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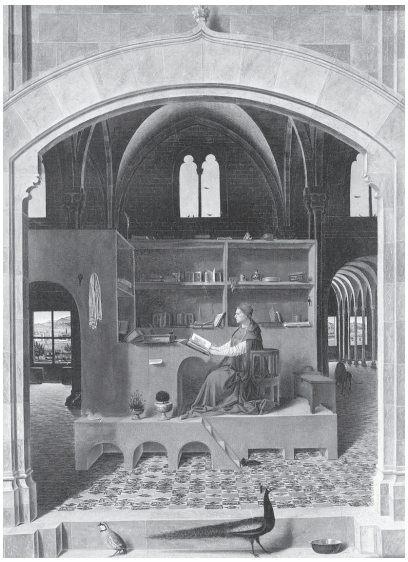
A Study of Iconography and Influences

Michael Guinn

1. Introduction

Vasari attributes the introduction of oil painting in Italy to Antonello da Messina's friendship with Jan Van Eyck in the fifteenth century. Scholars have long questioned whether this friendship existed, but it is apparent that Antonello was one of the first Italian painters to fall under the influence of Flemish painting in the fifteenth century. It is this fact which has taken up the lion's share of scholarly attention over the centuries when it comes to Antonello's work, but only recently has the artist's rich iconographical program attained some scholarly focus. In the following paper we will look at how Flemish influences and others marked this important artist's work in the iconography and other elements of design in two depictions of saints separated by twenty years.



St Jerome in his Study by Antonello da Messina
Oil on wood, 46 x 36,5 cm
National Gallery, London

2. Saint Jerome in His Study: A Marian Perspective

Depictions of Saint Jerome in the fifteenth century can be classified into two distinct settings: one in a study with contemporary paraphernalia and the other in the wilderness. (Antonello, in fact, composed one of each. The latter is entitled Jerome the Penitent). Both often contain the lion that, according to the golden legend of the saint, Jerome domesticated by means of withdrawing a thorn from the grateful creature's paw. With a magnificent naturalistic portrayal of the lion, Colantonio, Antonello's teacher in Naples, chose to dramatize this moment in his St. Jerome painted around 1445. The study, with its semi-circular chair, is comparable to the one in Antonello's painting and shows much knowledge of Netherlandish realism. As the age of printing was on the verge of expanding exponentially the libraries and studies of Renaissance patrons, St. Jerome's Vulgate became more and more significant, and it is no wonder that artists were called upon to tell his story. Although the particulars regarding the commission of the painting to which we will now turn are unknown, Antonello's painting is a remarkable example of his ability to convey both the intellectual Jerome and the Jerome of the wilderness simultaneously in a brilliant iconographical program.

At first glance, Antonello's St. Jerome in His Study in the National Gallery in London, completed around 1456 in Naples, would seem to have little connection to Marian theology. However, St. Jerome, like Mary

in a typical painting depicting the Annunciation, is reading in his study and facing the left side of the painting where the angel Gabriel would typically enter. There is also a cat and hanging towel, familiar symbols from Lorenzo Lotto's Annunciation, for instance. With regard to other Marian symbols, the basin in the lower right corner can also be found in Jan Van Eyck's Annunciation in The Ghent Altarpiece as well as Robert Campin's Annunciation, while the peacock, a symbol of immortality, is in the former's The Virgin of Chancellor Rolin and Carlo Crivelli's Annunciation. Clearly Antonello is linking the saint to the Virgin iconographically. Jerome's inculcation of chastity and isolation in his epistle to Eustochium is the motif behind many of the symbols of the painting. "Virginity can be lost even by a thought" (qtd. in Durant 53). Therefore, Jerome, as Mary, buries himself in theological study. "Let the seclusion of your own chamber ever guard you." The outer arch that frames Jerome and the space within distances the saint from the viewer, enhancing this seclusion. "And you will hear him answer: 'A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" (The Song of Solomon 4:12). The potted plant at Jerome's feet could be seen to stand in for this enclosed garden, a symbol familiar from Fra Angelico's Annunciation at San Marco in Florence, for example, and the water basin for the spring. It is Jerome's constant preaching of chastity that makes the comparison to the Virgin in this painting entirely appropriate.

