



Monastic Themes in Renaissance Art

**A Walking Tour of Italian Painting
and Sculpture in the
National Gallery of Art**

In Honor of the Fifteenth Centenary
of the Birth of St. Benedict of Nursia
480-1980

In Conjunction with
MONASTICISM AND THE ARTS
A Symposium sponsored by
Yale University and
St. Anselm's Abbey, Washington, D.C.

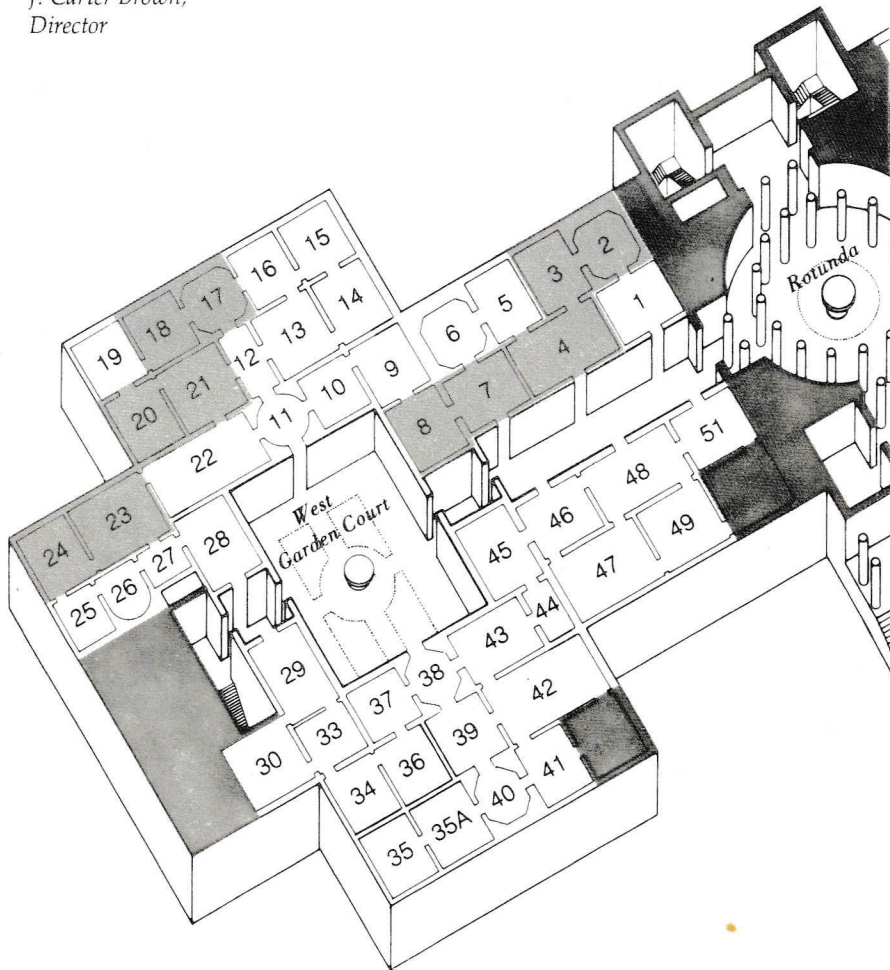
Foreword

These notes have been prepared in honor of the fifteenth centenary of the birth of St. Benedict of Nursia, the Father of Western Monasticism. They are meant to guide National Gallery visitors to Italian works whose subject matter is related to monastic tradition.

No student of European history and art history needs to be reminded of the contribution made by monks to medieval civilization. Less well known, perhaps, is the interest in early monastic history which developed in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This interest is amply reflected in Italian art of the period, however, and the ambulatory exhibition outlined here has been designed to suggest the religious and social context which brought it about.

The exhibition has been organized in connection with the symposium MONASTICISM AND THE ARTS, sponsored by the Yale Divinity School and St. Anselm's Abbey, Washington, D.C. Part of the symposium was held at the National Gallery, and the text of this brochure was written by a monk of St. Anselm's, Brother Gregory Verdon, O.S.B. We are happy to make available to the public an opportunity which can contribute to a fuller understanding of our Renaissance collection and of one of the enduring spiritual institutions of Western civilization: the monastic way of life.

J. Carter Brown,
Director



Shaded galleries contain paintings discussed on the walking tour.

Introduction

At the heart of the European monastic tradition is the life of St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-547). St. Benedict was not the first to introduce monasticism to the West; the monasticism he introduced in Egypt, two and a half centuries before him, had already made a significant contribution to the spiritual and intellectual life of the West. His contribution was to codify the spiritual and intellectual life of the monks, and to distill from the already extensive monastic tradition the *Regula monachorum*, or *Rule for Monks*. Perhaps the most significant contribution of the *Rule* of St. Benedict was that it shaped the religious and intellectual life of the West, and subsequent forms of religious life owe their origin to it.

The paintings and sculpture discussed here are products of that monastic culture. Not all were created by monks, and that is significant. The monastic life was a life of prayer and contemplation, a life in which the monk sought God in silence and prayer, and in which the monk sought to imitate the life of Christ. The monastic orders formed in the high Middle Ages, and influenced by their preaching, this helps explain the interest in early monastic history in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian iconography of monasticism: Saints John the Baptist, Anselm, and others. What is more, the emphasis given to the monastic life in the early Renaissance, and the taste for antiquity—here Christian rather than classical—of the reform movements in the contemporary monasticism, were restricted to humanists or monks; the evidence of the monastic life had a message for society at large, and for the deepest aspirations.

What is clear is that these works were meant to exhort to exalted obedience, chastity, poverty, fraternity, and other virtues. These values found their justification and their source in the life of Christ, and in his equality with God, but emptied himself for us, and took the form of a slave, as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to the point of Christ's "emptying" or "humbling" himself, and his Passion, set an example followed by all who would turn themselves as part of this system: successor to the apostles, and in turn had been heirs to the martyrs and Old Testament figures like John the Baptist and Elijah. The iconography of religious life, therefore, took always as its first principle the rhythm of humility and exaltation established by the life of Christ. The works discussed here illustrate this phenomenon in more elliptical ways, in the series of episodes of renunciation and penitence.

The method employed here to discuss such a complex subject is an associative interpretation which "reads" the works of art in the light of the life of St. Benedict. This approach takes for granted that the monastic life and its patrons would have been familiar: the works of art of St. Benedict's biographer, Pope St. Gregory the Great, meandering to left and right of its basic theme, should it be," he wrote, "with everyone who is discussing any subject, he should find at his disposal the same fountain, he should as it were, force the streams of discourse, and when he has poured enough upon its channel of discourse which he had prepared

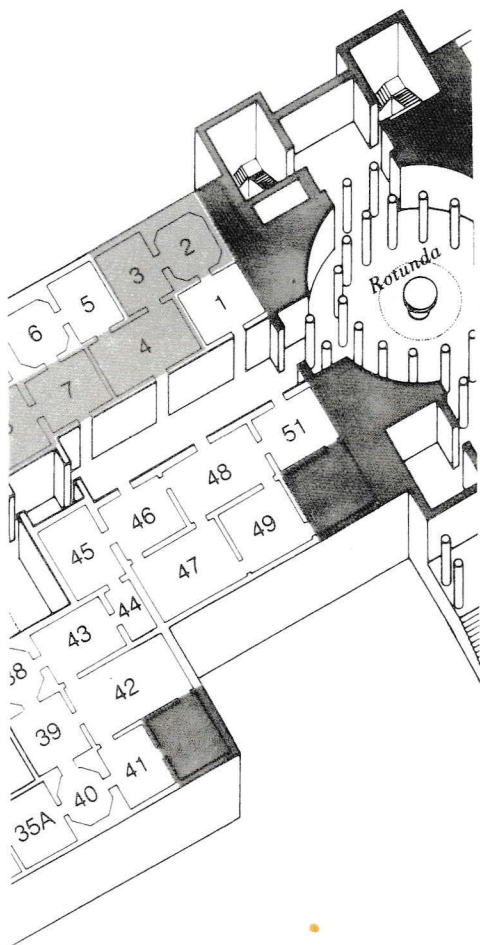
Timothy Gregory Verdon, O.S.B.
St. Anselm's Abbey
Washington, D.C.

Introduction

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and art history needs to be reminded of the medieval civilization. Less well known, perhaps, is the architecture which developed in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and is simply reflected in Italian art of the period, and the program outlined here has been designed to suggest what it brought it about.

connected in connection with the symposium sponsored by the Yale Divinity School and St. Anselm's Abbey. The program of the symposium was held at the National Gallery of Art, as written by a monk of St. Anselm's, Brother John, in order to make available to the public an opportunity for a better understanding of our Renaissance collection and the institutions of Western civilization: the monastic



used on the walking tour.

At the heart of the European monastic tradition stands the figure of St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-547). St. Benedict was not the first monk; the beginnings of Christian monasticism were in Egypt, two and a half centuries before his birth. Benedict's contribution was to codify the spiritual and institutional wisdom of his forebears, distilling from the already extensive monastic literature a single document, his *Regula monachorum*, or *Rule for Monks*. Perhaps more than any text after the Bible, the *Rule* of St. Benedict shaped the religious consciousness of early medieval Europe, and subsequent forms of religious life owe it a fundamental debt.

The paintings and sculpture discussed here are fourteenth- and fifteenth-century products of that monastic culture. Not all were made for monks, but all illustrate monastic themes, and that is significant. The ideal of monastic withdrawal from society to seek God in silence and prayer remained a paradigm even for the active orders formed in the high Middle Ages, and for the many ordinary men and women influenced by their preaching. This helps explain the popularity enjoyed in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian iconography by the traditional heroes of monasticism: Saints John the Baptist, Anthony Abbot, Jerome, Benedict, and others. What is more, the emphasis given these early monastic figures reflects climates of thought peculiar to the early Renaissance: such images both satisfied a taste for antiquity—here Christian rather than pagan—and mirrored the ideals of reform movements in the contemporary monastic milieu. Yet their appeal was not restricted to humanists or monks; the evidence suggests rather that monastic imagery had a message for society at large, which saw in it the reflection of its own deepest aspirations.

What is clear is that these works were meant to illustrate a value system. The system exalted obedience, chastity, poverty, fraternal service, and, above all, humility. These values found their justification and archetype in Christ, who "did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself . . . and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross."¹ Christ's "emptying" or "humbling" himself to become human—his Incarnation—and his Passion, set an example followed by the Christian saints. Monks saw themselves as part of this system: successors of the "desert fathers," who in their turn had been heirs to the martyrs and Old Testament prophets, particularly St. John the Baptist and Elijah. The iconography fostered by the system of organized religious life, therefore, took always as its fixed point of reference Christ, and the rhythm of humility and exaltation established by his birth, death, and resurrection. The works discussed here illustrate this phenomenon explicitly in the intact altarpieces, and in more elliptical ways, in the smaller works, which are fragmentary episodes of renunciation and penitence.

