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St. Jerome: Penitent and Scholar

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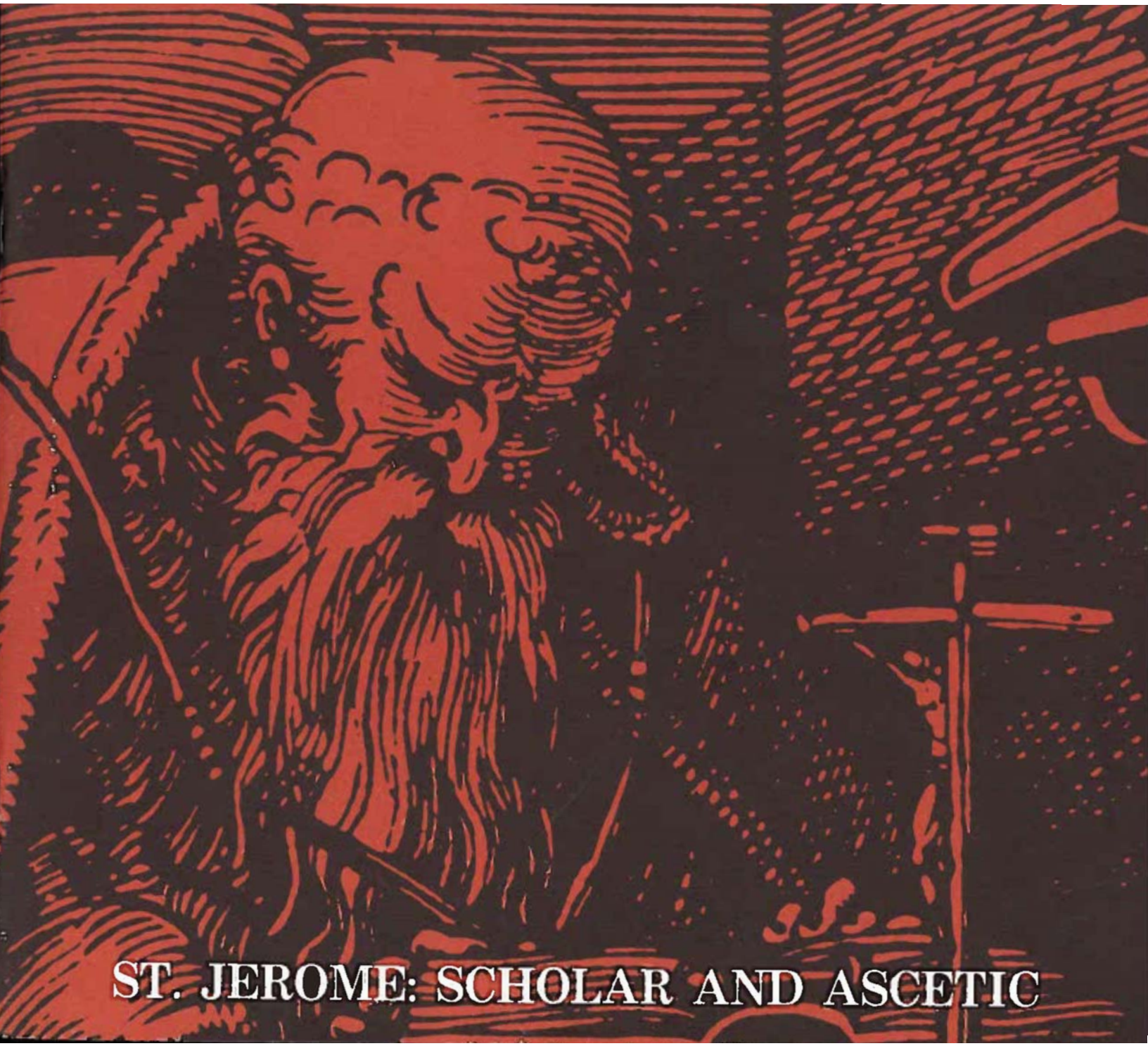
ST. JEROME: SCHOLAR AND ASCETIC

