

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM  
FINE ARTS

**FRENCH SCHOOL**  
17th century

**SAINT JEROME**

Oil on canvas  
H. 0,77 m; W. 0,92 m

DATE: c. 1630-1640

PROVENANCE:

Galerie Heim, London  
Jean Riechers collection  
Private collection, France

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Benedict Nicolson, *Caravaggism in Europe*, second edition reviewed and enlarged by Luisa Vertova, 1990, vol. I, p. 92, no. 821 (ill. 821 vol. II): "Caravaggesque unknown, French" and "c. 1630-40".

EXHIBITIONS:

*Religious and Biblical themes in French Baroque painting*, 29 May - 30 Aug 1974, London, Heim Gallery, London 1974, no. 3 (ill.): "Anonymous French Master, c. 1630-40"

**When you see this painting, the silence that surrounds this erudite saint gradually conquers us. We are enthralled by the delicacy of sentiments, highly confident handling, overall elegance of the composition and its realism that goes as far as showing the saint's dirty nails.**

St. Jerome is sometimes shown in the desert, as a scholar in his cell or occasionally as a Doctor of the Church with a cardinal's hat, accompanied by a tamed lion. He had withdrawn into the Syrian desert for three years where he learned Hebrew from a converted Jew. Jerome soon came to the attention of the pope Damasus who asked him to review the Latin translations of the Greek version of the Jewish Bible (the Septuagint) which were considered to be imperfect. Jerome began a new translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew text, the only inspired one in his eyes. Jerome's translation, which was finished by others, became known from the 13<sup>th</sup> century as the *vulgate versio*, "the generally used text". The *Vulgate* was declared the authentic translation in 1546, during the Council of Trent. One of the four great doctors of the Latin Church, during the Renaissance, St. Jerome became the patron saint of humanists. He conveyed values of respect, openness to others and continual questioning.

In this rather small painting, intended for private devotion, the artist has chosen quite a simple composition. The saint is shown half-naked, sitting in an interior, in front of a wall covered with books. His gaze rests on the crucifix he is holding firmly in his left hand on the table. To symbolise divine inspiration, golden rays emanate from a cloud above his head. The stone the saint is holding against his breast and the skull on which he is meditating are symbols of his penitence in the desert.

# JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM

## FINE ARTS

### **Realism Subdued by Soft Lighting**

The depiction of St. Jerome, shown half-length sitting at a table with a still life is very common among French Caravaggesque painters such as Valentin de Boulogne, Nicolas Régnier, Simon Vouet and Trophime Bigot.<sup>1</sup> In this simple composition, the austerity of the décor emphasizes the monumentality of the saint's figure, depicted with a strong sense of observation.

The physiological intensity of this face imbued with internal reflection, the meticulous rendering of the wrinkles of the face and body are noteworthy. The desire for realism goes as far as the rendering of the nails of the left hand, which are distinctly dirty. White light coming from the left bathes the entire composition. The shadows are gentle. This universe is far from dramatically lit Caravaggesque paintings. The use of a limited palette increases the restraint of the painting. We should emphasize the skill with which the artist has rendered the hair and beard of the saint with its frothy and well combed appearance.

### **Vanity**

In the catalogue of his exhibition on Vanities, Alain Tapié wrote that "We are accustomed to attributing the origins of the theme of the Vanity to the iconography of St. Jerome".<sup>2</sup> The saint's iconography does indeed include traces of the passage of time on the body like on words and objects. In his depiction of the skull, the bronze crucifix, the open book and the bookshelves in the background, our anonymous artist may have been inspired by the repertoire of Sébastien Stoskopf (Strasbourg 1597 - Idstein 1657), one of the great European masters of still life who lived in Paris during the 1620s and 1630s.

