

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

by *Barbara Jatta*

The Governorate of the State of the Vatican City and the Directorate of the Museums wished to celebrate the fifth centenary of the death of Leonardo da Vinci with a small but significant exhibition devoted to the only work by the artist in the pontifical collections: *St Jerome in the Desert* in the Vatican Pinacoteca.

Among the few creations of the genius from Vinci whose authenticity has never been disputed, the painting stands out not only in its iconography and its history in collections, but also and above all for its technical execution. The composition, dominated by the expressive potency of the Saint's face, is also transfigured by the quality of the setting, deep in a landscape which recalls those of the *Virgin of the Rocks* and the *Mona Lisa*. In it the Master draws on the many notes liberally spread throughout his scientific writings which make this a key work of his maturity.

So only the *St Jerome* is being exhibited, a work with a religious iconography that is complex to decipher and has been the object of decades of study, analysis, interventions by restorers, and arrangements by conservators.

The graphics you will find in the exhibition will enable you to get to know the figure of Leonardo da Vinci better, as well as the conjunction of history and culture in which the painting on display first saw the light. It will also be possible to dwell on the extraordinary context of Rome in the second decade of the sixteenth century when the artist lived and worked in the Vatican. Evidence of his staying in an apartment set up for him in the Belvedere is given by a little-known document in the Historical Archive of the Fabbrica di San Pietro, generously loaned for this occasion. These years saw the simultaneous presence in Rome of Michelangelo, Raphael, and many other eminent figures in art.

The document in question confirms that the artist, guest of Leo X, stayed from 1514 to 1517 in an apartment, no longer existing, located near the Palazzetto del Belvedere, now part of the Vatican Museums.

A separate study has also been made of the figure of Jerome of Stridon (347 – 419/20), priest, biblical scholar, and father of the Church, whose life story, hagiography, writings and iconography became especially well-known in the years when the painting was being created, attracting the interest of, among others, artists of the calibre of Antonello da Messina, Albrecht Dürer, Andrea del Verrocchio, Lorenzo Lotto, Giovanni Bellini and Cima da Conegliano.

The painting's highly distinctive technique and collection history provide two other important elements which make this work unique. A further panel is devoted to its restorations and the diagnostic work recently carried out on it which have allowed a better understanding of its structure and technical characteristics, and to try out locations and methods of conservation leading to the use of the *climaframe* in which it is preserved today.