Like Fra Angelico in his Annunciation, Antonello has created symbolic light as a means of developing the program of the painting. Natural light appears to bathe Jerome at an angle from the left side of the frame, yet light also comes from the rear of the building on the right side, illuminating the extensively vaulted cloister where the lion treads. Following the shadow cast from the left side of the work, one can trace a diagonal line moving across the seated saint and straight into the light of the arches. There is a dichotomy at work that divides the left side of the painting from the right, and it is no less than the division of this worldly life from Paradise with Jerome almost precisely between them. The rectangular windows on the left look out upon a city, while those on the right, divided ingeniously by Antonello so that more could be glimpsed behind the vertical columns, is the wilderness of paradise, which accounts for the lion's guarding presence there, as well as that unearthly light (Jolly 247). This accounts for the rather barren simplicity of the space before the left-side windows while the right side symbolizes the vaulting of the Church, the structure which leads to Paradise. Jerome is placed between these two windows to suggest that he is still among the living, yet what awaits him (and those who follow his moral precepts) is the paradise to the right. Jerome does face the left side, indicating that he is still of this world, but his books and a crucifix at the top of the bookcase stand between him and this worldliness. He is in a privileged position. The shoes discarded at the foot of the steps leading to the platform on which he reads indicates that where he sits is indeed holy ground.

Emblems of the soul, the birds in the upper windows are not present in the windows to the left, but instead fly towards Paradise in the windows above Jerome in the central section and then to the right above Antonello's depiction of the heavenly wilderness. The birds below in the portal are also significant. The peacock, as noted above, a symbol of immortality, is depicted in profile towards Paradise, but the partridge is an altogether more complicated figure. It is facing the left side but not in shadow like the cat, which because of its ability to pounce on mice, was a symbol of Satan and lust as well (241). Penny Howell Jolly maintains that the partridge has similar connotations to the cat as having a lascivious nature in Renaissance iconography, which accounts for its orientation to the left, but that is precisely why it is not in shadow in Antonello's painting, for it connotes the ease with which Mary conceived, as it is "*audita voce*

fecunda" or "fruitful by hearing a voice." Since Mary was thought to have conceived through the ear, the partridge becomes another Marian symbol in the painting. Holly draws the connection to Jerome by stating that Jerome conceived the Vulgate by means of divine inspiration and contributed, like Mary, to mankind's salvation (250).

Such a richly detailed iconographical work as Antonello's Saint Jerome in his Study was undoubtedly influenced by the painter's contacts with Flemish painting. Vasari claims that Antonello was deeply impressed by a Van Eyck painting at the court of King Alfonso which, if true, would have been shortly before the present work's execution (188). Antonello's adaptation of oil techniques from Flemish painters is evident in his Jerome as there is certainly a luminosity that distinguishes it from much of what had come before in Italian painting. In addition to this, the still life painting of iconographical components within a larger whole is a distinctively Flemish conception. The Arnolfini Marriage portrait is exemplary in this regard with its symbols of union and fidelity. In Antonello's painting, the basin of the foreground and the jars above Jerome on the bookshelf are exquisitely rendered with glints of the light falling from the left. The birds next to the basin are so stationary in appearance that they seem incapable of movement. These still-life qualities enhance their functions iconographically.