The method employed here to discuss such works of art might be called homiletic: an associative interpretation which "reads" a painting as the old monks read Scripture. This approach takes for granted the literary tradition with which artists and patrons would have been familiar: the whole body of sacred and monastic texts. St. Benedict's biographer, Pope St. Gregory the Great, likened this approach to a river, meandering to left and right of its bed as the lie of the land permits. "Thus should it be," he wrote, "with everyone who treats of the divine word, that if, in discussing any subject, he chance to find at hand an occasion of seasonable edification, he should as it were, force the streams of discourse towards the adjacent valley, and when he has poured enough upon its level of instruction, fall back into the channel of discourse which he had prepared for himself."²

Timothy Gregory Verdon, O.S.B.
St. Anselm's Abbey
Washington, D.C.

Gallery 2: Themes in Monastic Theology

The two works considered in this room were very likely painted for monastic patrons. Still medieval in character and style, they serve to introduce the world of ideas peculiar to monastic culture. Each may be considered a *summa* or compendium of monastic theology—that is, of how monks understood their way of life in relation to Scripture and tradition.

Explaining the meaning of works such as these is a little like breaking a code: the persons and events shown are separate words which must first be deciphered, and then arranged in groups to grasp the full message. In doing so, however, one should remember that in their original setting, over the altar of a chapel, these works would not have been analyzed, but meditated upon. What for the modern viewer is necessarily a schematic, rational process, for the fourteenth-century worshipper was probably more fluid: a gradual movement from hint to hint as he daily encountered the painting in a context of prayer. He would have sung psalms and listened to Scripture readings, heard sermons and participated at Mass in front of these altarpieces, and—inevitably, perhaps—the kinds of relationships suggested below would have crystallized in his imagination.



Agnolo Gaddi, Florentine, active 1369-1396
Madonna Enthroned with Saints and Angels, c. 1380/1390
 Andrew W. Mellon Collection (figure 1)

Works discussed in this booklet are indicated in the galleries by a symbol, the coat-of-arms of St. Anselm's Abbey



Mary is shown in majesty, that is, in the courtly late medieval fashion, as Queen of Heaven serenaded by angelic courtiers. Seated on a throne, and in turn providing a seat in her lap for the Christ Child, she represents the Seat of Wisdom (*Sedes sapientiae*) and the Church.

These elements take on a strong monastic coloration from the presence at Mary's right (viewer's left) of St. Benedict, displaying an open text of the *Rule for Monks*. At Mary's left is another monk, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the twelfth-century reformer who helped found the Cistercian branch of Benedictine monks. Both monk-saints wear the traditional *cuculla* or cowl, an enveloping garment with full, overlong sleeves. Since Benedict as well as Bernard wears not the more customary black cowl, but white, favored by the Cistercians, we may suppose that this work was painted for the altar of a Cistercian monastery.

Before considering the figures of Saints Ben comment on another element of this crowd Annunciation, in the upper pinnacles to Gabriel announces to Mary that she is to be words from God, is "overshadowed" by the upper zone thus illustrates the moment of C panel, he appears at about one year old.

For monks, this spelling out of the sequence bore Christ had particular significance. Spe compared Mary's womb to a *cloister*, in *w pudoris*.³ And Guerric of Igny, a disciple of St Christ: "Open to the Word of God," he exhorts the way to the womb of your heart for the Sp progression of ideas is simple: the monk, like prayer) to the word of God (in Scripture) and the monk's virtuous actions).



The key to this parallel is "an ear that will listen a main monastic theme, and provides the th altarpiece together. "Listen," is the first wor by St. Benedict: "Listen, my son, to your m your heart . . ." (*Ausculata o fili precepta magis* (figure 2). Listening was the posture of st thought of his monasteries as schools wher abbot, but through the abbot to Christ hims Christ's place in the monastery."⁶ Agnolo G ing St. Benedict displaying an open text. This in the center pinnacle (figure 3), and the vi Benedict's authority as a teacher derives from to abbots of monasteries: "he who hears you

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Before considering the figures of Saints Benedict and Bernard, it will be helpful to comment on another element of this crowded composition. That is the scene of the Annunciation, in the upper pinnacles to left and right of center. The Archangel Gabriel announces to Mary that she is to bear Christ, and Mary, listening to these words from God, is "overshadowed" by the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove. This upper zone thus illustrates the moment of Christ's conception; below, in the center panel, he appears at about one year old.

For monks, this spelling out of the sequence of events by which Mary conceived and bore Christ had particular significance. Speaking of this mystery, St. Leo the Great compared Mary's womb to a *cloister*, in which Christ dwelt for a time: *claustrum pudoris*.³ And Guerric of Igny, a disciple of St. Bernard, called monks the mothers of Christ: "Open to the Word of God," he exhorted them, "an ear that will listen. This is the way to the womb of your heart for the Spirit who brings about conception."⁴ The progression of ideas is simple: the monk, like Mary at the Annunciation, listens (in prayer) to the word of God (in Scripture) and gives life to the Word, i.e., to Christ (in the monk's virtuous actions).



The key to this parallel is "an ear that will listen." Listening: humble attentiveness, is a main monastic theme, and provides the thread which ties several elements of this altarpiece together. "Listen," is the first word of the *Rule* so prominently displayed by St. Benedict: "Listen, my son, to your master's precepts, and incline the ear of your heart . . ." (*Ausculta o fili precepta magistri [sic] et inclina aurem cordis tui . . .*)⁵ (figure 2). Listening was the posture of students, or disciples, and St. Benedict thought of his monasteries as schools where the monks listened not only to their abbot, but through the abbot to Christ himself, "for the Abbot is believed to act in Christ's place in the monastery."⁶ Agnolo Gaddi illustrates this hierarchy by showing St. Benedict displaying an open text. This pose echoes that of the figure of Christ in the center pinnacle (figure 3), and the viewer is meant to understand that St. Benedict's authority as a teacher derives from Christ. For, as the *Rule* has Christ say to abbots of monasteries: "he who hears you, hears Me."⁷



According to the *Rule*, the purpose of this listening is “to return to Him (God) from whom you had departed by the sloth of disobedience.”⁸ The way of return is Christ (the open text Christ bears, in the pinnacle over the central panel, includes the words, “I am the way . . .”). At this point the outermost figures at left and right of the altarpiece enter the program: they are Saints Andrew and Catherine of Alexandria, both martyrs. St. Andrew carries a cross, and we are reminded that Christ’s way and that of his followers is the way of the cross (“If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him take up his cross . . .”⁹); Saints Andrew and Catherine, as martyrs, were among the first to follow Christ by laying down their lives. When Christianity ceased to be a persecuted sect and became the state religion, monastic life replaced martyrdom as the ultimate expression of religious commitment, and monks came to be seen as living martyrs. This tradition is reflected in the compositional scheme of Agnolo Gaddi’s altarpiece, which places the monks Benedict and Bernard side by side with the martyrs Andrew and Catherine.

It might be said that the principal subject of this altarpiece is not Christ’s suffering and death, but his birth and infancy. In fact, the tradition saw both events as part of the same process. St. Leo the Great expressed this concisely: “the sole purpose of God’s son in being born was to make the crucifixion possible. For in the Virgin’s womb he assumed mortal flesh, and in this mortal flesh the unfolding of his passion was accomplished.”¹⁰ The connection would have been clearer in the original position of this painting over an altar, for the Mass commemorates Christ’s suffering and death and, in traditional belief, makes his body and blood really present in the bread and wine. To ponder such ideas before images of the conception and infancy of Christ is, in effect, to imply something momentous: what St. Leo goes on to call “a plan too deep for words: Christ’s humanity became for us . . . the first fruits of resurrection to eternal life.”¹¹

The overall meaning of Agnolo Gaddi’s altarpiece might be read, then, as follows: St. Benedict’s *Rule* (first panel on left of center), its authority derived from Christ’s Gospel (central pinnacle), teaches monks how to listen as Mary did (Annunciation scene, left and right pinnacles). The result of this prayerful listening is the monk’s ability to conceive and bring forth Christ (central panel) in his own life, patterning his attitude on the humility of Christ and of the martyrs, who “accepted even death, death on a cross” (the martyr-saints in the outer panels and the symbolism of the Mass taking place beneath the painting). *altar*



Master of the Fabriano Altarpiece and Allegretto Nuzi
1345-1373
Madonna Enthroned with Saints, 1354
Andrew W. Mellon Collection (figure 4)

Immediately next to Agnolo Gaddi’s painting work, attributed to two artists of the preceding generation, the same broad theological themes as the latter. Here the side figures are reduced in number and size, clearly reflecting St. Leo’s belief that “the sole purpose was to make the crucifixion possible.”

The monk represented in the panel at the top (251-356), called St. Anthony Abbot, the master of the monastic movement. He is recognized by coming to his great age, and a small black pig which is the saint’s mastery over vices of the flesh. Another panel in this altarpiece, on a smaller scale, to the right of the throne stands St. Benedict, robed in the traditional habit here rather than Cistercian white.

A word should be said about monastic clothing in the habit of an eleventh-century Antonine. The custom of distinctive garb is going back to Anthony’s own day and ultimately to the apostles, wearing a hair cloak . . . and a leather loincloth. The Christian significance of the religious habit is “be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness . . . (and) over all these . . . put on love.”

In a sociological perspective, the religious habit is the sign of a commitment to service. Indeed, the monk’s life with metaphors borrowed from the Bible explicitly addressed his *Rule* “to you . . . will take up arms for Christ the true King, girding himself with the sword of obedience.”¹⁵ The other saint in this altarpiece, in the mid-third century, is represented as a martyr and soldier like that between monk and

Gallery 3: The Life of Saint Anthony of Egypt

These four small panels are from a dismantled altarpiece by the Sieneese artist Sassetta. The subjects are drawn from a *Life of Anthony* written shortly after the saint's death, which became a spiritual classic, read and imitated from antiquity through the Renaissance.

The author, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, had known Anthony personally; in writing about him, however, Athanasius was less interested in factual details than in the larger significance of Anthony's way of life. The *Vita Antonii* is thus an enthusiastic presentation of the highest ideals of ancient monastic life, told in a style that has much about it of legend or, perhaps better, of parable. Sassetta's depictions capture these qualities, combining St. Athanasius' grave teaching intent with the freshness and charm of a fable.



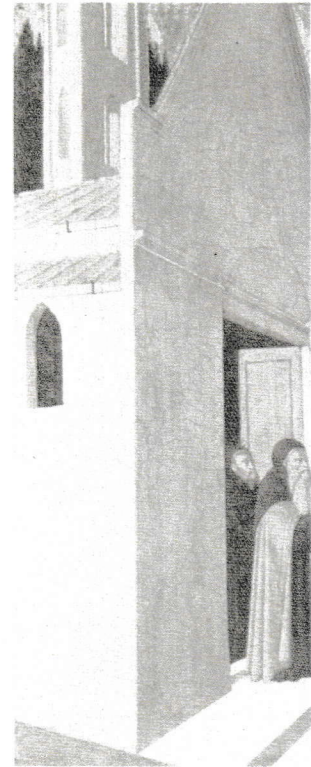
Sassetta and Assistant, Sieneese, active 1423-1450
St. Anthony Distributing his Wealth to the Poor, c.1440
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 5)

The first panel shows the young St. Anthony distributing his family fortune to the poor, the lame, and the blind. The historical background of this event, which happened about A.D. 271, is worth repeating, for it makes clear what monastic listening consists of.

