LEONARDO DA VINCI'S *SAINT JEROME IN THE WILDERNESS*: AN IMAGE OF SPIRITUAL BEAUTY

by

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(Under the Direction of Shelley Zuraw)

ABSTRACT

Leonardo da Vinci's *Saint Jerome* is an unconventional representation of a religious figure. Renaissance saints were typically endowed with appropriate physical markers such as beauty and grace; however, Jerome is haggard and aged. This paper will endeavor to reveal the importance of Leonardo's unusual aesthetic choices as well as illuminate the congruencies between the *Saint Jerome* and Donatello's *Penitent Magdalen.* Donatello's sculpture, which features a similarly haggard and elderly Magdalen, represents a critical prototype for Leonardo's *Saint Jerome*. This paper will also argue that these two works are images of the perfect penitent. The saints' weathered and emaciated exteriors emphasize their humanity and transform them into emblems of wisdom and redemption. In both the *Saint Jerome* and the *Penitent Magdalen*, there is an important message about the beauty, determination, and strength of the human soul.

INDEX WORDS: Leonardo da Vinci, Saint Jerome, penitent, haggard, old age, Donatello, Mary Magdalen, spiritual beauty, divine illumination, humanity

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Introduction

Leonardo da Vinci's unfinished painting *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness* (Fig. 1) is centered on an unexpected portrayal of the penitent saint.[1] The sallow cheeks, hollow eyes, and strained tendons of the saint were unusual characteristics for a religious figure during the Renaissance. Typically, saints were shown with lovely, pleasing features and a nobility of character and manner. There were, however, appropriate occasions for both the representation of ideal beauty and ugliness. For example, in his *The Fall of Man and Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* from 1509-10, Michelangelo transformed the fallen figures of Adam and Eve (Fig. 2), who became knowledgeable of good and evil, into the antithesis of their former idealized selves (Fig 3). The beauty associated with their innocence and purity has been altered by their sinful actions; they are cast out of the Garden of Eden as imperfect figures. To signify a virtuous nature, artists adorned a figure with beautiful and often graceful features. Thus the Madonna, an emblem of purity, is always represented as a beautiful and graceful figure, as seen in many of Leonardo's images of divine perfection such as the *Madonna and Child with a Vase of Flowers*

[1] For the most comprehensive discussion of this painting see Carmen Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003), 370-379. Her entry lists every source between 1804-2002; included in this bibliography is all of the significant non-English literature. It should be noted that, especially for English-speaking readers, sources of particular value still include Kenneth Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 1939;1959, rev. ed. with an intro. by Martin Kemp (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1993), 86-89; Pietro C. Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete Paintings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 95-101; Martin Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, 1981;1989 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 55-57. Since Bambach, the *Saint Jerome* has been discussed at length by Frank Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings* (Cologne: Taschen, 2007), 49-50. This paper cites the English translation of the original German edition, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: Sämtliche Gemälde und Zeichnungen* (Köln: Taschen, 2003), 49-50. The painting also appeared in an exhibition at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta; see Gary Radke, ed., *Leonardo da Vinci and the Art of Sculpture*, exh. cat., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), esp. 166-168.

(Fig. 4).[2] In contrast, a grotesque face was often an indicator of evil or a representation of vice.[3] Andrea Mantegna's dramatic narrative, *Pallas Expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue* (Fig. 5), depicts the idealized and virtuous goddess chasing away the deformed and brutish personifications of vice.[4] This tradition, associating beauty with moral perfection and ugliness with its opposite, seems to have originated from ideas surrounding the classical study of physiognomy. According to ancient philosophers such as Aristotle, the physical form of the body could be transformed through the character of the soul.[5] In his view, physical appearance and character became intertwined and mutually reflective of one another. In other words, a beautiful exterior was assumed to be the result of inner beauty and spiritual harmony while ugliness was associated with immorality.

Such Renaissance characterizations of beauty and ugliness expose the *Saint Jerome* as a visual anomaly. And yet, while Jerome's appearance is absent of the beauty in traditional representations of holy figures during this period, he is not simply ugly. But rather, he is portrayed as specifically haggard and old. A thorough analysis of issues such as the subject, iconography, and style of the painting is needed to determine why Leonardo's figure of Saint Jerome is so unconventional. This paper will endeavor to reveal the significance of Leonardo's

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[2] For more information on the *Madonna and Child with a Vase of Flowers* see Martin Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, 33-34; Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 14-17.

[3] Leonardo delighted in the inexhaustible variety of physical appearance, often drawing contorted, exaggerated, and altogether bizarre faces. In his writings, the artist described these odd faces as monstrous but they would later be referred to as grotesque. See Leonardo da Vinci, *Leonardo on Painting*: *An Anthology of Writings*, ed. by Martin Kemp, trans. by Martin Kemp and Margaret Walker (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989), 208; Martin Clayton, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Divine and the Grotesque* (London: Royal Collections Enterprises Ltd., 2004), 11-14, 73-99; Michael W. Kwakkelstein, "Leonardo da Vinci's Grotesque Heads and the Breaking of the Physiognomic Mould," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 54, (1991): 127-136.

[4] For a comprehensive discussion of this painting see Stephen Campbell, "Mantegna's Mythic Signatures: *Pallas and the Vices*," in *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 145-168.

[5] Aristotle, "Physiognomics," in *Minor Works: On Colours, On Things Heard, Physiognomics, On Plants, On Marvellous Things Heard, Mechanical Problems, On Individual Lines, Situations and Names of Winds, On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias*, trans. by W.S. Hett (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1936), 85.

peculiar aesthetic choices while concomitantly illuminating the conceptual and visual congruencies between the *Saint Jerome* and Donatello's earlier wooden sculpture, the *Penitent Magdalen* (Fig. 6). Furthermore, it will argue that Donatello's *Magdalen* provided Leonardo with the model for this specific penitential type. Both works, although in different media, proffer a unique kinship between divine illumination and extreme unattractiveness as well as old age and spiritual wisdom. The weathered and emaciated exteriors of both Saint Jerome and Saint Mary Magdalen were intended to emphasize the humanity of these religious figures and their fervent devotion to Christ; thus, transforming them into empathetic emblems of wisdom, penitence, and redemption. Interwoven in both of these works is a genuine understanding of human nature and an important message about the beauty and grandeur of the human soul.

Chapter 2

The Unfinished *St. Jerome* and Its Historical Background

When discussing Leonardo's *Saint Jerome*, two problems arise immediately: the painting is unfinished and the exact date of production is in question. The *Saint Jerome*, for reasons unknown, was abandoned by the artist in the early stages of its creation.[6] Leonardo had begun to use a mixed technique of oil and egg tempera on various sections of the panel but the underdrawing remains visible throughout a good portion of the painting.[7] The work itself is quite large; it measures 40 ½ inches by 28 $^{15}/_{16}$ inches and the panel is made of walnut wood.[8] The large, kneeling figure of Jerome is prominently positioned in the center of a rocky and barren landscape. Sketched in the background of the scene lies a small church, perhaps alluding to a specific place associated with Jerome's later years as well as his title as a Doctor of the Church.[9] The saint holds a rock in his outstretched right arm as he looks fixedly away from the viewer. There is a small, unfinished crucifix in the top right corner of the painting that seems to

[6] Giorgio Vasari notes that Leonardo, in his insatiable desire to capture perfectly on the canvas what he envisioned in his mind, was often disappointed with his own skill. He therefore developed a reputation for starting many projects but not finishing a majority of them. See Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de più excellent pittori, scultori, ed architettori,* ed. by Gaetano Milanesi (Firenze: G.C. Sansoni, 1906), IV, 22. Martin Kemp, *Leonardo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 10-13, questions how Leonardo retained good relationships with patrons when some of his paintings were never given to the individual who commissioned them. The artist also kept, until his death, a number of his paintings in his personal collection. Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete Paintings*, 96, suggests that Leonardo may have been unhappy with the painting of Saint Jerome. He asserts that the saint's outstretched arm is less than perfect and reveals mistakes with both perspective and anatomy.

[7] Left in its unfinished state, the painting offers a unique insight into Leonardo's creative process; moving from the initial design of the underdrawing to more realized forms in paint. Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 372; Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete Paintings*, 96.

[8] The exact measurements of the painting as well as the information regarding the material used for the panel itself are provided by Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 370.

[9] There are different interpretations regarding the sketch of a church in the saint's background. It has been suggested that it is the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, mentioned in *The Golden Legend* as his final resting place. See the full argument in Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 49. Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Drafstman*, 372, views the church as a symbol of Jerome's work in establishing and standardizing certain church doctrines. She also sees the inclusion of the sketch as evidence of Leonardo's interest in architecture.

be the object of the saint's intense gaze. So passionate is Jerome's stare that he appears to be in a spiritual trance-like state. A dark, bloody spot on his withered chest further reveals that he is in an active state of self-mortification. At Jerome's feet lies his devoted lion who seems both aware and engaged in the religious fervor of the moment.[10] In fact, the lion mimics the open-mouthed expression of agony seen on the face of Saint Jerome.[11]

Leonardo's authorship of the painting is widely accepted by modern scholars, despite a more than obscure past.[12] It is one of only five works in the artist's oeuvre which, according to Carmen Bambach, have never been disputed, with the *Adoration of the Magi*, the Louvre *Virgin of the Rocks*, the *Last Supper*, and the *Mona Lisa* completing the list.[13] This certainty seems surprising since the painting does not appear in written record until around the turn of the nineteenth century, when it shows up in the art collection of Angelica Kauffmann.[14] After her death the painting is believed to have been cut into pieces, for reasons unknown, although later restored, to its current condition.[15] And indeed, lines of incision are visible to the naked eye, for it appears that the work was unusually and carefully sawn into four separate parts.[16] The head of the saint as well as most of his sinewy neck were separated from the rest of the painting. In order to obtain this particularly desirable section, an odd segment of the jagged rocks above

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[10] Saint Jerome courageously pulled a thorn out of a lion's wounded foot. From that moment on, according to legend, the thankful lion was a devoted and loyal friend to Saint Jerome. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 589-591.

[11] Leonardo may have been interested in the concept of human-animal physiognomic analogies. A variety of his drawings and sketches depict images of animals in close proximity to the faces of men. The lion is often associated with courage and strength, which could emphasize Jerome's own strength of spirit. See Clayton, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Divine and the Grotesque*, 64.

[12] Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 86; Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci*: *The Complete Paintings*, 338; Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 375; Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 221.

[13] In his 1919 article, Guilio Urbini doubted Leonardo's authorship: "Leonardo," *Nuova Rivista Storica* 3(1919): 257-290. However, Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 379 n. 20, quickly dismisses his claims.

[14] Carlo Pietrangeli, "Un Leonardo in vendita a Roma," in *Roma, questa nostra città* (Rome, 1987), 104. This article was originally published in *Strenna dei Romanisti* 47 (1986): 441-450.

[15] Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 378.

[16] Ibid., 375-378. Although visible to the human eye, infrared photographs of the *Saint Jerome* clearly reveal the saw lines.

Jerome was cut out as well, because if left together, these two sections would have formed an awkward rectangular shape. However, the smaller rock segment was immediately or eventually sawn away from the saint's head, perhaps in order to form a more perfect square. Additionally, the sketch of the church in the top right corner was separated from the remaining larger section which included the kneeling body of the saint, a rocky landscape, and his lion. It is very likely that the sole purpose was to remove the head of the saint and the underdrawing of the church, which are the two most impressive and Leonardesque aspects of the painting.

In this mutilated condition it is alleged that the painting was fortuitously discovered by Napoleon Bonaparte's uncle, Cardinal Joseph Fesch around 1813.[17] Fesch appears to have accidentally stumbled upon all of the various segments of the *Saint Jerome* in rather unusual places. The larger portion of the painting is said to have been utilized as the door to a cupboard in the shop of a *rigattiere* or antiques dealer while a second and smaller section of the painting was transformed into a seat for none other than Cardinal Joseph Fesch's shoemaker.[18] Here, it is interesting to note that after it was miraculously rediscovered, the painting fit neatly back together. Yet, if a fragment of the *Saint Jerome* was utilized in such an everyday capacity—the seat of a shoemaker's stool—it seems likely that it suffered considerable damage. Despite these suspicious circumstances, the painting was eventually repaired (to what is now its current

[17] See Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 86-87; Stefania Vannini, "Il Cardinale Fesch e la sua Collezione," *Studi sul Settecento Romano* 3 (1987): 305, 308, n. 19; Fabrizio Mancinelli, "Leonardo: His Life and Works," in *High Renaissance in the Vatican: The Age of Julius II and Leo X*, ed. by Michiaki Koshikawa and Martha J. McKlintock (National Museum of Western Art: Tokyo, 1993), 106; Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 378.
[18] See Pietro D'Achiardi, *La nuova Pinacoteca Vaticana*, (Bergamo, 1914), 25; Deoclecio Redig De Campos, "San Girolamo," in *Leonardo: La Pittura*, ed. by Pietro Marani, rev. ed., (Florence: 1985), 37-38; Carlo Pietrangeli, "Un Leonardo in vendita a Roma," 106-107; Fabrizio Mancinelli, "Leonardo: His Life and Works," 106; Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 378; Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519*: *The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 221; Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 86-87, mentions that a section of the painting was being used as a tabletop, although he does not clarify which one.

condition) and was still in the collection of the Cardinal six years after his death in 1839.[19] From here the *Saint Jerome* slowly made its way through private collections before eventually becoming the property of the Vatican on September 5, 1856.[20]