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TEXT BY: DR. PENNY HOWELL JOLLY

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Preface

We are most grateful to the following persons and institutions who have loaned their works of art for this exhibition: Joan Lukach, Art Gallery Director, and Sally Mills, Curator, Vassar College Art Gallery; Ellen D'Oench, Curator of Prints and Janette G. Boothby, Registrar of Collections, Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University; Rafael Fernandes, Curator of Prints and Drawings and Martha Asher, Registrar, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute; and Colta Ives, Curator of Prints and Photographs, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

David Miller, Gallery Director
Skidmore Art Gallery
Penny Howell Jolly, Assistant Professor of Art
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Fig. 1: Albrecht Dürer, "St. Jerome in his Cell"

St. Jerome: Scholar and Ascetic

The Renaissance revived interest in many people from the classical past, one of whom was the early Christian saint Jerome. Rarely depicted during the Middle Ages, Jerome ranks among *the* most popular Renaissance saints, and remains a favorite in the art of the following two centuries. Jerome may at first appear an unlikely hero: often pictured as an elderly monk, he was well-known for his irascibility and irritability. But, the scholarly and pious Jerome was the perfect model for the Christian humanists of the Renaissance. We shall explore in this essay the circumstances that led to Jerome's increased popularity during the Renaissance and following centuries.

The Historical Jerome

Jerome (or Hieronymus) was born on the Dalmatian coast of modern-day Yugoslavia in about the year 340 A.D., and in about 360 went to Rome to begin his education. There he studied pagan and Christian authors, and was baptized as a Christian. In the years following, he continued his education in France and Germany, and travelled widely in the Near East. Disturbed by a dream in which he was called before God, flagellated, and accused of being more interested in Cicero than in Christ, Jerome isolated himself in the desert wilderness. There he lived as a penitent hermit for several years, enduring physical hardships in order to purify himself. Then, after his return to Rome in 382 and in acquiescence to requests from Pope Damasus, he began his monumental work on the Vulgate translation of the Bible, his most important contribution to Christianity. Jerome knew Latin and Greek well because of his extensive classical education, and had made himself study Hebrew secretly with an old Jew while in the desert: he writes in a later letter that he considered learning Hebrew one of the tortures he endured while in the wilderness! This knowledge of Greek, Latin and Hebrew, however, made Jerome the ideal scholar to reexamine the various textual redactions extant of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, and to create a new Latin translation. It was a project which was to occupy him for several decades, but his Vulgate has remained a standard text of the Catholic Bible.

Although Jerome worked for Pope Damasus in Rome, he made many enemies there, due to his outspoken criticism of prominent Christians. In 385 he left the city — to which he refers pejoratively in his writings as "Babylon" — and settled in 386 in Bethlehem. There he founded a monastery and worked at his scholarly pursuits in his study-cave, turning out numerous letters dealing with theological issues, addressed to friends and foes alike; various treatises, such as two which offer Biblical support for the perpetual virginity of the Virgin Mary, a problem which at that time was unresolved, but which was never again an issue after Jerome; biographies of his fourth and fifth century contemporaries in the Church; numerous sermons; and many commentaries on theological texts requested by Christians all over the Roman world. Jerome remained in Bethlehem until his death in the year 420 A.D.

St. Jerome in the Middle Ages

Jerome is pictured in art during the one thousand years between his death and the Renaissance, but the images are few in number and vary little in type. Most commonly we see author portraits of Jerome as frontispieces in editions of the Vulgate or his other writings, or we see him depicted as one of the four Latin Church Fathers, accompanied by Sts. Gregory, Ambrose, and Augustine. In both of these types of representations, he is typically seated as an author at work in his study. Theologians during these centuries praise Jerome's wisdom and scholarly talents, seeing his Vulgate translation as a source of "nourishment" for spiritually "hungry" mankind during its search for Salvation.

