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A NEW SOURCE FOR ANDREA DEL CASTAGNO'S
*VISION OF ST. JEROME**

ADRIENNE DEANGELIS

The extraordinary imagery of Andrea del Castagno's *Vision of St. Jerome* has never been completely explained. Painted for the chapel of Girolamo Corboli in Santissima Annunziata in Florence, the fresco altarpiece is traditionally dated to about 1454–1455. The saint, nearly nude in his torn gown, stands with one hand clutching the bloody stone with which he has been beating his breast in an act of penitence. His arms flung wide from his body, he seems to have been stopped in his act of self-flagellation by the vision above his head: a severely foreshortened crucified Christ supported by God the Father, under whose chin floats the dove of the Holy Spirit. The members of the Trinity shown in this manner form the *Gnadenstuhl*, the Throne of Mercy.¹ Even the lion beside him seems to share in St. Jerome's experience. Its head thrown back at the same angle, its mouth is opened in an outcry that in its animalistic response suggests less an understanding of the vision above than a reflexive imitation of its master's transported state.²

Flanking the saint are two heavily draped female figures who also look up at this extraordinary depiction of the Trinity. The expression of St. Jerome and the placement of the *Gnadenstuhl* as emerging from behind his head, as if out of the sky and into the viewer's worldly space, implies that St. Jerome's penitential self-flagellation has been so compelling that he has re-evoked his desert experiences of the Trinity for them to see. St. Jerome looks up to regard this group with an expression less innocently awe-struck than that of his companions, but with a rapt, contemplative fervor that suggests his familiarity with the experience (fig. 1).

*A version of this paper was given at the Renaissance Society of America conference in Vancouver, BC, in 1997. I would like to thank the organizers for selecting my paper, and Professor Sarah Blake McHam and the editors of *Comitatus* for their advice and assistance.

¹The Biblical source for this personification of the Trinity has been traced to Hebrews 4:15–16: "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." The emergence of the Trinity as a subject in art from the fourteenth century has been linked to the establishment of the feast of the Trinity in 1334; see Eve Borsook, *The Mural Painters of Tuscany* (New York, 1980), 58. On depictions of the Trinity, see Philippe Verdier, "Le Trinité debout de Champmol," in *Etudes d'art français offertes à Charles Sterling* (Paris, 1975): 65–90.

²Millard Meiss, *The Great Age of Fresco: Discoveries, Recoveries and Survivals* (New York, 1970), 153, makes the observation that the lion's reaction reflects that of its master.

All scholars agree as to this basic interpretation of the fresco's subject. St. Jerome (d. 420) is shown in a barren landscape reminiscent of the desert in Syria where he lived as a hermit for at least two years.³ The haggard, emotionally intense St. Jerome is here a continuation of an established visual tradition showing him as a penitent in the wilderness—seen, for example, in the early quattrocento panel now in the Art Museum, Princeton University.⁴ St. Jerome as penitent hermit became an artistic subject from about 1400, an apparent reflection of the influence of the new communities of flagellants, followers of St. Jerome, who devoted themselves to poverty, self-denial, and scourging.⁵ Meiss has pointed out that Florence became an important locus for several such groups, who were often composed in great part of individuals from some of the leading families of the city.⁶ One of the most important of the communities was the Buca di San Girolamo, which met in an underground room at the Ospedale di San Matteo, next to the church of the Santissima Annunziata.⁷ Meiss has suggested that the community's patron, Giovanni Corboli, long known to have been associated with Santissima Annunziata, was perhaps a member of a flagellant order there.⁸ Although no direct connection between Corboli and any such community has yet been found, scholars now generally agree that the choice of subject and

³On his life in the desert, see, for example, Eugene F. Rice, Jr., *St. Jerome in the Renaissance* (Baltimore and London, 1985), 6–10.

⁴By Giovanni Toscani, ca. 1430. This painting is discussed by Marvin Eisenberg, "The Penitent St. Jerome by Giovanni Toscani," *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 117, no. 878 (1976): 275–283.

⁵Millard Meiss, "Scholarship and Penitence in the Early Renaissance: The Image of St. Jerome," *Pantheon*, vol. 32, no. 2 (Apr.–June, 1974), 134, with bibliography; also Rice, *St. Jerome*, 75–83. Bernhard Riddebos, *Saint and Symbol: Images of St. Jerome in Early Italian Art* (Groningen, 1984), 63–73, proposed the fresco in the nunnery of Santa Marta at Siena as "one of the earliest representations, if not the first one, of the penitent St. Jerome."

⁶Meiss, "Scholarship and Penitence," *passim*.

⁷*Buca* means "cave"; the group was called this both on account of their meeting room and in honor of the desert residence of St. Jerome. On the origin, movements, and membership of the Buca di San Girolamo, see Riddebos, 76–78.

⁸Meiss, *The Great Age of Fresco*, and "Scholarship and Penitence."

Fig. 1. Andrea del Castagno, *The Vision of St. Jerome*, fresco, church of the SS. Annunziata, Florence (Alinari/Art Resource, NY).

Castagno's emphasis on suffering and gore in his interpretation of St Jerome's experience must be a reflection of the flagellant movement's influence in Florence.⁹

Castagno's highly emotional figure of St. Jerome as desert hermit has its origins in the later sculpture of Donatello, specifically his freestanding saints, such as his prophets for the Campanile of Florence, his two versions of *St. John the Baptist*, and his *Magdalen*.¹⁰ As graphic as some of the previous depictions of St. Jerome as desert penitent could be, Castagno focuses here on the most explicit illustration of the saint's own description of his physical state at that time, one preserved in Letter XXII to Eustochium: "Sackcloth disfigured my unshapely limbs and my skin from long neglect had become as black as an Ethiopian's. Tears and groans were every day my portion; and if drowsiness chanced to overcome my struggles against it, my bare bones, which hardly held together, clashed against the ground."¹¹ Castagno's emphasis is on the physical suffering of the saint: his bony, starved figure, sunken features, and above all, a fascination with blood: that on St. Jerome, that on Christ, and the blood red of the cherubim.

