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National College of Art & Design

Fine Art: Painting

Antonello da Messina's St Jerome in his Study:

A text within a text about a painting within a painting of a space within a space.

by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My grateful thanks to my parents for their biography of me and much more.

For John.

CONTENTS

List of illustrations

5

Frontipiece

6

General Introduction

7

TEXT

SUBTEXT

Introduction to the text

12

In which Alice meets the Painter and the Queen.

Chapter 1

The social and economic context of the Renaissance

15

On philosophy, maths, dates, and an optical instrument.

Chapter 2

A biography of Antonello da Messina

24

In which Alice learns of Tlön and its psychology.

Chapter 3

St Jerome and his representation in Renaissance painting

32

On the single author, familiar places and logic.

Chapter 4

The iconography of Antonello's *St Jerome in his Study*

38

In which Alice learns that the antithesis is the answer to the riddle.

Chapter 5

The possibility of further symbolism in perspective

48

On conventional signs, transitional visual geometric distortion and painting in miniature.

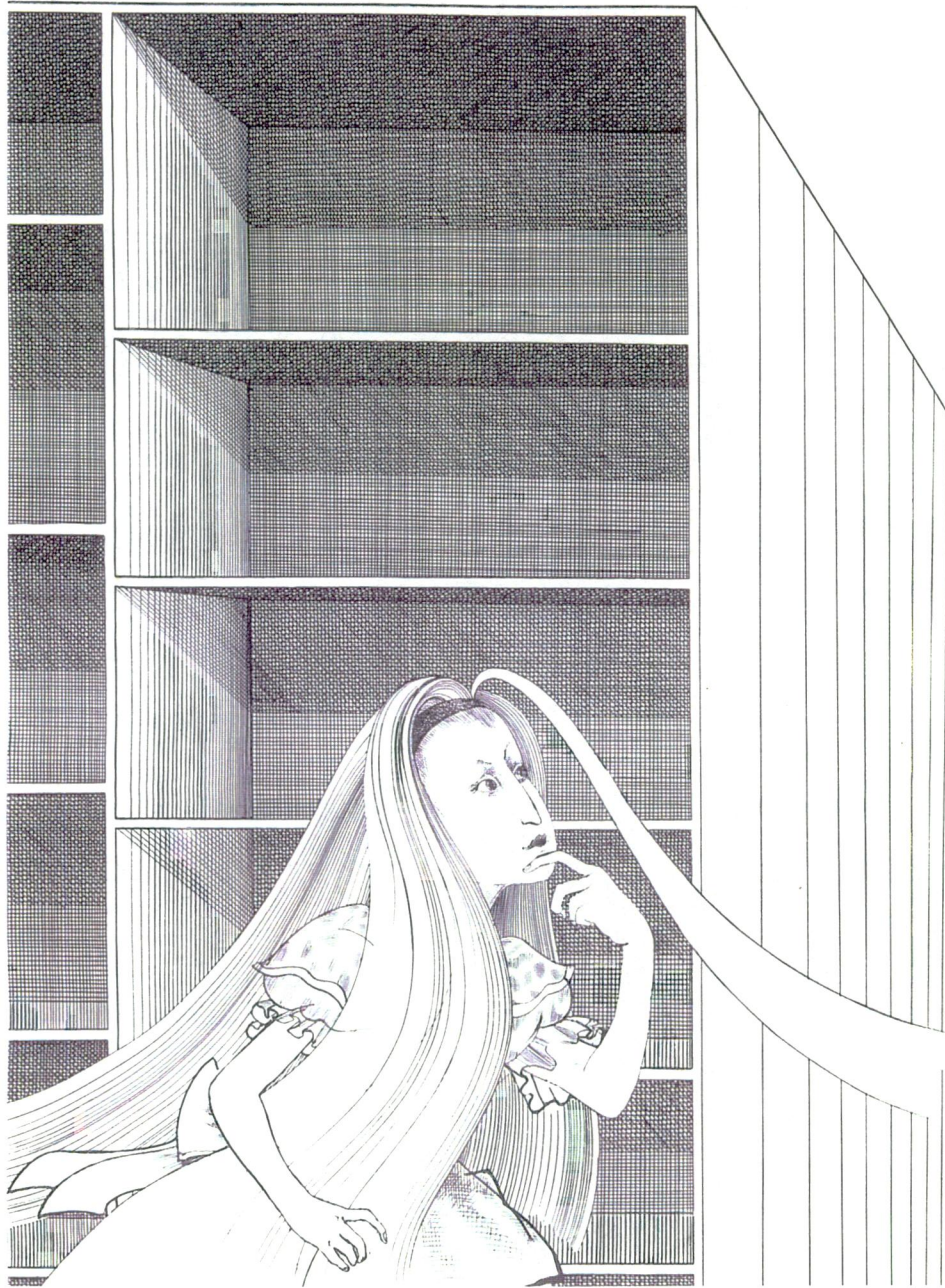
Conclusion to the text	55	In which Alice learns to invent with the facts of her imagination.
General conclusion	60	
Bibliography	64	
Illustrations	68	