It is, however, in the century just preceding the Renaissance that two major developments occurred which would permanently affect the cult of Jerome. First, the Late Gothic world of the fourteenth century saw a resurgence of *monasticism* in its most extreme, eremetical sense. Bodily mortification — e.g., flagellation, hair-shirts, fasting — became common, as pious Christians withdrew from the worldly existence and isolated themselves in monasteries. As a consequence, Jerome's own trials and mortifications in the wilderness

Fig. 2: Anonymous, Florentine, "St. Jerome in Penitence"

Fig. 3: Lucas Cranach the Elder, "The Penitence of St. Jerome"

became models of Christian behaviour, and his many writings about the lives of other desert hermits were read and became the basis of popular tracts about this mode of existence.

Second, the fourteenth century anticipated the Renaissance through its increasing awareness of and scholarly interest in *the classical world.* Italians such as Petrarch and Dante began to sing the praises of classical authors, and this encouraged interest in Jerome and his writings, for he was recognized as being a Roman scholar. More significantly, a law professor at the University of Bologna, Giovanni Andrea, decided to single-handedly promote the cult of the scholarly Jerome. His book, the *Hieronymianus* of c. 1342, compiled all the known information about Jerome and encouraged study and worship of him. Giovanni recognized the importance of art in such a campaign, and so he even instructed artists about how to depict Jerome:

> with a Cardinal's hat, for now he would be a Cardinal, seated, and with a lion at his side.

Jerome was no Cardinal — Cardinals did not even exist yet in Jerome's day — but Giovanni thought this an appropriate office for one who was so close to a Pope. His inclusion of a lion in reference to the story of the thorn removal actually derived from an old legend told of *Gerasimus,* not Jerome, but already by the ninth century there was confusion regarding who had performed the deed. Giovanni Andrea's promotion, however, ensured that the legend of friendship between man and beast was firmly established as Jerome's. So we see that the fourteenth century exalted Jerome for two completely different aspects of his life: for his penitential years as a suffering hermit when he associated with wild beasts, and for his scholarly pursuits as a Cardinal.

Jerome as Penitent during the Renaissance

It is exactly these two facets of Jerome's career which were responsible for his popularity during the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In terms of art, they were first kept distinct.

Indeed, one would hardly recognize that the penitent Jerome in the wilderness and the scholarly Cardinal Jerome were one and the same saint. Images of the penitent Jerome in the desert first appeared during the opening decades of the fifteenth century in Tuscany, the area around Florence in central Italy, where several Hieronymite monasteries had been recently founded. The new pictorial type was based on earlier Byzantine and Western images of penitent monks, which were popularized during the monastic resurgence of the fourteenth century, and clearly the new image celebrated the life of the ascetic recluse.

The images specifically reflect Jerome's autobiographical writings about his penance in the desert. In them, we see Jerome depicted as an elderly monk, haggard and dirty, beating his bloodied chest in penance. Generally the inhospitable landscape surrounding him is inhabited by beasts such as scorpions, snakes, and lions, although in some examples these are omitted. Usually a crucifix is present, for Christ's mortification on the cross is Jerome's inspiration while at prayer. Jerome described his experiences vividly in a letter he wrote to a young female follower, Eustochium, in 384:

> . . . in that lonely waste, scorched by the burning sun, which affords to hermits a savage dwelling-place, how often did I fancy myself surrounded by the pleasures of Rome! . . . Tears and groans were every day my portion; and if sleep ever overcame my resistance and fell upon my eyes, I bruised my restless bones against the naked earth . . . But though in my fear of hell I had condemned myself to this prison-house, where my only companions were scorpions and wild beasts, I often found myself surrounded by bands of dancing girls. My face was pale with fasting; but though my limbs were cold as ice my mind was burning with desire . . . Filled with stiff anger against myself, I would make my way alone into the desert; and when I came upon some hollow valley or rough mountain or precipitous cliff, there I would set up my oratory, and make that spot a place of torture for my unhappy flesh. (Epistle 22:7)

Fig. 4: Hieronymus Cock (after Bruegel), "St. Jerome in the Desert"

