

A Saint Jerome on copper after

Jacopo Palma

Conservation and art historical analysis: works from
the Courtauld Gallery

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1.1 Introduction

This report presents the results from collaborative research we undertook in the academic year 2012-13 as part of the project *Conservation and Art Historical Analysis: Works from the Courtauld Gallery*. Preliminary findings were presented in a panel presentation on 4 March 2013 and at a second session at the Courtauld Institute of Art's Research Forum on 13 May 2013.

Our study focused on a painting of *Saint Jerome* (Vivian Frederick Collection, on loan to The Reading Gallery), painted on a copper support. In addition to being of very high quality, this work is of particular interest for the history of the composition and for its materials.

The composition of the painting originated with the Italian painter Jacopo Palma (c. 1548-1628) and was disseminated via an engraving by the Dutch artist Hendrik Goltzius (1558-1617). Our study investigated the material connection of the copper support between the *Saint Jerome* painting and the Goltzius engraving. As an art historian and a paintings conservator, we worked together to approach the painting from multiple angles, taking into consideration the material aspects and its making as well as the history and iconography of the composition. We believe this interdisciplinary approach has been crucial in understanding the complexities of this work and has led us to a more complete understanding of the painting's genesis.

For their support we would like to thank Prof. Aviva Burnstock and Dr. Karen Serres, as well as the owner of the painting. We are in the process of publishing a more detailed study on the *Saint Jerome*; we hope this will soon be available.

1.2 *Saint Jerome*, Jacopo Palma and Hendrik Goltzius

The subject of this small painting (oil on copper, 26.3 x 22.2 cm, Vivian Frederick Collection, on loan to The Reading Gallery; Fig. 1) is Saint Jerome, one of the four church fathers and author of the first translation of the bible in Latin.¹



Fig. 1 After Jacopo Palma, *Saint Jerome*. Oil on copper, 26.3 x 22.2 cm, Vivian Frederick Collection, on loan to The Reading Gallery. (Photograph: Roxane Sperber)

¹ Nothing is known about the painting's provenance before 2008, when it came in the possession of the present owner. The work was first published in the local press: see an article by Linda Fort in the *Reading Post* of March 19, 2008, 'Artwork find was a stroke of good luck'.

Although the saint is depicted as an older man, with long white beard and balding head, his well-toned body appears not to have aged accordingly. He is covered by a red piece of drapery, which in colour is recognizable as that of the saint's cardinal robe – even if hardly reminiscent of an actual garment in shape. Seated in a landscape, he is only accompanied by a lion, his customary attribute. The view in the background opens to a mountainous landscape under a clouded sky; only faint contours of buildings and some foliage can be seen. The saint is depicted reading a large book, probably the bible. His pose is animated; as he holds his right hand on his chest in an emphatic gesture he points with his left hand in the direction of the figure of Christ on the cross. The cross is attached to a tree stump with an elegantly draped red ribbon.² The contrast with the growing tree that frames the composition on the left side further accentuates Christ's resurrection, whilst the skull also refers to man's triumph over death.

The composition of the painting is an invention by the Venetian painter Jacopo Palma (c. 1548-1628), also known as Palma *il Giovane* (or Palma the Younger) to distinguish him from the painter Jacopo Palma *il Vecchio* (Palma the Elder; c. 1479-1528), his father's nephew.³ We know this thanks to a much larger engraving (42,8 x 27, 8 cm; Fig. 2) that was made by the Dutch artist Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617).⁴ It is dated 1596.

² See for this motif S. Donahue Kuretsky, 'Rembrandt's Tree Stump: An Iconographic Attribute of St. Jerome', *The Art Bulletin* 56:4 (1974), 571-80 (Goltzius' print is also mentioned, 574).

³ For Palma il Giovane see Stefania Mason Rinaldi, *Palma il Giovane. L'opera complete* (Milan: Alfieri Electa, 1984) and S. Mason Rinaldi, *Palma il Giovane, 1548-1628: disegni e dipinti* (Venice: Museo Correr, 1990).