One day while attending Mass, Anthony heard Christ's words to the rich young man in St. Matthew's Gospel, "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."¹⁶ Struck by this passage, and taking it as addressed to him personally, St. Anthony set about stripping himself of the fortune left him by his parents.

Sassetta painted this scene in front of the *palazzo* or town house of a contemporary Sieneese merchant and gave Anthony the colorful costume of an early fifteenth-century aristocrat. Such up-to-date references are reminders of similar acts of renunciation famous in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. The best-known medieval example was St. Francis of Assisi who renounced his father's wealth to become the poor man of God. But nearer in time and place to Sassetta was St. Giovanni Columbini, a fourteenth-century merchant of Siena who, after reading a

life of the penitent hermit, St. Mary of Egypt. Like St. Anthony, Columbini gave his wealth to religious brothers called the Gesuati.



Sassetta and Assistant, Sieneese, active 1423-1450
St. Anthony Leaving His Monastery, c.1440
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 6)

The second panel shows a later moment in the life of the saint, as he sets out from the monastery. The depiction suggests all the allure of that hidden life, strong walls. The juxtaposition of figures is monks, both still sheltered by the monastery's staff in hand, turning to receive a final blessing from him, and blank door beyond, suggest their departure and their finality.

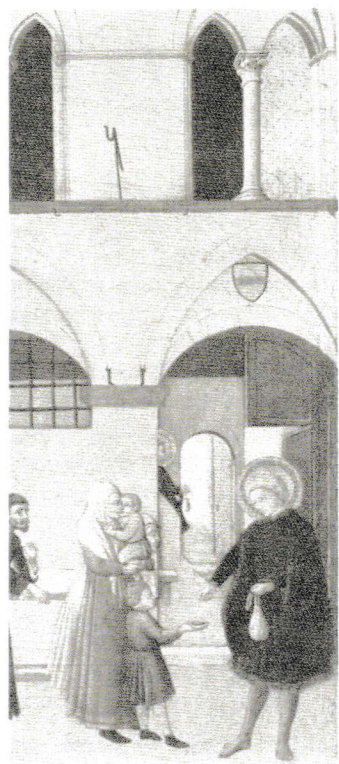
Sassetta's physical setting of this scene is a well-known one; there were no monasteries when St. Athanasius, however, there were holy men, in Alexandria, and it was first to one, then to another, to learn the spiritual art. Athanasius says that St. Anthony left to search for the spiritual art anywhere, like a wise bee he left to search for the spiritual art wherever he received from him, as it were, provisions for the spiritual life.

St. Anthony's departure from his first monastery was a point in the early development of monastic life, the perseverance in the solitary life, who drew from the Egyptian desert as hermits. Tradition describes him as eremitical or anchoritic—from community (from the Greek meaning "common": i.e. Benedict states what, in the West, came between the two. Writing to cenobites, Benedict said "those who . . . after long probation in the monastery many brethren how to fight against the devil, the community to the solitary combat of the devil, to save from God, to fight single-handed against evil thoughts."¹⁸

Life of Saint Anthony

dismantled altarpiece by the Sieneese artist in a *Life of Anthony* written shortly after the usual classic, read and imitated from antiquity

andria, had known Anthony personally; in fact he was less interested in factual details than in the ideal way of life. The *Vita Antonii* is thus an ennobling ideal of ancient monastic life, told in a style perhaps better, of parable. Sassetta's depictions of St. Anthony teaching intent with the



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life of the penitent hermit, St. Mary of Egypt, underwent a profound conversion. Like St. Anthony, Columbini gave his wealth to the poor; later he founded an order of religious brothers called the Gesuati.



Sassetta and Assistant, Sieneese, active 1423-1450
St. Anthony Leaving His Monastery, c.1440
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 6)

The second panel shows a later moment in the story. Anthony has spent some time with holy men near his home, but now decides to pursue a more solitary life. We see him here as he sets out from the monastery to seek God in the desert. Sassetta's depiction suggests all the allure of that hidden world, its shaded garden enclosed by strong walls. The juxtaposition of figures is eloquent: the aged abbot and one of his monks, both still sheltered by the monastery, and Anthony, already outside, wayfarer's staff in hand, turning to receive a final blessing. The empty space between them, and blank door beyond, suggest the human void left by such separations, and their finality.

Sassetta's physical setting of this scene is a charming anachronism. As far as can be known, there were no monasteries when St. Anthony was young. According to Athanasius, however, there were holy men, living singly outside the towns south of Alexandria, and it was first to one, then to another of these that Anthony went to learn the spiritual art. Athanasius says that "if [Anthony] heard of a zealous soul anywhere, like a wise bee he left to search him out . . . and only when he had received from him, as it were, provisions for his journey to virtue, did he go back."¹⁷

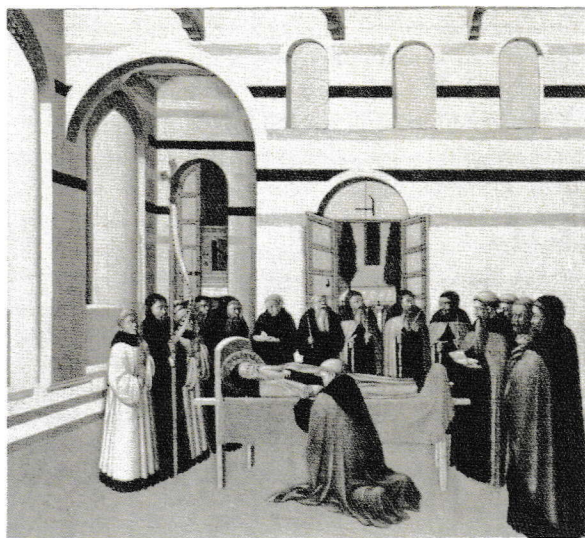
St. Anthony's departure from his first masters in the spiritual life marked a crucial point in the early development of monasticism. It was to be Anthony, by his perseverance in the solitary life, who drew hundreds and eventually thousands into the Egyptian desert as hermits. Tradition distinguishes this form of monastic life—eremical or anchoritic—from community living, called cenobitic monasticism (from the Greek meaning "common": i.e., life in common) and the *Rule* of St. Benedict states what, in the West, came to be understood as the relationship between the two. Writing to cenobites, Benedict cautioned that true hermits are only "those who . . . after long probation in the monastery, having learned by the help of many brethren how to fight against the devil, go out well armed from the ranks of the community to the solitary combat of the desert. They are now able, with no help save from God, to fight single-handed against the vices of the flesh and their own evil thoughts."¹⁸



Sassetta and Assistant, Sienese, active 1423-1450
The Meeting of St. Anthony and St. Paul, c.1440
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 7)

One temptation remained: spiritual pride. When ninety years old, Anthony began to think that he had excelled all other monks in austerities and perseverance. But God revealed to him in a vision that a man named Paul, in the desert beyond Thebes, had been a hermit longer than Anthony. Setting out to find Paul the Hermit, St. Anthony encountered various pagan spirits of the desert, including a centaur. In this panel Sassetta illustrated the beginning of Anthony's quest, the episode with the centaur, and, at last, the moving encounter between the two holy men.

Anthony remained with Paul the Hermit until the latter's death. In their desert retreat, the two monks were fed by a raven, who brought them a loaf daily. St. Jerome, who tells this story in his *Life of St. Paul the Hermit*, has Paul exclaim to Anthony: "God has sent us our dinner, God truly good, truly merciful. For sixty years now I have received a piece of bread every noon. Today, in honor of your arrival, Christ has doubled the rations of his soldiers."¹⁹



Sassetta and Assistant, Sienese, active 1423-1450
The Death of St. Anthony, c.1440
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 8)

The absolute solitude which St. Anthony first time of his death about 356 he had attracted series by Sassetta shows the saint's body mo again that of fifteenth-century Siena: the ci vistas into sacristy and cloister, and a liturgi

The funeral service depicted by Sassetta was in common by monks, which in their entire "work of God." For fourth-century monks, a present, the *opus Dei* consisted chiefly of gro of day and night, with readings from other b suggest the social character of this kind of temperaments united in the effort to channe shared faith. Looking closely at the monks' ge begins to see that tonsure and a uniform individual traits, bring them more clearly in

Later ages enriched the simple monastic litur music—the Gregorian chant which, to this and with splendid vestments and liturgical v these, the *Chalice of Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis*: The chalice, an ancient sardonyx cup mount worked setting, provides a visual link betwee Greco-Roman antiquity, which saw the birth Middle Ages, which saw its flowering. The cl tion Mass for the new apse in the abbey chu Abbot of the Benedictine community at St- keen personal love of beauty and saw in obje reflection of the God whom St. Augustine ca



French, c. 1140
Chalice of Abbot Suger of St.-Denis
 Widener Collection (figure 9)



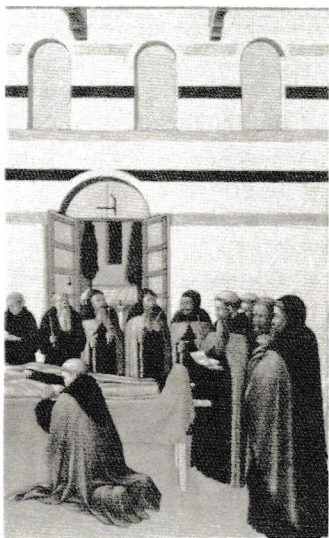
The absolute solitude which St. Anthony first sought was never attained, for by the time of his death about 356 he had attracted many disciples. The last panel in this series by Sassetta shows the saint's body mourned by his followers. The setting is again that of fifteenth-century Siena: the crossing of a great abbey church, with vistas into sacristy and cloister, and a liturgical ceremony in process.

The funeral service depicted by Sassetta was one of many liturgical rites performed in common by monks, which in their entirety St. Benedict called the *opus Dei*, or "work of God." For fourth-century monks, as later for St. Benedict and down to the present, the *opus Dei* consisted chiefly of group recitation of the Psalms at set times of day and night, with readings from other books of scripture. Sassetta managed to suggest the social character of this kind of communal ritual: different ages and temperaments united in the effort to channel individual piety into an expression of shared faith. Looking closely at the monks' gestures and facial expressions here, one begins to see that tonsure and a uniform religious habit, far from submerging individual traits, bring them more clearly into focus.