List of illustrations

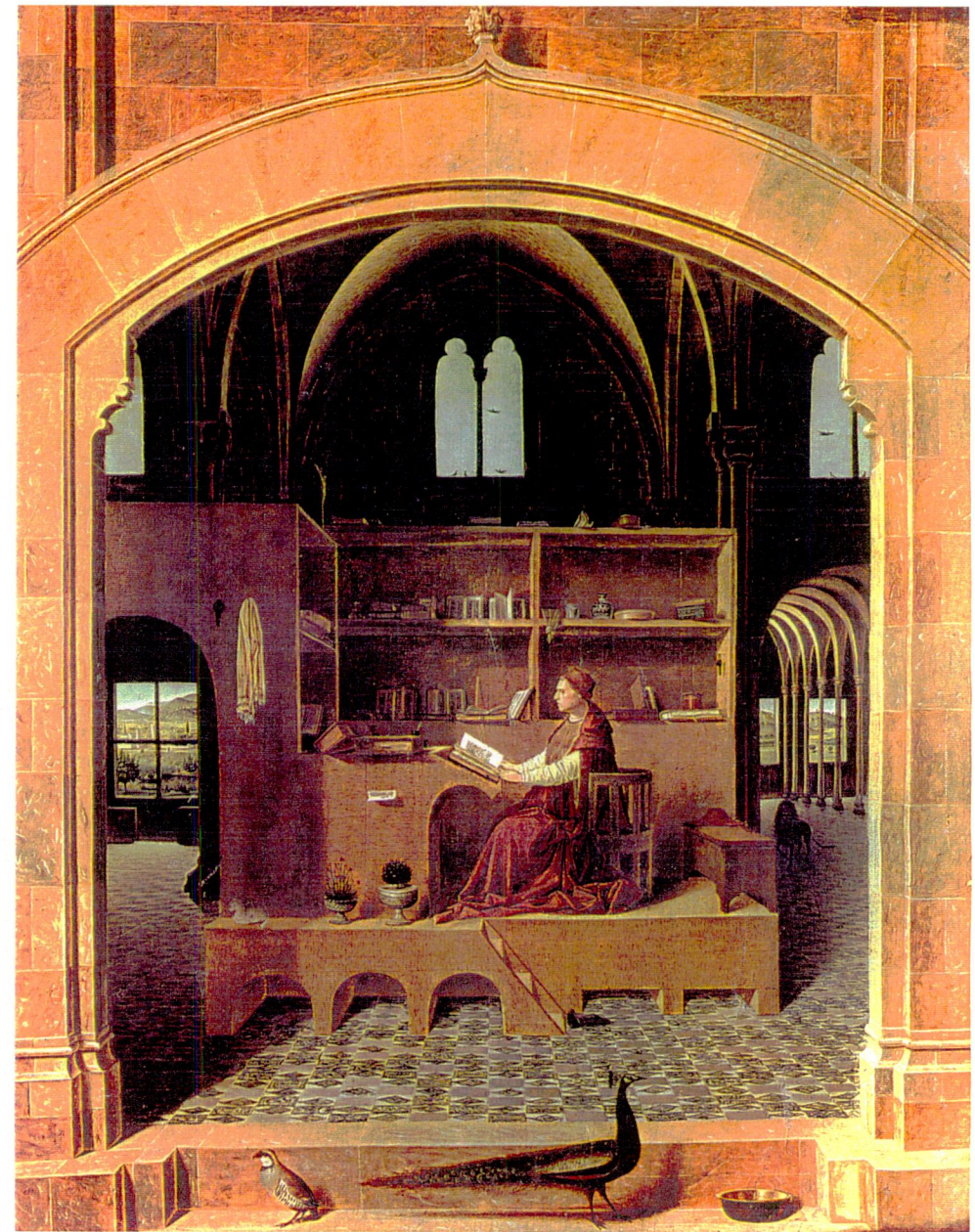
Frontispiece: Ralph Steadman, *Alice in the old sheep's shop*
Antonello da Messina, *St Jerome in his Study*, National Gallery, London.

The following illustrations are found at the end of the complete text.

1. Antonello da Messina *St Jerome in his Study* - details.
2. Bellini, *The Doge Leonardo Loredan*, National Gallery, London.
3. Uccello, *The Battle of San Romano*, National Gallery, London.
4. Van Eyck, *The Virgin Enthroned Nursing the Child (Madonna of Lucca)*, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt.
5. Rogier van der Weyden, *Pieta*, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.
6. Petrus Christus, *St Eligius*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
7. Van Eyck, *St Jerome*, Institute of Arts, Detroit.
8. Antonello da Messina, *San Gregorio Altarpiece (detail)*, Museo Nazionale, Messina.
9. Antonello da Messina, *San Cassiano Altarpiece*, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
10. Bellini, *San Giobe Altarpiece*, Academia, Venice.
11. Bellini, *Pesaro altarpiece, detail*, St Terentius, Patron Saint of Pesaro, Museo Correr, Venice.
12. Antonello da Messina, *St Sebastian*, Gemälde Galerie, Dresden.
13. Antonello da Messina, *Crucifixion*, National Gallery, London.
14. Bellini, *Crucifixion*, principe Corsini, Florence.
15. Antonello da Messina *Man in a Red Cap*, National Gallery, London.
16. Cima da Conegliano, *St Jerome in a Landscape*, National Gallery, London.
17. Crivelli *The Virgin with St Jerome and St Sebastian (The Madonna della Rondine)*, National Gallery, London.
18. Antonello da Messina, *St Jerome in the Desert*, Museo Nazionale, Reggio Calabria.
19. Gerard David, *St Jerome in a Landscape*, National Gallery, London.
20. Antonello da Messina, *St Jerome*, Galleria Nazionale, Palermo.
21. Catena, *St Jerome*, National Gallery, London.
22. Durer *St Jerome in his Study* (engraving)
23. Antonello da Messina *St Jerome in his study* with perspective construction
24. Antonello da Messina, *Virgin Annunciate* Galleria Nazionale, Palermo.



Ralph Steadman, *Alice in the old sheep's shop*.



Antonello da Messina, *St Jerome in his Study*, National Gallery, London.

General introduction

The aim of the study reported here was to explore the processes of art historical research according to Erwin Panofsky's definition:

...the art historian subjects his 'material' to a rational archaeological analysis at times as meticulously exact, comprehensive and involved as any physical or astronomical research. But he constitutes his 'material' by means of an intuitive aesthetic re-creation, including the perception and appraisal of 'quality', just as any 'ordinary' person does when he or she looks at a picture or listens to a symphony (Panofsky, 1970, p. 39).