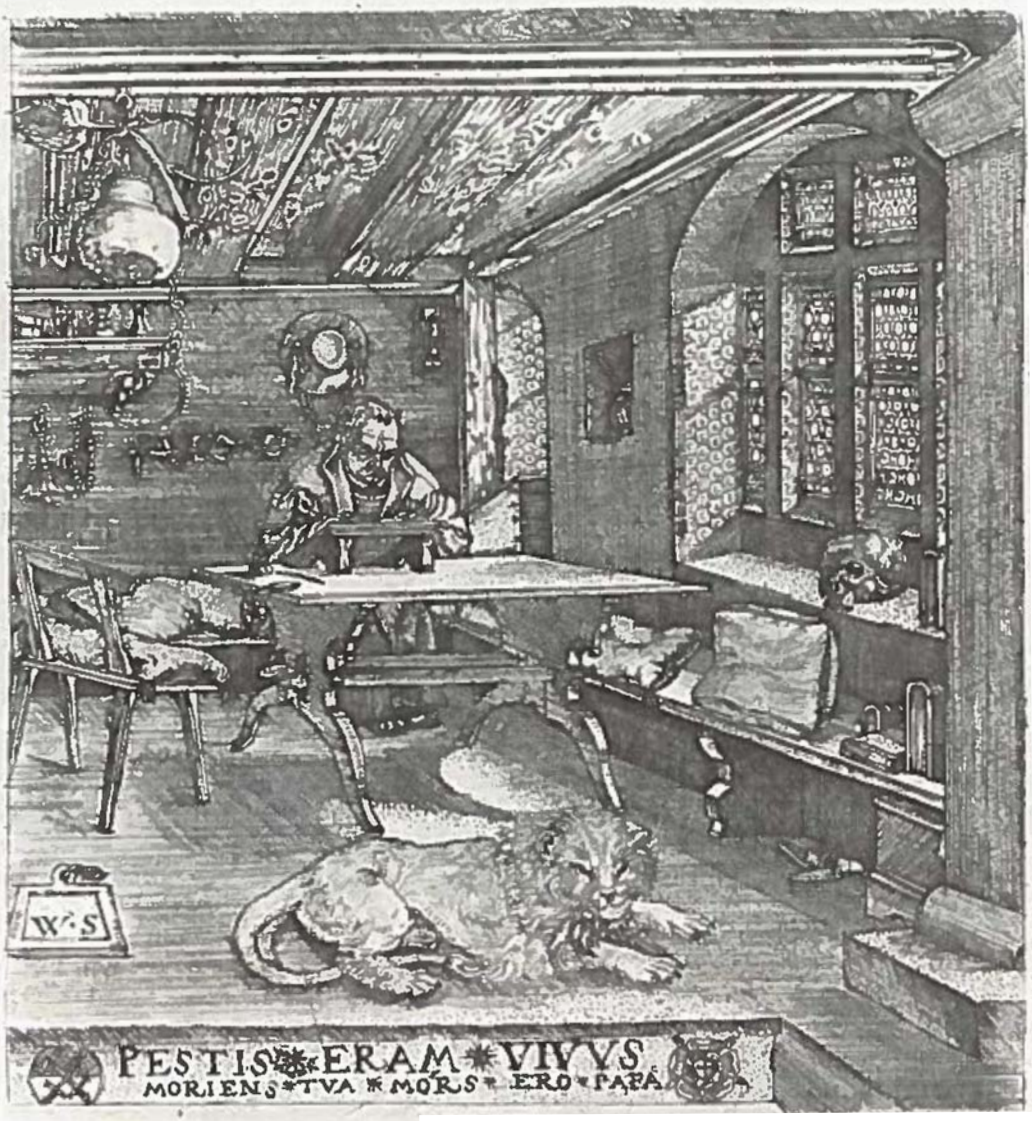

Fig. 5: Master W.S., "A Portrait of Martin Luther as St. Jerome"