Early biographers of Leonardo, such as Giorgio Vasari, do not mention the *Saint Jerome*, leaving no historical reference to a patron, purpose, or indisputable date.[21] In an effort by scholars to give the painting a date and even a provenance, it has most frequently been compared stylistically and compositionally to two works in Leonardo's oeuvre: the *Adoration of the Magi* (Fig. 7) and the Louvre *Virgin of the Rocks* (Fig. 8).[22] There are obvious visual congruencies between the *Saint Jerome* and the *Adoration of the Magi*.[23] They are both unfinished, contain large, exposed areas of monochromatic underpainting, and share an analogous figural type of a haggard, old man with sallow cheeks.[24] And in fact, a bald, gaunt man, in the *Adoration of the Magi*, tilts his head in the same way but in the opposite direction as the figure of Saint Jerome

[19] Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 378; Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519*: *The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 221.
[20] Pietrangeli, "Un Leonardo in vendita a Roma," 108-110.
[21] Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 375-378, states that the Saint Jerome is never "clearly" mentioned in any early documentation until the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, Kemp, *Leonardo*, 12, states that in 1524, Leonardo's *Saint Jerome* is recorded in an inventory of the property of Gian Giacomo Caprotti. Also, Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 86-87, believes the painting is listed in an inventory of Leonardo's paintings, drawings, and sculpture found in the *Il Codice Atlantico di Leonardo da Vinci nella Biblioteca Ambrosiana di Milano*, transcriptions and concordance by Augusto Marinoni, 12 vols (Florence: 1973-1975). The record is made by Leonardo himself and while the artist notes "certain figures of Saint Jerome" he does not specifically mention a painting of Saint Jerome. Therefore, it cannot be conclusively stated that this is an early listing of the painting.
[22] See Carlo Pedretti, *Leonardo: A Study in Chronology and Style* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1973), 53; Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 221; Bambach *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 375-377.
[23] For recent discussions on Leonardo's *Adoration of the Magi* see Kemp, *The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, 43-57; Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 50-60.
[24] See Kemp, *The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, 55; Clayton, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Divine and the Grotesque*, 53, who notes that Leonardo has a standard old man type that is a constant for the artist during his career. Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete Paintings*, 96, remarks upon the frequent recurrence of a certain old man type throughout Leonardo's oeuvre, and suggests that it was developed from a popular sculptural prototype. This recurring image of the haggard, old man and its origins in Florentine sculpture will be discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis in greater detail.

(Fig. 9).[25] The similarities between these two works have led to the assertion that the *Saint Jerome* was painted around 1480-1482, just before the *Adoration of the Magi*, and more specifically that Leonardo may have abandoned the project in order to take the commission for the latter.[26] Other scholars are more willing to propose slightly later dates for the painting, which coincide with the artist's first Milanese period and the production of the Louvre *Virgin of the Rocks* in 1483-1484/85.[27] Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* has delicate Verrocchioesque forms and subtle interplays of light, gesture, and grace.[28] The heightened beauty of the holy figures and the surrounding vista is a decidedly more pleasing image to look at than an excessively thin, self-whipping saint. Despite these observable disparities, compositional

[25] In the *Adoration* there is also a beautiful figure with lush hair and soft features to the right of the old, ugly man (Fig. 10). Leonardo often liked to contrast beauty and ugliness side by side in his drawings and paintings. The two figures in the *Adoration* appear to be a symbolic comparison of both age and youth and ugliness and beauty: Leonardo was profoundly interested in each of these subjects. See Leonardo da Vinci, *Leonardo on Painting*: *An Anthology of Writings*, 220; Clayton, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Divine and the Grotesque*, 51-52.

[26] Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, 55-57, gives the *Saint Jerome* an early date of around 1480. Pedretti, *Leonardo: A Study in Chronology and Style*, 60, also assigns an early date range of 1480-1481. Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 49, believes the painting was begun around 1480. A document dated July 1481 reveals that the painting known as the *Adoration of the Magi* was commissioned around March 1480 by the monks of San Doneto a Scopeto. See Leonardo da Vinci, *Leonardo on Painting*: *An Anthology of Writings*, 268. Leonardo did not complete his contract for the *Adoration of the Magi* but instead he departed Florence for Milan to work for the Duke Ludovico Sforza. See Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, 57.

[27] For recent discussions of the Louvre *Virgin of the Rocks* see Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, 74-79; Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 64-79. Stephen Campbell, "The Image of Saint Jerome in the Art of Leonardo da Vinci and Cosimo Tura," (master's thesis, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1987), 23-141, believes the *Saint Jerome* was created during Leonardo's Milanese period. He asserts that certain aspects of Leonardo's painting, such as the figure and pose of the saint, are influenced by images of North Italian art, specifically that of Cosmè Tura's *Saint Jerome in Penitence* (Fig.11) from around 1474 and now in the National Gallery in London. And it does appear that Milanese artists were aware of the figure in Leonardo's *Saint Jerome*. A bald, yet idealized, nude man mimics the foreshortened kneeling pose of Jerome in the woodcut, *Le antiquarie prospetiche romane* (Fig.12), by an unknown Milanese artist. The work was a frontispiece for a poem written in 1496-1498, which praised Leonardo. For more information see Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 377.

[28] Leonardo was an apprentice in the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio for about six or seven years. See Dario Covi, "Work in Progress: Workshops and Partnerships," *Verrocchio and Late Quattrocento Italian Sculpture*, ed. by Steven Bule, Alan Phipps Darr, and Fiorella Superbi Giofreddi (Firenze: Le Lettere, 1992), 368-369. The time that Leonardo spent in the workshop of Verrocchio contributed to his foundational education as well as the development of his artistic style. Traces of Verrocchio's manner and techniques exist in Leonardo's early work, such as the sweet disposition of his figures. However, Leonardo's artistic sensibilities legendarily surpassed that of Verrocchio. For more information on the artistic relationship between Leonardo and Verrocchio see Vasari, *Le vite*, ed. Milanesi, IV, 19-23; David Alan Brown, *Leonardo da Vinci: Origins of a Genius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 5-10, 47-73.

comparisons can be made between the *Saint Jerome* and the *Virgin of the Rocks*, because both paintings contain large, central figures in a similar rocky landscape.[29] In the end, without evidentiary fact it is difficult to conclusively give the *Saint Jerome* an exact date. Based on these and other stylistic comparisons, dates have been ascribed to the work that span several decades, but this dating system is ripe for reinterpretation. It is obvious that Leonardo was thinking about specific ideas such as old age, ugliness, and expression when he executed his painting of the penitent Saint Jerome. His interest in these subjects appears to have begun in the workshop of Verrocchio. Several early works, such as the *Adoration of the Magi*, show an old man type that was often used in his master's workshop. Leonardo continued experimenting with these concepts later in his career, and in particular, his sketches and studies of old men in the 1490s become uniquely his own. These later figures are often grotesquely exaggerated in appearance.[30] The extreme ugliness and agedness of these figures suggest a different meaning than the physical appearance of Saint Jerome.[31] Although wizened and ugly, he is not grotesque and elicits

[29] Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 375.

[30] Clayton, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Divine and the Grotesque*, 51-54, discusses the evolution of Leonardo's old man type. While Leonardo's early drawings of old men were often amusing, Clayton asserts that, although still grotesque, they developed into more serious, solemn characters as the artist aged. Thus, Leonardo may have been, on some level, expressing his feelings about growing older.

[31] The sixteenth-century idea of old age is vastly different from the modern conception: The Renaissance celebrated youth and beauty in literature, poetry, and the arts and despised decline and death. See George Minois, *The History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. by Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 249-254. In fact, it appears that artists feared old age. And indeed, there appeared to have been a general gerontophobia among practicing artists, especially in Tuscany. The negative attitude toward old age within the artistic community was supported by the fact that aging was accompanied by an inevitable decline in skill and technique. Ultimately, the reputation of the artist would decrease along with his or her talents. Therefore, old age usually meant the end of an artist's career. See Philip Sohm, *The Artist Grows Old: The Aging of Art and Artists in Italy, 1580-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 19-35. For more information concerning the issue of old age and the Renaissance artist see Creighton Gilbert, "When Did a Man in the Renaissance Grow Old?" *Studies in the Renaissance* 14, (1967): 7-32; Kenneth Clark, *The Artist Grows Old* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 1-30; Minois, *The History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, 249-302. Although there were negative stereotypes surrounding old age, it was also associated with wisdom mainly because it was believed that knowledge was gained from experience. See Minois, *The History of Old Age*: *From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, 304-305; Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man*: *Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), 129, 135, and 141. And Erin Campbell, "The Art of Aging Gracefully: The Elderly Artist as Courtier in Early Modern Art Theory and Criticism," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 321-331, further asserts that during this period of the Renaissance, the success and talent

sympathy and compassion from the viewer, not laughter.[32] Thus, the *Saint Jerome* seems best dated around 1480-1482, relatively close to the time when Leonardo was in Verrocchio's workshop.

There is no question that the *Saint Jerome* is an important painting in Leonardo's oeuvre. And yet, its incredible and inexplicable history can be disconcerting, leaving a multitude of questions with no definitive answers. When did Leonardo begin production on the *Saint Jerome*? What were the circumstances for which it was conceived? Why was the *Saint Jerome* eventually left unfinished by Leonardo? Was it just another project that lost the attention of the notoriously capricious artist? While the majority of these questions are unclear, Leonardo's subject matter is decidedly more certain.

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of artists such as Michelangelo helped to transform the view of the artist from craftsman to intellectual. Thus, older artists were not just admired for their artistic skill but became appreciated and respected for their overall, superior knowledge of the arts. For further information see Sophie Bostock, "A Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man-With Emphasis on Titian," in *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*, ed. by Albrecht Classen, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 517-531.

[32] Clayton, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Divine and the Grotesque*, 54.

Chapter 3

A History of the Penitent Saint Jerome in the Wilderness

The hagiography of Saint Jerome names him as one of the four Doctors of early Christianity and one of the most important Biblical scholars.[33] He is perhaps most famous for his translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, known as the Vulgate Bible.[34] This translation along with his many exegetical writings contributed to the spread of Christian doctrine and theology by making the Scriptures more accessible for Western readers.[35] And yet Jerome's lifelong devotion to Christianity came at a personal price. His love for the pagan classics conflicted with the Christian view that these texts were sinful and idolatrous. Consequently, Jerome was often ridden with guilt about his love of Latin literature and regularly repented for his sinful thoughts.

Saint Jerome was born around A.D. 345 at Stridon, in Dalmatia.[36] When he was a young

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[33] The four Doctors of the Church are Ambrose, Gregory, Augustine, and Jerome. Beginning around the eleventh century, they were recognized and celebrated for their wisdom and insight. The four saints were believed to be knowledgeable of all things relating to both Heaven and earth. For more information see Eugene Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 32-35. An in-depth discussion of the influence of all four saints on Italian humanists can be found in Charles L. Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Traversari and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977). For the complete hagiography of each of these four saints see Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 24-33, 177-190, and 485-501, 587-591, respectively.

[34] Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*, 15; Herbert Friedmann, *A Bestiary for Saint Jerome: Animal Symbolism in European Religious Art* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980), 19; George Kaftal, *The Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting* (Florence: Sansoni, 1952), 520.

[35] Friedmann, *A Bestiary for Saint Jerome: Animal Symbolism in European Religious Art*, 19.

[36] The exact date of Jerome's birth remains a topic of debate among scholars. The dispute mainly surrounds a letter written by Jerome, in which he describes himself as a young man (*adulecens*) during his journey into the Syrian desert in 375. See Letter 52, 1 in Jerome, *Saint Jérôme, Lettres*, ed. and trans. by Jérôme Labourt, 8 vols. (Paris, 1949-1963). J.N.D Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), 337-339, asserts that Jerome was born in A.D. 331 and died in A.D. 420 making him around 44 when he was in the desert. However, most scholars believe the saint was born in the early to mid-340s because this date corresponds better with Jerome's own words, making him considerably younger when he was in the desert. See Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*, 1, 203 n. 2; Friedmann, *A Bestiary for Saint Jerome: Animal Symbolism in European Religious Art*, 19; Kaftal, *The Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting*, 522.

boy, Jerome's Christian parents sent him to study in Rome and he subsequently devoted all of his attention to pagan learning. Jerome became intrigued by the poetry of Virgil, the comedies of Terence, and the rhetoric of Cicero.[37] Although preoccupied with his education, Jerome was still deeply interested in his Christian faith and was baptized around 366.[38] Despite his renewed covenant with God, Jerome's attachment to his classical studies conflicted with his Christianity. While he attempted to balance the paradoxical nature of his two passions, Jerome often preferred classical literature over the unpolished language of the Scriptures.[39] It was around the year 373 when Jerome had a major spiritual conversion. Afflicted with a sudden, feverish illness he had a vivid dream in which he stood before Christ the Judge:

> Suddenly I was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the tribunal of the Judge. Here there was so much light and such a glare from the brightness of those standing around that I cast myself on the ground and dared not look up. Upon being asked my status, I replied that I was a Christian. And He who sat upon the judgment seat said: "Thou liest. Thou art a Ciceronian, not a Christian. *Where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also.*" I was struck dumb on the spot. Amid the blows-for He had ordered me to be beaten-I was tormented the more by the flame of conscience. I repeated to myself the verse: *And who shall confess thee in hell*? However, I began to cry aloud and to say with lamentation: "Have mercy on me, Lord, have mercy upon me." The petition re-echoed amid the lashes. Finally, casting themselves before the knees of Him who presided, the bystanders besought Him to have mercy on the young man, granting me opportunity to repent of my error and then to exact the penalty if I ever again read books of pagan literature. Being caught in such an extremity, I would have been willing to make even greater promises. I began to take an oath, swearing by His name, saying: "O Lord, if ever I possess or read secular writings, I have denied thee." After I had uttered the words of this oath, I was discharged and returned to the world above…After that I read God's word with greater zeal than I had previously read the writings of mortals.[40]

As Jerome's letter narrates, the saint subsequently vowed to abandon his worldly possessions,

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[37] Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 11-24.
[38] Baptism was a serious commitment in the fourth century. It usually entailed making a complete break with the earthly world and focusing all of one's attention and efforts on the spiritual world. See Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*, 2.
[39] Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 42.
[40] See Letter 22, 30 in Jerome, *The Letters of Saint Jerome*, vol. 1, trans. by Charles Christopher Mierow, intro. and notes by Thomas Comerford Lawler (New York: Newman Press, 1963), 165-166.

including pagan literature, and dedicate the remainder of his life solely to the Word of God.