The two women have been identified as St. Paula and her daughter, St. Eustochium, followers of St. Jerome, who founded their own orders in the desert.¹² Although they followed him to Syria, they did not accompany St. Jerome into the desert. Here in the fresco the depiction of them as separated from and being introduced to the transcendent visual experiences of their friend forms Castagno's narrative content. Castagno has indicated their removal from the direct experience of the vision by moving them slightly out from the plane upon which St. Jerome stands, and by defining their bodies as more massive, even sculptural, wrapped in masses of drapery to look more monumental and more earthbound than the emaciated, twisting figure of St. Jerome. By subduing their gestures and their individual characteristics, Castagno has made them look like similar, if not identical, brackets to the central focus of the scene. These techniques of removal of the lesser figures from the immediate experience

⁹It was Meiss, in *The Great Age of Fresco*, and especially in "Scholarship and Penitence," who first proposed this connection; no scholars have challenged the essential idea.

¹⁰The prophets are dated to the 1420's. The first *St. John* is dated to 1438 and was made for the Chapel of the Florentines in Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice; the other, in Siena, is from 1457. The *Magdalen*, formerly in the Baptistery of Florence, now in the Museo del Opera del Duomo, has been dated to ca. 1460. For these, see John Pope-Hennessy, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture* (New York, 1985), 255–266.

¹¹St. Jerome, letter to Eustochium, no. XXII, written in Rome in 384; in *St. Jerome: Letters and Selected Works*, vol. 6 of *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. (New York, 1890–1900).

¹²Meiss, *The Great Age of Fresco*, 153; "Scholarship and Penitence," 137. Marita Horster, *Andrea del Castagno* (Ithaca, NY, 1980), 34, termed their identification "doubtful" but did not say why.

of the vision of the Trinity suggests that their understanding of the vision comes through the narrative of St. Jerome.

There is no precedent for Andrea del Castagno's narrative depiction of St. Jerome or for the emotional quality of the fresco.¹³ In part this is due to the presentation of a new subject, one with few visual precedents. There seem to be only three known previous depictions of St. Jerome with Saints Paula and Eustochium, none of which are sources for Castagno's treatment. *The First Bible of Charles the Bald* contains a frontispiece with a scene of St. Jerome explaining his writings to St. Paula and St. Eustochium, among others seated around him.¹⁴ There is a much-restored mosaic from the thirteenth century in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, the eventual burial place of St. Jerome.¹⁵ The saint is shown in his study, lecturing to his two followers. These two examples, however, would relate to Castagno's fresco only as general references to a tradition of the saint as a teacher or explicator of his writings.

Vasari noted a fresco of St. Jerome with St. Paula and St. Eustochium by Starnina in Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, but it has not survived.¹⁶ A predella panel by Francesco d'Antonio from his altarpiece of about 1430, probably originally for a Florentine church, is perhaps the closest in subject to Castagno's fresco.¹⁷ Here is a fully clothed St. Jerome confronting an apparition of the Trinity, while behind him his two male companions react with awe and confusion.¹⁸ The figures of the Trinity, shown in the same hierarchical relationship of the Gnadenstuhl, are flanked by angels and sealed within a gold-striated medallion. This bubble-like shape holding the figures is placed at the right of center, with the

¹³See George Kaftal, *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting* (Florence, 1952), no. 158, cols. 521–533, for a list of images of St. Jerome. See also Meiss, *The Great Age of Fresco*, and "Scholarship and Penitence"; Rice, "St. Jerome's 'Vision of the Trinity': An Iconographical Note," *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 125, no. 960 (Mar., 1983), and *St. Jerome*, Riddebos, *Saint and Symbol*; and Daniel Russo, *Saint Jérôme en Italie: étude d'iconographie et de spiritualité (XIIIe-XVe siècle)* (Paris, 1987).

¹⁴Rice, *St. Jerome*, 26, and fig. 9. Also called the Vivian Bible, this is dated ca. 845–846 and attributed to a workshop in Tours; now Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, lat.1. On this, see also Florentine Mutherich and Joachim E. Gaehde, *Carolingian Painting* (New York, 1976) [n.p.].

¹⁵On the removal of his body to Rome, see Rice, *St. Jerome*, 55–56. The mosaic is reproduced in: *Santa Maria Maggiore a Roma*, ed. Carlo Pietrangeli (Rome, 1988), 144.

¹⁶Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori con nuove annotazioni e commenti de Gaetano Milanesi*, rpt. ed., 9 vols. (1906; Florence, 1981), 2:7.

¹⁷Now in Avignon, the Musée du Petit Palais. The connection between the two was first made by Rice, in "St. Jerome's 'Vision of the Trinity,'" 151, and n. 1; also fig. 27. See also Rice, *St. Jerome*, 99. On Francesco d'Antonio, see Curtis Shell, "Francesco d'Antonio and Masaccio," *Art Bulletin* 47 (1965): 465–469; also James Beck, "Una Prospettiva... di mano di Masaccio," in *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Painting in Honor of Millard Meiss*, ed. Irving Lavin and John Plummer, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York, 1977), 1:48–53.