⁴ For the print see most recently Leeflang (ed.), *Goltzius (New Hollstein)*, vol. 2, 284-87. The painting under discussion here is mentioned (as 'a related painting').



Fig. 2 Hendrik Goltzius (after Jacopo Palma), *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*, (1596). Engraving, 41.8 x 28.4 cm, The British Museum. (Photograph: ©Trustees of the British Museum)

An inscription in the top right corner of the engraving attributes its invention to Palma (*invenit*) and the subsequent process of making it into a print (*sculpsit*) to Goltzius.⁵ The by that time already renowned Dutch draftsman and printmaker Hendrick Goltzius, visited Venice twice on his 1590-91 trip to Italy. That he met Jacopo Palma on his stay is evidenced by a large chalk drawing that Goltzius made of the Venetian artist.⁶ The inscription further

⁵ The inscription reads: 'Alexandro Victorio Insigni | Statuario et Architecto | amicitiae ergo | D.D. | Jacobus Palma invent. Hgoltzius sculp.'

⁶ *Portrait of Jacopo Palma il Giovane*, chalk on paper, 421 x 314 mm, Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett, inv. no. KdZ 1406. The date 1603 on the Berlin sheet was added later. See E.K.J.

contains the name of a third artist, that of the Venetian sculptor and architect Alessandro Vittoria (1525-1608), to whom the print is dedicated in friendship.⁷ Although documentation of Goltzius' acquaintance with Vittoria - who was a close friend and occasional collaborator of Palma - is lacking, it is probable that they too met while the former was in Venice.⁸

A contemporary source confirms the inscription and documents the circumstances in which the print originated. In his 1648 collection of biographies of artists working in Venice, *Maraviglie dell'Arte*, Carlo Ridolfi tells us that Palma had several of his *invenzione* put into print by Flemish printmakers.⁹ One of these works was Goltzius' print of Saint Jerome, which Ridolfi mentions as: '[...] e san Girolamo in meditazione, pur in foglio reale, inciso da Enrico Golzio, dedicato al Vittoria, di cui mandò la pittura al duca Francesco Maria d'Urbino [...]'.¹⁰ Interestingly, the biographer states that Vittoria, to whom the Goltzius print was dedicated, gave 'the pittura' of Saint Jerome to the Duke of Urbino Francesco Maria II delle Rovere, who ruled from 1574 to 1631 and who was one of Palma's patrons. This suggests that the print by Goltzius was made after an actual painting by Palma. Indeed the existence of a *Saint Jerome* made by Palma for Della Rovere is attested in two pieces of correspondence between the artist and the Duke from 1594-95.¹¹ Undoubtedly, a

Reznicek. *Die Zeichnungen von Hendrick Goltzius* (Utrecht: Haentjens Dekker & Gumbert, 1961), vol. 1, no. 281, 365.

⁷ Many of the other prints that were made around this time were dedicated to Palma's friends and acquaintances. See also J.P. Filedt Kok, 'Artists portrayed by their friends: Goltzius and his circle', *Simiolus* 24, no. 2/3 (1996), pp. 161-81.

⁸ Ridolfi informs us of the friendship between Palma and Vittoria, who was an important figure in Venetian artistic life: Carlo Ridolfi (ed. D. von Hadeln), *Le maraviglie dell'arte* (Berlin: G. Grote, 1914-24), II, 174. Around 1575, Vittoria sculpted a bust of Palma (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

⁹ Included the Sadeler brothers, printmakers to the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II.

¹⁰ Ridolfi, *Maraviglie*, II, 184.

¹¹ See G. Gronau, *Documenti artistici Urbinati* (Florence: Sansoni, 1936), CXCI, 150 and Gronau, *Documenti*, CXCII, 150-51. In addition, a 'note di spese' in the ducal administration of January 1595

meditating Saint Jerome was a suitable subject for a learned man such as the Duke of Urbino; moreover, the saint was a beloved subject to Palma. From the 616 autograph paintings Rinaldi attributes to the artist in her 1983 *catalogue raisonné*, at least ten works depict Saint Jerome as a single figure.¹² However, no autograph painting with exactly the same composition as our painting has survived. Although Palma appears to have painted a handful of works on copper,¹³ all of the surviving paintings of Saint Jerome are painted on a canvas support and are considerably larger in size.