In spite of this renewed fervent commitment to Christianity, Jerome's faith was still frequently tested by his undiminished love of secular literature, and this continuous struggle created great inner turmoil. Around 375, Jerome journeyed to the Syrian desert to live the life of a hermit, committed to achieving his ascetic goals through bodily mortification.[41] Through this process he hoped to experience communion with God and achieve divine illumination:

> And so, destitute of all help, I used to lie at Jesus' feet. I bathed them with my tears, I wiped them with my hair. When my flesh rebelled, I subdued it by weeks of fasting. I do not blush at my hapless state; nay rather, I lament that I am not now what I was then. I remember that I often joined day to night with my lamentation and did not cease beating my breast until peace of mind returned with the Lord's rebuke. I was afraid even of my little cell-as though it were conscious of my thoughts. Angry at myself and tense, I used to go out alone into the desert. Whenever I saw some deep valley, some rugged mountain, some precipitous crags, it was this I made my place of prayer, my place of punishment for the wretched flesh. And-as my Lord Himself is witness-after many tears, after fixing my eyes on the heavens, I sometimes seemed to myself to be surrounded by companies of angels and rejoiced, singing happily: We run after thee to the odor of thy ointments.[42]

Jerome's spiritual experiences in the wilderness seem to have assuaged temporarily the tension between his mind and his soul.[43] Following his sojourn in the Syrian desert, Jerome struggled with worldly temptations but he continued his life's work as a great promoter and translator of Christian literature and theology.[44] Jerome eventually settled in the quiet village of Bethlehem, where he lived and worked in a monastery. Bethlehem provided a peaceful refuge for the saint because of its small size and its remove from the corruption associated with large cities. Jerome

[41] Jerome supposedly took books with him to the desert and it is here where the saint mastered the Hebrew language. Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance,* 10.
[42] See Letter 22, 7 in Jerome, *The Letters of Saint Jerome,* 140.
[43] Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies,* 52.
[44] Ibid., 57.

remained in Bethlehem until his death in 420.[45]

Jerome was venerated as a saint by the early seventh century.[46] Praise for his wisdom and spiritual insight continued and in 1295, Jerome officially received the title of Doctor of the Church, through a decree passed by Pope Bonifice VIII.[47] The achievements of Jerome became widely known due to several biographies of the saint, written during the Middle Ages, specifically between the eighth and thirteenth centuries.[48] The information in these biographies was taken from letters written by Jerome throughout his lifetime. For example, Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend* from around 1260 is a detailed account of Saint Jerome's life, but it also includes passages from his spiritual writings and letters which recorded his struggles with the temptation of earthly desires and his attempts to repent for his human failings.[49] This text contributed to Jerome's popularity and so did early medieval representations of the saint. These images emphasized each of the saint's important roles in religious history and legend. Artists before 1300 depict Jerome as a Doctor of the Church. Accordingly, Jerome was given certain attributes that would become instrumental in identifying the saint. He was often painted with books (Fig. 13) or a pen (Fig. 14) to symbolize his work as a translator of biblical text. And

[45] Rice Jr., confidently states that the year of Jerome's death is 420. See Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, 22. Kelly also writes that Jerome dies in the year A.D. 420. See Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 337.

[46] Jerome was revered as a saint because martyrologies (catalogues that named martyrs and confessors) included his name in their list of important religious figures. For more information on martyrologies see Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, 31-32.

[47] Jerome received this title along with saints Gregory, Augustine, and Ambrose. See Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 333, n. 1; Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, 32-33.

[48] Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, 23.

[49] Jacobus de Voragine was a Dominican friar who wrote a book in 1260 about the lives of saints called *Legenda sanctorum* or *Legenda aurea.* For more information on *The Golden Legend* see Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, 23-26; Friedmann, *A Bestiary for Saint Jerome: Animal Symbolism in European Religious Art*, 20; Sherry L. Reames, *The Legenda aurea: A Reexamination of Its Paradoxical History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Robert Francis Seybolt, "The Legenda Aurea, Bible, and Historia Scholastica," *Speculum* 21, no. 3 (July 1946): 339-342; Robert Francis Seybolt, "Fifteenth-Century Editions of the Legenda Aurea," *Speculum* 21, no. 3 (July 1946): 327-338. Both Bambach and Zöllner argue that Leonardo's subject matter was inspired from this thirteenth-century work. Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 372; Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 49-50.

he can also be seen holding a small model of a church to emphasize his role in promoting and furthering church doctrine.[50] His physical attributes varied. He was at times void of facial hair and other times displayed a thick beard. Also, there seemed to be no firmly established tradition concerning his age, because he was portrayed as both youthful and aged.

The two most conventional and popular representations of the saint come from Italy and in particular from Tuscany and Bologna.[51] Jerome's role as a penitent in the wilderness begins in Tuscany and his identity as a scholar in his study originates in Bologna.[52] An example of this new image of the penitent saint can be seen in Fra Angelico's small panel, *The Penitent Saint Jerome* (Fig. 15).[53] It is an early Renaissance work from around 1419-1420. The saint is standing in the desert surrounded by scorpions and other beasts. This detail of the scene is taken directly from one of Jerome's own descriptive letters in *The Golden Legend*: "Yet, while I lived thus, the companion of scorpions and wild beasts…"[54] Jerome holds a rock in one hand which he places to his chest. Hanging at his side in Jerome's other hand is a scroll. His eyes are

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[50] For a variety of images from Tuscany see Kaftal, *The Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting*, 522-535.
[51] Jerome as a penitential hermit in the wilderness was developed for the first time in Italy after 1400. See Millard Meiss, "Scholarship and Penitence in the Early Renaissance: The Image of Saint Jerome," *Pantheon* 32 (1972): 134-140; Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, 75; Friedmann, *A Bestiary for Saint Jerome: Animal Symbolism in European Religious Art*, 231; Rudolf Wittkower, "Desiderio da Settignano's *St. Jerome in the Desert*," *Studies in the History of Art* 4 (1971-1972): 18.
[52] Jerome was also viewed as an ascetic and performer of miracles. See Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, 49. For the purposes of brevity, I will not discuss the rich symbolism in images depicting Jerome in his study. However, this tradition emphasizes not only Jerome's intellectual contributions to Christianity but also his conflicting love of both biblical and classical literature by depicting him in a studio surrounded by many books; this would remind the viewer of the reasons behind Jerome's penitential practices in the wilderness. An example of this tradition can be seen in Antonello da Messina's painting *Saint Jerome in His Study* from around 1475 (Fig. 16). See Penny Howell Jolly, "Antonello da Messina's *Saint Jerome in His Study*: An Iconographic Analysis," *The Art Bulletin* 65, no. 2 (June 1983): 238-253. For additional information on the general theme of Jerome in his study see Kaftal, *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting*, 520-535; Friedmann, *A Bestiary for Saint Jerome: Animal Symbolism in European Religious Art*, 29-47; Meiss, "Scholarship and Penitence in the Early Renaissance: The Image of Saint Jerome," 134-140; Stephen Campbell, "The Image of Saint Jerome in the Art of Leonardo da Vinci and Cosimo Tura," 5-22; Millard Meiss, "French and Italian Variations on an Early Fifteenth-Century Theme: St. Jerome and His Study," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 62 (1963): 147-170; Rosa Giorgi, *Saints in Art*, ed. by Stefano Zuffi, trans. by Thomas Michael Hartmann (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003), 179-184.
[53] The painting is accepted as a Fra Angelico by Carl Brandon Strehlke, "The Princeton *Penitent Saint Jerome*, the Gaddi Family, and Early Fra Angelico," Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University 62, (2003): 4-27. However, the panel was previously attributed to Giovanni di Francesco Toscani. See Marvin Eisenberg, "*The Penitent St Jerome* by Giovanni Toscani," *The Burlington Magazine* 118, no. 878 (May, 1976): 274-281, 283.
[54] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 589. See Letter 22, 7 in Jerome, *The Letters of Saint Jerome*, 139-140.

directed toward Heaven and his body is motionless. Another painting that depicts the saint in a very similar fashion is Sano di Pietro's *The Penitent Saint Jerome in the Wilderness* (Fig. 17) from around 1444.[55] In both images, the saint is represented as an older man with a beard and noble features. During the Renaissance, when portrayed as either a penitent or a scholar, Jerome is most typically older in age and almost always given a beard.[56] Beards were symbolic of wisdom, nobility, and strength and would have been a particularly important feature when emphasizing Jerome's role as a scholar of the Church.[57]

Jerome's Renaissance identity as a scholar emerged from very specific events. Italian humanist scholars became intensely interested in Greek and Roman literature.[58] And more specifically, they were intrigued with the concept of integrating into their own lives the ideas and values that these works contained.[59] Humanists shared the belief with ancient authors, such as Cicero, that liberal studies could provide one with culturally beneficial moral principles.[60] Therefore, the *studia humanitatis*, which included subjects such as philosophy, grammar, rhetoric, and literary studies, became an integral part of university curriculum.[61] Jerome's philological pursuits and his great love for classical authors, such as Cicero, attracted the attention of humanist scholars. Around the middle of the fourteenth century, a professor at the

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[55] Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, 9, 76.
[56] See Giorgi, *Saints in Art*, 179; Kaftal, *The Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting*, 523; Wittkower, Desiderio da Settignano's *St. Jerome in the Desert*," 18-21; Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 49, notes that Leonardo's Jerome has no beard which deviates from traditional Renaissance representations.
[57] Beards were considered unfashionable during the fifteenth century and were mainly seen on older dignitaries; it was a sign of both their age and their importance. Richard Corson, *Fashions in Hair: The First Five Thousand Years* (New York: Hastings House, 1965), 135. Wendy Cooper, *Hair: Sex, Society, Symbolism* (New York: Stein and Day/Publishers, 1971), 183-193, asserts that facial hair became associated with divine wisdom, power, and strength because of ancient images of bearded gods.
[58] For an in-depth look at humanism see Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Traversari (1386-1439) and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance*, 1-166.
[59] Nicholas Mann, "The Origins of Humanism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. by Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2.
[60] Ibid., 1.
[61] Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 22, 244.

University of Bologna wrote a book, *Liber de laudibus S. Hieronymi,* about both Jerome's classical background and his piety.[62] With the rise of humanist scholarship, the subject of Saint Jerome in his study became a favorite among Italian patrons.

Jerome's ascetic identity also developed toward the end of the fourteenth century.[63] A number of monastic congregations that formed during the latter part of the fourteenth century adopted Jerome as their patron.[64] They valued and devotedly imitated his abstemious way of life. The majority of these orders practiced self-flagellation as both a spiritual exercise and a form of repentance. By the end of the trecento there were at least fifteen congregations in Florence that practiced self-mortification.[65] The theme of Jerome in penitence, beating his breast, was an obvious choice for the devotional images commissioned by these congregations. Until the mid-fifteenth century, most of the early representations of the penitent Saint Jerome were painted for orders dedicated to the saint.[66]

And yet, monks were not the only group who appreciated the many facets of Saint Jerome's life. Wealthy Italian families ordered images of the saint. Small paintings, such as the *Saint Jerome* by Fra Angelico, were often intended for private devotion. The viewer could meditate on the contrite acts of Saint Jerome, and repent of his or her own sins.[67] But in order to evoke such an emotional response, the viewer needed to be able to understand the context of the saint's condition. Thus, the naturalistic portrayal of saints was a requirement for the artist. Italian Renaissance artists as well as their wealthy patrons were well-versed in scripture and it was expected that the visual representation of these saints be in accordance with their

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[62] Meiss, "Scholarship and Penitence in the Early Renaissance: The Image of St. Jerome," 134.
[63] Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance,* 68.
[64] See Strehlke, "The Princeton *Penitent Saint Jerome*, the Gaddi Family, and Early Fra Angelico," 7-9.
[65] Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance,* 68.
[66] Meiss, "Scholarship and Penitence in the Early Renaissance: The Image of St. Jerome," 135.
[67] Robert Kiely, *The Blessed and the Beautiful: Picturing the Saints* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 1-2; Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance,* 78.

hagiographies. Images with adequate details that could identify context, such as Sano di Pietro's *Saint Jerome,* which depicted an older, bearded man kneeling in the desert while devotedly beating his chest, became the traditional representation of Jerome's penitential period.[68] However, slight variations began to emerge in the second half of the fifteenth century. Desiderio da Settignano executed a *Saint Jerome in the Desert* (Fig. 18) around 1460-1464.[69] It is an extremely low relief in marble that features Jerome, frail and aged, kneeling in front of a crucifix.[70] The surrounding vista is stony yet there are cypress trees in the far distance. Desiderio's composition combines two stories in Jerome's biography: his penitence in the wilderness and his monastery's encounter with the wounded lion.[71] In the background of the relief, a frightened monk flees from the lion, who holds out his paw impaled by a thorn. A lioness, who is not mentioned in the famous story from *The Golden Legend,* follows closely behind her mate.