¹⁸Described in *Direction des Musée de France. Inventaire des Collections Publiques Françaises. Peinture italienne. Avignon: Musée du Petit Palais* (Paris, 1976), cat. no. 69. See also Rice, "St. Jerome's 'Vision of the Trinity,'" as cited in n. 14, above.

figure group tipped slightly to the left as if rushing forward through space. The suggestion of movement by the vision from right towards the center of the painting, and the gestures of surprise and awe of St. Jerome's brothers in faith as they look up at it, implies its sudden appearance. This iconography moves the prototype for this scene closer to the older depictions of the appearance to St. Francis of Christ of the stigmata, a notable example being the version by Giotto over the entrance of the Bardi Chapel in Santa Croce, Florence, dating to circa 1310–1316.¹⁹ Here, Francesco d'Antonio has taken the well-known iconography of the sudden appearance of the contemplated subject to the enraptured recipient whose less enlightened companions are overcome by awe of the miracle, and applied it to St. Jerome's verbal evocation of the Trinity made visual by the power of his intellect. While the presence of the Gnadenstuhl does make Francesco d'Antonio's painting a link to Castagno's interpretation, the overall effect is more reminiscent of always influential Franciscan iconography.²⁰

More surprising than its apparent lack of sources is the fact that Castagno's fresco, although it might be thought to have added a new and compelling subject to the iconography of St. Jerome, seems to have produced no visual offspring. This is even stranger when one considers that it was visible for at least one hundred years in one of the most important churches of Italy.²¹ Vasari praised the fresco, but noted its disappearance behind a later painting without much regret.²² There appear to be no later such depictions of St. Jerome with the Trinity.²³ The saint as

¹⁹See Rona Goffen's discussion of the dating of the Bardi Chapel frescoes in her *Spirituality in Conflict: St. Francis and Giotto's Bardi Chapel* (University Park and London, 1988), 56–59, where this entrance fresco is reproduced in plate 48, among other examples included.

²⁰The use of Franciscan visual precedent also can be seen, for example, in depictions of the death of St. Jerome, such as the version by Filippo Lippi and his workshop in Prato, dating also to 1455. Reproduced in Cecilia Filippini, *I Lippi a Prato* (Prato, 1994), 36–37.

²¹Santissima Annunziata contains a much-venerated painting of the Virgin of the Annunciation, attributed to St. Luke.

²²Vasari, 2:67: "Sopra questa, nella cappella intitolata a San Girolamo, dipinse quel Santo, secco e raso, con buon disegno e molto fatica; e sopra vi fece una Trinità, con un Crocifisso che scorta; tanto ben fatto, che Andrea merita per ciò esser molto lodato, avendo condotto gli scorti con molto miglior e più moderna maniera, che gli altri ananzi a lui fatto non avevano. Ma questa pittura, essendovi stato posto sopra dalla famiglia de' Montaguti una tavola, non si può più vedere." The fresco was covered by an altarpiece in 1565; it was revealed again ca. 1900; see Horster, 181.

²³Meiss, "Scholarship and Penitence," 136–137, lists two paintings from the later fifteenth century as reflections of Castagno's fresco, the first a painting attributed to Botticini, now in the National Gallery, London, showing a painted image of St. Jerome in penitence being adored by, on one side, Pope St. Damasus and St. Eusebius, and on the other, St. Paula and St. Eustochium. All four saints were associated with St. Jerome during his lifetime. See Martin Davies, *The Earlier Italian Schools. National Gallery of Art, London*, 2nd. ed., rev., (London, 1961), 118–122. The second painting, still *in situ* in the church of San Domenico in Fiesole, is from the circle of Botticelli. This is notable for its depiction of the bloody and

the penitent in the wilderness is most often shown alone with a relatively tame lion, contemplating a depiction of the crucified Christ that, while it perhaps is meant to be understood as a vision, is always presented as differing in substance not at all from its surroundings, and often appears very much like a carved altar cross.²⁴

The puzzle of the subject and its source increased when, during restoration of the fresco after damage caused by the 1966 flood, the fresco, when lifted off the surface of the wall, revealed an underdrawing, the *sinopia*, which differed substantially from the completed painting.²⁵ *Sinopie* are the drawings the artist makes to guide him in the creation of the fresco. They may be drawn freehand on the smoothed-out surface of the wall, called the *arriccio*, or they may be applied by tacking up drawings whose lines have been punched with small holes, which are to be gone over with loosely-woven bags filled with powdered chalk, leaving the general imprint of the drawings. The painter would cover a portion of these drawings with the final layer of plaster, the *intonaco*, upon which he applied the paint. Both drawing techniques are seen here.²⁶

The three figures of the lower level of the fresco are here, although the two female figures are smaller and all are set slightly farther back into the pictorial space. All three are here standing along the same groundline. Although all three look upward, the woman on the right is gazing at St. Jerome, while he appears to be looking up at some sort of apparition outside of the fresco space. The woman on the left appears to be following St. Jerome's gaze upward. That St. Jerome was perhaps originally intended to be shown looking up at a medallion is suggested by the curved lines that appear to outline a frame, which dips lowest above St. Jerome's head and is just slightly off-center, rather like that seen in Francesco d'Antonio's predella scene described above.

The two female figures here are both more delicate in weight and presence than they are in the fresco, and both are turned slightly towards the viewer. The one on the right—who seems to be older, and thus would be St. Paula—stands with her arms folded in a gesture of pious attention as she gazes into St. Jerome's face. The plain, columnar folds of her gown, falling almost unbroken to the ground, underline the impression of her

tortured Christ on the cross, with the weeping Mary at one side and, on the other, a kneeling St. Jerome, shown in the act of beating his chest with a stone. For this, see Meiss, "Scholarship and Penitence," 137–138.