Panofsky implies that the 'rational archaeological analysis' is more or less an objective process and the 'intuitive aesthetic re-creation' is subjective. The two processes are interconnected; "...they interpenetrate; not only does the re-creative synthesis serve as a basis for the archaeological investigation, the archaeological investigation in turn serves as a basis for the re-creative process; both mutually qualify and rectify one another" (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 40 - 41). Figure 1 shows how I saw the two processes working together.

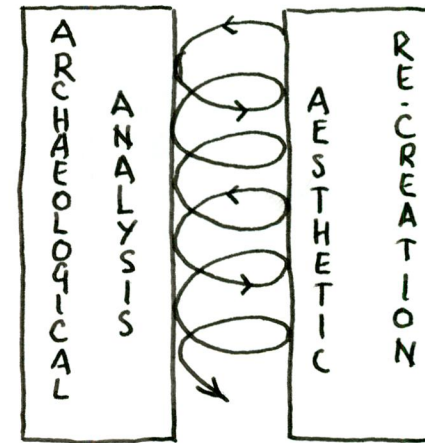


Figure 1. Panofsky's art historical process.



The validity of this re-creative experience in critical writing has been supported recently by Terry Eagleton in a television interview when he suggested that there might be;

...a way of writing which deconstructs the opposition, as we've historically received it, between creative writing and theoretical writing...so that criticism might be not a secondary parasitic writing but a genre in its own right....then there might be more interesting things to do with it. (Eagleton, Talking Liberties, Channel 4)

Methodology

This study took as its subject the painting *St Jerome in his Study* by Antonello da Messina c.1475 (*frontispiece*). What I attempted to do was to separate the 'archaeological analysis' as far as possible from the 're-creative experience' to observe how they interact. The presentation was inspired by Derrida's writings, and in particular by *Tympan*:

Tympan employs two columns side by side on the

page. On the left an interrogation of the closed philosophical structure that comprehends or includes its own outside and a reflection on the strategies for breaking in or out of this closure; on the right, a long quotation from the first part of Michel Leiris's autobiographical memoirs. (Kamuf, 1991, p.147)

In emulating this approach, to paraphrase Derrida, I wanted to ask the question: "What does this painting mean? Which has its roots in another more obscure question I ask of myself: 'Why finally does this painting fascinate me, preoccupy me, precede me?'" (Kamuf, 1991, pp. 3-4)

The study was planned, therefore, to take the form of two texts, to run side by side, the first a straightforward art historical investigation of the painting, and the second a more personal reflection on how my perception of the painting changed. I shall refer to them as the text and subtext, respectively. Figure 2 shows how the thesis is constructed.

I intended that the writing of the text and subtext would run concurrently, but this proved far more difficult than I had thought.

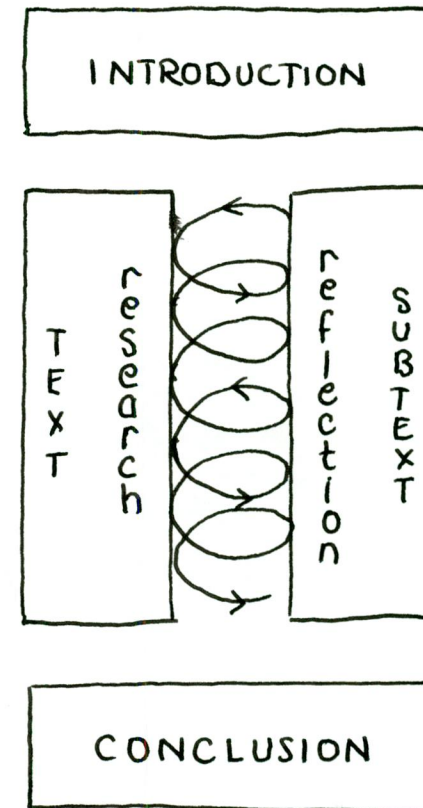


Figure 2. Construction of the thesis.

1875

1876

Eventually the subtext was written almost entirely after the text had been finished and therefore acted more as a conclusion to, rather than a commentary on, the text. It was originally concerned with reflections on my background in relation to the painting and I wrote some autobiographical notes to substantiate this. I also asked my parents to contribute their own version of my biography; there were sufficient discrepancies of interpretation between the two accounts to suggest that all three of us were highly subjective in our view points. It became apparent during this exercise that, as Barthes puts it, "...an author's life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work." (Barthes, 1971 quoted in FitzGerald, 1995, p. 8). More than this, the subtext itself had begun to evolve into a dialogue and it was a short step from this to the decision that the subtext would take the form of a fiction.

I have based the subtext very loosely on Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories and the poem *The Hunting of The Snark*. I was interested in viewing the text from the vantage point of a parallel world where the text's (and therefore my own) assumptions could be challenged. Alice finds herself inside the painting, in conversation

with a painter, about a book which bears a very close resemblance to the text included here (*frontispiece*). Since Lewis Carroll's dialogue is so effective in subverting meaning and logic, I have stuck closely to it .

The writings to which Alice is referred in the subtext are extracts from the Jorge Luis Borges story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. This takes the form of an apparently factual account of a parallel world found in the pages of certain editions of an encyclopaedia. Also included is an extract from Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* which is about an elaborate academic game based on Rosacrucianism and which explores the boundaries between fact and fiction. In order to preserve the form of a piece of fiction, these four passages are referenced at the end of the subtext.

I have introduced and concluded both the text and subtext independently in their respective styles; the main conclusion of the thesis therefore deals with the nature of the interaction between the two.

Introduction to the text

Antonello da Messina's painting *St Jerome in his Study* hangs in the National Gallery, London along with five or so of his other works. It is displayed (October 1996) in a dimly lit room behind glass in what is certainly not its original frame; the battered edges of the panel are clearly visible. The painting is small, only 45.7 x 36.2 cm, and is made from oils on a panel of lime wood - an alternative to the poplar usually used by Italian painters of the period. Some of the pigments used by Antonello were fugitive; the cat, to the left, and some of the architectural detail in the foreground is fading (*ill. 1*).