Leonardo's *Saint Jerome* provides details not often included in the established pictorial tradition.[72] Surrounding Jerome is a desolate, craggy landscape. The harsh environment conceived in Leonardo's painting appears to be derived from specific selections found in *The Golden Legend*. In particular, there is an excerpt from a lengthy letter written in 384, from Saint

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[68] Meiss, "Scholarship and Penitence in the Early Renaissance: The Image of St. Jerome," 134.

[69] The relief is generally accepted as an autograph work by Desiderio. See John Pope-Hennessy, *An Introduction to Italian Renaissance Sculpture,* vol. 2, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture,* 4th ed., (London: Phaidon, 1996), 375-377; Nicholas Penny, "Desiderio's Reliefs: *Saint Jerome in the Desert,*" in *Desiderio da Settignano: Sculptor of Renaissance Florence,* ed. by Marc Bormand, Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, and Nicholas Penny, (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2007), 192-195. However, Wittkower, "Desiderio da Settignano's *St. Jerome in the Desert,*" 6-37, expressed certain concerns over the attribution of the work.

[70] Another example of the same subject was made around 1470 by Benedetto da Maiano (Fig. 19). Again, an old and bony Jerome kneels and prays in front of a crucifix. James Draper, "Benedetto da Maiano: *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 60, n.2 (Fall 2002): 14.

[71] See Wittkower, "Desiderio da Settignano's *St. Jerome in the Desert,*" 7-37.

[72] Desiderio's artistic techniques and manner influenced several generations of artists working in Florence, including Leonardo's master, Verrocchio. Leonardo, himself was aware of and influenced by the sculpture of Desiderio. See Giancarlo Gentilini, "Desiderio in the Workshop: Masters and Pupils, Works and Clients Mentioned in the Documentation and Sources," in *Desiderio da Settignano: Sculptor of Renaissance Florence,* ed. by Marc Bormand, Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, and Nicholas Penny (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2007), 42.

Jerome to a female disciple called Eustochium.[73] Jerome vividly details his harsh surrounding during his four-year penance in the desert:

> For as long as I dwelt in the desert, that vast solitude, burnt with the heat of the sun, which provides a fearsome abode for monks, I thought that I was in the midst of Rome. My twisted members shuddered in their sackcloth, my squalid skin was black as an Ethiop's. Daily I wept, daily I groaned; and when sleep finally beat me down, my bare bones were bruised on the hard ground.[74]

Saint Jerome's account of his dwelling describes a sterile landscape, scorched by the sun and bereft of any vegetation. An interpretation of this excerpt from Saint Jerome suggests that the rocks in Leonardo's painting are symbolic of Christ, and thus Jerome can literally beat out his sinful thoughts with the help of Christ.[75] In another passage from the letter to Eustochium, the penitent describes his attempts to overcome earthly desires. He writes:

> Yet, while I lived thus, the companion of scorpions and wild beasts, ofttimes I imagined that I was surrounded by dancing girls, and in my frozen body and moribund flesh the fires of concupiscence were lighted. For this I wept unceasingly, and subjugated the rebellious flesh with week-long fasts. Often I joined the days with the nights, nor stayed from beating my breasts until the Lord restored my peace of spirit.[76]

It is with these words that Leonardo must have formed the image of his penitent Saint Jerome. Leonardo's visual interpretation of Jerome's letter brings to life the harsh reality of the physical state of the saint during his quest for spiritual enlightenment. He is wizened, emaciated, and every tendon in his shoulder and neck are visible.[77] The ascetic saint admits that he denies his

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[73] Saint Eustochium Julia was the daughter of Paula and the sister of Blesilla. Eustochium and her mother and sister were noble ladies who rejected earthly pleasures. Interestingly, Eustochium chose an ascetic life and wore specific clothing in an attempt to make herself appear unattractive. See Rice Jr., *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, 12. For a more detailed description of Eustochium's life and her relationship with Jerome see Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies*, 91-103.

[74] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 588. This particular excerpt comes from Letter 22, 7 written to Eustochium. See Jerome, *The Letters of Saint Jerome*, 139-140.

[75] Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 49-50.

[76] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 589. See Letter 22, 7 in Jerome, *The Letters of Saint Jerome*, 140.

[77] Leonardo had a deep interest in the human body. He filled notebooks with an exhausting amount of anatomical sketches. A great number of these drawings are nicely organized and discussed in a catalogue by Carlo Pedretti, ed., *The Temple of the Soul: The Anatomy of Leonardo da Vinci between Mondinus and Brengarius* (Cartei and Bianchi Publishers, 2008).

body of food and water for weeks at a time: "Of food and drink I say naught, since even sick men drink cold water, and to them also it is somewhat of a luxury to eat cooked food."[78] However, despite his weakened body he continues to beat his breasts bloody with an intense, inner strength. He is ultimately rewarded for his conviction through spiritual communion. Jerome confesses that "…after all my weeping, I sometimes seemed to be among the choirs of the angels."[79] The saint's determination to gain redemption for his sinful thoughts was an inspiring message to those who read his story in *The Golden Legend*. Leonardo captured Jerome's tenacity of spirit visually, with a naturalistic image of the saint as a human being struggling with the temptations that plague all humanity. Jerome's passionate acts of contrition revealed his tireless desire to gain redemption for his sins. Renaissance men and women could personally relate to Jerome's human failings as well as appropriate his story of penitence and forgiveness as a model for their own lives.

[78] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 588-589. See Letter 22, 7 in Jerome, *The Letters of Saint Jerome*, 140.
[79] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 589.

Chapter 4

An Analysis of Style and Content

In his letter to his follower Eustochium, Jerome detailed his exhaustive, spiritual journey in the desert with a stark physical realism. Evocative descriptions such as "my squalid skin" and "my bare bones were bruised on the hard ground" illustrate Jerome's bodily hardships.[80] Leonardo surely used these expressive words as inspiration during the conception of his painting, thus making a definite break from the standard representations of the saint in the beginning of the quattrocento. When compared stylistically to earlier images, Leonardo's departure from established Jerome imagery is apparent. Jerome is no longer a graceful and idealized figure. Instead, Leonardo emphasized the mental and physical sufferings of the saint by conceiving an extremely withered and aged figure. And yet, Leonardo's figural type may have relied upon a precedent set in Florentine sculpture and painting of the 1460s and 1470s.[81] In particular, the penitential type of a gaunt, aged man appeared in imagery from the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio.[82] A painting attributed to Verrocchio, known as a *Saint Jerome* (Fig. 20) from around 1465, depicts the saint as old but not haggard and displays a masterful knowledge of techniques such as modeling in light and shade. The painting presents the saint at bust length in order to focus on Jerome's solemn expression and contemplative, faraway gaze. Verrocchio's head of Saint Jerome can be compared to small, naturalistic busts of old men that were executed and studied in order to gain a better understanding of three-dimensional form, expression, and

[80] Ibid., 588.
[81] Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, 375.
[82] Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete Paintings*, 95.

anatomical detail.[83] One such model is a terracotta figure (Fig. 21) associated with the workshop of Verrocchio that has been attributed to both Leonardo and Giovan Francesco Rustici.[84] Visual congruencies between these sculptural models and Leonardo's *Saint Jerome* suggest that he may have also used a similar bust to help him execute aspects of his painting, such as the naturalism in both the saint's wrinkled face and contemplative expression.

While there were similar figural types represented in certain Florentine precedents, Leonardo's *Saint Jerome* pushed the envelope further than any of these. The saint's sinewy neck, excessive thinness, and altogether anomalous appearance have been viewed as a combination of both Leonardo's love of naturalistic anatomical detail and his interest in old age.[85] Although these components played a part in the conception of Leonardo's Jerome, they do not offer a reason for the extremely haggard, emaciated and toothless visage of the penitent. And this appearance is certainly inconsistent with Renaissance idealistic conceptions of holy figures, as they were always expected to be shown with a certain standard of beauty and decorum.[86] Leonardo emphasized the importance of endowing appropriate characterizations to individuals in a narrative:

> Observe decorum, that is to say the suitability of action, clothing, and situation, and have regard to the dignity or baseness of those whom you wish to portray, that is to say the king will be bearded, with dignified demeanour and clothing, and

[83] Laurie Fusco, "The Use of Sculptural Models by Painters in Fifteenth-Century Italy," *The Art Bulletin* 64, no. 2 (June 1982): 175-194. Sculptural models depicting this old man type appear to have been popular and were used after Leonardo's death in 1519. An example can be found in a bust, dated to around 1525 (Fig.22) that was recently displayed in an exhibition at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. The bust is stylistically similar to Leonardo's image of the saint and is considered to possibly be a depiction of Jerome. See Radke, ed., *Leonardo da Vinci and the Art of Sculpture*, 173, pl.39.

[84] Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci*: *The Complete Paintings*, 95-96. Giovan Francesco Rustici, who worked closely with Leonardo in the early sixteenth century, often experimented with expression and movement to create a sense of dynamism in his sculpture. For more information on the relationship between the two artists see Philippe Sénéchal, "Giovan Francesco Rustici, With and Without Leonardo," in *Leonardo da Vinci and the Art of Sculpture,* exh. cat., ed. by Gary Radke (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 161-193

[85] See Clayton: *Leonardo da Vinci: The Divine and the Grotesque,* 73-100; Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci*: *The Complete Paintings,* 95-101; Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings,* 49-50.

[86] Michael Kwakkelstein, "The Lost Book on 'moti mentali,' " in *Leonardo's Writings and Theory of Art,* ed. with introductions by Claire J. Farago (New York: Garland, 1999), 216.

> in an ornamented setting, and the bystanders should be respectful and admiring, and clad in garments worthy and fitting for the dignity of a court. And those of a base nature will be unadorned and [shown as] abject dissemblers, and the bystanders should be similar with base and rude actions, and all the elements should correspond to such a composition.[87]

The artist certainly appears to have ignored his own advice during the production of the *Saint Jerome*. Saint Jerome's appearance is completely devoid of the grace and beauty of a religious figure. Although the painting represents the unpleasant subject of self-mortification, earlier Renaissance imagery of the penitent Jerome represented him with idealized features, (as related in the examples in Chapter Three). Martin Clayton suggests that the absence of beauty in Leonardo's *Saint Jerome* reflects the saint's virtuous rejection of vanity and is, further, an indication of spiritual enlightenment.[88] To elaborate on Martin Clayton's theory, if the haggard appearance of Saint Jerome indicates a rejection of vanity, it is an interesting reversal of certain stereotypes which developed through the study of physiognomy.

The theory of physiognomy is the evaluation of a person's moral character or innate personality from their outer physical appearance, predominantly the face.[89] In the modern world, the idea that there is a connection between physical appearance and moral worth seems ludicrous. However, the notion has existed since ancient times in the physiognomic writings of philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato.[90] Aristotle believed that the condition of the soul affected the health and outer appearance of the body. He devotes a chapter of his text to physiognomy:

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[87] Leonardo da Vinci, *Leonardo on Painting*: *An Anthology of Writings,* 152.
[88] See Clayton, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Divine and the Grotesque,* 11-14.
[89] Physiognomy is a classical theory that has been both accepted and praised while contemporaneously harshly criticized as nothing more than a pseudo-science. A broader and more modern discussion of physiognomy can be found in Martin Porter, *Windows of the Soul: Physiognomy in European Culture 1470-1780* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).
[90] The preliminary ideas which form the basis of physiognomy emerge in texts, dating as far back as the fifth century B.C. For a more comprehensive study of the development of classical physiognomy see Simon Swain, *Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon's Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

> Dispositions follow bodily characteristics and are not in themselves unaffected by bodily impulses. This is obvious in the case of drunkenness and illness; for it is evident that dispositions are changed considerably by bodily affections. Conversely, that the body suffers sympathetically with the affections of the soul is evident in love, fear, grief, and pleasure. But it is especially in the creations of nature that one can see how body and soul interact with each other, so that each is mainly responsible for the other's affections. For no animal has ever existed such that it has the form of one animal and the disposition of another, but the body and soul of the same creature are always such that a given disposition must necessarily follow a given form. Again, in all animals those who are skilled in each species can diagnose their forms. Now if this is true (and it is invariably so, there should be a science of physiognomy.[91]

To Aristotle, physiognomy was applicable to everyday life. He believed it was a valuable tool that allowed the viewer to use physical traits to reveal a person's true moral character and worth. He notes, for example, that "thickness of the hair about the belly shows talkativeness."[92] Other character types are revealed in later passages:

> The marks of the shameless man are an eye wide-open, eyelids bloodshot and thick; he is somewhat bowed; shoulders raised high; his figure is not erect but inclines to stoop forward, he is quick in his movements and reddish in body; his complexion is ruddy; he is round-faced with a high chest.[93]

While a modern reader might find some enjoyment in these vivid descriptions, Aristotle believed the theory should be regarded as a science. A similar current of thought was present in the writings of Plato. The philosopher believed that the soul represented the innate features of the individual which could be physically altered by an immoral life. He writes in the *Republic:* "Ugliness and discord and disharmony go hand in hand with bad words and bad nature, while the opposite qualities are the sisters of good, virtuous characters, and resemble them."[94] Plato continued to advise poets and artists alike to avoid portraying ugliness in their work, for fear it would affect the morality of younger citizens:

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[91] Aristotle, "Physiognomics," in *Minor Works,* 85.
[92] Ibid., 95.
[93] Ibid., 101.
[94] Plato, *The Republic and Other Works by Plato*, trans. by Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, Inc., 1973), 89-90.

> So must we supervise only the poets, obliging them to imbue their works with good character, on pain of their being forbidden to make poetry in our lands? Or should we supervise the other artists, preventing them from portraying what is morally bad, unbridled, ignoble, and ugly, both in images of animate beings, buildings, and any other manufactured product? And are those incapable of doing this to be forbidden to work among us for fear that our citizens, raised amid corrupted images as in a bad pasture, by dint of feeding daily upon such fare, gradually and unwittingly accumulate a single great evil in their souls?[95]

For Plato, as well as Aristotle, physiognomy had a moral and social significance and thus became an important philosophical idea.