Later ages enriched the simple monastic liturgy of the early centuries with elaborate music—the Gregorian chant which, to this day, is associated with monasteries—and with splendid vestments and liturgical vessels. One of the most magnificent of these, the *Chalice of Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis* (figure 9), may be seen in Gallery 38. The chalice, an ancient sardonyx cup mounted by medieval goldsmiths in a richly worked setting, provides a visual link between two of the great ages of monasticism: Greco-Roman antiquity, which saw the birth of Christian monastic life, and the high Middle Ages, which saw its flowering. The chalice is recorded in use at the consecration Mass for the new apse in the abbey church of St.-Denis, June 11, 1144. Suger, Abbot of the Benedictine community at St.-Denis for nearly three decades, had a keen personal love of beauty and saw in objects like the National Gallery's chalice a reflection of the God whom St. Augustine called "Beauty, ever ancient, ever new."

pride. When ninety years old, Anthony
other monks in austerities and perseverance.
at a man named Paul, in the desert beyond
Anthony. Setting out to find Paul the Hermit,
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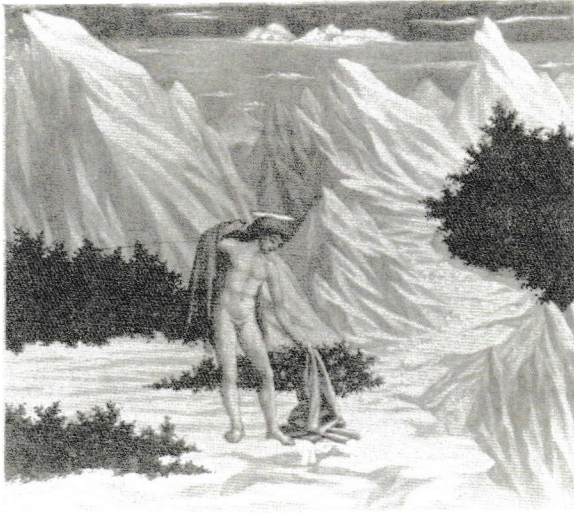
ermit until the latter's death. In their desert
a raven, who brought them a loaf daily. St.
e of St. Paul the Hermit, has Paul exclaim to
er, God truly good, truly merciful. For sixty
bread every noon. Today, in honor of your
s of his soldiers."¹⁹



French, c. 1140
Chalice of Abbot Suger of St.-Denis
Widener Collection (figure 9)

Gallery 4: *Fuga Mundi*

The paintings discussed in Gallery 4 all emerge from organized religious life—not only from what may be strictly defined as monastic life, but from Franciscan and lay-confraternity settings also. Together they illustrate the phenomenon observed in the life of St. Anthony Abbot: voluntary separation from society in order to pursue spiritual objectives. This separation the ancient and medieval writers called *fuga mundi*: “flight from the world.”



Domenico Veneziano, Florentine, active 1438-1461
St. John in the Desert, c.1445
Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 10)

The first is a predella panel by Domenico Veneziano which shows St. John the Baptist putting off his worldly garb with one hand, while with the other he dons the camel-hair garment which the New Testament describes him wearing. It is the moment when, according to popular legend, the still young saint left his parents to seek God in the wilderness.

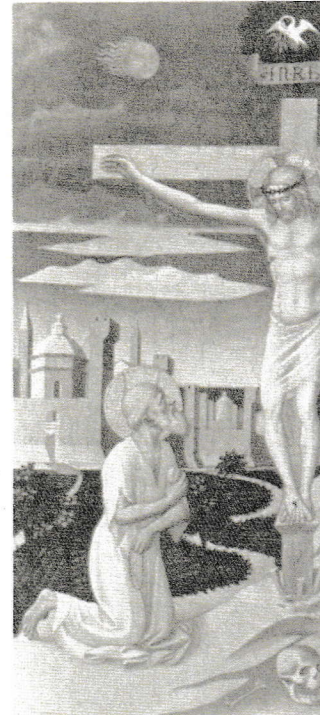
Ancient tradition made St. John the Baptist one of the chief patrons of monks. The author of a Syriac text of the *Lives of the Fathers* wrote that “the first to dwell in the desert were St. Elijah the prophet and St. John the Baptist . . . [who] was proclaimed in the womb to be a prophet before he was born.”²⁰ It was as prophet, even more than as desert-dweller, that John the Baptist was important for monks. St. John’s life apart from society gave him insight to recognize Christ and courage to proclaim him: “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world.” Monks were expected to do the same: to cry out (in words which seem to describe this painting): “Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley will be filled in, every mountain and hill be laid low, winding ways will be straightened, and rough roads made smooth. And all mankind shall see the salvation of God.”²¹

Particularly important to the meaning of Domenico Veneziano’s panel is the background. The cool, jagged facets of rock, result of some ancient convulsion of the earth, contrast sharply with the rounded forms of St. John’s body and the pensive expression of his face. We are reminded that in Scripture the desert can mean quite different things. On the one hand, it is a “vast and dreadful wilderness . . . where your God led you . . . to test you and know your inmost heart . . . training you as a man trains his child.”²² But the desert can also be a trysting place; God says of his beloved people of Israel, “I am going to lure her and lead her out into the wilderness, and speak to her heart.”²³

Domenico Veneziano’s *St. John the Baptist* suggests both these themes. The fine adolescent nude evokes the metaphor of physical training which St. Paul and the Church Fathers applied to Christian asceticism, thinking of its practitioners as “athletes of Christ,” and at the same time recalls late antique Eros figures. Fifteenth-century Florentines seem to have been fascinated by the element of paradox in this youthful St. John type: the contradiction of a boy in the bloom of

health taking up the prophet’s cry: “All flesh is grass, and the flower of the grass withers, the flower of the world is as the flower of the grass, but the word of the Lord abides forever.”²⁴

This panel was part of an altarpiece painted and distributed among several museums. The Na predella panels of this ensemble, *St. Francis* room, several feet to the viewer’s left of *St. John*, the life of St. Francis paired with John’s flight from the world. St. Francis, the preacher or worker of miracles, but the next to the central Italy, received the imprint of Christ’s stigmata. This altarpiece situated St. Francis next to St. John, intended to incorporate Francis into the ancient



Francesco Pesellino, Florentine, c. 1422-1457
Crucifixion with St. Jerome and St. Francis, c. 1440/1445
Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 11)

Pesellino depicted an imagined moment centuries enter into physical and psychological space. The fourth person involved as well: the viewer is intended as aids to meditation. Pesellino, who followed Fra Angelico, reduced the elements of the scene to an economical minimum. In the context of religious art, summed up in the words St. Benedict used to describe the calling: that they may “by patience share in the kingdom of God.”²⁵ St. Jerome and St. Francis, in this attitude, the one beating his breast in prayer, the other in communion with the crucified Christ, who received the stigmata. Again, St. Francis is portrayed as the fifth-century monk, St. Jerome.

Various details develop the panel’s message. The skull and bones beneath refer to the belief that Adam’s burial. (To religious viewers, this was a warning of the ego, of the egotistic self.) Finally, the eclipse which the New Testament says

Of particular importance for the meaning of the panel is the juxtaposition of desert and city, ideal and actual. In the early monastic literature, the *Life of Anthony*, or Rome, in St. Jerome’s writing

Mundi

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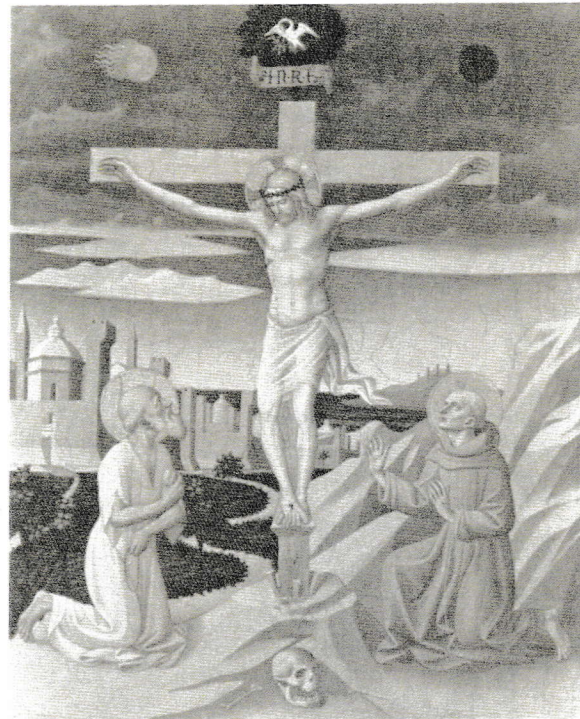
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health taking up the prophet's cry: "All flesh is grass, and its beauty like the wild flower's . . . the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God endures forever."²⁴

This panel was part of an altarpiece painted for a Florentine church and today distributed among several museums. The National Gallery possesses another of the predella panels of this ensemble, *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, hanging in this room, several feet to the viewer's left of *St. John*. It is noteworthy that the event in the life of St. Francis paired with John's flight from the world did not show Francis the preacher or worker of miracles, but the mystic who, in his retreat at La Verna, in central Italy, received the imprint of Christ's nail wounds. The large, principal panel of this altarpiece situated St. Francis next to St. John the Baptist, and clearly was intended to incorporate Francis into the ancient ascetic tradition.



Francesco Pesellino, Florentine, c. 1422-1457
Crucifixion with St. Jerome and St. Francis, c. 1440/1445
Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 11)

Pesellino depicted an imagined moment in which three people from different centuries enter into physical and psychological relation with one another. There is a fourth person involved as well: the viewer; for such mystical paintings were intended as aids to meditation. Pesellino, who was influenced by the Dominican artist Fra Angelico, reduced the elements of this composition to a symmetrical and economical minimum. In the context of religious life, the panel's message might be summed up in the words St. Benedict used to explain why monks persevere in their calling: that they may "by patience share in the sufferings of Christ, and so deserve a share also in his kingdom."²⁵ St. Jerome and St. Francis here provide examples of this attitude, the one beating his breast with a stone, the other rapt in mystical communion with the crucified Christ, whose wounds he experiences through the stigmata. Again, St. Francis is portrayed as heir of an older tradition, represented by the fifth-century monk, St. Jerome.

Various details develop the panel's message: a pelican nesting above the cross symbolizes sacrifice—it was believed to feed its young with its own flesh—and the skull and bones beneath refer to the belief that Christ was crucified on the site of Adam's burial. (To religious viewers, this would have suggested the death of the old Adam, i.e., of the egotistic self.) Finally, the double representation of the sun depicts the eclipse which the New Testament says occurred at Christ's death.

Of particular importance for the meaning of this *Crucifixion* is its setting just outside a city. The juxtaposition of desert and city illustrates a relationship at once symbolic and actual. In the early monastic literature, the city—whether Alexandria, in the *Life of Anthony*, or Rome, in St. Jerome's writings and in Gregory the Great's life of St.