Palma thus had some of his works made into print as a deliberate strategy to make his name more widely known; that he entrusted Goltzius with the task of executing one of his designs in print, probably by sending a drawing to Haarlem since Goltzius was back in his hometown by 1591,¹⁴ was perhaps a slightly different case, due to their friendship. Nevertheless, Palma must have been pleased by the prospect that Goltzius' fame as a draftsman and printmaker would bring his work under the attention of a large audience outside of Italy. Goltzius of course did more than 'simply' reproduce his friend's composition. In line with his stature he enhanced the Italian master's original *invenzione*.¹⁵

records that Della Rovere paid Palma 100 *scudi* for the *Saint Jerome*, even though he had received it from the painter as a gift. "[...]1595. Genn(ai)o. Al Palma pittor per il S. Hier(onim)o donato da lui...100 (scudi) [...]". Gronau, *Documenti*, 151.

¹² Rinaldi includes at least 10 paintings depicting Saint Jerome as a single figure, including works last seen in the Brass collection, Venice (c. 1590-95) and a private collection in Treviso (c. 1596-1600); in the Farington collection, Buskot Park (c. 1596-1600) and in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow (c. 1596). See for the latter M. Mseriantz, 'A new picture by Palma Giovane', *The Burlington Magazine* 72, no. 418 (Jan. 1938), pp. 38-39, 43.

¹³ Including one work on copper that is signed and dated 1598, *Il serpent di bronzo*, in the Pinacoteca nazionale, Siena (oil on copper, 70 x 98 cm; inv. 538).

¹⁴ Von Hadeln already concluded that the painting originated at least two years before the print. Ridolfi, *Maraviglie*, II, p. 184.

¹⁵ The print Goltzius made after Palma perfectly fits in his group of so-called master prints in its large dimensions, masterful execution and the fact that it is a clear homage by Goltzius to another artist.

The resulting print of Saint Jerome is a very ambitious work, targeted to an international audience, as its virtuoso execution, large format and the Latin verses added below imply.¹⁶

1.3 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PAINTING AND PRINT

Comparison between the *Saint Jerome* painting and the print by Goltzius shows that every element of the composition—the figure of the Saint, the book, the crucified Christ, the tree, the skull, the lion accompanying Jerome, as well as the second book in the lower right foreground – has been closely followed. Moreover, the relationships of negative space including the angle of the crucifix and the space around the figures raised hand are remarkable similar. Nevertheless, the composition of the print shows a stronger coherence as the separate elements (the figure, the tree, the branch with the crucifix) are more closely fitted together. In the painting there is more space between elements, for example between the knees of the saint and the tree branch. This is probably a result of the difference in dimensions between the print and the painting. Indeed, the different measurements of the copper support of the painting (26.3 x 22.1 cm) and Goltzius' large-scale engraving (42.8 x 27.8 cm) indicate that the image for the painting was not directly transferred from the print. An overlay of the print and the painting (Fig. 3) makes clear that, even if the artist reduced the size of the print using a grid system, there is no direct relationship between the compositions. It thus seems most plausible that the print was copied by eye to match a copper panel with slightly different dimensions and proportions.

See also Filedt Kok, 'Hendrick Goltzius – Engraver, Designer and Publisher, 1582-1600 in: *NKJ* 42-43 (1991-92), p. 187.

¹⁶ *Vir pietatis amans mollis solatia vite, fallaces carnis deliciasque fugit | et solum casto meditatur pectore Christum, Hanc sibi presidium, subsidiumque petens.* This Latin verse accompanying the print reinforces the meaning of the composition, namely that of the virtuous man's triumph over death by meditation on Christ. It was composed by the Haarlem poet Cornelis Schoneus (1541-1611), who was principal of the Latin school in Goltzius' hometown of Haarlem.