²⁴See the collection of sculptures and paintings on this subject in Herbert Friedmann, *A Bestiary for St. Jerome* (Washington, D.C., 1980), esp. his discussion, "Saint Jerome in the Wilderness," 48–100.

²⁵Meiss, *The Great Age of Fresco*, 153.

²⁶The best explanations of fresco techniques are still those found in Meiss, *The Great Age of Fresco*, and Borsook, *The Mural Painters*. On Castagno's drawing here, see Baldini, cited below, n. 29.

rapt attention to the saint's words. Her counterpart, St. Eustochium, is more involved with both the vision of the saint and the gaze of the viewer; her body is turned in a full three-quarter pose to the front of the picture plane, although her face remains in profile as she looks up to the same spot above the group that St. Jerome regards. A notable difference is the interpretation of the drapery, which, swathing a body of about the same size as that of St. Paula, is here thicker and heavier, broken and agitated in its folds.

There is evidence that this is a redrawing or a rethinking of a figure type that started out to be much the same as that of St. Paula, for example in the way that the lines defining the right shoulder and upper back seem to have been filled out by Castagno to make the figure more massive. The depiction of St. Jerome is even more of a hybrid; apparently larger than the corresponding figure in the fresco, the saint here is almost decorative in his Gothic-like sway and his primly laced-up gown (fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Andrea del Castagno, sinopia for *The Vision of St. Jerome*, church of the SS. Annunziata, Florence (Scala/Art Resource, NY).

In short, this sinopia never would have worked as a finished fresco. There is no “flow” between the figures; their movements and their glances are irresolute and isolated. Not only do the figures look in different

directions, but their placement also has not been fully thought out. St. Jerome's left hand dangles awkwardly in space; his right is lost over the drapery folds of the woman on the left, as if he, or perhaps she, has been fitted in without a great deal of thought. As to the space above the figures, it is too small to contain the Trinity group seen in the later fresco. It would seem that whatever Castagno had originally planned, proved unsatisfying almost immediately.²⁷

Yet all these problems are resolved in the fresco itself. The two women, now differentiated by age, are posed to direct the viewer's attention to the figure of the saint, who in turn indicates the Trinity. The most astonishing portion of the fresco is this section above with the Trinity, shown in a type of perspectival collapse without precedent in Florence. Meiss even suggested that Castagno found this technique so difficult that he never did quite work out the proper method for the completion of the vanishing body of Christ, and had to resort to masking the awkward fade with clouds and cherubim in *fresco secco*, which soon began to flake off.²⁸ As explained below, however, this interpretation of the use of the cherubim is debatable.

Why are there differences between the drawing and the fresco, and what is the source of the imagery? That both the composition and the subject of this fresco are unique within the range of the iconography of the stories of St. Jerome has been recognized for a long time. The composition's source, however, may be found in one of the cypress-wood panels on the doors of the church of Santa Sabina in Rome. This supports the attribution of both the sinopia and the completed fresco to Andrea del Castagno, first proposed by Baldini and others.²⁹ Finally, with the Santa Sabina panel, the sinopia, and the fresco of the *Vision of St. Jerome*, one is in the unique presence of the artist's model, his process drawings, and his finished work.

The composition of both the underdrawing and the fresco has only a general correspondence with the most probable literary source, the apocryphal *Regula Monachorum* of St. Jerome. In this text, thought during the quattrocento to have been written by St. Jerome, the saint is presented as describing his experiences as a hermit in the wilderness to his follower St. Eustochium. The relevance of this text was discovered by Eugene Rice.³⁰ The apocryphal St. Jerome writes:

²⁷Borsook was of the opposite opinion. She believed that the sinopia was the better design, and that the completed fresco showed a miscalculation in the size and placement of the figures. See her "The Great Age of Fresco," in Letters, *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 111, no. 794 (May, 1969), 303–304.

²⁸Meiss, *The Great Age of Fresco*, 153. Meiss calls them seraphim.

²⁹Borsook, *The Mural Painters*, 90, n. 22.; Umberto Baldini, "Dalla Sinopia al cartone," in *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Painting*, ed. Lavin and Plummer, 1:43–47.

³⁰Rice, "St. Jerome's 'Vision of the Trinity'."

I have often been among the angelic choirs; for weeks at a time, feeling no corporeal sensation, I have seen with the sight of divine vision; after many days, foreknowing things to come, I returned to myself and wept. But how perfect was my happiness there! How unspeakable my delight! My witness is the Trinity itself, which I saw, I know not with what kind of sight.³¹

According to Rice, Castagno has here used the apocryphal text as the basis of his narrative of the evocation of the Trinity.³² But Castagno has made some important changes: from an ecstatic, joyful transport of the saint among the angelic choirs to a searing, martyrial image of him as physically and emotionally wracked by his desert penitence. St. Jerome's reference to the Trinity in the *Regula Monacharum*, however, does not mention his own suffering as the agent of his vision. Castagno—or the iconographer here—has combined his own interpretation of this passage with the passage from Letter XXII to St. Eustochium, to produce this unique visual narrative. Then he has brought in St. Paula to stand with her daughter as the witnesses to the power of St. Jerome's evocation of the Trinity. For viewers with knowledge of the life of St. Jerome, the appearance of the two women would have been logical, for both were known to be close friends of St. Jerome, and to have gone with him to the Holy Land. There is, therefore, no literary and no visual precedent for the depiction of both St. Paula and St. Eustochium together with St. Jerome and his vision. Yet this composition does have a visual source.

