

Wednesday, 13 April 2022 in Amboise

“LÉONARDO DA VINCI’S
SAINT JEROME.
AN UNFINISHED
MASTERPIECE””



**Temporary
Exhibition**

**From 10 June
to 20 September
2022**

Leonardo da Vinci,
*Saint Jerome in the
Wilderness*
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From 10 June to 20 September 2022, the Château du Clos Lucé in Amboise is holding a major exhibition dedicated to Leonardo da Vinci’s *Saint Jerome*, an unfinished masterpiece, to celebrate the immortal spirit of Leonardo da Vinci in the very place where he lived. This masterpiece, on special loan from the Vatican Museums, is one of the most intense works of the Italian master.

The exhibition, curated by the Vatican Museums, comes three years after the celebrations commemorating the 500th anniversary of Leonardo da Vinci's death at Clos Lucé. On that occasion, and for the first time in 500 years, the Vatican Museums lent the monumental tapestry of *The Last Supper* (9 × 5 m) to the Château du Clos Lucé, the very place where those who commissioned it had lived. Indeed, Francis I and Louise of Savoy gave the tapestry to Pope Clement VII on the occasion of the marriage of his niece Catherine de Medici to Henry, Duke of Orleans, the son of the king of France.

All Leonardo's paintings have a psychological dimension and allow him to give free rein to his desire to paint emotions. None, however, is as powerful as his *Saint Jerome*. Moreover, it is one of the few works whose authenticity has never been disputed.

The picture, still in the sketch stage, oscillating between drawing and painting, raises many questions as to why it was never finished, about its dating, its commissioners and its provenance. Some experts believe that Leonardo never stopped coming back to it and was very attached to it. The work is thought to have accompanied him throughout his life.

"Leonardo's *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness* is certainly an unqualified masterpiece," explains Barbara Jatta, Director of the Vatican Museums and curator of the exhibition with Guido Cornini, Director of the 15th and 16th century art department in the same museum, "but also a work that exalts the spirituality of a great man and Doctor of the Church." "The painting has a turbulent history, but above all," emphasises Guido Cornini, "it stands out for its technical execution, characterised by the unfinished aspect of large sections of the painting, which makes it possible to analyse the techniques employed by the artist." The fact it remains unfinished is an integral part of the work's power.

A BREAK WITH TRADITIONAL ICONOGRAPHY

The painting shows the 4th-century scholar and translator of the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into Latin during his penance in the desert. According to historical sources, Saint Jerome lived in the desert for about five years, from 374 to 378. Saint Jerome was a very popular subject in the Renaissance period, embodying the union of religion and the humanist intellectual movement. There are versions of the picture by Masaccio, Perugino, Piero della Francesca, Andrea Mantegna, Giovanni Bellini, Lorenzo Lotto and Domenico Ghirlandaio. Saint Jerome is usually depicted as a Father of the Church, dressed in a cardinal's coat, bearded and bent over the Bible.

The saint appears as a penitent in the desert. Leonardo da Vinci chose to portray him stripped of his customary attributes. He depicts him beardless, with emaciated features, dressed in rags, without the holy book. Only his cardinal's hat, evoked by the large red patch next to the drapery, and the crucifix discernible in the small sketch in the upper right-hand corner have been sketched. The saint kneels uncomfortably and his whole body is twisted. In his right hand he holds a stone with which he is preparing to beat his chest, a common practice in penance.

TECHNIQUES USED

Because it is unfinished, the picture, painted in oil on a walnut panel, offers a glimpse of the various stages of its creation. Using brushes, Leonardo first drew the body of the saint, the lion and the landscape in brown, on a preparation made of plaster, glue and lead white. He then applied the *imprimatura*, a translucent layer of lead white. This softened the elements of the picture that he did not want to develop in the next phase and made the underlying drawing appear grey.

Macro photography has revealed the presence of Leonardo's fingerprints, particularly in the upper left-hand part of the composition. In addition to brushes, Leonardo used his fingers and palm to spread the pigments and create a blurred effect in the sky and landscape.

