

Two Views of a Scholarly Saint

St. Jerome in his Study, 1514

St. Jerome Reading in the Desert, 1565

LOOKING at *St. Jerome*

For hundreds of years, St. Jerome has been a favorite subject for artists. Some artists chose to depict the saint as a hermit in the desert; others prefer to show him as a scholar in his study.

St. Jerome was a 4th century scholar who could speak, write, and read Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. He used his knowledge to translate the New Testament gospels and all books of the Old Testament into Latin, the language used by the educated elite. The project took him twenty years.

In both prints of St. Jerome, a LION keeps the scholar company. According to legend, the lion came limping up to St. Jerome when he lived as a hermit in the desert. Unafraid, St. Jerome carefully removed a thorn from the lion's paw. The grateful lion remained with the saint and became his loyal companion.

St. Jerome in His Study



Saint Jerome is bent over his desk, thoroughly absorbed in his work in his quiet, peaceful study.

[Zoom in to look for these objects in the study:](http://artbma.org/paintedprints/html/pp05_flash.html)

http://artbma.org/paintedprints/html/pp05_flash.html

Bible and scholarly books

Cardinal's hat

Candlestick

Crucifix

Cushions

Dog

Gourd

Hourglass

Lion

Sandals

Skull

Albrecht Dürer's monogram and 1514 date on the floor

The monogram of the colorist D:R: on the step

St. Jerome in his Study

1514

Albrecht Dürer

German, 1471-1528

and

Domenicus Rottenhammer

German, active c. 1594-1640

Signed "D.R."

Engraving with transparent washes and body colors, highlighted with gold

Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg, Germany

St. Jerome Reading in the Desert



St. Jerome Reading in the Desert
1565

Cornelis Cort - Dutch, c. 1533-1578

After Titian

Italian, c. 1490-1576

and

Georg Mack the Elder

German, active Nuremberg, c. 1556-1601

Signed "GM 1579"

Engraving with transparent washes and body colors, highlighted with gold and silver

British Museum, London

St. Jerome is reading his Bible outdoors in a mountainous landscape. [Zoom in to look for these objects surrounding St. Jerome outdoors:](#)

http://artbma.org/paintedprints/html/pp07_flash.html

Bible and scholarly books

Bird

Crucifix

Hourglass

Lion

Skull

Squirrel

Which four objects appear in BOTH *St. Jerome Reading in the Desert* and *St. Jerome in his Study*?

Which of these objects is a symbol of the passage of time?

Which object is a symbol of the idea that all of life must come to an end?

ACTIVITY

Compare numerous images of St. Jerome by many different artists. Look online for "Gallery of Images of Saint Jerome" at www.catholic-forum.com/saints/stj06002.htm

Who was St. Jerome?

How did he become a scholar?

Where did he meditate and pursue his studies?

According to historians, a rock-hewn monastery cell in Bethlehem was the place where St. Jerome did his most important scholarly work during the 4th century.

However

- Albrecht Dürer placed the scholarly St. Jerome in a room that could have easily belonged to a German 16th-century middle-class burgher.
- Cort placed St. Jerome in a wild mountain landscape.

Discussion

- Read about St. Jerome's life on the next pages. Then discuss what aspects of St. Jerome's life Dürer and Cort chose to depict.

St. Jerome's Life Story

EARLY LIFE

The scholar known as St. Jerome was born about 342 A.D. in Stridon, a small town in north Italy near today's Italian-Yugoslavian border. His Christian father sent him to Rome to receive a classical education. Jerome became fluent in the Greek and Latin languages and took great pleasure in reading classical literature.

STUDY AND TRAVEL

In Rome, Jerome encountered a pleasure-loving society, and drifted somewhat from the strict piety of his upbringing. On Sundays, he and his friends went underground into the Roman catacombs, where the remains of Christian martyrs and Apostles were buried. Jerome, already skilled in language, enjoyed deciphering the inscriptions on the tombs. While in Rome, Jerome was baptized by the Pope.