According to the National Gallery:

This painting by Antonello is described by the collector Michiel as being in a Venetian collection in 1529, when it seems to have formed the subject of a dispute between connoisseurs (one of the first such disputes ever recorded about a European painting): 'The little picture of St Jerome reading in his study in Cardinal's attire,

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the big black book her sister was reading and caught sight of the words "*Antonello da...*" but then her sister turned a page. Although the book looked very important, with gold lettering on its front and spine, it had no pictures or conversations in it, "and what is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?"

The hot day was making her feel very sleepy and stupid, and she was considering whether to go and explore the church nearby, when suddenly a Partridge scuttled by. She heard it say, "Oh my beak and feathers! I shall be too late!" as it disappeared into the church. She ran after it, just in time to see it hop up some steps through an archway, closely followed by a Peacock.

Alice followed them up the steps and saw the Partridge and the Peacock disappear through another archway. Then, on a ledge nearby, she caught sight of a cat which it seemed, had

believed by some to be by the hand of Antonello da Messina: but more, and with better judgement, attribute it to Jan van Eyck [*Gianes*] or to Memlinc [*Memelin*], the old master from the Netherlands, and it is in their manner, although the face [*volto*] is finished in the Italian style and therefore seems to be by the hand of Jacometto.' (Dunkerton et al, 1991, p. 318)

The date of the painting is the subject of much dispute, the National Gallery itself opting for a later date:

The painting may well date from Antonello's stay in Venice in 1457-6, or it may have been sold by him there and painted a year or so before. Many scholars prefer a much earlier date, but the stiff profile pose, the angular elaboration of the drapery, and the character of the landscape are very similar to the *Crucifixion* which is dated 1475. (Dunkerton et al, 1991, p. 318)

In the following analysis I follow Panofsky's example in analysing the painting and its symbolism in the context of its period, both social, intellectual and artistic. The first chapter describes how humanism, education and patronage affected the role of the painter in the fifteenth century. The relationship between Italian and Netherlandish painting is established. These ideas are

just appeared. Alice was just thinking how friendly and comfortable it looked, curled up with a huge grin, when it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail and ending with the grin, which remained sometime after the rest of it had gone.

"How curious," said Alice to herself. She began to look around her. She was in a huge dark hall, with a vaulted ceiling and windows high up. In front of her was a wooden structure with shelves full of books and things, a desk, and a large comfortable wooden chair. Sitting quite motionless in the chair was a little fat man in a red cloak with a red hat.

"How funny," thought Alice, "this all seems quite familiar, as if I've been here before. But what a dear little study," she continued out loud, "just the thing for homework!"

"Goodness, gracious me!" said the little man, "Look at this!" And he pointed at the book on the desk in front of him with a rather paint stained finger. Alice obediently scrambled up the little flight of steps to look over his shoulder. She caught sight of the words "...Antonello was responsible for the intellectual content of his work....", and was just thinking how much the book looked like the one

applied, in the second chapter, to what little is known of the life of Antonello da Messina, to provide some insight into his personality and achievements. His influence on other Renaissance painters is discussed. The subject of the painting, St Jerome, was the patron saint of the Humanists and his writings were widely read. The third chapter outlines his life and work, and describes his depiction in other paintings of the period.

In chapter four the symbolism of the painting is explored, firstly through the unhelpful medium of a dictionary of symbolism and then in the context of other paintings and texts. The potential for further symbolism in formal aspects of the painting, such as light, is discussed. The possibility that the figure of Jerome is a disguised portrait leads on to a discussion about the function of the painting. Chapter five explores a further formal aspect of the painting which may carry hidden meaning, that of perspective. The possibility is proposed that the painting was meant as a *demonstrazione* of the artist's skill. If the painting can be said to carry hidden symbolism the question arises as to how much Antonello himself was responsible for the intellectual content of his work; this forms the basis of the concluding remarks.

her sister had been reading when the little man exclaimed, "It's a book about me!"

"Oh," said Alice politely, "so you're -,"

"The Painter," said the little fat man, rather grandly.

"I think she's got it all Wrong," said the Queen, emerging from behind the study, "What's Philosophy got to do with Art? Call in the Jury!"

"Oh dear," said the Painter.

Chapter 1

The Social and Economic Context of the Renaissance

Philosophy and learning

Renaissance thinking, harking back to the golden age of Classicism, is sometimes described as Neo Platonism. Levey suggests however that "the typical tendencies of Early Renaissance art to place man in his own environment - itself realised with maximum science - can be claimed to be much more truly inspired by Aristotle than Plato" (Levey, 1967, p. 16). This is Humanism: a preoccupation with the nature of man; open-mindedness; an empirical approach to the study of nature; and the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake. It is reflected very clearly in the portraits of the time, including those by Antonello. Bellini's *The Doge Leonardo Loredan* (ill. 2) is a perfect example of what Plumb describes as "Man, solitary, alone, without friends and of necessity without principle....a terrible majesty, an aloofness, a dedication beyond the reality of common man" (Plumb, 1964, p. 270-71). Castiglione in the Book of the

In the twinkling of an eye, the Partridge, the Peacock and the Cat reappeared, carrying with them a Stuffed Lion. "For frightening the monks," said The Painter.

"Call the first witness," said the Queen; and the Partridge puffed out his chest and called out "First witness! That's you, you know," he said to Alice who began to feel quite important.

"Item number one: Philosophy and Learning!" said the Painter, reading from the book. "First witness, tell us what you know about Philosophy."

"You mean," said Alice, "all about Aristotle and Plato? I'm afraid I don't know much about that. But you've lots of books - can't you look it up in them?"