The classical theory of physiognomy was well known in the Renaissance, and by 1503 Leonardo owned at least three books that dealt directly with the subject.[96] From its first appearance in Renaissance art theory, writers realized the usefulness of physiognomy in developing convincing human figures in narrative painting.[97] Nevertheless, the scientist in Leonardo asserted his reservations concerning physiognomy: "I will not enlarge upon false physiognomy and chiromancy, because there is no truth in them, and this is made clear because such chimeras have no scientific foundation."[98] Following this declaration Leonardo continued with a lengthy and specific argument, similar to the Aristotelian line of thought, that reveals his actual interest in the theory:

> It is true that the signs of faces display in part the nature of men, their vices and their temperaments. If in the face the signs which separate the cheeks from the lips of the mouth and the nostrils of the nose and sockets of the eye are pronounced, the men are cheerful and often laughing, and those with slight signs are men who engage in thought. And those who have facial features of great relief and depth are bestial and wrathful men of little reason, and those who have strongly pronounced lines between their eyebrows are evidently wrathful, and those who have strongly delineated lines crossing their forehead are men who are full of hidden or overt regrets. And it is possible to discuss many features in this

[95] Ibid.
[96] For a list of the books in Leonardo's collection see Kwakkelstein, "Leonardo da Vinci's Grotesque Heads and the Breaking of the Physiognomic Mould," 127, n. 3.
[97] Kwakkelstein, "The Lost Book on 'moti mentali,' " 216, n.1, comprehensively lists the Renaissance writers who promoted physiognomy to artists. For example, the humanist scholar Pomponius Gauricus published *De Sculptura* in 1504 in Florence. His treatise was the first to introduce the subject of physiognomy into art theory.
[98] Leonardo da Vinci, *Leonardo on Painting*: *An Anthology of Writings*, 147.

way.[99]

Leonardo's own writings reveal that certain aspects of physiognomy definitely appealed to him. The artist was often obsessive in his desire to represent successfully the character of a figure through facial features, expression, and gesture. His unusual yet creative methods were so well-known that writers such as GiovanBattista Giraldi wrote about them decades after Leonardo's death:

> Whenever Leonardo wanted to paint a figure, he first thought about [that person's] qualities and nature, i.e. about whether they were noble or common, cheerful or stern, troubled or happy, old or young, angry or calm, good or bad. And when he had established their character, he went to where he knew people of this kind would be gathered, and diligently observed their faces, their mannerisms, their dress and the movements of their bodies. And when he had found something that was suitable for his purposes, he recorded it with a pen in a notebook that he always wore on his belt.[100]

Examples of Leonardo's studious application of physiognomy can be found in the *Last Supper,* a work from his first Milanese period.[101] Leonardo methodically planned the *Last Supper* (Fig. 23). He utilized figural types from his earlier works, such as the *Adoration of the Magi* and the *Saint Jerome*, in order to achieve a rich variety of physiognomies, expressions, and movements. The beautiful youth and the old man types were employed in the face of Christ (Fig. 24) and of Judas (Fig. 25), respectively. In harmony with his divine spirit, the head of Christ is physically ideal. And in accord with his evil and traitorous nature, Judas has a furrowed brow and is cast in shadow. An amusing anecdote recorded by both GianBattista Giraldi and Vasari narrates an

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[99] Ibid.

[100] GiovanBattista Giraldi, *Discorsi intornal comporre dei Romanzi delle Comedie, e delle Tragedie, e di alter maniere di poesie* (Venice, 1554), 193. This translation appears in Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 132. GiovanBattista Giraldi was a sixteenth-century Italian philosopher, novelist, and poet who praised Leonardo as a remarkable physiognomist. See Kwakkelstein, "The Lost Book on 'moti mentali,' " 217.

[101] Leonardo painted the *Last Supper* for Duke Ludovico Sforza around 1495-1497 in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie. For a comprehensive look at the *Last Supper* see Leo Steinberg, "Leonardo's Last Supper," *Art Quarterly* 36, (1973): 297-410. For a more recent discussion see Zöllner, *Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 122-139.

exchange between Leonardo and the prior of Santa Maria delle Grazie. The concerned prior went to Ludovico Sforza and demanded to know when the often distracted painter would finish his work. Leonardo cheekily responded:

> Most excellent lord, there still remains to be done the head of Judas, that great traitor whom you know; for he deserves to be painted with a face fitting to such villainy. And although I could pick many from among those who accuse me, who would be wonderfully apt for Judas-nonetheless, so as not to embarrass them, for a year or more now I have taken myself to the Borghetto, where all the vile and ignoble people live, wicked and villainous for the most part, to see if I should come across a face that would be up to fulfilling an image of that wretch; nor have I been able to find it yet, but the moment it appears before me I will complete in a day all that remains to be done. Or if perhaps I don't find it, I will place there the face of the prior who is such a nuisance to me now, for he will be wonderfully suitable.[102]

This tale reveals that Leonardo was ardently committed to the physiognomic representation of not only the human form but the soul as well. And more fundamentally, he believed that such a conflation was possible.

While Leonardo may have often adhered to physiognomic principles, he did not do so when he conceived the *Saint Jerome*. Jerome is a saint, and according to the customary standard he should have the appropriate physical markers of a holy figure: idealized beauty and grace. But Leonardo broke with physiognomic tradition and did not idealize Jerome's outer appearance. Instead, Leonardo intended to depict Jerome as a believable sinner. The saint is externally haggard but through his repentance, his soul will be internally redeemed with heavenly grace and illumination. Saint Jerome's dramatically unpleasant appearance stresses his humanity and his perpetual struggle with sin. It is clear that Leonardo's unconventional stylistic choices were an intentional device used to emphasize the specific narrative purpose of the painting.

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[102] Gionbattista Giraldi, *Discorsi intornal comporre dei Romanzi delle Comedie, e delle Tragedie, e di alter maniere di poesie*, 195. Also see Vasari, *Le vite*, ed. Milanesi, IV, 29-31. This translation was read in Michael Kwakkelstein, *Leonardo da Vinci as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice* (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 1994), 139.

Chapter 5

The Influence of Donatello's *Penitent Magdalen*

In his *Lives of the Artists,* Giorgio Vasari praised Donatello's skill and considered him to be a master of sculpture.[103] The artist was admired for his ability to portray naturalistically human expression and anatomy. His innovative style and techniques provided an endless source of inspiration to other artists, including Leonardo.[104] In fact, for his realistically harrowed portrayal of Saint Jerome, Leonardo may have been looking at a specific sculpture by Donatello. Decades before Leonardo's *Saint Jerome,* Donatello created an iconic and influential image of penance with the Magdalen as his subject.[105]

The saint known as Mary Magdalen became, like Jerome, a perfect emblem of repentance and redemption. Facts surrounding the historical Magdalen are quite convoluted. She was a follower of Christ and a witness to the events of his life, including his death and resurrection.[106] But the saint's life is, in fact, composed of events linked to completely different women who are mentioned at various times throughout the Gospels.[107] In Mark 15:40, a "Mary Magdalene" was present at the crucifixion of Christ.[108] She is also considered the Mary of Magdala in Luke 8:1-3, a woman from whom Jesus cast out seven demons and the anonymous sinner who anointed

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[103] Vasari, *Le vite*, ed. Milanesi, II, 395-396.
[104] John Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello: Sculptor* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 314-315.
[105] For the most in-depth discussion of this sculpture see Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello: Sculptor,* 276-279. His bibliography includes every source between 1500-1993; included in this is all non-English literature. It should be noted that for English-speaking readers, H.W. Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello,* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 190-191, is of particular value. Since Pope-Hennessy, the *Penitent Magdalen* has been discussed at length by Kelly Barnes-Oliver, "Legendary Penance: Donatello's Wooden *Magdalen,*" *Athanor* (1999): 25-33; Martha Levine Dunkelman, "Donatello's *Mary Magdalen: A Model of Courage and Survival,*" *Woman's Art Journal* 26, no. 2 (Autumn, 2005-Winter, 2006): 10-13.
[106] Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1995), 1-2.
[107] Barnes-Oliver, "Legendary Penance: Donatello's Wooden *Magdalen,*" 25.
[108] See Mark 15:40.

Christ's feet at the Banquet of Simon in Luke 7:36-50.[109] Perhaps the most well-known account of the saint's life is found in *The Golden Legend*. Here she is Mary of Bethany, the daughter of Syrus and Eucharia and the sister of Lazarus and Martha. According to *The Golden Legend*, she fell into a life of pleasure: "As rich as Mary was, she was no less beautiful; and so entirely had she abandoned her body to pleasure that she was no longer called by any other name than 'sinner'."[110] In the fourteenth year after the death of Christ, Mary and her siblings, Martha and Lazarus, journey to France to spread the word of God. It is here, in southern France, that Mary worked with her brother and sister to convert sinners and pagans. However, she eventually went into the wilderness at Aix to live in a cave as a hermit for a period of thirty years.

In the Renaissance, the Magdalen became popular among powerful Franciscan and Dominican congregations.[111] These mendicant orders admired the devotion and penitence of the saint. Consequently, during the fifteenth century, a large number of works were produced which chose the Magdalen as its subject matter. As with traditional depictions of Saint Jerome, there were also established pictorial conventions for Mary Magdalen. Her common attributes include an ointment jar and long hair.[112] The ointment jar symbolizes the moment when she anointed Christ's feet.[113] Fully in accord with the concupiscent nature of her sins, Mary Magdalen is often depicted as a young, alluring woman with flowing, golden hair.[114] But her hair also had different connotations of sexuality and abstemiousness. During her stay in the wilderness, the saint removed all of her clothes and she was left only with her hair to cover her nakedness. An

[109] See Luke 8:1-3 and Luke 7:36-50.
[110] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 356.
[111] Sarah Wilk, "The Cult of the Mary Magdalen in Fifteenth Century Florence and Its Iconography," *Studi Medievali* (1985): 685-698.
[112] Theresa Louise Huntley, "On Gilded Ugliness: Donatello's 'Penitent Magdalen' and Issues of Beauty, Sanctity, and Sexuality in Fifteenth-Century Florence," Master's Thesis, (Queen's University, 2008), 21.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Long, loose hair became associated with sexual sinners and emphasized the carnality of the human body. See Mosche Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 177.

example of the Magdalen with long hair can be seen in a fourteenth-century fresco in the Magdalen Chapel in San Francesco, Assisi (Fig. 26).[115] This particular scene also represents the saint as beautiful and idealized. She is the antithesis of Donatello's wooden sculpture.

Donatello's sculpture evokes a specific narrative taken from passages in *The Golden Legend* about the saint's penitential period in the desert. She gave up all earthly possessions, including food in favor of the rewards of spiritual enlightenment:

> In the meantime Saint Mary Magdalen, moved by her wish to live in contemplation of the things of God, retired to a mountain cave which the hands of angels had made ready for her, and there she dwelt for thirty years, unknown to anyone. There she found neither water nor herb nor tree, whereby she knew that Jesus wished to sustain her with naught but heavenly meats, allowing her no earthly satisfaction. But every day the angels bore her aloft at the seven canonical hours, and with her bodily ears she heard the glorious chants of the heavenly hosts. Then, being filled with this delightful repast, she came down to her grotto, and needed no bodily food.[116]

The physicality of the sculpture's life-size dimensions (72 ½ inches) emphasizes the shocking naturalism of her haggard appearance. A combination of animal skins and the saint's own long, unkempt hair serve as clothing for her naked body but they do not disguise her emaciation. The gauntness of her face and the boniness of her arms and legs indicate intense physical suffering. And there is also a mental exhaustion revealed in the Magdalen's extremely emotive facial expression. Her deep-set eyes contemplatively gaze out toward the viewer as she gently raises her hands in a gesture of prayer. This gesture, which emphasizes her devotion to God, is quite specific. The predominant prayer gesture represented in early Christian art was the raising of the hands above the sides of the head.[117] However, after the twelfth century the hands shifted to the front of the chest.[118] In the thirteenth century, a Roman pontifical stated that a repentant sinner

[115] Alessandro Tomei, *Giotto: La Pittura* (Florence: Giunti Gruppo Editoriale, 1997), 35.
[116] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 360-361.
[117] For further information see Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture*, 56-71.
[118] Barnes-Oliver, "Legendary Penance: Donatello's Wooden Magdalen," 26.

should place his or her hands into the hands of a priest and repeat the following phrase three times: "Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit."[119] Thus the prayer can be interpreted as the giving of both the body and the soul to God. It seems likely that Donatello would have been aware of this popular gesture of prayer and its penitential implications, and in fact, the Magdalen raises her hands in this gesture but does not completely join them together.[120] It has been argued that the gap between the Magdalen's hands may suggest she is about to receive Holy Communion.[121] It seems likely that Donatello would have chosen such an important moment—when the Magdalen is to take in symbolically the body of Christ—to emphasize further the spiritual rewards of the saint's long and intense devotion to her contrition. The Magdalen's haggard face and body reveal her personal sacrifice during her penitence, while the saint's prayer gesture suggests her redemption and forgiveness through Christ.