After three years of classical education in Rome, Jerome devoted himself to theological studies and came to enjoy intellectual discussion and argument. Finally, in his mid-thirties, Jerome sought solitude in the desert of Chalcis in Syria, where hermits and monks went to meditate.

A HERMIT IN THE SYRIAN DESERT

Jerome entered the desert with three companions. Two soon died, and one returned to the West, but Jerome remained for four or five years. His writings say that he lived *in the remotest part of a wild and stony desert...burnt up with the heat of the sun... with no other company but scorpions and wild beasts....*

Jerome fought off many attacks of illness, and tried to tame his temptations with brutal fasting. In the end it was his intellect that helped him do battle with his personal devils. *"When my soul was on fire with wicked thoughts, as a last resort I became a pupil to a monk who had been a Jew...."*

There in the desert, Jerome learned the Hebrew alphabet and began his study of the Hebrew Scriptures. His command of the Hebrew language would serve him well in later years.

TRANSLATOR FOR THE POPE

When Jerome emerged from the desert, he became a priest and within two years was back in Rome, serving as secretary to the Pope. The Pope recognized Jerome's special aptitude for language and asked him to undertake the enormous task of translating the Gospels of the New Testament from Greek into Latin.

Translations already existed, but the Pope thought they were all flawed by "wrong copying, clumsy correction, and careless interpolations." Since Latin was replacing Greek as the common language throughout the vast Roman Empire, Greek Bibles were no longer sufficient for reaching all Christians. There was an urgent need for an accurate Latin version.

The forty-year old Jerome was prepared to take up the challenge.

- He was “trilingual,” with a strong command of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew.
- He had studied the Latin classics with a famous Latin grammarian as a young man.
- He was a devout Christian who had personal attachment to the Gospels.

Jerome carried out his charge superbly and impressed everyone with his great learning and his exquisite control over the language of the Gospels. However, he had difficulty controlling his own sharp tongue in the presence of self-absorbed, vain people.

He mocked Christian clerics who seemed overly concerned with the appearance of their beards.

- *If there’s any holiness in a beard, he said, none is holier than a goat.”*
- He made scathing remarks about older women who try to look young and *load their heads with other people’s hair.*
- He belittled worldly women who *paint their cheeks with rouge and their eyelids with antimony, whose plastered faces, too white for human beings, look like idols; and if in a moment of forgetfulness they shed a tear, it makes a furrow where it rolls down the painted cheek...*

A SCHOLAR IN A BETHLEHEM CAVE

Jerome’s harsh criticisms offended many people. Facing growing resentment and ill will in Rome, Jerome moved to Bethlehem. He lived in a in a large cave near Christ’s birthplace and devoted himself to a life of asceticism and study. **It was in this cave in Bethlehem that Jerome completed the translation of most of the Old Testament books from Hebrew into Latin.**

Jerome pursued his scholarship in his cave in Bethlehem for thirty-four years until his death in 420 A.D. Unlike earlier translators, Jerome brought geographical considerations into this research and used archaeological findings to clarify the meaning of the words of the Old Testament. Today Jerome is acknowledged to be the greatest Biblical scholar of the early Christian Church and is recognized as the patron saint of archeologists, archivists, Bible scholars, librarians, students, and translators. The ultimate tribute to St. Jerome’s scholarship came from theologian St. Augustine who said, *What Jerome is ignorant of, no man has ever known.*

DISCUSSION

- To what extent might Jerome’s desert (in Cort’s print) resemble an actual desert in Syria, which Jerome himself described as *a wild and stony desert...burnt up with the heat of the scorching sun?*
- To what extent might Jerome’s study (in Dürer’s print) resemble a cave in Bethlehem where St. Jerome did his scholarly work?
- To what extent should we judge an artwork on the basis of how well it reflects historical facts?
- To what extent should we allow the artist some leeway in the manner that he chooses to present the story?