Benedict—comes to be associated generally with worldliness. It is understood as hostile to the monastic ideal: a busy place whose cares and pleasures may deflect the monk from his singleminded purpose. From this arises in the early literature an equation of withdrawal into the desert with a flight from the world, i.e., from the city. Psalm 55 contains an Old Testament expression of this *fuga mundi* theme: “O for the wings of a dove to fly away and find rest. How far I would take my flight, and make a new home in the desert! . . . I can see how Violence and Discord fill the city; day and night they stalk together along the city walls.”²⁶

Pesellino’s city is in fact a generalized view of Florence, and this topical reference is also significant. In the outlying quarters and immediate environs of Florence there were dozens of hermitages and small cloistered communities whose presence was part of the urban consciousness of city dwellers. To this day, in the short distance from Florence to Fiesole, the traveler passes a Benedictine abbey and Dominican, Franciscan, and Jeronymite monasteries, each of which was rebuilt or remodeled in the fifteenth century. The Renaissance, with its interest in ideal cities, was acutely aware of this parallel life behind cloister walls: a life with its own rhythms, customs, laws and values. In socio-urbanistic terms, one may say that organized religious communities in the Middle Ages and Renaissance constituted the city of God within and alongside the earthly city. And in the center of those ideal cities, as in Pesellino’s composition, stood the cross with its invitation to self-transcendence.



Jacopo del Sellaio, Florentine, 1441/42-1493
St. John the Baptist, c. 1480
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 12)

St. John the Baptist is shown in a secluded spot, not far from a city. He holds his traditional attribute, a cross-staff with banderole bearing the inscription *Ecce agnus Dei, ecce qui tollit peccata mundi*, “Look, there is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (only partially visible here).²⁷ These words, with which St. John identified Christ, identify the Baptist in turn as a prophet of Christ’s death (“Lamb of God”). The axe embedded in the tree stump at the lower left refers to the need for repentance: “even now” John said, “the axe is laid to the roots of the trees, so that any tree which fails to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire.”²⁹ Above the axe, a slender Christ emerges from between the trees; and at St. John’s feet lies the bowl with which he will baptise Christ. The two goldfinches in the painting connote Christ’s Passion (they were believed to eat thorns, which was taken as an allusion to the crown of thorns).

In the background Jacopo del Sellaio has given a detailed skyline view of late fifteenth-century Florence, seen from Oltrarno, the quarter across the Arno River from the center of the city. The bridge in the upper center of the composition is the Rubaconte, also called Ponte alle Grazie. In the fifteenth century this bridge bore a chapel and several small structures used as cells for recluses: urban hermits whose life of penance contrasted with the bustling commercial activity of the bridge.

The most important contemporary reference to the boy St. John the Baptist. St. John as a boy or younger adolescent is prominent. Recent Florentines gave increasing attention to the boy. Recent scholarship²⁹ has shown that this effect—were created to provide an environment for the morally dangerous atmosphere of the street, the adult counterparts, met periodically in monastic prayer services modeled on the communal life of the boys also staged religious dramas and took part in the life of the time.

The object of these activities, in addition to the recreation for the young, was to exert a wholesome influence upon their families and, ultimately, on society. In a panel was painted, the Dominican reformer Serapione was on a campaign to the youth of Florence exhorting them to follow the prophets, and saviors of the city.



Fra Filippo Lippi, Florentine, c. 1406-1469
St. Benedict Orders St. Maurus to the Rescue of St. Placidus,
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 13)

St. Benedict fled Rome while still young to the country around Subiaco. Pope St. Gregory III's influence spread over the surrounding country. . . . came to visit the saint, and left their sons in the monastery. One day, one of these boys, Placidus, fell into the sea. Benedict saw this in a vision and hurriedly sent Maurus to the rescue. Maurus hurriedly came to the shore and saved Placidus. “What followed was the time of Peter the Apostle! Maurus was on dry land. It was only when he set foot on the sea and realized that he had been running on the sand that he was saved.”

This illustration of the episode recounted by the monk and lay brother, Fra Filippo Lippi. It belonged to the collection of the Benedictines of Monte Oliveto, who wear the habit of the Virgin Mary. Filippo painted for a Florentine convent of nuns. The deeper meaning of the story would have been lost on the nuns, and as painted by Lippi, it is a parable expressing the virtue of life, in which a monk helps save his brother. This scene should be viewed in light of the Rule on obedience: “This is the virtue of those who are ordered by the superior, receive it as a Divine commandment in executing it. Of these the Lord says, ‘As you hear the voice of the Lord again, to teachers he says, ‘He who hears your voice immediately leaving their own affairs and following the voice of the Lord.’”

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The most important contemporary reference in this painting is its principal subject, the boy St. John the Baptist. St. John was the patron of Florence, and that fact explains his placement against a backdrop of the city. But Jacopo's representation of St. John as a boy or younger adolescent is particularly significant. From the 1430s onward, Florentines gave increasing attention to the religious education of boys. Recent scholarship²⁹ has shown that confraternities of boys—boys' clubs, in effect—were created to provide an environment segregated from what was seen as the morally dangerous atmosphere of the streets. These confraternities, like their adult counterparts, met periodically in monasteries and other religious houses for prayer services modeled on the communal rituals of monastic communities. The boys also staged religious dramas and took part in the civic and religious processions of the time.

The object of these activities, in addition to providing religious formation and recreation for the young, was to exert a wholesome moral influence through the boys upon their families and, ultimately, on society at large. A decade or so after this panel was painted, the Dominican reformer Savonarola devoted a special preaching campaign to the youth of Florence exhorting them to be the exemplars of innocence, prophets, and saviors of the city.



Fra Filippo Lippi, Florentine, c. 1406-1469
St. Benedict Orders St. Maurus to the Rescue of St. Placidus, c. 1445
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 13)

St. Benedict fled Rome while still young to seek God in solitude, in the wild hill country around Subiaco. Pope St. Gregory the Great says that "as Benedict's influence spread over the surrounding countryside . . . pious noblemen from Rome . . . came to visit the saint, and left their sons to be schooled in the service of God."³⁰ One day, one of these boys, Placidus, fell into the lake while fetching water. Still in the monastery, Benedict saw this in a vision, and called an older boy, Maurus, to hurry and save Placidus. "What followed was remarkable indeed, and unheard of since the time of Peter the Apostle! Maurus asked for the blessing, and on receiving it hurried out to fulfill his abbot's command. He kept on running even over the water till he reached the place where Placidus was drifting along helplessly. Pulling him up by the hair, Maurus rushed back to shore, still under the impression that he was on dry land. It was only when he set foot on the ground that he came to himself and realized that he had been running on the surface of the water. . . ."³¹

This illustration of the episode recounted by St. Gregory was painted by a Carmelite lay brother, Fra Filippo Lippi. It belonged either to an altarpiece done for the Benedictines of Monte Oliveto, who wear white, or perhaps to one which Fra Filippo painted for a Florentine convent of nuns, the Murate. In either environment, the deeper meaning of the story would have been clear: both as told by St. Gregory and as painted by Lippi, it is a parable expressing St. Benedict's ideal of communal life, in which a monk helps save his brother through service in the obedience of faith. This scene should be viewed in light of St. Benedict's beautiful passage in the *Rule* on obedience: "This is the virtue of those who . . . as soon as anything has been ordered by the superior, receive it as a Divine command, and cannot suffer any delay in executing it. Of these the Lord says, 'As soon as he heard me, he obeyed me.' And again, to teachers he says, 'He who hears you, hears me.' Such as these therefore, immediately leaving their own affairs and forsaking their own will, dropping the

work they were engaged in and leaving it unfinished, with the ready step of obedience follow up with their deeds the voice of him who commands. . . ."³²

Although himself a renegade from the cloister, Fra Filippo Lippi understood this story from within. The way he set off Benedict and Maurus in a vivid pink arcade, makes of them a visual epitome of monastic life: each in his place, separate from one another yet united by a gaze that bespeaks the bond of deep faith. The elder—in the posture of a teacher, of one who transmits the wisdom of a tradition—blesses (the name "Benedict" derives from the word "to bless": *benedicere*). The younger strains forward, listening, his whole being animated by trust. We are put in mind again of the opening line of the *Rule*, "Listen, my son, to your master's precepts, and incline the ear of your heart. . . ." Nor is this merely a private spiritual experience; what Brother Filippo showed us represents a social ideal: community living grounded in fraternal trust and service.

Seen in this light, the Renaissance interest in monastic history has something in common with humanist dreams of utopias and ideal cities, and flight from the world may be understood as a functional prerequisite to building a better world: an abiding city where human relationships are transformed from within.

Galleries 8, 17, and 18: Penitence and Purity of Heart

The four works studied in these rooms are products of the late fifteenth-century penitential climate in Florence. Like Jacopo del Sellaio's *St. John the Baptist*, they emphasize innocence as an ideal value: the natural innocence of the child and the recaptured innocence that comes with contrition for past sins—what the ancients called *puritas cordis*, purity of heart.



Pietro Perugino, Umbrian, c. 1445-1523
St. Jerome in the Wilderness, c. 1481/1482
Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 14)

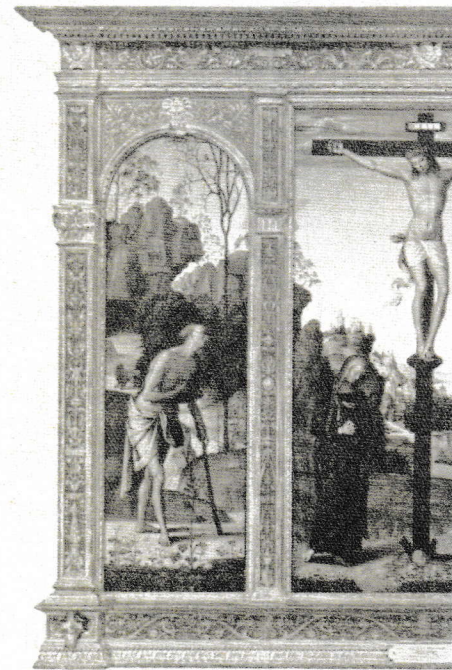
Speaking of the temptations which assailed him even in the desert, St. Jerome said that "daily I wept, daily I groaned . . . and did not cease beating my breast until peace of mind returned with the Lord's rebuke."³³ Next to St. Jerome in this panel

reclines a lion from whose paw—according to legend, the saint had been miraculously associated with Jerome—the saint had been framed by overhanging rock. The infant St. John the Baptist (with the cross)

The key to this scene is the implied parallel between the two children. According to legend, St. John the Baptist was born in the desert where he met the infant Jesus, whom Mary and Joseph brought there. The two children played together: the one who would be the other who, as a grown man, would forgo the world for martyrdom. The late fifteenth-century imagery emphasizes the sentimental aspects of this tale: the poignant contrast between the two pending doom. Many turn-of-the-century artists painted them together, including works by Raphael Sanzio's *Alba Madonna* (on the next wall, to the right of the altar) and others of the theme.

The point of linking this children's meeting with the crucifixion is in saying, "Unless you change and become like the children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."³⁴ But how does an adult become like a child? St. Ambrose, in a treatise "On Flight from the World," says, "To be with Christ . . . [and] it is no longer our own life, but His. . . . Innocence, a life of chastity, a life of simplicity, a life of poverty, here, by his physical penance for past sins, has been recaptured. . . . share in Christ's "life of innocence, . . . chastity, and poverty."