Donatello's interpretation of the Magdalen's appearance is difficult to explain because of its incomplete history. There is no conclusive date of production or decisive knowledge of the original location and patronage. Frequently believed to be an example of Donatello's late style, which is characterized by a deep expressive quality, the *Penitent Magdalen* was often chronologically and stylistically linked to Donatello's wooden *Saint John the Baptist* (Fig. 27) in the Santa Maria dei Frari in Venice.[122] However, following a restoration in 1972, a date of 1438 was revealed on the base of the *Saint John the Baptist*. The discovery of an earlier dating of the *Saint John* has led some scholars to re-evaluate the date of the *Penitent Magdalen* and suggest

[119] G.B. Ladner, "The Gestures of Prayer in Papal Iconography of the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries," in *Images and Ideas in the Middle Ages: Selected Studies in History and Art* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e letturatura, 1983), 225.
[120] Barnes-Oliver, "Legendary Penance: Donatello's Wooden Magdalen," 26.
[121] Ibid., 28-29.
[122] Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello*, 191, suggested a date of around 1455 for the *Penitent Magdalen*. Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello, Sculptor*, 276, agrees with Janson and dates the work to around 1454.

that the sculpture was created between the late 1430s to the early 1440s.[123] However, there are striking stylistic comparisons between Donatello's sculpture and works appearing in the 1450s.[124] If the *Penitent Magdalen* served as a prototype for these works it seems that the best date for the sculpture is the mid 1440s.

The earliest known source which names Donatello as the artist behind the *Penitent Magdalen* can be found in a text from 1510 by Francesco Albertini: "In the Baptistery there is a St. Mary Magdalene by the hand of Donatello…"[125] In *The Lives* Giorgio Vasari commented, with moderately more detail, on the location of the *Penitent Magdalen* and also specifically pinpoints Donatello as the creator of the work:

> Vedesi nel medesimo tempio [the Baptistery of San Giovanni], e diriment a quest'opera [the tomb of Pope Giovanni Coscia], di mano di Donato una Santa Maria Maddelena, di legno, in penitenza, molto bella e molto ben fatta…[126]

The *Penitent Magdalen's* long association with the Baptistery has led scholars to believe that the work was originally intended for its artistic program. Kelly Barnes-Oliver makes a compelling argument for not only the original location but the true meaning and intention behind the *Penitent Magdalen.*[127] Barnes-Oliver asserts that the sculpture fits in perfectly with the artistic program of the Baptistery. She believes that the *Penitent Magdalen* is an icon of penance and

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[123] See Deborah Strom, "Studies in Quattrocento Tuscan Wooden Sculpture," Dissertation (Princeton University, 1979); and "New Chronology for Donatello's Wooden Sculpture," *Pantheon* 38 (1980): 239-248. Bonnie A. Bennett and David G. Wilkins, *Donatello* (Oxford: Phaidon Press Limited, 1984), 129; Barnes-Oliver, "Legendary Penance: Donatello's Wooden Magdalen, 25, n. 2.

[124] These specific works will be discussed later in Chapter 5.

[125] Francesco Albertini, *Memoriale di molte statue e pitture,* Florence, 1510, reprint (Leipzig, 1869), 8. This translation was read in Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello,* 190; Joachim Poeschke, *Donatello and His World: Sculpture of the Italian Renaissance,* trans. by Russell Stockman (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1993), 402-403.

[126] See Vasari, *Le vite*, ed. Milanesi, II, 400. Vasari's statements about the location of the *Penitent Magdalen* are unclear because the Baptistery is octagonal. The tomb of Pope Giovanni Coscia is on the northwest wall of the Baptistery. Thus, Barnes-Oliver, "Legendary Penance: Donatello's Wooden Magdalen," 27, states that the *Penitent Magdalen* may have been opposite the papal tomb on the southeast wall, or it also may have been across from Coscia's tomb on the southwest wall. Vasari's ambiguous statement has been interpreted by both Janson and Pope-Hennessy to mean that the statue was across the tomb on the southwest wall. See Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello*, 190; Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello: Sculptor*, 346, n.46.

[127] Barnes-Oliver, "Legendary Penance: Donatello's Wooden Magdalen," 28-29.

redemption and would have been interpreted as such near the tomb of Pope Giovanni Coscia, who was disgraced and forced to abdicate the papacy.[128]

A different explanation has also been persuasively argued. The *Penitent Magdalen* seems to some to have been more appropriate for institutions which housed *convertite*, or converted prostitutes.[129] These institutions, which were growing in number in fifteenth-century Florence, named Mary Magdalen as their patron saint.[130] One of these rehabilitation shelters, known as Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertiti, likely housed a sculpture (Fig. 28) closely modeled after Donatello's *Penitent Magdalen.*[131] The sculpture is thought to be from 1519 and is attributed to Francesco da Sangallo. Numerous artists adopted this haggard type, including Desiderio da Settignano. His wooden sculpture in Santa Trinità in Florence (Fig. 29) closely resembles the weathered appearance of Donatello's hermit saint.[132] Also displayed in Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertiti was an altarpiece by Sandro Botticelli of the *Holy Trinity* (Fig. 30), from around 1490.[133] Botticelli's representation of Mary Magdalen appears to be a direct reference to Donatello's *Penitent Magdalen*. She is aged and weathered. Animal skins and her hair blend together, covering her frail body, and she raises her hands in a similar gesture of prayer. It seems obvious that Botticelli used Donatello's sculpture as the standard when creating his own version of the contrite saint. The artist's depiction of the courage, strength, and

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[128] Ibid. For information concerning the life of Pope Giovanni Coscia and his tomb see R.W. Lightbown, *Donatello and Michelozzo: An Artistic Partnership and its Patrons in the Early Renaissance*, vol. 1, (London: Harvey Miller, 1980), 4-51. Also see Sarah McHam, "Donatello's Tomb of Pope John XXIII," in *Life and Death in Fifteenth-Century Florence,* ed. by Marcel Tetel, Ronald Witt, and Rona Goffen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989): 146-173.

[129] Dunkelman, "Donatello's *Mary Magdalen: A Model of Courage and Survival*," 10-13.

[130] Ibid.

[131] Alan Phipps and Rona Roisman, "Francesco da Sangallo: A Rediscovered Early Donatellesque 'Magdalen' and Two Wills from 1574 and 1576," *Burlington Magazine* 129 (1987): 784-793.

[132] The sculpture was not finished by Desiderio. It was completed by Giovanni d'Andrea. Jean-René Gaborit, "Desiderio, Vasari, and Us," in *Desiderio da Settignano: Sculptor of Renaissance Florence,* ed. by Marc Bormand, Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, and Nicholas Penny (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2007), 20-21.

[133] For more information on Botticelli's painting see R.W. Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli, Life and Work* (New York: Abbeville, 1989), 202-207.

determination of the *Penitent Magdalen* was a very appropriate model for such establishments. In *The Golden Legend*, Mary's penitence secured her eventual salvation:

> For before her conversion she remained in her guilt, being laden with the debt of eternal punishment; in her conversion she was both armed and unconquered, by means of the armament of penance, because she put on the excellent armour of penance, devising an immolation of herself to atone for each of the pleasures she had enjoyed; after her conversion she was magnificent by the superabundance of grace, because where sin abounded, grace did more abound.[134]

The saint's iniquitous past and her journey to find salvation would have been seen as an emblem of hope for prostitutes seeking forgiveness.

Although Donatello's *Penitent Magdalen* was emerging as a new prototype for the representation of haggard saints, it had origins within a subgroup of five wooden sculptures from the fifteenth century.[135] The earliest example of these works is the *Pescia Magdalen* (Fig. 31).[136] The wooden sculpture, believed to be from the early 1400s, is by an unknown artist and located in Santa Maria Maddalena in Pescia. In each, the saint is adorned with long hair and stands with her hands meekly raised in a gesture of penance. This traditional representation of the penitent Magdalen continued as seen in the later Empoli Magdalen, a wooden sculpture from around 1455.[137] However, Donatello does not follow these established conventions. And indeed, compared to his *Penitent Magdalen* these other figures of the saint seem devoid of spirit and life.[138] The expressive realism of Donatello's sculpture elevates the profundity of the sculpture's spiritual message. The mental and physical anguish seen in the haggard appearance of the saint

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[134] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 355.
[135] Strom, "A New Chronology for Donatello's Wooden Sculpture," 239-248; Marilena Mosco, *La Maddalena tra Sacro e Profano* (Florence: Mondadori, 1986), 48-52; Dunkelman, "Donatello's *Mary Magdalen*: *A Model of Courage and Survival*," 10. Also John T. Paoletti, "Wooden Sculpture in Italy as Sacral Presence," *Artibus et Historiae* 13, no. 26 (1992): 85-100, discusses the function of large-scale wooden sculpture during the Renaissance. He states that most wooden figures were intended for chapels or altarpieces. However, the life-size wooden sculptures were placed on ground level in order to emphasize its "sacral presence."
[136] Dunkelman, "Donatello's *Mary Magdalen*: *A Model of Courage and Survival*," 10.
[137] For more information see Barnes-Oliver, "Legendary Penance: Donatello's Wooden Magdalen," 25, 27.
[138] Ibid., 27.

elucidate her humanity and create a touching moment of the perseverance and strength of the human soul. Donatello makes the penitential type entirely his own and Leonardo soon follows with his own saint, the haggard Jerome. Both artists are asking the viewer to see the uncharacteristic physical appearances of these saints as something profoundly different. The striking haggardness and agedness of the figures means something. Leonardo and Donatello stress the absence of their beauty and reveal the effects of true penance. Because of their old and wizened bodies, they have left the corporeal world behind, and moved to an ethereal state of contemplation that will end in spiritual wisdom.[139] Through their old age they are now closer to God and Heaven. Both Jerome and Mary Magdalen chose to undergo an extreme transformative process, both physical and mental, in order to gain the inner rewards of divine illumination, grace, and forgiveness.

[139] Erin Campbell, "The Art of Aging Gracefully: The Elderly Artist as Courtier in Early Modern Art Theory and Criticism," 330.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

One of the most iconic images of idealized beauty is Michelangelo's *Pietà* (Fig. 32) from 1499 and now in the Basilica di San Pietro in the Vatican. The Virgin is youthful and Christ, even in death, is graceful.[140] The viewer is meant to contemplate the somber moment after Christ's death and understand the importance of the sacrifice of both figures. Their spiritual perfection is out of the reach of mere humans. During the Renaissance, religious figures were expected to be treated in a manner which respected their superior and virtuous natures. However, it is obvious that Leonardo's *Saint Jerome* and Donatello's *Penitent Magdalen* do not follow this pictorial tradition. Saint Jerome is toothless and old and the Magdalen is equally haggard. Instead, the works provided a model for spiritual enlightenment through a very human kind of suffering.

Both the *Penitent Magdalen* and the *Saint Jerome* depict the reality of suffering that true penance requires. The Magdalen sought forgiveness for her sexual immorality. Donatello wanted a reflection of that penance throughout the Magdalen's face and body, so her beauty has faded and she is now old and gaunt. The *Saint Jerome* is more complicated. Jerome was a biblical scholar who spent his life repenting his love of classical literature; Leonardo reflects Jerome's suffering primarily in his face and neck. And indeed, Jerome's body is more youthful than his aged face and sinewy neck. Donatello and Leonardo seemed to believe that the saints'

[140] It is important to note that Michelangelo was criticized because of the Virgin's lack of agedness. She was considered too young in relation to the specific narrative. However, the work is an example of the Renaissance tradition of idealizing religious figures. See Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009), 37.

experiences of penitence and redemption are best expressed without beauty.

The visualization of the heroic suffering of both saints was intended to evoke from the viewer both empathy and emotion. And indeed, the striking absence of beauty in the weathered and emaciated exteriors of both Jerome and the Magdalen emphasized their humanity and transformed them into models of penitence and redemption. They are haggard and exhausted yet resolute in their search for divine illumination and spiritual beauty. It is their untiring faith and strength of spirit that reveals the true nature and beauty of the human soul. In both the *Penitent Magdalen* and *Saint Jerome,* Donatello and Leonardo ignored Renaissance standards of beauty and grace and created their own ideal images of perfect penance.