UNKNOWN SPONSORS AND UNCERTAIN DATING

Who commissioned the painting remains unknown to this day. Some see the painting as a work of personal devotion for the artist, while others believe it was a commission from Florence, where the subject was highly prized, either by the Brotherhood of Saint Jerome or by the Benedictine monks of the Badia Fiorentina, which housed the tomb of Leonardo's family.

Art historians are still uncertain about the dates of the painting. They do not know whether the work was begun in Florence and completed in Milan or whether it never left Florence.



Leonardo da Vinci,
Adoration of the Magi
© Alinari Archives, Florence,
photo: RMN-Grand Palais/Nicola Lorusso

Its stylistic and technical similarities to the *Adoration of the Magi*, now in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, have been highlighted on several occasions. It is known that the work was commissioned from Leonardo in 1481 while he was living in Florence and remained unfinished when he left for Milan in 1482.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin of the Rocks*
 © RMN-Grand Palais (Louvre museum)/Michel Urtado

Other art historians favour a date closer to the 1490s, drawing a comparison with the first version of the *Virgin of the Rocks* in the Louvre, painted between 1483 and 1486. The fantastic landscape of caves where one can see into the distance through the gaps between the rocks is reminiscent of the background of the *Saint Jerome*.

4

POSTERITY OF THE PAINTING

The earliest mention of the *Saint Jerome* and the belief that Leonardo da Vinci had painted it dates back to the beginning of the 19th century, in the will of the Swiss painter Angelica Kauffmann (1741-1807), one of the most famous female painters and portraitists of the 18th century. After her death, the painting entered the vast and prestigious collection of Napoleon's uncle, Cardinal Joseph Fesch, which included more than 16,000 paintings. The story goes that the two halves of the panel were found by the cardinal in separate locations, one in the back of a Roman antique shop, the other in the home of a cobbler who was using it as a board for a stool.

After the cardinal's death, the painting was sold at auction several times. When it resurfaced, it was bought from a pawnshop in 1856 by Pope Pius IX (pontificate from 1846 to 1878) for the Vatican *Pinoteca* (picture gallery).



The painting will be exhibited at Clos Lucé in a dedicated space in the Halle muséographique, located in the heart of the Parc Leonardo da Vinci.

The exhibition, which has already been presented at the Vatican and then at the Met in New York in 2019, will be enhanced by pieces from the Clos Lucé collections, including an engraving of Saint Jerome by Albrecht Dürer, as well as a painting from the workshop of Joos Van Cleve depicting Saint Jerome meditating in his study. There will also be a copy of the complete 1542 edition of the Epistles of Saint Jerome, in the version compiled by Erasmus at the monastery of Marmoutier in Touraine, as well as a Vulgate, a Bible translated into Latin, printed in Lyon in 1511, on loan from the Custody of the Holy Land in Jerusalem, which administers the Bethlehem shrine.

Barbara Jatta, Director of the Vatican Museums, Guido Cornini, Director of the 15th and 16th century art department of the Vatican Museums, François Saint Bris, President of Château du Clos Lucé - Parc Leonardo da Vinci, and Laure Fagnart, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Liège and a specialist in Leonardo's work in France, will be taking part in a free conference on *Saint Jerome Praying in the Wilderness* on Thursday, 9 June 2022 at the Château du Clos Lucé.

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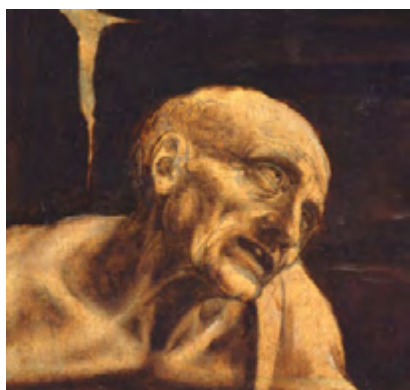
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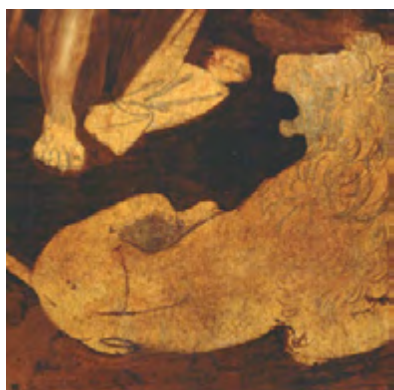
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