"What's the use of books if you're always reading them?" shouted the Queen.

Courtier advocates nonchalance about achievement "so as to conceal all effort and make whatever is done and said appear to be without effort and without almost any thought about it" (quoted in Plumb, 1964, p. 275).

Printing had been invented and perfected in Germany by 1450 and the first Italian press was established at Subiaco in 1465. This fed the thirst for new knowledge and encouraged its dissemination. The passion for the observation of man in his environment contributed to developments in perspective that helped to raise art to the level of science. Alberti, in his treatise of 1435, *On Painting* maintained that ".....no one could be a good painter who did not know geometry" and encouraged painters "....to be learned in all the liberal arts....it will be of advantage if they take pleasure in poets and orators, for these have many ornaments in common with the painter" (Alberti, 1972, p. 95). One of the "ornaments" shared by poets, philosophers and painters was the "....language of concealment that all literary coteries delight in cultivating" (Plumb, 1964, p. 266). The setting of riddles, particularly mathematical ones, was a significant part of Renaissance life.

"But that's what they're for," protested Alice.

"No they're not," said the Queen, "they're an aid to digestion."

"Nonsense," said Alice.

"You can call it nonsense if you like, but I've heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary," said the Queen, and stalked off.

"Item number two, Education and Mathematics. That's very important," said the Painter.

"No it's not," said the Jury.

"Evidence! You can't say that without evidence!" shouted the Queen, slamming the door behind her.

"Unimportant, of course, I meant," the Painter said, and went on to himself in an undertone, "important - unimportant - unimportant - important -," as if he were trying which word sounded best.

"Item number three - Dates," said the Painter and he pointed at the book. "1431, 1475, 1479. All wrong! Write that down," he said to the Jury, and the Jury eagerly wrote down all three dates on their slates, and then added them up, and reduced the answer to shillings and pence.

Education and the importance of mathematics

Education in Italy in the fifteenth century was roughly divided into the Latin schools, where the classics were taught, and the abbaco schools, which taught vernacular reading and writing, the basics of Latin, commercial mathematics (abbaco), and accounting. Only the sons of the wealthier middle class families would attend school and their education in the abbaco schools was largely commercial (Grendler, 1995, pp. 161- 164). The importance of arithmetic was considerable for a nation of traders when there were few standard measures and no common currency, even between the city states. The calculation of proportion, expressed by the Rule of Three, was so important to 15th century trading people that "...they knew their specialised area absolutely...played games and told jokes with it" (Baxandall, 1974, p. 101). So it is not surprising that the love of riddles and hidden messages, coupled with a penchant for mathematical problems should lead to geometrical puzzles in paintings; Baxandall suggests that in Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* (ill. 3) Lorenzo de Medici would have accepted Niccolo de Tolentino's hat as a 'serial geometrical joke' ; ".....as a way of making

"That's the Rule of Three, you know," he said to Alice.

"Is that the single ruling order?" she asked.

"There is no single ruling order. I invented it just now. *That's* the oldest rule in the book."

"Then it ought to be number one." said Alice, confused, "Rules *are* rules."

"No they're not," chorused the Jury.

"Item number four: Telescopes and Microscopes." said the Painter, and he reached up to the top of the shelves and took down a shiny brass box. "Open it," he said, handing it to Alice. Inside the box was a tiny, beautiful optical instrument with the legend *Made in Uqbar* engraved on its side.

"What is it?" asked Alice.

"It's a microscopic telescope. Or a telescopic microscope. For seeing things through." said the Painter. Alice put it to her eye and twisted a brass ring. Everything seemed to grow very small. She twisted it the other way. Everything grew very large.

"Dutch," said the Painter, "Or do I mean double dutch?"

Niccolo da Tolentino noticeable the device of paradox and ambiguity is obviously effective" (Baxandall, 1974, p. 89).

The role of painters

Up to the 15th century there was no distinction between art and craft, and painting had a much broader definition. Painters were expected to paint on any surface; they decorated *objets d'art* and worked as designers. Like other artisans, painters formed themselves into guilds which had a social and political role; the guilds set regulations about materials and training and restricted competition by charging high membership fees and banning the import of paintings.

Over the 1400s the role of the painter changed gradually from craftsman to artist. In part, the attitude of the guilds provoked competition between artists so that by 1450 ".....personal vendettas and public rivalry ... were a commonplace of Florentine and Venetian life" (Plumb, 1964, p.81). As with all commercial competition, differentiation was a key strategy, leading to the cultivation of individual style. According to Plumb, the painter

Aretino "gave impetus to the idea that the artist was beyond morality, outside society, a spirit dedicated only to the compulsive needs of his art" (Plumb, 1964, p. 270).

That this individuality was perceived by the patrons of art is demonstrated by a letter about four painters, Botticelli, Filippino Lippi, Perugino, and Ghirlandaio, distinguishing both their skills and characters (quoted in Baxandall, 1974, pp. 25 - 27). Alberti reminds the painter, however, that he is not to work completely autonomously - in the process of making a painting he should draw out and respond to the criticism of the public; "The painter's work is intended to please the public. So he will not despise the public's criticism and judgement when he is still in a position to meet their opinion" (Alberti, 1972, p.105).

The function of patronage

For the prosperous merchant class the commissioning of religious painting was a visual expression of their piety, and portraits were an expression of their social standing and wealth. Although "....commissioned works were less usual than is supposed today",

much of what we know about the painter's relationship with his customers comes from the contracts drawn up between patron and painter (Dunkerton et al, 1991, p.128). Although these vary in their degree of formality, they usually set out three things: the subject matter; how and when the client is to pay and a delivery date; and a job specification. This last demand changed over the fifteenth century from a materials specification (for example, the quantity and quality of expensive pigments and gold leaf) into a more general stipulation about the skills of the painter and the amount of work he was expected to carry out himself. This dichotomy between the quality of materials and the quality of the artist's skill is, according to Baxandall, central to Renaissance thinking about pictures; it describes or even caused the change in the status of the artist (Baxandall, 1974, p. 14).