The architectural framework that, as we have said, serves to distance the saint from the viewer, is also a Flemish motif (Wundram 46). The right wing of Rogier Van Der Weyden's St. John Altarpiece in the Museo del Prado is a good example of this motif in action. Dieric Bouts also uses this type of framework for several paintings (The Annunciation, The Visitation, The Nativity, and The Adoration of the Magi) hanging in the same museum. It is likely then that Antonello had seen works like these in Naples. The series of portals and arches beyond the opening of the monumental basket arch in his painting, however, are unparalleled in their complexity and create a sense of movement that offsets the still life components. The floor tiles too are of dazzling complexity and reminiscent of some of Van Eyck's scenes. The receding interior that looks out ultimately on a landscape is also a Flemish characteristic in painting and puts one to mind of Robert Campin's work. Antonello, however, retains the Italian perspective system with its mathematical meticulousness rather than the Flemish painter's perspective of "personal experience" in such works as his St. Barbara of 1438 (56). What is unusual about Antonello's painting is its asymmetrical design. The left aisle that leads to the view of the city is much shorter than the right aisle, perhaps reflecting Jerome's philosophy that the path of purity is harder than the worldly path (Durant 53). The arched portal leading there is also closer to the viewer and much smaller than on the right. A look at the central axis of the work is also revealing. Jerome, the focal point of the work, is actually slightly off to the right of the axis; it is, in fact, the book that he is reading that is in the center. The implication may be that it is Jerome's writings, divinely inspired, that bring him to this holy ground. His position read horizontally, then, is much closer to the paradisiacal windows to the right because Antonello has moved him unexpectedly away from the central axis in that direction. Whether this was Antonello's intention is difficult to discern, but such a conjecture seems consistent within such a broad iconographical program which requires from the painter such care in his placement of figures and objects.

Antonello synthesized elements of Jerome's philosophy and legend in a highly successful fashion. There are symbols linking the saint to purity; the book stands centrally for his influential writings; the lion stands for his curative powers, even raising one paw from the ground as though still tender from its wound; and Antonello has emphasized Jerome's rugged asceticism by means of a framing arch creating

St. Sebastian by Antonello da Messina
Oil on canvas transferred from panel,
171 x 85,5 cm
Gemäldegalerie, Dresden

distance from the viewer in addition to the wilderness beyond the lion. Upon reading the iconography, one has the sense of being engaged in a powerful theological and intellectual drama.

3. Saint Sebastian: The Emphasis on Physicality

The depiction of Saint Sebastian calls for an altogether more physical drama. Sebastian, who converted to Christianity in the third century, was a soldier for the Emperor Diocletian, and according to his legend, became a soldier specifically to give comfort to the final moments of martyred Christians. When his faith was discovered he was ordered by the emperor to be executed by archers, but the saint survived, was nursed reasonably back to good health, and then went back to Diocletian, who had him clubbed to death. Since arrows from the time of Homer's Iliad have symbolized the desultory nature of death, the saint's suffering and miraculous survival qualified him to be venerated as the one who could help people ward off plague. Images of Sebastian abounded at a time when all Europe was in the throes of plague or fearing its reoccurrences. The saint also gave artists license to paint a male nude in an ecclesiastical context (Wundram 47).

Antonello's St. Sebastian was painted in Venice around 1476. Unlike Pollaiuolo or Mantegna, who both emphasize the dramatic encounter with the archers in their paintings of this subject, Antonello's work depicts the saint sometime between this event and the time he is taken from the tree by a Christian woman to her home.

This painting, now hanging in Dresden's Gemaldegalerie Alte Meister, like the earlier Jerome, emphasizes the remoteness of the saint, but this time it is not from the viewer, rather from the figures in the background. If Jerome was set into the distance, Sebastian is set almost life-size before the viewer with striking immediacy. His sculptural, almost stereometric, form is consistent with his stature as the patron saint of soldiers. This figure's plasticity is similar to that of the Christ figure (especially in the upper body) in Piero della Francesca's The Baptism of Christ, although Antonello's Sebastian shows a darker coloring that can be attributed to his position under the sun. The painter shows Piero's influence with his treatment of light as well. The different modulations of light are striking and help to give definition to Sebastian's physique; it is light and shadow that give substance and depth to the elements of Antonello's painting, and this is perhaps in part due to a study of Piero's works.