While the *Regula Monacharum* may have provided the most general outline of the fresco's subject—St. Jerome recounting his life in the desert to St. Paula and St. Eustochium—Castagno seems to have derived the basic composition for the fresco from a panel on the fifth-century wooden doors of Santa Sabina, which he would have seen on his visit to Rome in 1455. This scene, the exact identity of which has never been explained, but which has been called “The Triumph of Christ and of the Church,” shows two male saints, presumably St. Peter and St. Paul, flanking a central female figure, now usually identified as Ecclesia.³³ Above the group are the moon, five stars, and the sun, most likely indicating Creation. The female figure looks up to the standing figure of Christ above them, separated from those below in a garlanded medallion embraced by symbols of the four Evangelists. Christ holds an open scroll and is flanked by the Greek letters *alpha* and *omega*, signifying that he is the

³¹Quoted in *ibid.*, 152.

³²*Ibid.*

³³On the interpretation of the panel, see Gisela Jeremias, *Die Holztür der Basilik S. Sabina in Rom*. (Tübingen, 1980), 80–88.

Beginning and the End, the Christ Triumphant.³⁴ Apparently only Ecclesia actually sees Christ; St. Peter and St. Paul appear to be looking up at the nimbed cross, which they grasp above her head (fig. 3).³⁵

Castagno found in this wooden relief the model for the *Vision of St. Jerome*, and it is the immediate source for the sinopia, which was then developed into the surviving fresco. The basic similarities between the panel and Castagno's work are plain: the division of the picture plane into two registers, with a vision of Christ above and his saints below. In this lower space, two persons flank a third, who seems to be the direct recipient of the vision; in the relief Ecclesia, in the sinopia and the fresco, St. Jerome. There are also specific correspondences between figures in each; for example, the heavily draped Ecclesia is refashioned into the two female saints. In the saint on the right, in the relief, the pose of the legs is repeated in Castagno's *St. Jerome*. The curved double lines of the sinopia may reflect the frame of the medallion containing Christ. The most compelling similarity, after the basic organization, is the theme of the transcendent appearance of the figure of Christ and its effect on the three individuals below. These receive the vision of Christ in a type of hierarchy of experience, in which the central figure is the most directly affected. Those who flank Jerome, or Ecclesia, are removed to just outside the direct reception of the vision.

³⁴Ibid., 82–88.

³⁵See Jeremias, *Die Holztür*, 81–82. As the identification of the subject has never been completely resolved, it is worth noting also its general resemblance to the mid-third-century fresco tentatively identified as an initiation scene in the vault of the cubiculum of the hypogeum of the Aureli family in Rome. For the date and illustration, see Pasquale Testini, *Le Catacombe e gli cimiteri cristiani in Roma* (Bologna, 1966), 157, and fig. 121. I was alerted to its resemblance to the Santa Sabina panel by its inclusion in a lecture by Alison Poe of Rutgers University, whose dissertation discusses the fresco programs of the hypogeum of the Aureli.

Fig. 3. Detail of the wooden door, church of Santa Sabina, Rome (Scala/Art Resource, NY).

How would Castagno have found himself at Santa Sabina? It is now generally accepted that Andrea del Castagno was in Rome from June 1454 to the early summer of 1455, during which time he painted the *Bibliotheca*

Graeca of the Vatican Palace.³⁶ Along with Santa Sabina's own attractions as an early Christian basilica, the church had in 1441 been extensively restored and so may have been of interest for that reason. Beyond this, there is a possible link between Santa Sabina and St. Jerome, for the church has a well-known traditional association with St. Jerome through his follower St. Marcella, who lived nearby. St. Jerome, in the slightly less than three years he spent in Rome, found devoted followers in a group of aristocratic women who lived on the Aventine. According to Eugene Rice, in their strict and enthusiastic adherence to his word they made over their palaces on the Aventine hill into "virtual domestic nunneries"; these followers included St. Marcella, St. Paula, and St. Eustochium, among others.³⁷ The many surviving letters from St. Jerome to all three women indicate his friendship with and his respect for them.

St. Marcella and her adopted daughter remained in Rome when St. Jerome, St. Paula, St. Eustochium, and others left for Syria at the end of the fourth century. St. Marcella owned a home on the Aventine near the site of Santa Sabina. Her closeness to St. Jerome is well documented, for eighteen letters survive written by St. Jerome to her, more by far than to St. Paula and St. Eustochium combined.³⁸ There is a tradition that St. Marcella began a convent for women near Santa Sabina, although modern research has shown that she died about 410, at least twenty years before the present church was built.³⁹ Finally, Santa Sabina was until 1464 part of an Ash Wednesday penitential procession led by the pope and called the *Conducta* or the *Colletta*, whose fame may well have acted as yet another draw for Castagno, who was in Rome in the spring of 1455.⁴⁰

This is not to say that Castagno's fresco is necessarily a reference to the church of Santa Sabina. While it is also difficult to propose any specific doctrinal connection between the panel and the fresco, it may be suggested that the visionary imagery of Christ in glory in the upper part of the panel might have struck Castagno as an intriguing variation on standard Trinitarian imagery. There appears to be no way to determine how the Santa Sabina panel was interpreted by religious scholars in the fifteenth century, and in fact any such contemporary interpretation might have been unrelated to its appeal to and use by Castagno. The legendary

³⁶The details of Castagno's visit to Rome and his painting of the *Bibliotheca Graeca* can be found in Toby Yuen, "The *Bibliotheca Graeca*: Castagno, Alberti, and Ancient Sources," *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 92, no. 812 (Nov., 1970): 725–736. See also Horster, 41–44.

³⁷Rice, *St. Jerome*, 12–14.

³⁸There are only three letters each to the latter women. They are included in *St. Jerome: Letters and Selected Works*, Schaff and Wace, eds.

³⁹The founder of the church is named as Pietro of Illyria, according to the mosaic inscription on a wall of the church. For this, see Mariano Armellini, *Le Chiese di Roma dal secolo IV al XIX*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1942), 2:709–710.