Fig. 3 Overlay of Goltzius print, *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness* (Fig. 2) over painting after Jacopo Palma, *Saint Jerome* (Fig. 1).

The combination of a very exact correspondence of motifs with a looser compositional coherence (resulting from the differences in scale between the print and the painting), in conjunction with the fact that the dimensions of the print are larger than that of the painting, all suggests our painting was probably made after the print. This should not come as a surprise, as it was after all through the print medium that Palma's composition was disseminated.¹⁷

¹⁷ Bowron mentions the regular occurrence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of copper being employed for 'reduced copies of easel paintings and altarpieces', often made by 'the efforts of anonymous copyists'. Edgar Peters Bowron, 'A brief history of European oil paintings on copper, 1560-1775', in: *Copper as Canvas. Two centuries of masterpiece paintings on copper, 1575-1775*, exh.

Interestingly, a significant change in the crucified Christ and the cross was made in the painting (fig. 4). The 'INRI' inscription on the upper portion of the cross is not included on the Goltzius' print (and we should assume also not in the painting by Palma).



Fig. 4 Comparison of the crucifix on the painted *Saint Jerome* (Fig. 1) and Goltzius' print of *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness* (Fig. 2).

Moreover, the blood dripping out of Christs' wounds on his hands and feet and surrounding his head, also absent in the print, add another colour accent that, together with the red of the cloth and the lettering in the bible direct the viewer's attention to the crucified Christ. As the crucifix in itself is an object of catholic devotional practice, used in aiding meditation on Christ's suffering and subsequent victory, the choice of the copyist to alter this motif might also point to the background and devotional practices of the painting's patron.¹⁸

1.4 MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

Painting on copper became very popular throughout Europe from 1575 to 1650. It was at this time that the greatest number of painters utilised this support.¹⁹ After the mid seventeenth century, for reasons that are not entirely clear, copper as a support for painting seems to have fallen out of fashion and there are far fewer examples of copper panels dating to this period. Technical investigation of the *Saint Jerome* found the painting technique and copper surface preparation to be typical of copper painting of the seventeenth century (see hereafter). Since Goltzius' print is dated to 1596, and thus provides a *terminus post quem*, this suggests that the painting was very likely produced during the proliferation of copper panel painting during the first half of the seventeenth century.

In the seventeenth-century copper plates were produced by coppersmiths who hammered nuggets of copper into flat plates. There are some early examples of rolled

¹⁸ This would be different from the treatment of the subject by Rembrandt, who favoured an interpretation that accommodated both Catholic and Protestant belief, as Scallen has argued. C. Scallen, 'Rembrandt's Reformation of a Catholic Subject: The Penitent and the Repentant Saint Jerome', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30 (1999), pp. 71-88.

¹⁹ Edgar Peters Bowron 'A Brief History of European Oil Paintings on Copper 1560-1775,' in *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper 1575-1775* ed. Phoenix Art Museum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 25.

copper plates, but this technology was still in the early stages of development.²⁰ The production of printing plates differed from copper prepared for the supports of paintings. Printing plates tended to be on average 1.0 mm thick, while painted plates tend to average around 0.5 mm. Because prints were put through a printing press they required a flat, even surface on two sides, while painted plates required only the front to be highly finished. Consequently painted copper plates would be expected to have a lower level of finish on the verso than printed plates.²¹ A comprehensive survey of painted panels found that painted plates that are prepared to a level of finish acceptable for printing are relatively uncommon. Of over 350 surveyed painted plates only 15% had a high enough level of finish to have been used for printing.²²



Fig. 5 Detail of verso. After Jacopo Palma, *Saint Jerome*. Oil on copper, 26.3 x 22.2 cm, Vivian Frederick Collection, on loan to The Reading Gallery. (Photograph: Roxane Sperber)



Fig. 6 Detail of verso. Johann König, *Autumn*. Oil on copper, 19.0 x 28.0 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum (Photograph: Robert Wald reproduced in Isabel Horovitz, 'The Materials and Techniques of European Paintings on Copper Supports,' in Phoenix Art Museum eds., *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper 1575-1775* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 67.