Clearly this passage was well-known to the Florentine artists who first depicted the penitent Jerome in the wilderness. For example,
Fig.2 the anonymous Florentine "St. Jerome in Penitence" from about 1500 is an interesting engraving which seems to have been inspired by earlier versions done of this scene in the mid-Quattrocento. Jerome beats his breast vigorously in front of a rocky cave, while his only companion, a lion, roars at his side. Haggard and ill-clad, he turns his eyes towards Heaven and an image of Christ on the Cross. Although Jerome is surrounded by a relatively detailed landscape, the anonymous engraver forces the viewer to focus on the pained figure of the penitent saint by pressing it up close to the picture plane. The ship in the harbour in the background may derive from earlier images of the life of Jerome where he is shown making the boat trip to the wilderness, while the buildings may be a reference to the monastery Jerome founded in the wilderness at Bethlehem.

While fifteenth century artists of the Florentine school wished to demonstrate the extremely pious nature of the hermit Jerome, another aspect of the story grew increasingly appealing. The great sixteenth century landscapists of the Venetian School and the Danube School particularly enjoyed the opportunity afforded them by this subject for depicting extensive landscapes, and Jerome remained a favorite among these artists. We see this in Cornelis Cort's engraving of Jerome done after a painting by Titian, and in several of the dramatic works by the Germans Dürer, Cranach, Altdorfer, and Baldung Grien. The earliest of this group, Dürer's "St. Jerome in the Wilderness" of c. 1496, shows the Renaissance attitude towards the scene by focussing on a relatively large figure of the saint
Fig.3 and his lion within a desolate landscape. Cranach's "St. Jerome in Penitence" of 1509 immediately sets the tone for what will happen to this theme in the Danube School. The figure of Jerome becomes smaller while the landscape grows more extensive and dramatic in its handling. The church and wall in the left background in Cranach's print may be a reference to the monastery which Jerome founded in the wilderness, but of course Cranach makes no attempt to accurately reproduce the architectural style or topography of fifth century Bethlehem.

Fig. 6: Jusepe de Ribera, "St. Jerome Reading"

Altdorfer is more historically accurate when he places Jerome in a study-cave for his woodcut of c. 1515, for Jerome's final dwelling in Bethlehem was a cave near the grotto of Christ's Nativity. The contrast here of darks and lights and the vault-like quality of the high, pointed ceiling set the mood for this dramatic print, as do the gnarled roots and hanging mosses. He demonstrates his penchant for breaking with tradition in his engraving of "Jerome Walking in a Churchyard." This unusual scene apparently shows the saint setting out into the wilderness — book, crucifix, and rock in hand — to do penance. Hans Baldung Grien's "Jerome" again demonstrates these artists' love for their dark German forests, and suggests well the mystical nature of Jerome's experiences in the desolate wilderness. Jerome's human frailty is all too apparent in Hieronymus
Fig. 4 Cock's etching after a work by Bruegel. There the sweeping landscape completely dominates the scene, while the tiny figure of Jerome is almost lost. Surrounded by dead trees which are reminders of his own mortality, he kneels in penance before his crucifix and cleanses his soul. Titian made similar references to human mortality when he included a skull and hourglass in his image. Yet Jerome did attain a state of ectasy while in the wilderness:

> There sometimes also . . . after many a tear and straining of my eyes to heaven, I felt myself in the presence of the angelic hosts. (Epistle 22:7)

Hans Sebald Beham depicts just such a moment when he includes an angel with Jerome in the wilderness.

St. Jerome in his Study

Depictions of Jerome in his study are more widespread at the opening of the fifteenth century than those of the penitent Jerome, for they evolved from the well-established author portrait images of Jerome found throughout the Middle Ages. However, while the Medieval examples are simple, by the fifteenth century the spatial setting and the variety and number of objects in the study are greatly elaborated. In most examples — due to Giovanni Andrea's influence — Jerome is dressed as a Cardinal, his great hat either on

