

## ICONOGRAPHY

by *Barbara Jatta*

The iconography chosen by Leonardo to portray his St Jerome is that of the penitent hermit in the desert, in his retreat or in the so-called forest. Clothed in a few rags, he is crouching rather than kneeling in a posture of bodily and emotional tension. His right hand is holding the stone used for beating his breast while the left is turned towards his body in a gesture of contrition. The setting and the stone, but also the lion, the cardinal's hat, and the crucifix are all elements which allude to the saint's life as handed down by the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacopo da Varagine and widely disseminated during the fifteenth century.

The figure of the hermit has been studied with remarkable attention to anatomical detail and to the distinctive iconography of the Saint, who is nevertheless represented as hairless, in contrast to so many paintings of the period where he is always distinguished by a bushy white beard.

The way the old man's body is rendered is of particular interest: tense, leanly muscled, with visible tendons, evidence of Leonardo's pioneering interest in these subjects. Most striking of all are the dark, sunken chest behind his shoulders, the expressive gesture of the outstretched arm which seems to be probing the surrounding space, and the forward-pointing knee, an extraordinarily effective piece of perspective. The bare, bony head, foreshortened in its twisting to the right, is drawn with incisive expressiveness and closely recalls Hellenistic models.

The figure of the Saint also stands out powerfully because of its dark background composed of bizarrely shaped rocks such as are also found in the *Virgin of the Rocks* (1483-1486).

His haggard face is turned upwards, towards a crucifix according to tradition, but this is only lightly hinted on the right of the painting. On the same side a landscape is portrayed, with the sketch of a church which has been variously interpreted by the critics (Santa Maria Novella in Florence, Pavia Cathedral, or similar buildings sketched in Codex

'B' and in other writings of the Milanese period). Another landscape is painted on the left-hand side, characterized by a delicate blue-green tone in which the image of a palm tree can be glimpsed.

Leonardo's decision to portray the saint in his hermit guise rather than as the biblical scholar, Father and Doctor of the Church, should be read as a key moment in the artist's development, on the one hand depicting the saint's body as a "personification of the passion" and on the other giving us a representation of it in line with his interest in the anatomical study of the human body.

So, this is a work poised between naturalism and idealism, observation and imagination, inherited wisdom and self-taught truths: rich in tension generated by its intrinsic superimposition of different systems of perception and knowledge.