²⁰ Isabel Horovitz, 'The Materials and Techniques of European Paintings on Copper Supports,' in *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper 1575-1775*. Phoenix Art Museum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 64.

²¹ Horovitz, 'The Materials and Techniques,' 64.

²² Michael K. Komanecky, Isabel Horovitz, and Nicholas Eastaugh, 'Antwerp Artists and the Practice of Painting on Copper' in *Pre-Prints of the 17th IIC Congress, Dublin, 1998*. 137.

The copper support of the *Saint Jerome* has a smooth verso (fig. 5) with a high level of finish typical of a plate that was prepared for printing (fig. 6). The support averages about 1.0 mm thick and appears to have been hammered flat, slight undulations can be seen in raking light and the thickness of the copper does not follow as consistent pattern of rolled pressure. The edges are also quite regular and parallel to each other. The materiality of the copper has revealed that the copper plate was likely initially intended for printmaking and may even have been painted by an artist in a print workshop.

Ease of preparation contributed to the popularity of copper panels as painting supports during the seventeenth century.²³ The preparation for *St Jerome* is typical of copper of supports of this period. Concerns with adhesion of the paint to the copper caused many artists to roughen the surface of the metal in order to give it more tooth.²⁴ Losses in the paint layer and ground on *Saint Jerome* reveal scratches across the surface of the metal (fig. 7), which implies that the person preparing the surface was well acquainted with copper panel painting practise.



Fig. 7 Detail of scratches on copper support. After Jacopo Palma, *Saint Jerome*. Oil on copper, 26.3 x 22.2 cm, Vivian Frederick Collection, on loan to The Reading Gallery. (Photograph: Roxane Sperber)

²³ Horovitz, 'The Materials and Techniques', 67.

²⁴ Horovitz, 'The Materials and Techniques', 68.

The *Saint Jerome* support has a cool, grey oil ground composed of lead white and black pigment particles (fig. 8). This ‘thin, pale-toned preparation layer’ is typical of copper supports.²⁵ A green, copper oleate layer is present between the copper and the ground. This layer is formed from the interaction of the copper support and the oil in the ground or perhaps from an oil layer applied by the artist. The ground was almost certainly applied by the artist as there is not a clear distinction between the ground and paint layer (fig. 9). This indicates that there was not too much time between the application of the ground and paint.

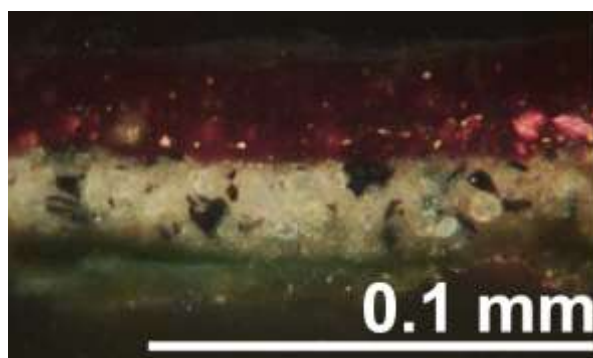


Fig. 8. Cross-section from the red robe of St Jerome. After Jacopo Palma, *Saint Jerome*. Oil on copper, 26.3 x 22.2 cm, Vivian Frederick Collection, on loan to The Reading Gallery. (Photograph: Roxane Sperber)