his head or on a near-by chair. The lion almost always accompanies him in these images, sometimes asking to have the thorn removed from his paw, other times, sleeping peacefully. Jerome's desk becomes more and more cluttered with books and scraps of paper, writing implements and other objects. This theme is particularly popular in Northern Europe — France, the Netherlands, and Germany — where the Northern artists' love of still-life and minutely depicted details seems to blossom along with the popularity of Jerome. All the examples of Jerome in his study in this exhibition are Northern. Of course disguised symbolism plays a role here: we shall discuss below some of the complex meanings of the objects surrounding Jerome. In these fifteenth century Northern works Jerome is almost always seen as dark-haired, beardless and youthful, while Italian examples more commonly show an aged and hirsute Jerome. It appears that the latter draw upon the classical tradition for depicting the wise philosopher type as elderly and bearded. The Italian taste also favors a less complex interior setting, but influence of Northern artists like Jan van Eyck was quickly felt in Italy, and youthful Jeromes and cluttered studies become increasingly popular there by the second half of the fifteenth century.

Iconographical analyses of a number of Renaissance images of Jerome in his study demonstrate the increasing significance accorded to Jerome the scholar. Jerome came to be viewed as a key element with regard to mankind's salvation. Incredible as it may seem, he was seen as being analogous to the Virgin Mary: she made the Word Incarnate in her womb, while Jerome similarly gave the Word physical form through his translation of the Vulgate. Mankind would be able to be saved, because it could obtain the necessary knowledge of Christ by reading the Gospels. Thus artists created images of Jerome at work on the Vulgate in his study which were pictorially similar to the scene of Christ's Incarnation, i.e., the Annunciation. Quite a number of the scenes of St. Jerome in his study include a pristine white towel symbolic of Mary's (and Jerome's) state of purity; apothecary jars which refer to their "healing" capabilities with regard to mankind's "ills" (spiritual ills, of course); or the clear-glass carafe with water in it (a reference to Mary's womb holding

Christ Incarnate, the living water, or, in the case of Jerome, a reference to his creation of the Word in physical form).

Albrecht Dürer created three prints of "St. Jerome in his Study," the two later of which are included in this show. The earliest, a 1492 woodcut, shows a youthful, beardless Jerome. However, Dürer travelled to Italy and, like several of his contemporaries, was greatly affected by the Italian Renaissance. One small manifestation of this new interest is that all his later prints of Jerome show the elderly,
Fig.1 Italian type. In the 1511 woodcut we see the saint busily at work in his crowded study. The crucifix, which originated in the penitent Jerome scenès, is now set on his desk. Dürer rethought the setting and lighting for his 1514 engraving, one of his three great "Meisterstücke." The saint, totally absorbed by his work, sits within a more spacious and sunny interior. He seems to write under the guidance of divine inspiration, for no notes or books clutter his desk. The sleeping dog and drowsy lion create an atmosphere of repose. Only the skull on the windowsill and the hourglass behind Jerome remind the viewer of the seriousness of the work that is being done. This print became enormously popular in Europe, as is evidenced by the numerous copies made of it. While reversed copies were made with no fraudalent intent (e.g., that by Hieronymus Hopfer), we are much more suspicious regarding the motives of artists who made unreversed copies (e.g., Anonymous, Netherlandish, late 16th century).

Dürer's print also influenced many artists who made original
Fig.5 paintings or prints, e.g., Master W.S. who created the "Portrait of Martin Luther as St. Jerome." This is an example of another remarkable development in images of Jerome in his study, that of the disguised portrait. A number of both Northern and Italian works were done where the features of a living or dead Renaissance personnage were used for those of Jerome. The earliest that we presently know of is the *Jerome* in Detroit which is attributed to Jan van Eyck (c. 1435), which Erwin Panofsky convincingly demonstrated to be a disguised portrait of Cardinal Nicolas Albergati. Master W.S.'s portrait, like the Detroit *Jerome*, is an elaborate compliment, and refers to Luther's piety and scholarship.