How much this shift in emphasis embraced the intellectual as well as the practical skills of the painter is not clear. Some contracts specified the subject matter exactly, either by referring to a drawing or even another painting. However, Dunkerton says that, "More frequently, contracts are vague concerning the subject matter of the work being commissioned" (Dunkerton et al, 1991,

p. 130). Alberti, in addition to his recommendation that painters should consult with literary men, says that the painter himself should be "well versed in the liberal arts" although a knowledge of geometry has precedence (Alberti, 1972, p. 76). Baxandall suggests that "...in the fifteenth century painting was still too important to be left to painters" (Baxandall, 1974, p. 3) If, however, as Plumb suggests, the direction of art was towards a cult of a private language, exemplified by Giorgione, who could "...give universality to a private and exclusive myth, indeed deepen his genius by indulging in it," then we have evidence of a trend towards painters who shared the esoteric knowledge of their patrons (Plumb, 1964, p. 97).

The relationship between Italian and Netherlandish art

Most of the foregoing has been descriptive of the Italian Renaissance in particular. North of the Alps, in Flanders there were important developments which had a strong influence on fifteenth century Italian painting. The philosophical difference between the North and the South, according to Panofsky, was the Northerners' emphasis on the particular and the individual;

whereas in the South there was the search for the ideal, embodied in the art of the Greeks and Romans (Panofsky, 1971, p. 8). The influence flowed from the North to the South; more Northerners travelled South than Italians went North; Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden and Michael Pacher (*ills. 5,6*) are all known to have spent varying periods of time in Italy; paintings by Ghirlandaio and Botticelli are known to have been influenced by a van Eyck St Jerome (*ill. 7*); and Hugo van der Goes' Portinari altarpiece was an inspiration for both Ghirlandaio and Piero di Cosimo (Panofsky, 1971, p. 2, Harbison, 1995, pp. 156-8).

The Italians took the new technique of oil painting from van Eyck but were more sceptical of the emotional impact of Flemish religious painting; "It will appeal to women, especially to the very old and the very young, and also to monks and nuns and to certain noblemen who have no sense of true harmony" (Michaelangelo's opinion as reported by Francisco de Hollanda, quoted in Harbison, 1995, p. 156). It was the particular naturalism of Flemish painting which so impressed the Italians;

...the direct juxtaposition of the minutiae of an interior with a vast almost cosmic panorama, of the microscopic with the telescopic.....the simultaneous realisation, and in a sense reconciliation of the "two infinities", the infinitesimally small and the infinitely large (Panofsky, 1971, p. 3).

Chapter 2

A biography of Antonello da Messina

Chronology

Like many Renaissance artists, relatively little is known of Antonello and what there is has to be gleaned from a variety of sources such as civic documents, letters, contracts or inferred from the location of works which are sometimes signed and dated, sometimes not. Vasari included him in his *Lives* but according to Robertson "....almost every detail with which Vasari decks out this story may be shown to be false..." (Robertson, 1968, p. 56). Furthermore, the information which does exist is often contradictory, because it depends largely on perceived similarities of style between painters of the period and attributions change constantly as new evidence is uncovered. Antonello is supposed to have been born around 1431. Beck suggests this because his son Jacobello was married in 1479 and his parents were still alive at the time of his death though this seems rather strange reasoning (Beck, 1981, p. 250). Bottari offers a date of

Alice was looking at the landscape she had spied through the optical instrument and thinking how cool the river looked.

"Next chapter," said the Painter, the Jury disappeared and they were in the countryside.

"This reminds me of somewhere," said Alice.

"Tlön?" suggested the Painter. Alice looked at him and frowned.

"Who are you?" asked Alice.

"Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle," said the Painter, smiling. "But I know where this is, I grew up here."

"And did you go to school? " asked Alice, becoming interested.

"Oh yes, but I only took the regular course.....the different

1430 "since his death, seemingly about the age of forty" occurred in February 1479, notwithstanding that by this point he would have been almost fifty (Bottari, 1955, p.13). The first mention of him is in 1457 when he was commissioned to paint a banner in Regio Calabria, and took on a pupil. He trained in Naples, with Colantonio, from whom he would have gained an understanding of Flemish painting including the use of oils, and spent some time in Milan, according to records in the Ducal Palace and the memoirs of Francesco Maurolico (Bottari, 1955, p.9). In 1460 he went back to Messina and the following year took on his brother Giordano as his apprentice. He received commissions in Messina in 1463 and in 1464 bought a house there.

Very little is known of Antonello between the years 1465 and 1473; he could have been in Rome since Vasari mentions a journey to Rome at this point and there are documents in Messina which make similar references (Bottari, 1955, p. 14). Robertson suggests that a visit to Venice could explain the Venetian influence observed in the San Gregorio Polyptych of 1473 in Messina (ill 8). The same year Antonello received a commission for a lost work at Caltagirone, also in Sicily. In 1475

branches of Arithmetic - Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision. But no Washing. That was extra," said the Painter, and then muttered, "don't care what *She* says, Arithmetic is important. Wouldn't be what I am today without it. Ambitious, distracted, ugly....."

"Beg pardon?" said Alice, who thought she had misheard.

"You see, *Psychology* is the pre-eminent discipline in Tlön," the Painter explained. Alice was more than a little confused.

"Naples," murmured the Painter, changing the subject. "Ah yes, Naples," he said, with a faraway look in his eye.

"Did you go to school there too?" asked Alice.

"Oh no, I had a Master," said the painter, pompously. "The Drawling Master was an old conger-eel, that used to come once a week; he taught us Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils."

"What?" said Alice, so surprised she forgot her manners.

