Dale and I went on to describe as 'the twist', a feature of Jerome's representation that appears regularly. Attributes or features of a Saint's iconography are transmitted throughout the centuries by mutual influences, repetition and contamination. Some aspects, such as Jerome's twist, might never be consciously codified, yet become part of the visual tradition of the subject.

Dale's new body of work enters into direct dialogue with this tradition, taking as a fundamental point of reference exactly one of those aspects that developed in a less-structured way. Rather than citing the physical objects that regularly accompany Jerome — the lion, the books, the stone — the artist has been fascinated by two subtler and less material aspects: the twist, which has become the material means to the realisation of the pieces, and the many sides of this ultimately unknowable figure.

Jerome went back to the original languages of the Bible to produce his final Latin translation, while Dale has been facing the task of translating painting into sculpture, returning to the unifying element between them — drawing. A very small selection of the paintings we observed during the trip have been sketched by the artist, and on these sketches she based the sculptures that now inhabit the new space of the University gallery, pointing their gazes in a multitude of directions.

Picture this: one old man, a man who embodies the many paths to sanctity and whose contribution to knowledge and culture in the modern Western world is immense. Then, picture a contemporary artist and combine them in the contemporary world. Dale grounds her work in the authority of the past, basing her modern sculptures on historical paintings (which include a Leonardo), and brings them into the present by exploring the formal possibilities of sculpture and the conceptual challenge of defining one's identity. *Figurehead* reflects on the power and threat of distraction, of pointing our gaze in all directions, of twisting ourselves in multiple occupations. As detrimental as it can sometimes seem in our increasingly distracting times, Jerome shows us that, if done constructively and creatively, it can also lead us to achieve exceptional things, such as having a lion for a pet.

In front of Domenico Beccafumi, 'St. Jerome', first half of 16th century, oil on canvas, Galleria Doria Pamphilij, Rome:

S The lion doesn't really look like a lion.

N No, it looks like a man with a moustache pretending to be a lion.

1 John N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975), p. 162.

2 Marco Lattanzi, 'Il tema del "San Girolamo nell'eremo" e Lorenzo Lotto', in *Il San Girolamo di Lorenzo Lotto a Castel Sant'Angelo*, ed. by Bruno Contardi and Augusto Gentili (Rome: Romana Società Editrice, 1983), pp. 54–70 (p. 56). (Author's translation).

3 For some considerations on the relevance of the landscape in Jerome's iconography see Elizabeth Pilliod, 'Alessandro Allori's "The Penitent Saint Jerome"', *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University*, 47.1 (1988), pp. 2–26 (pp. 5–6); and Grete Ring, 'St. Jerome Extracting the Thorn from the Lion's Foot', *The Art Bulletin*, 27.3 (1945), 188–94 (p. 188).

4 Megan H. Williams, *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 53–54.

5 For more on variations in the iconography of the Saint in the Netherlandish area, see Ring, *St. Jerome Extracting the Thorn*, p. 192, note 36; and John O. Hand, "'Saint Jerome in His Study" by Joos van Cleve', *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University*, 49.2 (1990), pp. 2–10.

6 The most important Doctors of the Latin Church, often represented in a group of four, are Saint Jerome, Saint Augustine, Saint Ambrose and Saint Gregory the Great. They all contributed to the foundation of Christian theology in the first centuries of life of the Church.

7 'While the title 'Cardinal' became current during the barbarian invasions of Eastern Europe, especially in the sixth century [...], it was only in the eleventh century that the Sacred College at Rome took institutional form, the Roman Cardinals becoming the principal counsellors and assistants of the popes'. Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 334, note 6.

8 Eugene F. Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 39–40.

9 Pilliod, *Alessandro Allori's "The Penitent Saint Jerome"*, p. 7. For more on the transmission of the episode through literary sources see Ring, *St. Jerome Extracting the Thorn*, pp. 189–190.