Perugino's small devotional panel should be read in the context of the practice: through a life of penance in the desert, the infant St. John the Baptist, meets Christ in the recaptured innocence of the crucifixion.



Pietro Perugino, Umbrian, c. 1445-1523
Crucifixion with the Virgin, St. John, St. Jerome and St. Mary Magdalene, c. 1481/1482
Andrew W. Mellon Collection (figure 15)

Probably painted for the Dominican church at Arezzo, the panel is as much a crucifixion as a visual meditation on the life of the Virgin. In the side panels, gazing upon the cross with the Virgin and St. Mary Magdalene.

This painting might be read along with the words of St. Jerome: "Let our gaze on the blood of Christ . . . [which] has been shed for the whole human race."³⁶ Jerome and Mary Magdalene, gazing on the cross, were both penitent saints who had a personal sense of sinfulness and of the physical suffering caused in him. And St. Mary Magdalene, w

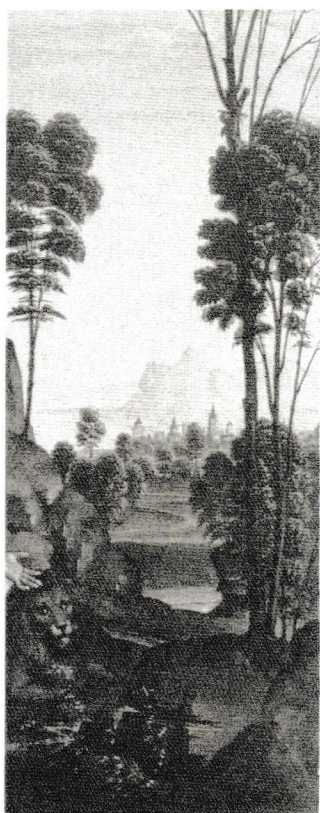
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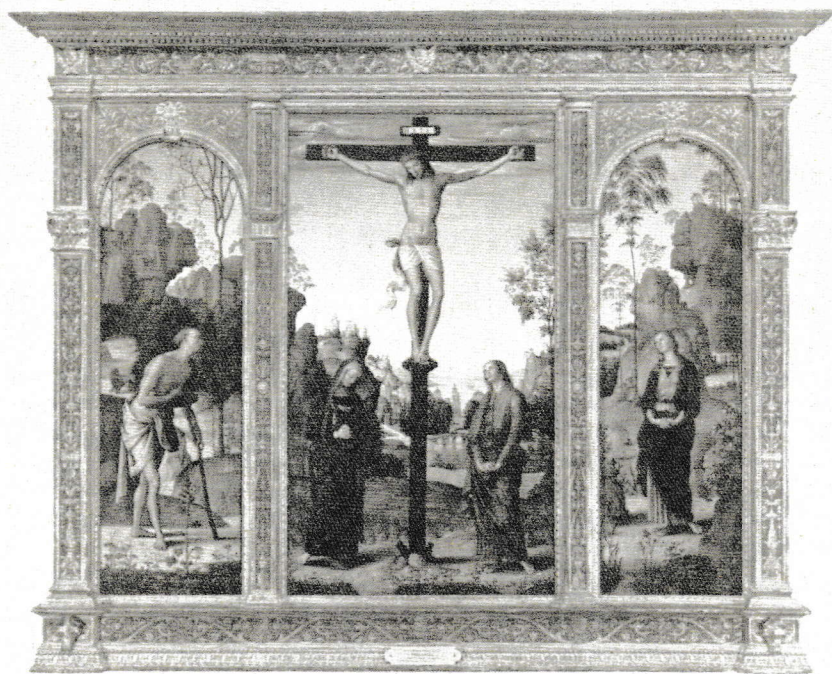
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reclines a lion from whose paw—according to the legend erroneously but tenaci- ously associated with Jerome—the saint had extracted a painful thorn. On the left, beyond Jerome and framed by overhanging boulders, two children meet and touch: the infant St. John the Baptist (with the cross-staff) and the Christ Child.

The key to this scene is the implied parallel between St. Jerome and the children. According to legend, St. John the Baptist went out into the desert as an infant, and there met the infant Jesus, whom Mary and Joseph were bringing back from Egypt. The two children played together: the one who, as a grown man, would be crucified; the other who, as a grown man, would foretell that death and himself undergo martyrdom. The late fifteenth-century imagination responded to the heroic and sentimental aspects of this tale: the poignance of children's innocence before impending doom. Many turn-of-the-century devotional images bring the children together, including works by Raphael Sanzio, Perugino's famous pupil. Raphael's *Alba Madonna* (on the next wall, to the right of this panel) is a distinguished example of the theme.

The point of linking this children's meeting with St. Jerome is expressed by Christ's saying, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."³⁴ But how does an adult regain the innocence of childhood? St. Ambrose, in a treatise "On Flight from the World," gives the answer: "We died with Christ . . . [and] it is no longer our own life that we live, but Christ's life, a life of innocence, a life of chastity, a life of simplicity, a life of every virtue."³⁵ St. Jerome here, by his physical penance for past sins, has "died with Christ," and so also has a share in Christ's "life of innocence, . . . chastity, etc."

Perugino's small devotional panel should thus be read as a statement of ascetic practice: through a life of penance in the desert, the monk (Jerome) like St. John the Baptist, meets Christ in the recaptured innocence of spiritual childhood.



Pietro Perugino, Umbrian, c. 1445-1523
Crucifixion with the Virgin, St. John, St. Jerome and St. Mary Magdalene, c. 1485
Andrew W. Mellon Collection (figure 15)

Probably painted for the Dominican church at S. Gimignano, this altarpiece is not so much a crucifixion as a visual meditation on that event, set in a peaceful landscape. In the side panels, gazing upon the cross with deep devotion, are St. Jerome and St. Mary Magdalene.

This painting might be read along with the words of Pope St. Clement I: "Let us fix our gaze on the blood of Christ . . . [which] has won the grace of repentance for the whole human race."³⁶ Jerome and Mary Magdalene, who in this painting "fix their gaze" on the cross, were both penitent saints. Jerome's letters speak at length of his personal sense of sinfulness and of the physical and psychological anguish this caused in him. And St. Mary Magdalene, whom the New Testament says Christ

freed from “seven demons,” has traditionally been seen as a prototype of the converted sinner. She washed Christ’s feet with her tears, and in later years became a hermit—at least according to the legend—just as centuries later Jerome was, for a time, a hermit.

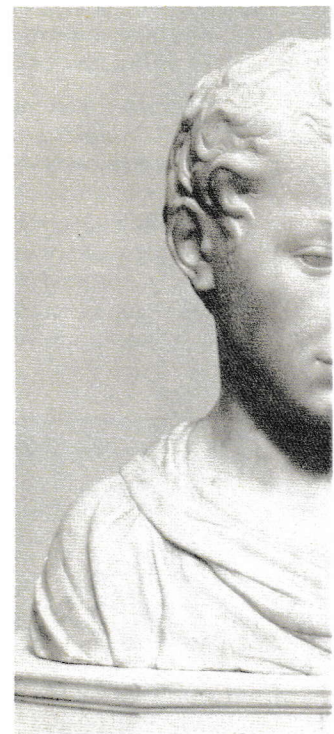
Perugino’s altarpiece for the Dominicans was thus meant to underline the penitential character of religious life. More than that, it illustrated a particularly monastic form of prayer: according to St. Benedict “it is not in saying a great deal that we shall be heard, but in purity of heart and in tears of compunction.”³⁷ John Cassian, the monk on whose early fifth-century writings St. Benedict drew extensively, made this clearer: “Our immediate aim is purity of heart . . . it is impossible for man . . . to be united with [God] inseparably in contemplation, but it behooves us to know . . . what the gaze of our mind should seek . . . it is whoredom to depart for only a moment from looking at Christ.”³⁸ What Perugino tried to paint, therefore, is contemplative prayer: Jerome and Mary Magdalene, the eyes of their hearts cleansed by tears of contrition, gaze on the one who said “Happy are the pure of heart: they shall see God.”³⁹



Studio of Benedetto da Maiano, Florentine, 1442-1497
St. John the Baptist, c. 1480
 Andrew W. Mellon Collection (figure 16)

The animal skin beneath his cloak identifies this St. John as an ascetic, and his open mouth shows him to be a prophet: *vox clamantis in deserto* (“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness”).⁴⁰ With his windswept hair and frank, serious features, this lad calls to mind a wonderful sentence of the third-century writer Origen on St. John the Baptist: “He went into the desert, where the air was more pure, the heavens more open, and God more familiar, that till the time of his preaching was come, he might employ himself in prayer in the company of angels.”⁴¹

One activity of many of the boys’ confraternities was the acting out of religious plays. In this bust, the artist seems to portray a boy in his upper teens reciting a carefully learned part—note the open lips, the gaze turned inward as if upon the meaning of memorized lines, and the features taut with concentration. It is not difficult to imagine this boy in the setting of a confraternity described in 1435 by the Camaldolese monk Ambrogio Traversari: “Following their rule, the boys observe continence in everything . . . they confess more frequently, and take communion often . . . when however they have left their childhood years behind, they transfer to another group, where older people meet, and continue in similar works. Many of them, once they have tasted the goodness of innocence, enter the religious life. . . .”⁴²



Antonio Rossellino, Florentine, 1427-1478/79
The Young St. John the Baptist, c. 1470
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 17)

This charming piece sums up the themes of the previous section. Again, it shows St. John the Baptist, patron of children, as a little boy. The child is lost in reverie, a wistful expression on his head suggesting foreknowledge of his future.

Such religious seriousness was cultivated in the Dominican Giovanni Dominici, in a treatise addressed to parents to “teach them to preach after they have been instructed.” A surviving account of just such a child-sermon is preserved in artwork like this bust. Describing a sermon delivered in the company or confraternity of the *Purità*, a confraternity that explained the meaning of the words ‘company,’ ‘confraternity,’ and ‘end [the company] had been instituted and the purpose of the conscience, and right, honest, virtuous living. . . . pronounced the said sermon not with artifice, but with grace, God, [and] with such grace that he reduced the hearts of the great devotion.”⁴⁴

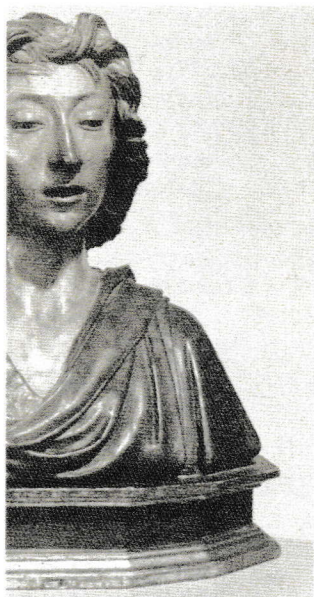
Galleries 18, 20, 21, St. Jerome

The following six works represent perhaps the most important objects inspired by monastic culture in the fifteenth century.