"The Drawing Master was Old Colantonio, and he came once a week; he taught us Drawing, Sketching and Painting in Oils," the Painter explained with exaggerated patience, "You really are very stupid!"

"Sorry," said Alice.

he was in Venice, painting the San Cassiano altarpiece (*ill. 9*). In 1476, one of the Dukes of Milan, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, wrote to his representative in Venice, asking him to invite Antonello to become court painter in Milan, apparently on the strength of an Antonello portrait he had seen. Antonello appears to have turned the invitation down; by the end of the year he was back in Messina where he died three years later.

Education

Antonello's father appears to have been a builder and a stone mason; he would therefore have been of the artisan middle class and not wealthy. Antonello could probably read in the vernacular therefore, but we cannot assume that he was well educated, that is, that he could read Latin. Since he was sent to Naples to train and seems to have visited most of the major cities in Italy throughout his career, we can infer that his parents had at least some financial resources and that his intelligence was an active, searching one.

Just then a boat drifted past; in the bows of which an old sheep sat knitting. "Somehow that reminds me of Venice," said the Painter wistfully, "I was such a celebrity. The secret of oil painting you know," He winked at Alice and broke into verse:

"They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;

They pursued it with forks and hope.

They threatened its life with a railway share,

They charmed it with smiles and soap."

"Bellini was the worst," he continued, "But he didn't fool me. I told him; 'You've got no idea what a difference it makes mixing it with other things such as gunpowder and sealing wax.' And that ridiculous pop-up Doge....."

But Alice was getting tired of the Painter's bombast.

"Tlön?" she interrupted.

"I'll show you," said the Painter and pointed. Alice peered through the optical instrument and saw the wooden study again, very small. She twisted the brass ring so that the study became very, very large.....

Relationships with other painters

Antonello, van Eyck and Petrus Christus

Vasari's *Life of Antonello* says that he studied in Bruges with van Eyck, having seen an Eyckian painting in Naples. Since van Eyck died in 1441 we can disregard this. It is generally assumed that his understanding of oil painting technique was derived from his teacher Colantonio and from his acquaintance with works by van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden which he would have seen in Naples. However Bottari argues that since Petrus Christus was in Milan at the same time as Antonello, it was he, more than van Eyck and even Colantonio who was responsible for the Flemish influence (ill. 6). Bottari provides several examples of this influence in Antonello's work, including the *St Jerome in his Study* (ill. 7). (Bottari, 1955, p. 11).

Antonello and Bellini

There is an apocryphal tale, apparently fabricated by Carlo Ridolfi, writing in 1646, that Bellini was so anxious to learn

Antonello's oil painting technique that he visited his studio disguised as a gentleman and fooled Antonello into revealing his secret. Since Bellini's style clearly changed at the time Antonello is known to have been in Venice, "this posthumous libel was regarded as *ben trovato* - 'well found' " (Goffen, 1989, p. 121). Robertson establishes the relationship between Bellini's *San Giobe Altarpiece* (ill. 10) and Antonello's *San Cassiano Altarpiece* "...one of the most famous works in Venice in its day..." (Robertson, 1968, p. 58). Further connections are made between Bellini's *St Terentius* (ill. 11) and Antonello's *St Sebastian* (ill. 12) and between the paintings of the *Crucifixion* done by both artists (ills. 13,14). All of these works can be dated around the time of Antonello's arrival in Venice in 1475, though Robertson suggests that an earlier visit would make more sense of the chronology. Antonello's visit to Venice was a "singular stroke of good fortune" in a period of great experimentation for Bellini in the 1470s (Robertson, 1968, p. 58).

Personality

Although so little is known of Antonello, and there are relatively

few surviving works, something of his personality survives from the information we have. Beck writes:

Antonello is one of the most heterogeneous Italian painters of his generation, little intimidated by localism. He is a product, perhaps more than any other contemporary, of the broadest range of personal and regional school influences, which even transcend Italy itself. He succeeded in achieving a profound personal art from such divergent sources as his own native Sicilian background, Netherlandish painting, and as has been suggested frequently, Piero della Francesca, and to a lesser extent Mantegna, without being impervious to what he saw in the artistically thriving Venice of the later *quattrocento* (Beck, 1981, p. 256).

From this we may deduce that Antonello was open-minded, with a tremendous capacity for learning. The frequent alterations he made to paintings show, according to Beck, that he was a perfectionist, and the oil technique suited a painter who took pains to achieve the formal qualities he wanted (Beck, 1981, p. 253). He seems to have been self motivated, ambitious and upwardly mobile.

More than this, he appears to have flaunted his skill:

Even Antonello, better acquainted with Netherlandish techniques, tended to produce flashy imitations of Netherlandish paintings by using very sharp lighting and by concentrating detail in and around the eyes. Individual hairs are painted and are again [as in Castagno's and Mantegna's portraits] too coarse in texture (ill. 15). It is as if Antonello were obtrusively indicating that his virtuosity should be noticed and admired. Other areas of his portrait heads, most noticeably the ears, are rather negligently simplified or indeed omitted (Campbell, 1990, p. 232).

In this sense Antonello was typical of his time, in using his paintings as *demonstrationes* or demonstrations of new skill, "which Gombrich has associated with the birth of the Renaissance" (Elkins, 1994, p. 239). Vasari reinforces this view of Antonello "...a person with a good and lively mind, who was very clever and experienced in his trade" (Vasari, 1991, p. 187). But he also explains that Antonello moved to Venice;

....where, as a man greatly given over to all the carnal pleasures, he resolved to live forever and

to end his life in a place where he had found a way of living exactly to his liking (Vasari, 1991, p. 188).

Chapter 3

Saint Jerome and his representation in Renaissance painting

Biography

Saint Jerome is known as one of the Four Fathers of the early Christian Church, along with Augustine, Ambrose and Gregory. He was born in Stridon in 342 and educated there and in Rome. Attracted by the idea of the heremitical life he became a hermit, spending four years in the desert at Chalcis (de Voragine, 1993, p. 212).