⁴⁰J.J. Berthier, *L'Eglise de Sainte-Sabine à Rome* (Rome, 1910), 53–55. F. Darsy, *Santa Sabina* (Rome, 1961), 17–28.

connection between the neighborhood of the church and St. Jerome might have furnished part of Castagno's reason for visiting Santa Sabina. Such a visit to the one site in Rome most associated with the living St. Jerome also may indicate that Castagno already had been given the commission for the St. Jerome fresco before he left for Rome. Once there, the unique iconography of the panel, with its implications of a transcendent experience of Christ in glory, would have appealed to an artist searching, perhaps, for ideas for representing St. Jerome's vision.

Regarding Andrea del Castagno's presence in Rome, most scholars now accept that he was there to paint the *Bibliotheca Graeca*, even if there is some discussion as to the extent of his responsibility for the frescoes.⁴¹ Most scholars agree that Castagno was responsible at least for the illusionistic architectural portion of the frescoes. From the few dates known for Castagno, and with some reasonable stylistic extrapolations from his works, it is possible to suggest that the St. Jerome fresco dates to immediately after his return to Florence from Rome. The timeline is the following. The Corboli Chapel in Santissima Annunziata was not ready for painting until September, 1453, at the earliest.⁴² Presumably it is not likely that Castagno would have attempted to paint the frescoes during the cold, damp late fall and winter months, which thus pushes the earliest starting date for the project forward to the spring of 1454. As mentioned above, Castagno was in Rome from June, 1454, to the early summer of 1455.⁴³ He was back in Florence before July of 1455, when he received his first payment for the now vanished fresco of Mary Magdalen with Martha and Lazarus for the Orlando Chapel in Santissima Annunziata, the first of three fresco altarpieces he was to paint in that church.⁴⁴ Spencer, who did not believe that Castagno went to Rome, theorized that he first painted the Orlando Chapel, then that of St. Julian, and finally that of St. Jerome, all during the period of summer to fall of 1455, thus agreeing with Yuen on their dating.⁴⁵

Although there are no documents for Castagno's St. Julian fresco, for stylistic reasons it has always seemed most reasonable to date this slightly before that of St. Jerome.⁴⁶ The two figures are a contrasting visual pair: the dark, brooding figure of St. Julian against the explosive vitality of St.

⁴¹Yuen attributes all of the frescoes here to Castagno; see his "The *Bibliotheca Graeca*." Horster, 41–44, attributes to him only the illusionistic colonnade and its fictive ceiling. John R. Spencer, *Andrea del Castagno and His Patrons* (Durham and London, 1991), 13, does not accept that Castagno was in Rome at all.

⁴²Spencer, 50, 61, notes that the Corboli began paying for the Feast of St. Jerome "no later than September 28, 1453," and that painting in the chapel could not have begun before then.

⁴³Yuen, 733. Also Horster, 13–14.

⁴⁴Horster, 14.

⁴⁵Spencer, 11.

⁴⁶For the history of this, see *ibid.*, 67–69.

Jerome.⁴⁷ The frescoes also are opposed in artistic compositional types: the unity and perspectival depth of the St. Jerome fresco, against the episodic narrative structure and relatively flat visual organization of that of St. Julian.

In considering the St. Julian fresco, it must be kept in mind that a large portion from the lower half is gone. The fresco originally showed several scenes from St. Julian's life, arranged around the centralized, praying figure of the saint, above whom floats an image of the blessing Christ.⁴⁸ The composition, with the saint looming in front of schematic representations of scenes from his life, would in its original state have looked rather like an evocation of a trecento panel: the enlarged, iconic standing figure of the saint, surrounded by scenes from his life. Even more archaic is the beardless young Christ who floats above St. Julian, holding the orb in his left hand with his right hand raised in blessing. This is the early Christian portrayal of Christ, a depiction that would have been extremely unusual for mid-fifteenth century Florence, although not for Castagno, who portrayed Christ this way three times in the upper portion of his frescoes for the Cenacolo of Sant'Apollonia.⁴⁹ Perhaps Castagno used this older type to emphasize the early Christian date of the living St. Julian, as well.⁵⁰

There is another element to consider. The fact that the St. Jerome and St. Julian frescoes are the altarpieces of their respective chapels has not been commented upon in the critical literature. More typically, the walls of the chapel would be frescoed, while the altarpiece would be a painted panel. While in use in Italy from earlier centuries, and popular with the Franciscan communities of southern Tuscany and Umbria,⁵¹ these fresco altarpieces seem to be among the last examples done in Florence. Cost would appear to be the one great advantage in using fresco here, and the later history of damage done to them, both deliberately and accidentally, indicates that they probably would have suffered less as panel paintings.⁵² Whether or not Castagno was compelled to accept the limitations posed by thrifty patrons, he made the most of his circumstances by exploiting as completely as possible his subject matter, the challenges posed by the

⁴⁷Ibid., 68, notes the contrast between the "agitated" St. Jerome and the "calm and introspective" St. Julian with Christ.

⁴⁸On this, see Horster, 33–34, 181. Also see Spencer, 67–78.

⁴⁹Spencer, 68: "In fact, St. Julian conforms more closely to the traditional representation of Christ than does Christ." Borsook, *The Mural Painters*, 89, n. 9, quotes Luisa Vertova's suggestion, in *I Cenacoli fiorentini* (Turin, 1965), 32, that the beardless Christ symbolizes "Christ as the son of God."

⁵⁰Kaftal, col. 593. Julian also was a fourth-century saint, thus almost contemporary with St. Jerome.

⁵¹Borsook, *The Mural Painters*, 46–48.