St. Jerome was born in Dalmatia (present-day Croatia) and received a brilliant classical education. In his late twenties he became a Christian and, inspired by the example of St. Anthony, he renounced his career as a scholar to enter the desert. However, he returned to literary pursuits and became the secretary of St. Damasus I. It was from Damasus that he prepared a standard translation of the Old and New Testaments, the Vulgate, this was to be used through the entire Middle Ages.

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Antonio Rossellino, Florentine, 1427-1478/79
The Young St. John the Baptist, c. 1470
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 17)

This charming piece sums up the themes of penitence and spiritual childhood. Again, it shows St. John the Baptist, patron of monks and ascetics, but as a *fanciullo*, a little boy. The child is lost in reverie, a wistful sadness about the lips and in the tilt of his head suggesting foreknowledge of his own martyrdom.

Such religious seriousness was cultivated in children in the fifteenth-century. The Dominican Giovanni Dominici, in a treatise on the education of children, urged parents to "teach them to preach after they have heard preaching in Church . . ."⁴³ A surviving account of just such a child-sermon illustrates the affective context of an artwork like this bust. Describing a sermon delivered by a small boy to the Pistoian company or confraternity of the *Purità*, a contemporary source says: "[He] explained the meaning of the words 'company,' 'fraternity,' and 'purity,' and to what end [the company] had been instituted and many other things, exhorting purity of conscience, and right, honest, virtuous living in these early years [of life]. He pronounced the said sermon not with artificial gestures, but with ones taught by God, [and] with such grace that he reduced many of the bystanders to tears and great devotion."⁴⁴

Galleries 18, 20, 21, and 23: St. Jerome

The following six works represent perhaps the single largest category of devotional objects inspired by monastic culture in the Renaissance: depictions of St. Jerome.

St. Jerome was born in Dalmatia (present-day Yugoslavia) about 331, and received a brilliant classical education. In his late twenties or early thirties he became a baptised Christian and, inspired by the example of St. Anthony and the Egyptian hermits, renounced his career as a scholar to enter the Syrian desert. After about four years, however, he returned to literary pursuits and served for a time in Rome as Pope St. Damasus I's secretary. It was from Damasus that Jerome received the commission to prepare a standard translation of the Old and New Testaments; under the name the Vulgate, this was to be used through the entire Middle Ages. In the 380s St. Jerome

became the guiding spirit of a small cenobitic community at Bethlehem, where he produced the steady stream of biblical translations and commentaries, as well as letters, on which his reputation as a scholar rests. He died about 420.

Devotion to St. Jerome increased in the fourteenth century with the circulation of three apocryphal documents describing his miracles, "magnificences," and holy death. It was in the following century, however, that his popularity reached its peak. The fifteenth century recognized in Jerome a kindred spirit: a man divided between his love for pagan culture and the desire to live as a monk. St. Jerome's ambivalence seems to have illuminated a crisis of values to which Renaissance humanists were personally sensitive, and several *Lives* of the saint were produced in North Italy in the late 1400s which, along with editions of his works, figure among the first printed books. Paintings depicting St. Jerome are particularly numerous in Venetian Renaissance art.



Desiderio da Settignano, Florentine, 1428-1464
St. Jerome in the Desert, c. 1450-1460
 Widener Collection (figure 18)

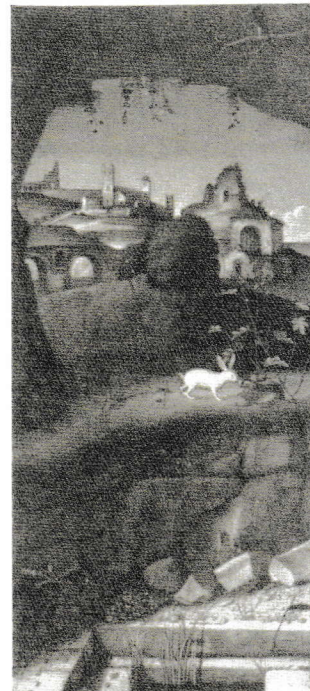
The saint appears in this marble relief as we have seen him before: in intense prayer before a crucifix. A lion and lioness emerge from among the rocks at our left and threaten a figure in fluttering draperies at the right of the relief, who flees with gestures of terror. St. Jerome, however, is left undisturbed, and that fact illustrates an ancient monastic theme. As a human being from whom fear and aggression have been expunged by penance, the monk was believed to stand in a new relationship to Nature. In the *Lives of the Fathers*, for example, the early monks are shown in harmony with their environment, farming the desert and enjoying the friendship of its denizens. The Old Testament prophet Hosea summed up this idea when he compared Israel to a much loved wife whom God will "... lure ... and lead ... out into the wilderness, and ... will make a treaty on her behalf with the wild animals ..."⁴⁵ The vision was of a return to Paradise: to a condition of peace among the diverse components of God's creation.

Between the foot of the crucifix and St. Jerome lies a flat, broad-brimmed hat of the kind worn by Roman Cardinals. Throughout the Middle Ages, St. Jerome was generally shown in the splendid regalia of a Prince of the Church, a reference to his brief employment as secretary to Pope Damasus I. (It was a posthumous dignity, since in Jerome's lifetime that office did not exist.) A 1472 *Life* of the saint by a Bolognese monk went so far as to recommend this official costume for depictions of Jerome, but by that time the fashion had already changed. Most mid- and late-fifteenth-century Italian art shows Jerome in the wilderness, with his Cardinal's hat incongruously deposited on the ground.



Francesco Benaglio, School of Verona, 1432-c. 1492
St. Jerome, c. 1450/1455
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 19)

This painting represents another tendency to show Jerome, showing him robed as a monk. The several new orders which grew up from the patronage and name of St. Jerome. Their austerity, and Benaglio's depiction of St. Jerome in concentration—may be related to their humanist revival that fostered such reform in ancient monastic texts which sang the praise of Syrian deserts.



Giovanni Bellini, Venetian, c. 1430-1516
St. Jerome Reading, c. 1480-1490
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 20)

This panel is one of many by the Venetians showing Jerome reading in a desert setting—the desert alwa

enobitic community at Bethlehem, where he did translations and commentaries, as well as scholarly rests. He died about 420.

In the fourteenth century with the circulation of his miracles, "magnificences," and holy power, that his popularity reached its peak. He became a kindred spirit: a man divided between the desire to live as a monk. St. Jerome's ambivalence led to the styles to which Renaissance humanists were attracted. Some of the saint were produced in North Italy in the sixteenth century, figure among the first printed editions, are particularly numerous in Venetian Renaissance.



As we have seen him before: in intense prayer. He emerges from among the rocks at our left and right; the figure at the right of the relief, who flees with a woman, is left undisturbed, and that fact illustrates the saint's being from whom fear and aggression have been banished. It was believed to stand in a new relationship to the world. For example, the early monks are shown in the desert and enjoying the friendship of the wild. The prophet Hosea summed up this idea when he said: "I will make a treaty on her behalf with the wild beasts; they shall return to Paradise: to a condition of peace and rest, as in God's creation."

Throughout the Middle Ages, St. Jerome was depicted as a Prince of the Church, a reference to his position as Pope Damasus I. (It was a posthumous dignity, which did not exist.) A 1472 *Life* of the saint by Giovanni Bellini had already changed. Most mid- and late-century depictions of the saint in the wilderness, with his Cardinal's hat discarded.



Francesco Benaglio, School of Verona, 1432-c. 1492
St. Jerome, c. 1450/1455
Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 19)

This painting represents another tendency in fifteenth-century depictions of St. Jerome, showing him robed as a monk. The monastic habit is probably that of one of several new orders which grew up from the late fourteenth century onward, taking the patronage and name of St. Jerome. These "Jeronymites" led lives of great austerity, and Benaglio's depiction of St. Jerome—almost a caricature of stern concentration—may be related to their influence. In part at least, it was the humanist revival that fostered such reform movements, making accessible again ancient monastic texts which sang the praises of the champions of the Egyptian and Syrian deserts.



Giovanni Bellini, Venetian, c. 1430-1516
St. Jerome Reading, c. 1480-1490
Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 20)

This panel is one of many by the Venetian Giovanni Bellini showing St. Jerome reading in a desert setting—the desert always lyrically beautiful, as here. City views

in the middle and far distance of this panel again suggest a contrast between the world—here falling into ruins—and St. Jerome’s quiet retreat. The peaceful landscape and charming details of animals reflect that new relationship to nature which was part of the monastic vision. The hares or rabbits, as defenseless creatures, symbolize trust in Christ’s Passion.

The prominence of St. Jerome in Venetian art is due to several factors. First, perhaps: he was a local figure, born in Dalmatia, which in the fifteenth century was a Venetian possession. More important, though, are two aspects of his personality with which Venetians identified in a special way: his thirst for solitude and love of learning. Regarding the former, a passage from Jerome’s letter to the city-monk Heliodorus deserves to be read alongside this panel: “O desert of Christ, burgeoning with flowers! O solitude, in which those stones are produced of which, in the Apocalypse, the city of the great king is constructed! O wilderness, that rejoices in intimacy with God! What are you doing in the world, brother, you who are greater than the world? How long will the shadows of houses oppress you? How long will the smokey prison of these cities close you in?”⁴⁶ Such a paean would not have left unmoved Venetians of the Renaissance, who—in their eagerness to escape the narrow confines of their island city—built hundreds of villas and pleasure parks on the mainland.

But obviously there is more here than love of nature. St. Jerome’s desert “rejoices in intimacy with God,” and the ultimate appeal of Bellini’s panel lies in what can only be called its prayerfulness. The saint is not shown as a scholar, but as a man of prayer, absorbed in reading his Bible. The calm concentration on his face, the quiet alertness of his body, belong to the contemplative, whose eye pauses as he ponders some word or phrase of the sacred text. In Jerome’s own words, “When I read the Gospel, and see there the testimony from the Law and the Prophets, I contemplate Christ alone.”⁴⁷



Cima da Conegliano, Venetian, 1459/60-1517/18
St. Jerome in the Wilderness, c. 1495
 Andrew W. Mellon Collection (figure 21)

Jerome the scholar and lover of nature here gives way again to Jerome the penitent. A link between the two sides of the saint’s personality may be provided in this painting by the monumental scale and unusual beauty of the crucifix before which he does penance. Commenting on passages from the Book of Psalms, Jerome claimed that their “intention was that we . . . be ever mindful of the death of the Lord. As Jacob erected a pillar over Rachel’s grave, and the memorial remains to this day, even so may we perpetuate in our heart the inscription and the memory of his Passion.”⁴⁸ For Jerome, all Scripture was a summons to ponder Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection, and to lament his own sins.

