

TECHNIQUE

by *Barbara Jatta*

The Vatican Museums' *St Jerome* is an undisputed masterpiece of Leonardo's genius. Precisely because of its "unfinished" character it is considered one of his most interesting works, and is numbered among the very few of his paintings whose authorship has never been called into question.

Created using an oil technique (tempera) on a walnut panel, composed of two boards vertically aligned, it is characterized by a widespread "unfinishedness" over large parts of the painting which allows us to analyse the artist's methods of execution, including the technique of finger-painting. Indeed, in much of the composition the pigments appear to have been distributed with the fingers in order to soften the sharp outlines of the figures. Brushes were also used, however, and there is evidence of the practices of wiping or rubbing and the use of pads.

The wealth of information offered by the painting clearly emerges from the scientific examinations which have been carried out on the work, by means of which it is possible to investigate the various stages in which the painting was created. Leonardo used some partial cartoons to create the individual figures. There were two layers to the drawing, the first applied with a brush directly onto the preparation (four layers consisting of gesso, glue, and lead white), the other onto the primer. The drawing was applied with the tip of the brush, using a dark tone composed of iron oxide and a brown pigment. In this phase, Leonardo also created an under-modelling, shaping the bodies in watercolour. The next phase was the use of a semi-transparent primer with a lead white base to give the underlying drawing a grey appearance. This device enabled Leonardo to dim the graphic elements that he did not intend to develop at the painting stage, and also acted as an insulation to stop the binder of the paints leaking into the preparation. The transparency of this layer allowed the artist to continue seeing the drawing and to use it as a guide for the subsequent stages. The underlying grey acted as a half tone for the moulding of the flesh tones.

Most of the shadow was painted using brown pigments, often mixed with green

(copper carbonate). The sky and the distant mountains were created using azurite. The drawing of the church on the right and the hint of crucifix were executed with a brush, using a brown ink.

Leonardo left the panel unfinished: only the Saint's face, part of his right leg, and the dark rocks show a finished underlying chiaroscuro.

The panel is characterized by a strong, dynamic impulse and tension characteristic of Leonardo's work from this time. In the fourteen-eighties he developed a technique characterized by an accentuated simplification of his palette, as is testified not only by an unfinished work such as the *Adoration of the Magi* in the Uffizi, but also by *Musician* in the Ambrosiana and the *Virgin of the Rocks* in the Louvre. In parallel to, and perhaps as a consequence of, this voluminous research expressed chiefly in paint, we witness a renewed interest in drawing which plays a key role in every investigation and takes full account of reality. This active research with its emphasis on drawing leads to the systematic study of human anatomy, developed on pages of the highest artistic and scientific value.