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Appendix

Figures

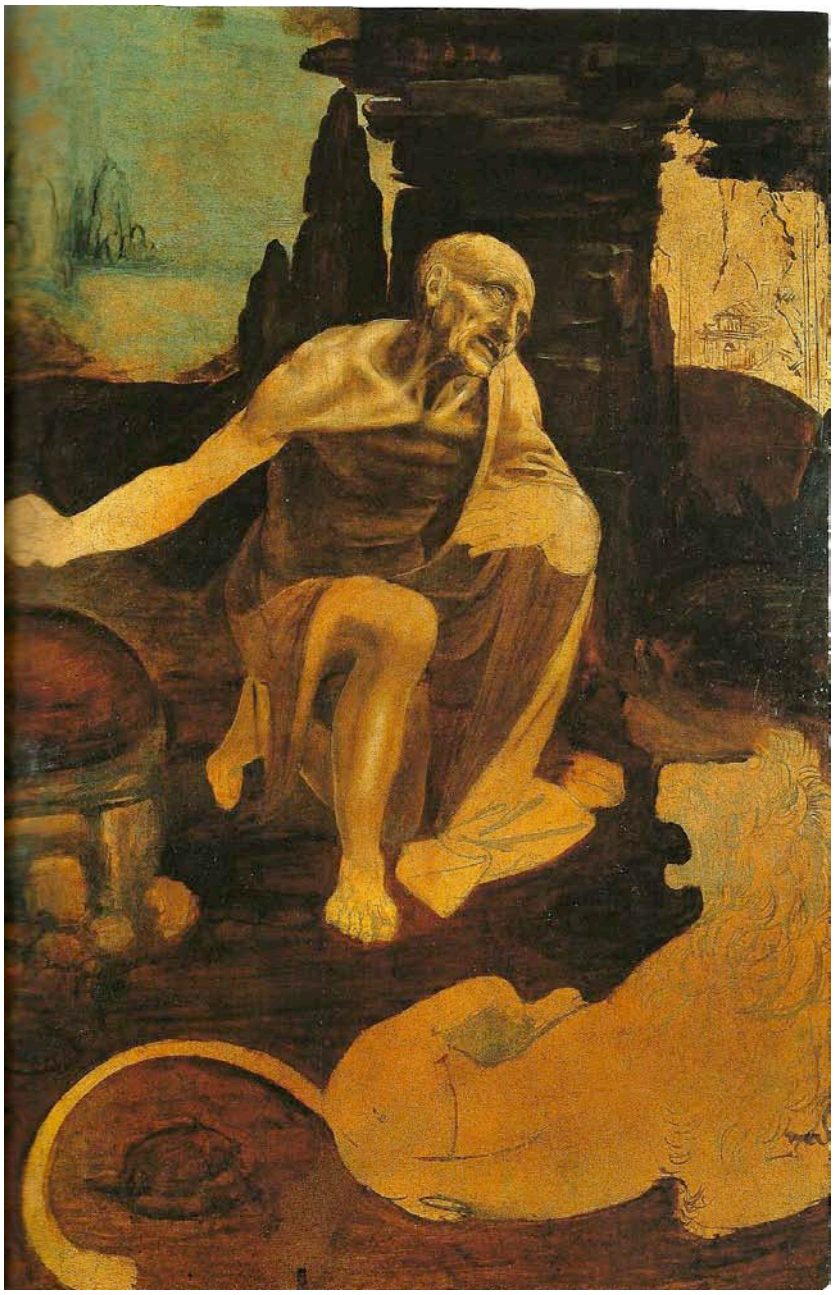

Figure 1, Leonardo da Vinci, *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness,* c. 1480-1482, Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome

Figure 2, Michelangelo, segment of *The Fall and Expulsion from Garden of Eden*, c. 1509-10, Cappella Sistina, Vatican

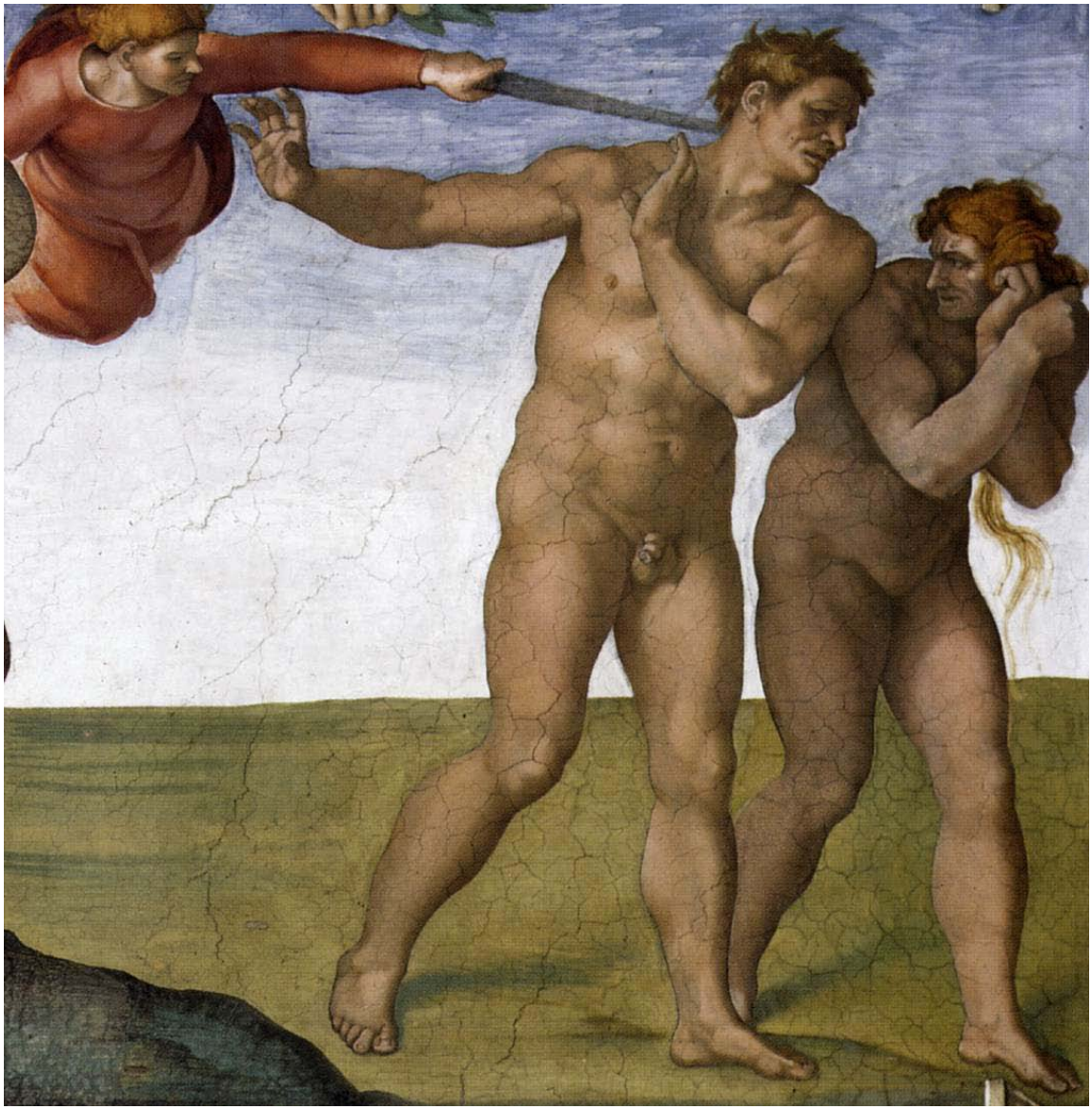

Figure 3, Michelangelo, segment of *The Fall and Expulsion from Garden of Eden*, c. 1509-10, Cappella Sistina, Vatican

Figure 4, Leonardo da Vinci, *Madonna and Child with a Vase of Flowers*, c. 1475, Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Figure 5, Andrea Mantegna, *Pallas Expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue*, c. 1499-1502, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Figure 6, Donatello, *Penitent Magdalen*, c. 1440s, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence

Figure 7, Leonardo da Vinci, *Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1481-1482, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Figure 8, Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the Rocks*, c. 1483-1485, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Figure 9, Leonardo da Vinci, detail of the *Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1481-1482, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Figure 10, Leonardo da Vinci, detail of the *Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1481-1482, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Figure 11, Cosmè Tura, *Saint Jerome in Penitence*, c. 1474, National Gallery, London

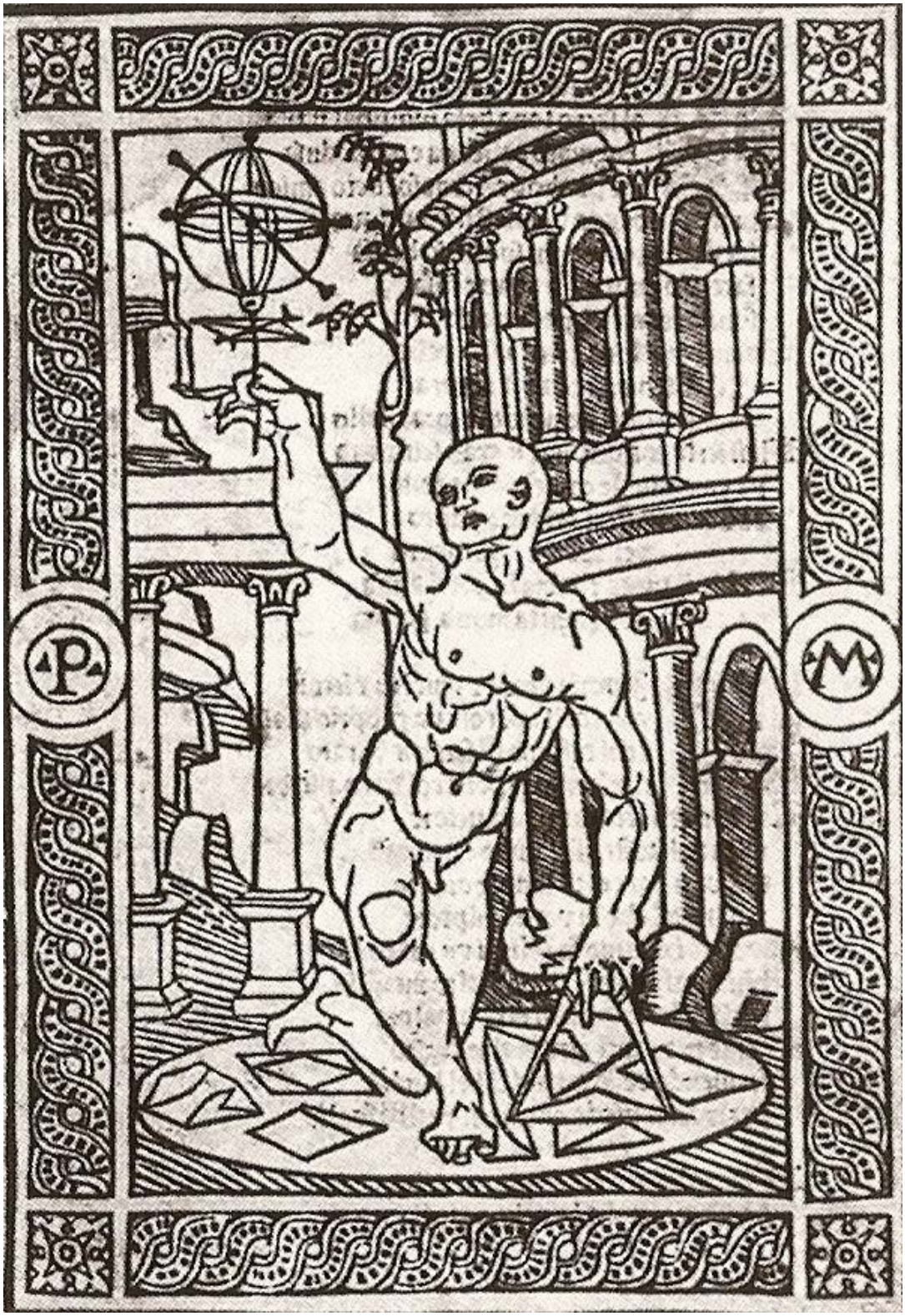

Figure 12, Anonymous Italian artist, *Le antiquarie prospetiche romane*, Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome

Figure 13, School of Corbie, *Beatus Hieronimus presbyter,* eighth century, State Public Library, Leningrad, MS. Q.v.I. no. 13, fol. 3v

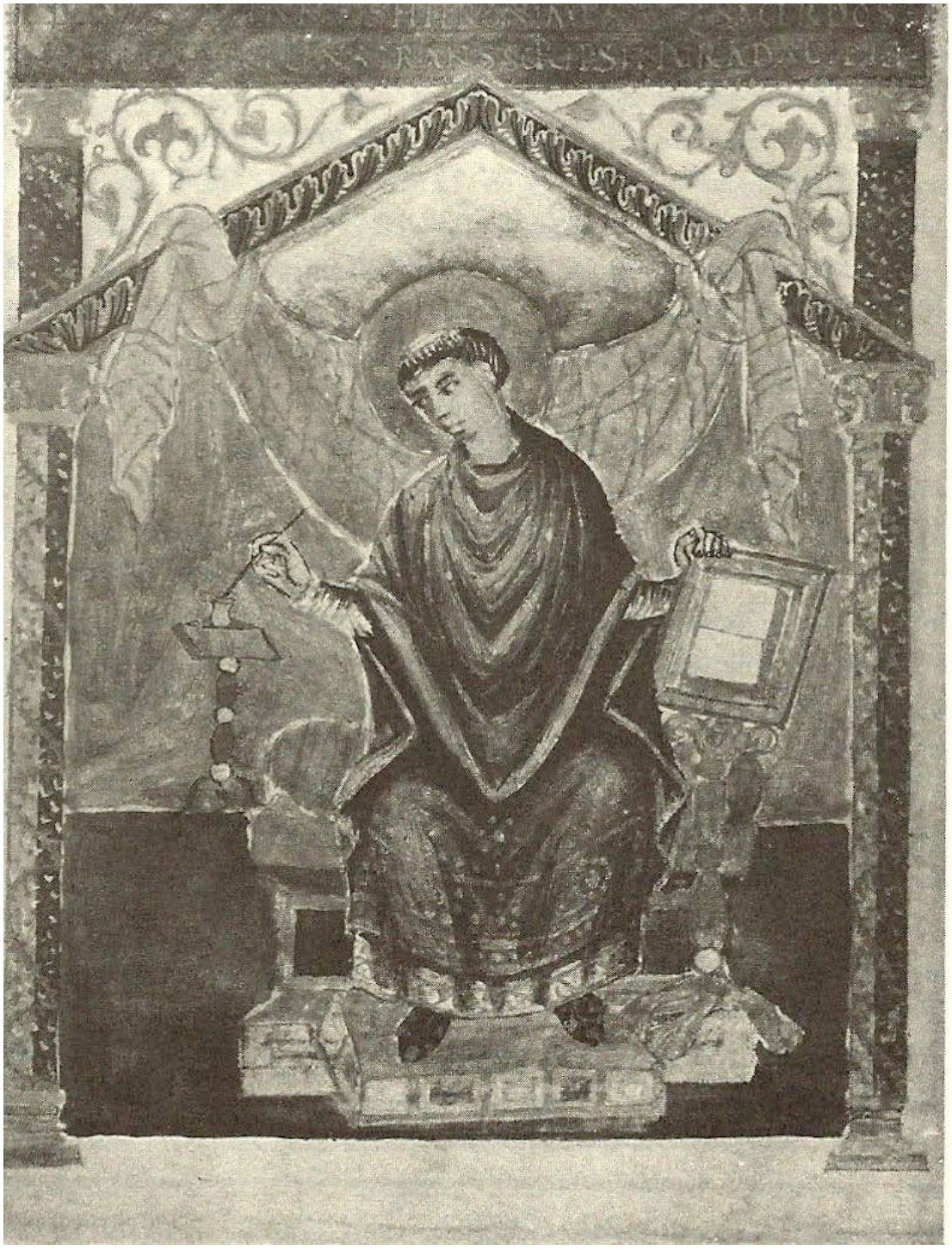

Figure 14, School of Charles the Bald, *Saint Jerome Translating the Psalms,* c. 860, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS. Lat. 1152, fol.4