Fifteenth-century Venice was no stranger to St. Jerome. The best-known living example was the first Patriarch of the city. As a young member of a group of companions to St. Giorgio in Alga, he was expected to lead a life of monastic austerity. Lorenzo Bruni published a *Life* of his uncle in 1475, stressing the saint’s devotion to the traditional monastic spirituality of St. Jerome. Other works include “On Flight from the World,” “On the Interior Conflict of the Soul.”⁴⁹



Alvise Vivarini, Venetian, c. 1457-1503/15
St. Jerome Reading, c. 1475-1480
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 22)

The saint’s posture and facial expression here suggest a man of study (note also the natural desk formed of a rock). Sources describe him as “ever engaged in reading, day and night, neither by day nor night. He was always reading.”

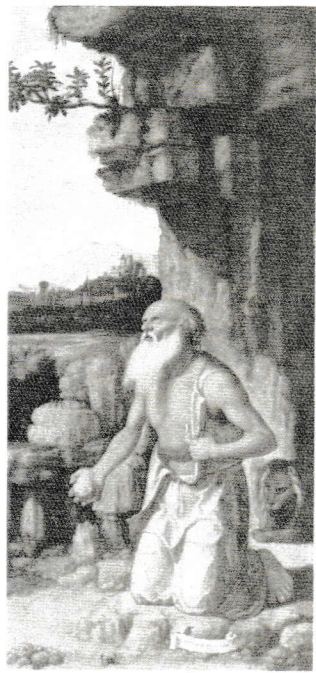
St. Jerome’s gifts and taste were developed in a world where this he always felt guilty. In a dream he once saw a man because he was—by literary preference, at least—and he considered giving up intellectual pursuits. The monk Heliodorus about the Last Judgment: “Foolish Plato will be brought forward with his works, but will not avail. Then you, the illiterate and anti-humanist bias can be found in St. Jerome. He distracts from the sentiment of faith and alienates hope for salvation in contempt for the world.”

Yet neither St. Jerome nor the Renaissance could resist the fascination of pagan culture. St. Jerome’s monastic life, such as it was probably not in the sense of the romantic, and the language in which he ultimately found it easy to identify with these sentiments together the conflicting sides of the saint’s personality (scholar he wears), scholar (the book and desk), and a combination in a single composition would reflect the historical reality of one man’s struggle for

panel again suggest a contrast between the . Jerome's quiet retreat. The peaceful landscape reflects that new relationship to nature which hares or rabbits, as defenseless creatures,

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Fifteenth-century Venice was no stranger to penitential asceticism like that of Jerome. The best-known living example was St. Lorenzo Giustiniani, Archbishop and first Patriarch of the city. As a young man St. Lorenzo had withdrawn with a group of companions to St. Giorgio in Alga, a desolate islet in the Venetian lagoon, to lead a life of monastic austerity. Lorenzo's nephew, Bernardo Giustiniani, published a *Life* of his uncle in 1475, stressing the saint's ascetic feats; but the best index to the traditional monastic spirituality of St. Lorenzo is his own writings, which include works "On Flight from the World," "On the Solitary Life," and "On the Interior Conflict of the Soul."⁴⁹



Alvise Vivarini, Venetian, c. 1457-1503/15
St. Jerome Reading, c. 1475-1480
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 22)

The saint's posture and facial expression here suggest not prayer but careful, critical study (note also the natural desk formed of rocks). This is the man whom medieval sources describe as "ever engaged in reading, ever in the midst of books, he rested neither by day nor night. He was always reading or writing."⁵⁰

St. Jerome's gifts and taste were developed in the study of pagan literature, and for this he always felt guilty. In a dream he once saw himself being beaten by angels because he was—by literary preference, at least—Ciceronian rather than Christian, and he considered giving up intellectual pursuits entirely. In that vein he wrote to the monk Heliodorus about the Last Judgment: "It will come, that day will come . . . Foolish Plato will be brought forward with his disciples. The reasoning of Aristotle will not avail. Then you, the illiterate and the poor, shall exult. . . ."⁵¹ A similar anti-humanist bias can be found in St. Lorenzo Giustiniani: ". . . human learning distracts from the sentiment of faith and alienates from Christ those who place their hope for salvation in contempt for the world."⁵²

Yet neither St. Jerome nor the Renaissance was "illiterate and poor"; neither could resist the fascination of pagan culture. St. Jerome's yearning for a primitive form of monastic life, such as it was probably not in his nature to sustain, had much about it of the romantic, and the language in which he expressed his feelings derived ultimately from Virgil and the other bucolic poets of antiquity. The fifteenth century found it easy to identify with these sentiments, and Alvise Vivarini's panel brings together the conflicting sides of the saint's character: monk (note the hooded cowl he wears), scholar (the book and desk), and lover of solitude (the landscape). The combination in a single composition would be amusing, did it not reflect the historical reality of one man's struggle for spiritual equilibrium and peace.



Paolo Veronese, Venetian, 1528-1588
St. Jerome in the Wilderness, c. 1580
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 23)

The date of the last *St. Jerome* in the tour situates it in another world, one torn by war and religious dissension. Veronese's powerful figure, inspired by the sculpture of Michelangelo, leans forward with intense concentration over a worktable bearing *vanitas* symbols: the skull and the hourglass, signs of the transitory character of earthly things. Before him lies a folio volume, held open by a crucifix upon which the saint fixes his gaze.

This painting was probably executed for the Jeronymite monks of St. Sebastiano, Venice. In it Veronese fused two conventional *St. Jerome* types in a dynamic psychological synthesis. His Jerome is a strong man with conflicting drives, who calls to mind St. Paul's distinction between the "terms of philosophy in which the crucifixion of Christ cannot be expressed" and the "language of the cross." Also applicable to Jerome is St. Paul's conclusion, in the same passage, that while Christian renunciation may seem foolish to the learned of this world, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness stronger than human strength."⁵³

Gallery 24: Conclusion

The subject is taken from the First Book of Kings, 17: 26: "The word of the Lord came to Elijah, 'Go away from here, go eastwards, and hide yourself in the wadi Cherith which lies east of Jordan. You can drink from the stream, and I have ordered the ravens to bring you food there.'" In the background are later episodes of Elijah's story: in the upper left, the prophet is taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot while from the ground his successor, Elisha, and the fellowship of prophets watch from opposite banks of the river. This painting was part of a larger work—probably executed for the Carmelites of Brescia—which balanced this *Elijah* with the analogous scene of Saints Anthony Abbot and Paul the Hermit fed by a raven. Elijah here gazes speculatively at the raven, as if trying to fathom the meaning of this nourishment from above (note the loaf which the bird holds in its beak).



Girolamo Savoldo, Brescian, 1508-1548
Elijah Fed by the Ravens, c. 1510
 Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 24)

The subject of this last work described important themes of organized religious monasticism, Elijah was looked upon as the dweller in the desert." The two kinds of monasticism, Elijah's time, in the solitary holy man as prophet" which often formed around him living tradition—of the handing down from also implicit in the story of Elijah, who chose authority. This transmission was symbolized in the painting, on the river bank); in monastic habit has similar connotations. A Enoch who "walked with God" and "vanished by God's will, manifest in history, to separate himself from his fellows for his own purposes, to be prophesied chooses merely of himself to be a monk; darkness of faith.

The true subject of this painting is human Elijah's pose and expression of the puzzler discern God's will. Elijah's compliance with God demanded an act of faith that God could sustain the essence of all monastic life; as St. Benedict may seem impossible: "obey out of love, true such trust over the course of a lifetime entails across the centuries, monasticism has continued challenge, to abandon life's normal tasks well and simply expressed by the Syrian illumine Savoldo's painting and the phenomenon—fascination—"The ravens that fed Elijah cry



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Girolamo Savoldo, Brescian, 1508-1548
Elijah Fed by the Ravens, c. 1510
Samuel H. Kress Collection (figure 24)

The subject of this last work described in the walking tour sums up the most important themes of organized religious life. From the early days of Egyptian monasticism, Elijah was looked upon as the Old Testament prototype of "those who dwell in the desert." The two kinds of monks, hermits and cenobites, existed in Elijah's time, in the solitary holy man as distinguished from the "fellowship of prophets" which often formed around him. And the strong monastic sense of a living tradition—of the handing down from abbot to novice of spiritual wisdom—is also implicit in the story of Elijah, who chose a successor to whom he transmitted his authority. This transmission was symbolized by Elijah giving Elisha his cloak (visible in the painting, on the river bank); in monasteries the investiture of a novice with the monastic habit has similar connotations. And Elijah taken up in the chariot, like Enoch who "walked with God" and "vanished because God took him,"⁵⁴ signifies God's will, manifest in history, to separate certain individuals and groups from their fellows for his own purposes, to be prophets, saints, monks. For ultimately no one chooses merely of himself to be a monk; it is a call from God, pursued in the darkness of faith.

The true subject of this painting is human faith in God. Savoldo illustrated, in Elijah's pose and expression of the puzzlement experienced by a soul groping to discern God's will. Elijah's compliance with the command to go into the desert demanded an act of faith that God could and would "send ravens." And this is the essence of all monastic life; as St. Benedict urged monks commanded to do what may seem impossible: "obey out of love, trusting in the help of God."⁵⁵ To maintain such trust over the course of a lifetime entails great risk, and this may explain why, across the centuries, monasticism has continued to engage man's spirit. The monastic challenge, to abandon life's normal tasks, entrusting the self totally to God, was well and simply expressed by the Syrian monks. They said—in words which illumine Savoldo's painting and the phenomenon of monasticism's perennial fascination—"The ravens that fed Elijah cry, 'Leave the plow.'"⁵⁶

Notes

Unless otherwise indicated, Biblical references are cited from *The Jerusalem Bible*, Doubleday Co., Inc., Garden City, N. Y., 1966. References to the *Rule* of St. Benedict are quoted from what is still the most available English translation, *St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries*, Leonard J. Doyle, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1947. (That small-format edition does not number the verses within chapters; specific verse references have been taken from *La Regola*, edited by Anselmo Lentini, O.S.B., Montecassino, 1947.) The best critical edition of the *Rule* is R. Hanslik, *Benedicti Regula*, Vienna (*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* series) 1960. The first full critical edition of the *Rule* in English, edited by Timothy Fry, O.S.B., and other American Benedictines, is to be published later this year by the Liturgical Press. Finally, for the Patristic sources, available English and other modern language references have been preferred to older editions in Latin.

Abbreviation

RB=*Rule* of St. Benedict: chapter and verse references following.

1. Philippians 2:6-8 *passim*.
2. *Praefatio in Iob* i, 6-7: quoted by Beryl Smalley in *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1964, p. 33 (Oxford University Press edition, 1952).
3. *Sermo ii in Nativitate Domini, Sermons de Leon le Grand*, trans. Dom René Golle (*Sources Chrétiennes* series), Paris, 1947, p. 78.
4. *Sermo 27:5, Gueric of Igny, Liturgical Sermons*, ed. M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O. (*Cistercian Fathers* series no. 32), Spencer, Massachusetts, 1971, p. 45.
5. RB: prologue, 1.
6. RB: 2,2.
7. RB: 5,6; cf. Luke 10:16.
8. RB: prologue, 2.
9. Mark 8:34.
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18. RB: 1,3-5.
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