Jerome's Popularity

It may seem remarkable that two such contradictory views of Jerome could simultaneously exist in the Renaissance, that of the pious, ill-clad ascetic who beats his breast with a rock, and that of the rational theologian and classical scholar. Yet Jerome's popularity during this period is attested to by the great number of paintings, sculptures, and prints done of him. The reason seems to lie in his broad appeal. For example, Christians had long prayed to a personal patron saint, usually one who shared their own given name. A new development became popular in the fifteenth century, that of choosing one's personal saint because of some other affinity. For example, *Cardinals* whose names were not "Jerome" chose Jerome as their patron saint because he was so outstanding a Cardinal; *hermit monks* similarly choose Jerome to pray to because of his promotion of the eremetical existence; and *scholars*, particularly Christian humanists, felt an affinity to Jerome because they were Christian, but were interested in the Greek and Roman past.

It was probably this last class of admirers that assured Jerome's popularity during the Renaissance. Jerome confirmed that one could be both a Christian and a pagan scholar. We must remind ourselves that Renaissance Europe, with all its interests in the classical, pagan past, remained a Christian world of pious men and women who had genuine concerns regarding their fates after death. Jerome was trained in Vergil and Horace, he knew well the works of Cicero, and often referred to these pagans in his religious writings. Yet no one could doubt the Christian piety of this great theologian who renounced the worldly existence in favor of the contemplative life of a hermit and scholar. The potentially embarrassing story — that of Jerome's flagellation before God because he was a Ciceronian and not a Christian — Jerome himself had later belittled and ignored, saying that one could not take a dream seriously. Jerome symbolized all that the Christian humanists hoped to be.

Jerome's appeal to the Renaissance humanists was on another level, too. The humanists, when pursuing their classical studies,

Fig. 7: Rembrandt Van Rijn, "St. Jerome Beside a Pollard Willow"

repeatedly encountered philosophers who praised the contemplative life. Aristotle stated that the supreme good of man should include a minimum of external advantages, and that the contemplative life should be one's goal. Neoplatonism denied the worth of the earthly, tangible world in favor of the intangible. According to the Stoics, another philosophical group popular in the Renaissance, the supreme good consisted of Virtue alone, and therefore there must be a suppression of physical pleasures and physical passions. Jerome's denial of the worldly existance and his scholarly pursuits functioned as both an inspiration to and a justification for the Renaissance Christian humanist.

Jerome in Later Centuries

While the Renaissance is the height of Jerome's popularity, many images of the saint continued to be made in the following centuries. It is noteworthy that during the seventeenth century, scenes emphasizing the scholarly Jerome become much rarer — and still they are more common in Northern Europe — while the penitent Jerome is clearly the favorite. This of course reflects the Baroque era's love of the emotional moment, and most of the versions stress either Jerome's most agonized or most ecstatic moments in the wilderness.

Fig.7 While Rembrandt, in his "St. Jerome by a Pollard Willow", still shows the Northern artist's love of a dramatic and somewhat inhospitable landscape — the lion seems to be suspiciously on guard while the saint is busily writing — it is his "St. Jerome Kneeling in Prayer" which is the more typical Baroque image. Rembrandt moves up close to the saint, and depicts him during a most private moment of contemplation and prayer. In a similar fashion, the great Spaniard *Fig.6* Ribera forsakes any dramatic use of setting, and in his "St. Jerome Reading" we find ourselves intimately close to this elderly hermit who can ignore bodily discomfort and become completely absorbed by his reading. A century later, the power and influence of the Catholic Church has weakened in Europe, and one result is that Jerome is less commonly depicted by artists. Yet even Fragonard — far better known for his frivolous scenes of coy lovers and coquettish

bathers — again depicts the saint in a moment of religious ecstasy, as Jerome transforms his desert wilderness into a place of bliss.

Like the post-medieval world, Jerome is a synthesis of the pagan and the Christian, a man driven by *intellectual needs* as well as *spiritual* ones. Through his unerring piety and his distinguished scholarship, Jerome secured a place for himself in Christian Europe.

Catalogue of the Exhibition

1. Anonymous, German, "St. Jerome in his Study," Page from the Lubeck Bible, printed by Steffen Arndes, 1494; woodcut, 19.0 × 19.6 cm; Davison Art Center Collection, Purchase Fund, 1963.