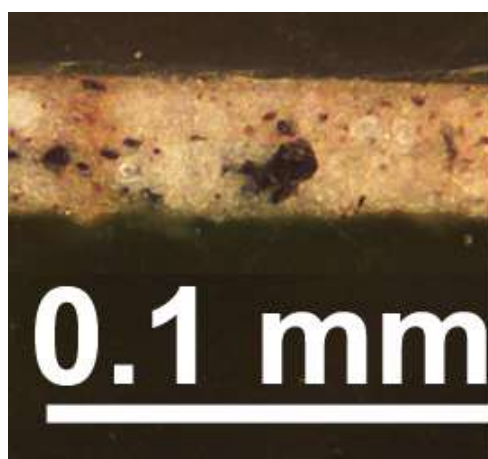


Fig. 9. Cross-section from the flesh of St Jerome. After Jacopo Palma, *Saint Jerome*. Oil on copper, 26.3 x 22.2 cm, Vivian Frederick Collection, on loan to The Reading Gallery. (Photograph: Roxane Sperber)

²⁵ Horovitz, ‘The Materials and Techniques’, 71.

Although slight *pentimenti* could be made visible with infrared examination, for example here in the abdomen and shoulder of the figure (fig. 10), for the most part the underdrawing carefully follows the outlines of the figure that are later articulated in paint, making it impossible to detect the underdrawing using infrared photography. This confirms that the artist was copying an already established composition, probably the Goltzius print, and making slight alterations to the position of the elements within the composition in relation to each other.



Fig. 10 Infrared photograph detail of *pentimenti* in shoulder and abdomen of St Jerome. After Jacopo Palma, *Saint Jerome*. Oil on copper, 26.3 x 22.2 cm, Vivian Frederick Collection, on loan to The Reading Gallery. (Photograph: Roxane Sperber)

The order of painting shows that the main compositional elements, including the figure, foreground, trees, and crucified Christ were roughly blocked in first. The blue layer of sky was then applied around the outlines of these shapes (fig. 11).



Fig. 11 Detail of the sky extending over the hand of St Jerome. After Jacopo Palma, *Saint Jerome*. Oil on copper, 26.3 x 22.2 cm, Vivian Frederick Collection, on loan to The Reading Gallery. (Photograph: Roxane Sperber)

The details of the main compositional elements were then worked up to a higher level of finish ending with the application of dark glazes in the outline of the figure, tree branches, trunk outline, and grass. These glazes slightly overlap the blue sky. The grey clouds were applied last, and can be seen overlapping the body of Christ. This evidences that the primary concern of the artist was to establish the main elements of the composition on the panel, and that the background was filled in to meet the dimensions of the support.

The paint is applied over the light grey ground in a simple build-up of layers. The application of paint in the red robe of the figure is typical of the painting technique used throughout the work. In the robes form is created by the application of an underlayer of vermillion mixed with red lake followed by glazed shadows composed of layers of a red lake (fig. 8). Form in the flesh tones is created through the application of thin dark glazes and

opaque highlights over a mid-tone (fig. 9). The mid-tone is not applied, but rather is created from the thin, grey ground over the luminescent copper. The deepest shadows are created through the application of a brown glaze directly over the mid-tone. This glaze is also used to outline the figure. The lightest highlights are created through the application of opaque, light, highlights over the mid-tone. The lights tend to be more thickly applied than the dark glazes.

1.5 CONCLUSION

The painting of *Saint Jerome* reproduces a *Saint Jerome* by Jacopo Palma; it was copied after an engraving of the composition by Hendrik Goltzius. The composition was however not copied directly from the print, as the difference in measurements between the works as well as crucial iconographic changes attest. Insight into the material characteristics of the painting, specifically its copper support, have led us to the conclusion that it was likely created in a printmaker's workshop on a piece of copper originally intended for print-making not painting. Although the painting can probably be dated within the 17th century it is difficult to further geographically locate where it was made or to attribute the painting to a specific artist, due to the use of common materials and painting technique. This is enhanced by the very nature of the object, which is small, light and easily transportable, and the cultural circumstances of the period, where the medium of print spread ideas geographically and made them available to different artists and workshops to copy. Further study of the painting's materials together with consideration of other copies of the same composition (in prints and paintings) and the function of the work might provide additional insight into the making and meaning.