Figure 15, Fra Angelico, *The Penitent Saint Jerome*, c. 1419-1420, Princeton Art Museum

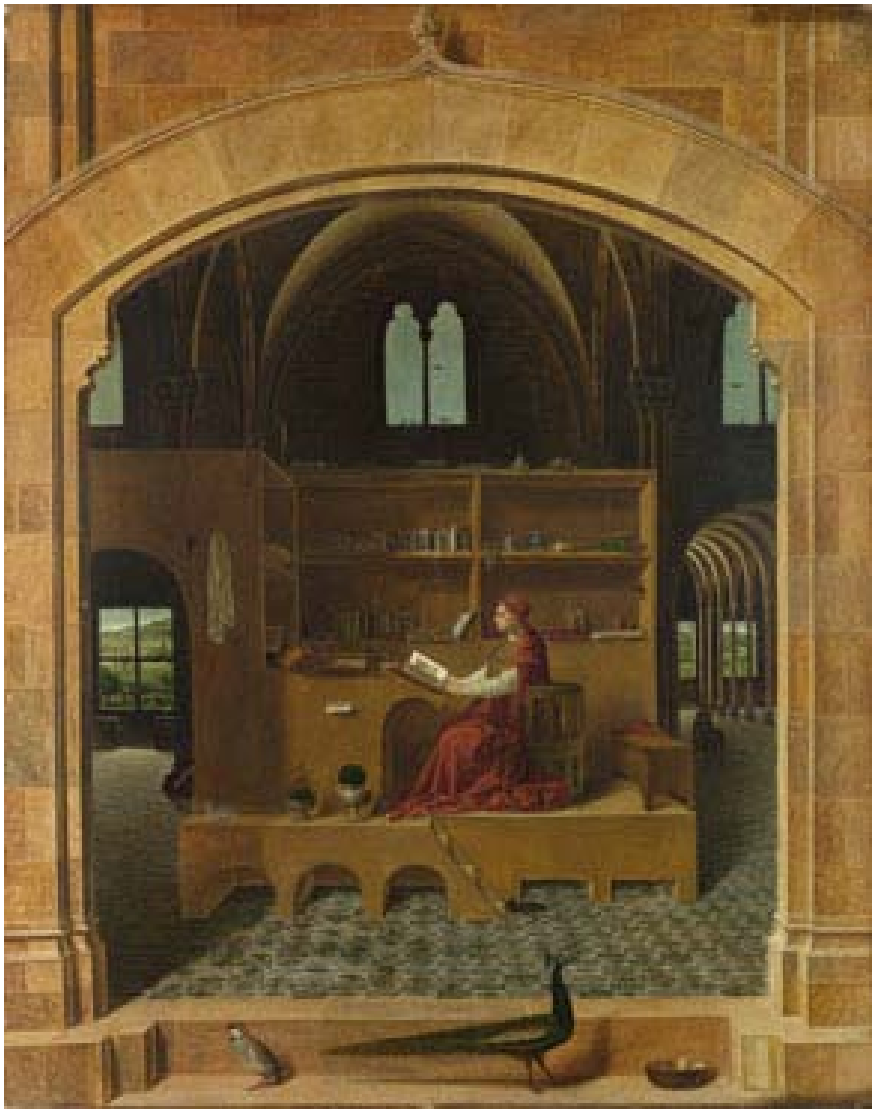

Figure 16, Antonello da Messina, *Saint Jerome in His Study*, c. 1475, National Gallery, London

Figure 17, Sano di Pietro, *The Penitent Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*, c. 1444, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Figure 18, Desiderio da Settignano, *Saint Jerome in the Desert*, 1460-1464, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Figure 19, Benedetto da Maiano, *Saint Jerome Praying in the Wilderness*, c. 1470, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

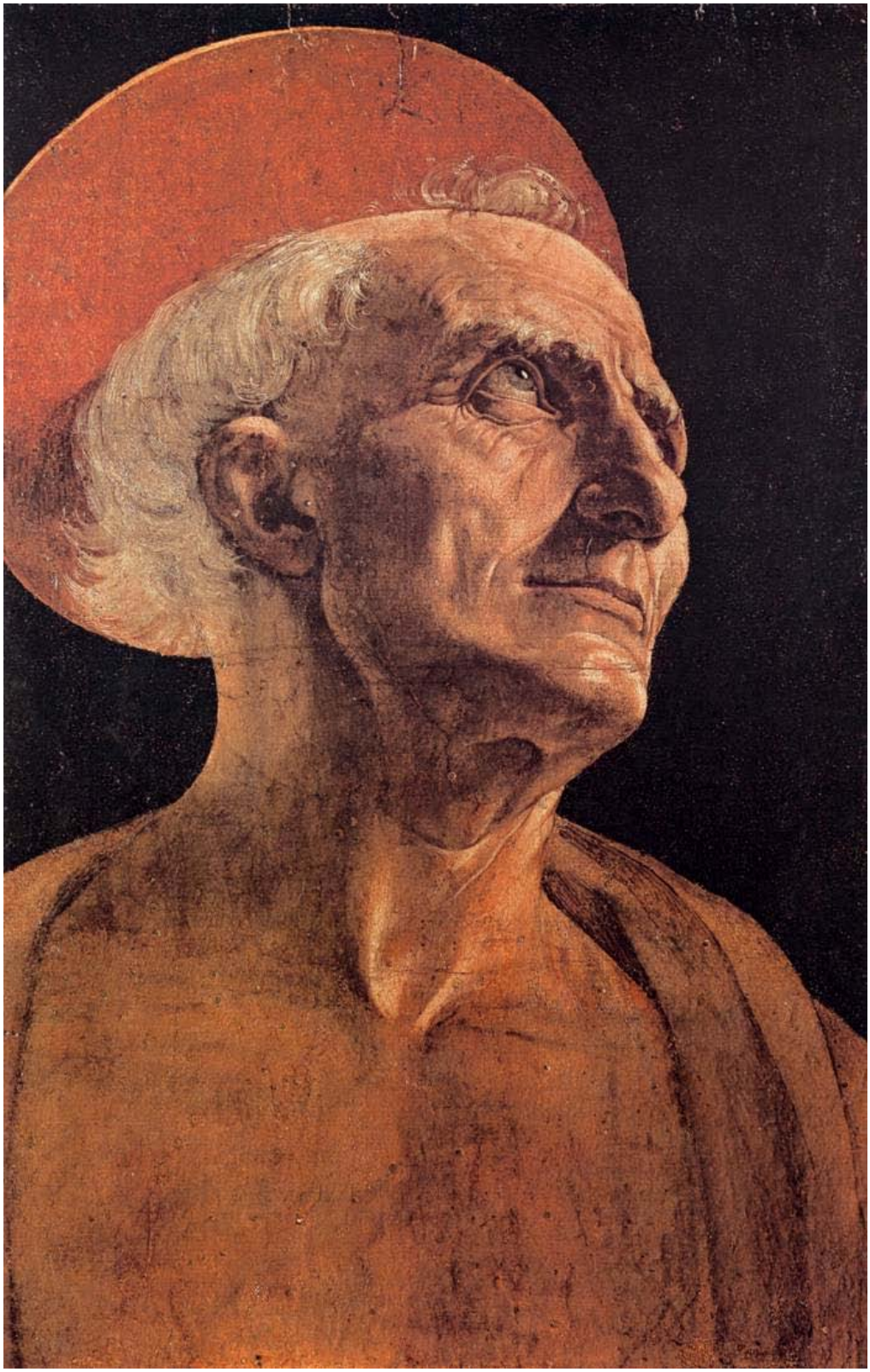

Figure 20, Verrocchio, *Saint Jerome*, c. 1465, Galleria Palatina (Palazzo Pitti), Florence

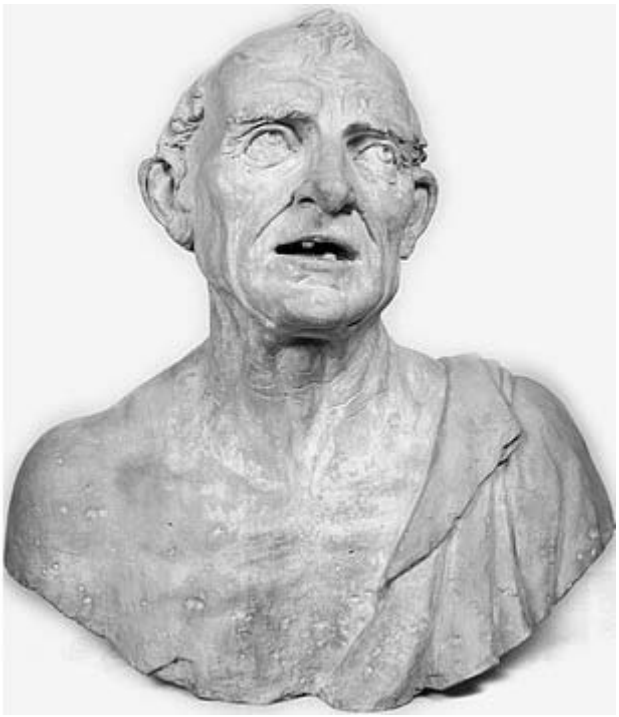

Figure 21, Workshop of Verrocchio (?), *Saint Jerome*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Figure 22, Unknown Artist, *Bust of a Man* (possibly Saint Jerome), c. 1525, High Museum of Art, Atlanta

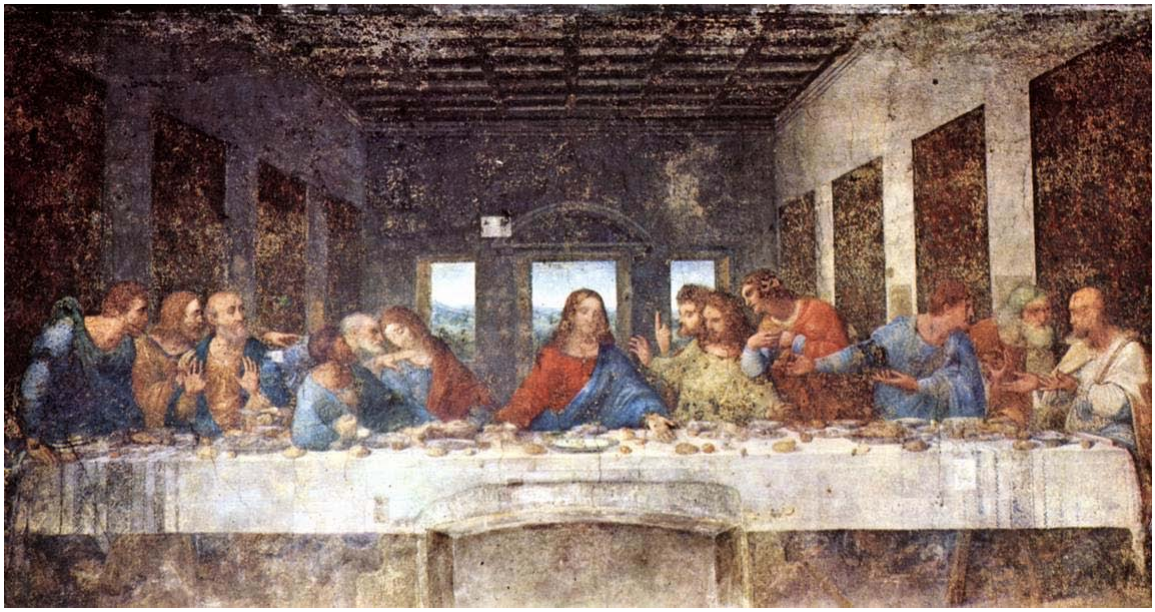

Figure 23, Leonardo da Vinci, *Last Supper*, c. 1495-1497, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan

Figure 24, Leonardo da Vinci, detail of the *Last Supper*: *Christ*, c. 1495-1497, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan

Figure 25, Leonardo da Vinci, detail of the *Last Supper*: *Judas*, c. 1495-1497, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan

Figure 26, School of Giotto, *Scenes from the Life of Mary Magdalene*: *Mary Magdalene Speaking to the Angels*, 1320s, Magdalene Chapel, Church of San Francesco, Assisi

Figure 27, Donatello, *Saint John the Baptist*, 1438, Santa Maria dei Frari, Venice

Figure 28, Francesco da Sangallo, *Magdalen*, c. 1519, Church of Santo Stefano al Ponte, Florence

Figure 29, Desiderio da Settignano, completed by Giovanni d'Andrea, *Mary Magdalene*, c. 1458-1499, Santa Trinità, Florence

Figure 30, Sandro Botticelli, *Holy Trinity*, c. 1490, Courtauld Institute Galleries, London

Figure 31, Unknown artist, *Magdalen*, early 1400s, Santa Maria Maddalena, Pescia

Figure 32, Michelangelo, *Pietà*, c. 1499, Basilica di San Pietro, Rome