Fig.2 2. Anonymous, Florentine, "St. Jerome in Penitence," c. 1500; engraving, 22.0 × 16.9 cm; Davison Art Center Collection, Gift of George W. Davison '92, 1944.

3. Albrecht Dürer, German, "St. Jerome in the Wilderness," c. 1496; engraving, 32.0 × 22.2 cm; Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, Gift of Mrs. Felix Warburg and her children, 41.1.26.

Fig.1 4. Albrecht Dürer, German, "St. Jerome in his Cell," 1511; woodcut, 23.5 × 16.0 cm; Davison Art Center Collection, Gift of George W. Davison '92, 1953.

5. Albrecht Dürer, German, "St. Jerome in his Study," 1514; engraving, 24.6 × 19.0 cm; Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, Gift of Mrs. Felix Warburg and her children, 41.1.25.

6. Hieronymus Hopfer, German, "St. Jerome in his Study," 1514; reversed copy after Dürer, etching, 22.3 × 15.5 cm; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 58.40.

7. Anonymous, German, "St. Jerome in his Study," 1514; unreversed copy after Dürer, engraving, 23.9 × 18.4 cm; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 58.42.

Fig.5 8. Master W. S. (Wolfgang Stüber), German, "A Portrait of Martin Luther as St. Jerome in his Study," late 16th century; engraving, 14.0 × 12.6 cm; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 58.41.

Fig.3 9. Lucas Cranach the Elder, German, "The Penitence of St. Jerome," 1509; woodcut, 33.7 × 22.8 cm; Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, Purchase, Fund in Memory of Adolf Katzenellenbogen, 66.24.

10. Albrecht Altdorfer, German, "St. Jerome in the Cave," c. 1515; woodcut, 17.0 × 12.0 cm; Davison Art Center Collection, Gift of George W. Davison '92, 1953.

11. Albrecht Altdorfer, German, "St. Jerome Walking in a Churchyard," c. 1516; engraving, 12.0 × 10.5 cm; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Felix M. Warburg, 1920, 20.64.1.

12. Hans Sebald Beham, German, "St. Jerome and the Angel," 1521; engraving, 11.3 × 7.4 cm; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 1941, 41.1.96.

13. Hans Baldung Grien, German, "St. Jerome in the Desert," early 16th century; chiaroscuro woodcut, 19.1 × 13.08 cm; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1917, 17.72.27.

14. Cornelis Cort (after Titian), Netherlandish, "St. Jerome — After Titian," mid-16th century; engraving, 30.6 × 27.0 cm; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 17.50.16-168.

Fig.4 15. Hieronymus Cock (after Pieter Bruegel), Flemish, "St. Jerome in the Desert," c. 1553-1557; etching, 32.5 × 42.5 cm; Davison Art Center Collection, Purchase Fund, 1957.

Fig.6 16. Jusepe de Ribera, "St. Jerome Reading," c. 1624; etching, engraving, drypoint, 19.0 × 25.0 cm; Davison Art Center Collection, Gift of George W. Davison '92, 1942.

17. Rembrandt Harmensz Van Rijn, Dutch, "St. Jerome Kneeling in Prayer, Looking Down," 1635; etching, 10.2 × 8.2 cm; Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, Gift of Mrs. Felix Warburg and her children, 41.1.99.

Fig.7 18. Rembrandt Harmensz Van Rijn, Dutch, "St. Jerome Beside a Pollard Willow," 1648; etching, second state, 17.8 × 13.3 cm; Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, Gift of Mrs. Felix Warburg and her children, 41.1.68.

19. Jean Honoré Fragonard (after Jan Lis), French, "Penitent St. Jerome," mid-18th century; etching, third state, 16.2 × 11.1 cm; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1977.40.

Figs. 1, 2, 4 and 6 Courtesy of: Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut
Figs. 3 and 7 Courtesy of: Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York
Fig. 5 Courtesy of: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts

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