

## ITS COMMISSIONING AND HISTORY IN COLLECTIONS

by Barbara Jatta

Even today the commissioning of Leonardo's *St Jerome* remains uncertain and divides those critics who have devoted considerable attention to the painting. We have no documentary evidence on which to base an opinion, there are no papers directly concerning it, and the work is not mentioned in any early biography of the artist. It has often been asserted that, in style, technique and composition it resembles the *Adoration of the Magi*, now in the Uffizi, which we know to have been commissioned in 1481 and left incomplete because of Leonardo's departure for Milan the following year. Other scholars date the work to the artist's first sojourn in Milan (1482-1484), seeing the *St Jerome* as a step in that important journey of studying and drawing the nude through annotations, sketches, and comments recorded by Leonardo in the early fourteen-nineties and then reorganized by his pupil Francesco Melzi in his *Treatise on Painting*, based on the master's notes.

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There are those who have wanted to see the painting as a product of the artist's private devotion, those who see it as having been commissioned in Florentine circles where the artist was much in demand, and those who regard it as a request by a confraternity of *St Jerome* or by the Benedictine monks of the Badia Fiorentina, which housed Leonardo's family tomb and commissioned Filippino Lippi to paint a similar subject (perhaps because Leonardo's painting, left incomplete, had not been delivered?).

Other scholars, however, incline towards a date close to the fourteen-nineties, making a comparison with the first version of the *Virgin of the Rocks* in the Louvre (1483-1486) and a prelude to some solutions in the *Last Supper*.

The painting is documented in the early nineteenth century as being in the collection of the famous painter Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807); in fact, it turns up in a declaration by her cousin, Johann Kauffmann, which refers to "a painting thought to be by Leonardo da Vinci." It subsequently appears in the artist's will, attested by the notary Bortolo in 1803, where she declares "another beautiful painting on wood which portrays St Jerome in the desert, half life size, kneeling before a cross. This painting is considered by me to be the work of Leonardo Da Vinci, a work worthy of this painter and in an excellent state of preservation."

It is not clear what happened to the painting after Kauffmann's death but it is known to have formed part of the collection of Napoleon's uncle, Cardinal Joseph Fesch (1763-1839) who, according to his biographer J.B. Lionnet, is to be thanked for putting the work back together after it had been sawn in two. The lower and larger part had been used as a cupboard door and was found in a junk shop, while the other part, with the Saint's head, had been used by a shoemaker as the seat of a stool.

So the picture was re-assembled thanks to the Cardinal, and on his death in 1839 it was auctioned with the rest of his valuable collection.

However, the work was sold again in a later auction held at the Palazzo Ricci in Via Giulia in 1845, and acquired by a certain Alessandro Aducci, an art dealer who gave it as part of her dowry to his daughter, wife of the advocate Cesare Lanciani who, probably because of financial difficulties pawned it at the Monte di Pietà.

The painting was finally acquired by the Vatican at the behest of Pope Pius IX, who wished to add important works of religious art that were on the commercial market to the pontifical collections. The *St Jerome* was purchased in 1856 thanks to Tommaso Minardi and Filippo Agricola who recommended it as "*painted by the hand of Leonardo da Vinci and therefore very rare and most valuable.*"

The work was placed in the then Pontifical Pinacoteca, situated in the Sala del Bologna of the Vatican Palaces, and later formed part of St Pius X's New Pinacoteca which opened in 1909.

From 1932 the *St Jerome* was displayed in Hall IX of the Pinacoteca, beside the large salon dedicated to Raphael. This space was conceived according to a plan by Luca Beltrami in consultation with Biagio Biagetti and Bartolomeo Nogara, specifically to conserve Leonardo's masterpiece.

On the outside of the building, Leonardo's name appears inscribed in mosaic together with those of other great artists whose work is conserved in the Pinacoteca: Giotto, Raphael, Titian, Melozzo and Caravaggio.

The work has undergone numerous restorations, notably those by Luigi Cavenaghi and Biagio Biagetti (1930). The most important and thorough intervention has been the most recent one, performed in 1993 by Gianluigi Colalucci.