⁵²Neither Girolamo Corboli nor Piero da Gagliano—who paid for the St. Julian fresco—was a noted patron of the arts. See Spencer, 56–68.

innovations of modern painters in fresco, and the opportunities offered by the fresco medium itself.

Of the modern painters' works, a notable example for Castagno would have been Fra Angelico's series of devotional frescoes for the cells of the friars at San Marco, dating to 1438–1442. These were painted on the walls, one to each cell, both as a guide to contemplation and as a representation of the *topos* of the visual revelation of the contemplated subject.⁵³ In a similar manner, each of Castagno's saints is shown in the act of conjuring up his vision for the viewer to witness. Each saint is shown as lost in his vision, yet in the extravagance of his emotional display is also supremely self-conscious. Castagno's connection to the Fra Angelico cycle may well have been inspired also by the history shared by the Dominicans at San Marco with the community of the Buca di San Girolamo.⁵⁴

Millard Meiss first suggested that the differences between the underdrawing and the St. Jerome fresco might be laid to the influence of Domenico Veneziano, whose frescoes in St. Egidio Castagno recently had undertaken to finish, in 1451–1453.⁵⁵ Although these are now lost, the documented working relationship of the two artists adds a factual basis to their evident stylistic similarities. These can be seen in Domenico's figure of St. John the Baptist, one of two saints from a fresco fragment in Santa Croce, Florence, painted most likely between the years 1445 and 1450.⁵⁶ The emaciated, drawn face uplifted to heaven and the powerful body with the ragged clothing are close to Castagno's *St. Jerome*. Yet the stance here is stiffer, more self-consciously posed than that of the latter saint. That this figure by Domenico Veneziano predates Castagno's also is suggested by the awkward, dangling right hand of St. John, echoed in Castagno's sinopia but changed to a more forceful gesture in the fresco.

Meiss notes that the two slender figures in the sinopia, outlined in long, smooth strokes of chalk, give way in the third figure to a blurry tangle of shorter, quicker lines. He contrasts the fresco figure of St. Jerome, with its emotional incandescence manifested in the sprawl of limbs and the painfully realistic description of the emaciated body and bloody chest, with the more elegant and more subdued St. John the Baptist of

⁵³For example, see Paolo Morachiello, *Fra Angelico: The San Marco Frescoes* (New York, 1995), 43, who explains the use of the frescoes: "Each friar was to be given an image to love and on which to meditate, generated by Dominican doctrine and created by the art of a fellow friar in polychrome vitreous paste on the bare walls of his cell." See also William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven and London, 1993), esp. 209–236.

⁵⁴Riddebos, 75–88.

⁵⁵Meiss, *The Great Age of Fresco*, 132, 153. On the history of Castagno at St. Egidio, see Horster, 188–189.

⁵⁶Meiss, *The Great Age of Fresco*, 132, dates it as belonging somewhere between 1450 and 1461. For the earlier date—which seems more reasonable, as outlined above—and a technical description of the fresco, see Borsook, *The Mural Painters*, 90–91, and plates 110–111.

Domenico Veneziano, to propose as the author of the sinopia another artist perhaps close to Domenico.⁵⁷ He stops short, however, of Frederick Hartt's later attribution of the sinopia to Domenico, the publication of which in a major Italian Renaissance art history text has kept alive the issue of Domenico Veneziano's presence in this commission.⁵⁸

Umberto Baldini provided a detailed interpretation of the sinopia that reclaimed it as Castagno's.⁵⁹ He notes first that sinopie can differ markedly from the completed frescoes. He remarks also on the tradition of Castagno's interest in freehand drawing, and explains the appearance of the sinopia here as the result of the artist's having drawn with charcoal directly upon the arriccio without using preparatory drawings. The result was worked over thoroughly in red chalk. The sculptural and emotional development of the figures implies less Castagno's intervention in another artist's work than that his own ideas changed as he drew from right to left on the wall. From these studies on the wall Castagno made a series of full-scale drawings to be pounced. Traces of the pouncing can still be seen on the completed fresco.⁶⁰

In analyzing the differences among the underdrawing, the fresco, and the panel, Castagno's process of composition becomes clear. The drawing represents a project much closer to the lower-register narrative of the panel: the two male saints are now female, but their postures, drapery, gestures, and angle of vision correspond so closely to the Santa Sabina panel that the composition must derive from direct study by Castagno in Rome, rather than from a description or a drawing obtained from someone else. It would appear that after his return from Rome, Castagno set to work almost immediately on the St. Jerome fresco for the Corboli Chapel. Working from his studies of the Santa Sabina panel, he drew freehand the basic composition on the arriccio, the first layer of smooth plaster on the wall made to receive the underdrawing. While the three figures of the lower level were easily translated from the panel, the upper area was more problematic. The previous depictions of the Trinity as the medallion-encapsulated Gnadenstuhl were old-fashioned and insufficiently dramatic for the artist; and after an attempt to adapt for his use a composition such as that by Francesco d'Antonio, as seen in the curved markings on the sinopia, Castagno turned to the supreme example of the subject in Florentine painting, Masaccio's *Trinity* in Santa Maria

⁵⁷Meiss, *The Great Age of Fresco*, 173.

⁵⁸Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 4th ed., rev. by David Wilkins (New York, 1994), 274, fig. 275, and colorplate 51.

⁵⁹Baldini, 43ff.

⁶⁰These can be seen most obviously in Meiss, *The Great Age of Fresco*, 135. Baldini separated the pounced drawing created over the *sinopia* and recreated the original cartoon; see "Dalla Sinopia," illustrations 9–10.