The painting is divided precisely horizontally by the parapet in the background and vertically by the tree and martyr in the foreground. Sebastian and the tree are given a towering appearance by means of a very low horizon line. The blue of the sky becomes gradually higher in value as it nears the horizon; the darkness around the clouds is probably meant to convey God's displeasure at the scene below. The modulations of light and color in the clouds and sky once again point to Piero della Francesca and such works as The Baptism of Christ. With his slightly outstretched right foot in a typical sculptural stance, Sebastian's figure makes a striking sinuous silhouette against the strict horizontals and verticals. His right foot leads

the direction of his gaze, the expression calm and holy rather than psychologically expressive. His left foot is turned at the same angle as the cylinder on the ground. From a technical point of view the pavement renders the linear perspective palpable, a conceit often prescribed by art theorists such as Leon Battista Alberti in his On Painting (33). Nonetheless, Antonello makes the tree seem purposely incongruous with the pavement, to demonstrate how Sebastian is incongruous with the society behind him. In this sense Sebastian and the tree are one and the same, and Antonello drives this point with all the force of the arrow in the martyr's right leg that has pinned him to the tree. The parallel to the Crucifixion is clear. In addition to this, the shadow on the inner thigh of Sebastian's left leg completes the line of the tree, and it is very difficult to differentiate one from the other.

Whereas Antonello's St. Jerome in His Study derived its power from the iconography, here it comes not only from the martyrdom of the saint but also from the distribution and character of the figures in the background. Most of the figures are grouped in pairs and are so small that they serve to exaggerate the remoteness yet grandeur of the saint. Men are engaged in animated conversations at the base of the loggia; they represent soldiers or those who keep the peace, marked by their attire and weapons, and elder churchmen, marked by their hats and long, flowing beards and robes. To emphasize their indifference to the foreground scene, the painter has placed a sleeping figure to the left next to a spear or stick that points into the depth of the background space. The women on the parapet and a woman below holding an infant are looking out at Sebastian, but this may only be in admiration of the handsome, almost nude, young man, as none of them appear to be particularly horrified by the proceedings or in any state of action. The women on the parapet may, in fact, be famed Venetian courtesans that Antonello certainly would have seen in the city. That they stand behind luxurious carpets only serves to strengthen the argument. Antonello appears to be stressing the notoriously lax morals of Venice against the piety of the saint whose virtues include protection against the plague, a phenomenon often attributed to a city's lax morals. Thematically we are back looking out of that window from the left side of St. Jerome in His Study; worldly pleasure is here again condemned. Ironically, Vasari claims that Antonello enjoyed just this aspect of Venice (188). Whether true or not, the painter approached the theme of his commission with an enormously powerful work.

As in St. Jerome in His Study, the attention to still life in St. Sebastian is painstakingly rendered, although this later painting is in large form rather than a multi-component structure. The cylinder at Sebastian's left is probably a glimpse of the near future, a reference to the collapse of pagan ways since the cylinder was incorporated into Roman architectural forms. The light that falls on it from the left is beautifully caught with careful modulation. The carpets hanging over the parapet are also treated with great care. This may be another result of the painter's exposure to Flemish art as Jan Van Eyck's The Virgin and Child in a Church, for example, contains a very detailed carpet at the foot of the Virgin, or it could be that Antonello had seen many such carpets in the trading town of Venice. In any event, Crivelli too painted a similar carpet around ten years later in his Annunciation. Interestingly, the same plants that were at the base of Jerome's feet in the earlier painting make a reappearance here on either side of the parapet behind Sebastian. Could it be that Antonello is here again making a reference to the Virgin's chastity? Since, however, similar plants can also be seen on the building at the upper left of the painting, they may be strictly decorative. On the other hand, based on our study of the iconography of St. Jerome in His Study it seems unlikely that Antonello would place objects so prominently as they appear on the

parapet without imbuing them with meaning. It seems apparent that the "enclosed garden" of chastity is here meant to be contrasted with the women on the parapet.

4. Conclusion

Antonello da Messina's paintings should be seen as an indispensable link between the experimental decades that opened the fifteenth century and the mastery of line, light, and anatomy that characterized the end of the century. The painter absorbed important influences from his own countrymen such as Colantonio and Piero della Francesca and from the Flemish masters whose rendering of fine details broadened the possibilities of iconography. It is clear from his later works that although Antonello was still interested in individual components, as we have seen in St. Sebastian, he was approaching the overall whole that would characterize painting in the coming century. His work was invaluable to the next generation of Venetian artists in particular, and as such, the conquest of new terrain in art history is an indelible mark of his legacy.

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