### **What is he reading?**

This book and the mannerist print visible on the open page are painted using a freer technique than for the saint himself. However, the artist has not sought to imitate the texture of a print. What it depicts must be connected to the holy writings on which the hermit is meditating. Even if we could be tempted to see it as Jupiter holding a bolt of lightning, it is more likely to be a Last Judgment or a scene of divine justice. St. Jerome does in fact have a particular connection with the Last Judgment. Louis Réau refers to an apocryphal letter attributed to the saint: "Whether I am awake or asleep, I always think I'm hearing the trumpet of the Judgment".<sup>3</sup>

### **A Work from the Flemish School?**

Benedict Nicolson suggested associating this painting with the Flemish school, and proposed the name of Jacob Van Oost the Elder (1603-1671).<sup>4</sup> The most important artist in Bruges during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Van Oost painted many religious paintings for the churches and convents of the city. He was admitted to the Guild of St. Luke of Bruges in 1621, travelling shortly afterwards to Italy. He returned to his home city in 1628 after journeying through France. However, an attribution to Van Oost seems unlikely for this painting as his manner seems to be very heavily influenced by Van Dyck and Rubens. Neither the spirit of internal reflection nor the almost meticulous realism in the treatment of the skin and hair in our St. Jerome appear in

---

<sup>1</sup> Benedict Nicolson, *Caravaggism in Europe*, 2nd ed. rev. and enlarged by Luisa Vertova, 1990, no. 659 (Valentin), 730 (Vouet), 877 and 878 (follower of Bigot), 971 (Régnier).

<sup>2</sup> Alain Tapié, exh. cat. *Les Vanités dans la peinture au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Méditations sur la richesse, le dénuement et la rédemption*, Caen, Musée des Beaux-arts de Caen, 27 July - 15 October 1990, Paris, Musée du Petit Palais 15 November - 20 January 1991, Caen, 1990, p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, t. III *Iconographie des saints* (2), Paris, 1958, p. 748.

<sup>4</sup> According to the auction catalogue Ader, Paris, 24 June 2019, lot 25, Benedict Nicolson apparently connected it to the Flemish school.

# JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM FINE ARTS

his work. Nevertheless, a Dutch or Flemish influence is plausible in Paris where a large community of Flemish painters was active in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

## Connection with Jacques Blanchard

For its treatment of light, the palette and the composition, our painting is reminiscent of certain works by Jacques Blanchard, a Parisian artist who had returned from Italy in 1629. Comparing our painting with Blanchard's *St. Jerome*, now in Budapest, there is a similar atmosphere with the same treatment of white light and a reduced palette. However, his more supple and sensual manner, attributed to the influence of Venice, where Blanchard stayed during the 1620s, is different to our painting. In the flesh tones, not only is this Venetian influence present, but also the heritage of Rubens of whom Blanchard was probably one of the greatest proponents in Paris during the 1630s.<sup>5</sup> In our painting, the skin tones are treated quite differently, marked by great realism; the hair and beard are rendered with greater delicacy, giving a frothy appearance, unlike Blanchard's painting.



Jacques Blanchard, *Saint Jerome*, 1632, oil on canvas, H. 1,46 m ; L. 1,12 m, Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts.



George de La Tour, *Penitent St. Jerome*, oil on canvas, H. 1,52 m ; L. 1,09 m, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum

## Beards in Georges de La Tour's Work

The strange and moving combination of realism and spirituality in our painting is reminiscent of the atmosphere of Georges de la Tour's paintings. His *Penitent St. Jerome* in the Nationalmuseum Stockholm shows greater introspective reflection on this saint. He highlighted the silhouette of a thin old man, resting a knee on the ground. We find the same detailed treatment of details especially on the muscles and wrinkled skin of our work. However, the merciless realism goes further than our painting to describe a body emaciated by penitence and his feet dirtied by walking. However, there is a similarity in the treatment of the hair and the beard which are painted precisely. In fact, the same careful treatment of the beard appears in the *Diogenes* attributed by Jean-Pierre Cuzin<sup>6</sup> to Georges de La Tour.

---

<sup>5</sup> Guillaume Kazerouni, exh. cat. *Jacques Blanchard, au musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes*, 6 March - 8 June 2015, Rennes, 2015, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> *Diogène*, oil on canvas, H. 1,00 m ; L. 1,21 m, private collection. Jean-Pierre Cuzin, "Georges de la Tour's earliest painting?", *The Burlington Magazine*, no. 160, July 2018, p. 554-557.

# JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM

## FINE ARTS

### **A Parisian artist**

The identity of the maker of our painting is unknown. Its very high quality suggests the hand of a major artist. The attribution to the French school can be justified by the composition and the treatment of the colours. The softness of the light, the restraint and delicacy of sentiment, a certain solemnity and austerity, the confident handling and the overall elegance of the composition explain our attribution of painting to a Parisian painter of the 1630s and 1640s.