Novella, of about 1425.⁶¹ Here the divine inhabits the spatial world as defined by the chapel, and it is the humans who are restricted to two dimensions. The patrons, kneeling outside the chapel space, are the farthest removed, and even Mary and St. John the Baptist, humans also, are shown as not quite part of the divine world of the Trinity. The hierarchical expression of the passage from human to divine is reflected in their exclusion from the perspectival space of the painted chapel. In this way Masaccio expresses the separation of the divine apparition of the Trinity from the human world (fig. 4).

In Castagno's fresco, the split between the human and the divine world almost does not exist. Here the violently foreshortened Trinity, with its dead, bloody Christ still on the cross, is a much more aggressively experiential interpretation of the presence of the divine in the world. Beyond the physicality of the persons of the Trinity, Castagno used perspectival foreshortening to create the illusion that St. Jerome can, through his speech, instantly evoke the living presence of the Trinity among humanity. To make the connection with and the challenge to Masaccio as clear as possible to the spectator, Castagno has closely modeled his Trinity on that of Masaccio; here God the Father stretches out his arms to support the cross, upon which is the dead Christ; the dove of the Holy Spirit is likewise posed with outstretched wings below the face of God and above the head of Christ.

There is at least one important iconographical difference between these two versions of the Trinity; Masaccio left out a traditional element, the cherubim. These are visible in other representations of the Trinity, for the good reason that their presence there is cited in the Bible. They are part of the construction of the Ark of the Covenant, as in Exodus 25:19–20, among other passages: "Even of the mercy seat shall ye make the cherubims on the two ends thereof. And the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces shall look on to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be."⁶² They are cited by the patriarch Tarasius in the eighth century, at the Council of Nicaea: "As then, the Old Testament had the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy-seat, let us also have the images of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the holy Mother of God, and of the saints, to overshadow the altar."⁶³ The literary and visual tradition

⁶¹For a recent discussion of Masaccio's use of perspective and a bibliography, see Jane Andrews Aiken, "The Perspective Construction of Masaccio's *Trinity* Fresco and Medieval Astronomical Graphics," *Artibus et Historiae*, vol. 16, no. 31 (1995): 171–187.

⁶²For these and other references, see Lawrence Nees, "Image and Text: Excerpts from Jerome's 'De Trinitate' and the *Maiestas Domini* Miniature of the Gundohinus Gospels," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 18 (1987), 13–14.

⁶³Quoted in Nees, 14, as trans. by John Mendham in *The Seventh General Council, the Second of Nicaea* (London, 1860), 127.

indicates that their presence here is not, as Meiss stated, to mask Castagno's unsuccessful foreshortening, but more likely a deliberate placement of a required element.

Meiss's interpretation of the cherubim had a solely technical basis. *Fresco secco* ("dry fresco") refers either to paint applied to a wall that

Fig. 4. Masaccio, *The Trinity*, fresco, church of Santa Maria Novella, Florence (Alinari/Art Resource, NY).

has not been prepared to receive true fresco painting, or to paint applied to a dried, previously frescoed surface. In either case, the paint does not adhere well to the surface of the wall and will begin to flake off, usually

within a few years of its application. This defect of fresco secco was well known by the fifteenth century. Meiss assumed that if the cherubim were meant to be part of the original composition, Castagno would have applied them with the original, true fresco composition.⁶⁴

Yet the assumption that they are an afterthought does not make sense. Since the cherubim are a usual part of the iconography of the Gnadestuhl, it seems odd that Castagno either would have forgotten them or treated them as optional until he discovered that he needed something to cover the vanishing point of St. Jerome's vision. A closer look at the fresco does not discover any great problems with Castagno's original handling of this area, and so it would seem that he decided, for his own reasons, to use fresco secco to paint the cherubim.

This is one of several questions remaining about this fresco, and this short article is perhaps the beginning of a reconsideration of its visual and iconographical sources. To sum up, then: In order to create the new iconography required for his new subject, Castagno combined three elements: the Santa Sabina panel, techniques of illusionistic painting, and a reinterpretation of Masaccio's *Trinity*. Castagno fastened on the narrative implications of the interaction between the two levels of the Santa Sabina panel. He used a variation of Masaccio's foreshortening as part of the visual language of a painting whose subject was literary in origin. This interpretation of perspective was at the extreme of the logical outgrowth of Castagno's interest in the technique. The interpenetration of the traditional divine presence and the awakening of human knowledge of the miracle of the vision is shown to have been evoked by the words of St. Jerome. The depicted recognition of St. Jerome's vision by St. Paula and St. Eustochium is not, of course, the beginning of this process; it begins with the living viewer, peering up and into the dark, shallow chapel to realize himself as the lowliest part of the hierarchical levels among the figures leading to the divine image.

Castagno in his fresco develops connections and relationships between the figures in a manner both more sophisticated and more dramatically compelling than anywhere else in contemporary painting. It seems unlikely that Girolamo Corboli, the patron, was much involved in the creation of this new subject.⁶⁵ The uniquely complementary qualities of both the St. Jerome and St. Julian frescoes suggest that it was Castagno who was the dominant force here in the construction of the visual language, while the rather complex literary origin of the subject implies the presence of a theological advisor.

⁶⁴Meiss, *The Great Age of Fresco*, 153.

⁶⁵Spencer, 60, is probably correct in suggesting that Corboli might have been approached by a Medici functionary and offered the opportunity, through his payment for the fresco, to create a good work for Santissima Annunziata and to earn some fame.

Acceptance of the Santa Sabina panel as a source for *The Vision of St. Jerome* provides not only the model for the composition, but expands our knowledge of the process by which Andrea del Castagno arrived at his unique interpretation in Santissima Annunziata, and opens the possibilities for further research and interpretation.

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