...at times I felt myself surrounded by clusters of pretty girls, and the fires of lust were lighted in my frozen body and moribund flesh. Often I joined day to night and did not stop beating my breast until the Lord restored my peace of mind (Jerome, quoted in de Voragine, 1993, p. 213).

In 382 he returned to Rome and served as secretary to Pope Damasus, studying the Scriptures and promoting asceticism. Damasus died and Jerome left for the East again, and in 386 settled

“Here we are,” said the Painter, “Tlön, Chapter Three.” He pointed to one of the open books on the lower shelf. Alice read: “*All men who repeat a line from Shakespeare are William Shakespeare.*”

“But that’s ridiculous,” she said.

“You think so?” said the Painter, “Take a look at this picture then,” and he thumbed through the black book.

“So there were pictures,” thought Alice, “I just didn’t look hard enough,” and found herself looking at a picture of the study in which she was standing. At the bottom she read: “*St Jerome in his Study.*”

“But that’s a picture of you,” she said to the Painter.

“Of course it is, I painted it,” said the Painter rather proudly.

“But it says it’s St Jerome,” said Alice faintly.

“And that’s just where this silly book is wrong,” The Painter

in Bethlehem, where he supervised a religious community "...offered himself to live, like a domestic animal, at the Lord's crib" (de Voragine, 1993, p. 213). Jerome is said to have adopted a lion after he had removed a thorn from its paw, until it ran off after an ass it was guarding was stolen (de Voragine, 1993, pp. 213-4). It was in Bethlehem that Jerome completed his translation of the Bible into Latin, known as the Vulgate, which was declared the official Latin text by the Council of Trent in 1563, although it was widely used before this. He died in Bethlehem in 419. Posthumously he was made a cardinal of the church - he refused all offices in his lifetime.

The work of Jerome

Jerome is known at least as well for his letters as for his work on the Vulgate. The first printed editions of Jerome's work were published in the third quarter of the fifteenth century but his work was popular in the Middle Ages; some manuscripts can be dated before 600. Lawlor quotes Dom. Leclercq:

It was Saint Jerome [that the medieval

pointed to another open book on the shelves and Alice read: *"In literary practices the idea of a single subject is also all-powerful. It is uncommon for books to be signed. The concept of plagiarism does not exist: it has been established that all works are the creation of one author, who is atemporal and anonymous."*

"And I suppose that goes for paintings too," said Alice.

"Naturellement," said the painter, "Look at these." He showed Alice three more pictures labelled van Eyck, Catena and Dürer. They all looked much the same to Alice so she said,

"Did you paint these too?"

"What do you think?" said the Painter.

"I'm very confused," said Alice, "These all look so familiar, but..."

"I know," said the painter with a mysterious smile, and he whisked a large book from the very top shelf and began to read aloud. Alice settled herself in the wooden chair, closed her eyes and listened. *"....don't you ever get that strange sensation that what you are reading or watching is something you already know? Bells of recognition ring as you welcome an old friend. All good ideas are like that. You already know*

monastics] consulted on the philosophical interpretation of Holy Scripture, though he seems to have exerted influence above all through his letters; here were at the same time models of the art of letter writing and a source, as well, for ideas on monastic asceticism (Lawlor, 1963, p. 8).

Jerome was the patron saint of the Humanists:

Quattrocento humanists were convinced that their work was morally supportive and actively useful to Christianity, and Jerome putting his classical learning at the service of religion perfectly represents this belief. That it was expressed with such sympathetic assurance by Antonello.....shows a respect for scholarly activity that made it easier for painters to enter the flow of humanistic values and ideals (Hale, 1977, p. 29).

Representations of St Jerome in Renaissance painting

There seems to have been a fashion for images of St. Jerome, probably inspired by the printed publication of his work: a straw poll of volumes on the Renaissance yielded twice as many paintings attributed to the last quarter of the fifteenth century as there are in

them. The familiarity is part of the enjoyment..... The picture someone has struggled to create is something you have already seen, otherwise how would you ever recognise its content?" "I don't like the idea of struggling, " the Painter murmured, "whatever happened to nonchalance? - But it's true enough wouldn't you say?"

"Yes," said Alice, hesitantly, "I think I've even heard those words before! Show me the book!" And she read on the cover of the book: "*The Complete Alice.*" "But it's a book about me!" said Alice.

"Or me," said the Painter.

"Oh, no," said Alice and smiled, "Contrariwise, if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn't, it ain't. That's logic."

"You're getting the idea," said the Painter.

the preceding 75 years. The majority of paintings of Jerome show him as penitent in the desert, sometimes with a rock with which he beat his breast; for example *St Jerome in a Landscape*, Cima da Conegliano c.1500-10 (ill. 16).

Where Jerome is shown in the company of other saints and the Madonna he is depicted as a penitent, holding a rock, or as a cardinal with a hat (Carlo Crivelli *The Virgin and Child with Saint Jerome and Saint Sebastian* c. 1490 (ill. 17)) He usually carries a bible and sometimes a model of the church, symbolising the illumination of his learning.

The face of Jerome as the ascetic is most often represented as bearded and gaunt with a long hooked nose and is instantly recognisable; for example, Antonello's *St Jerome in the Desert* (ill. 18). Otherwise Jerome is depicted as clean shaven; for example Gerard David's *St Jerome in a Landscape* (ill. 19), Michael Pacher's *Altarpiece of the Four Fathers* and Antonello's *St Jerome in Palermo* (ill. 20).

Some of the best known depictions of Jerome in his study are those

by van Eyck, Catena and Durer (ills 7,21,22). In describing these paintings I shall concentrate on those aspects most relevant to the Antonello *St Jerome*. The van Eyck *St Jerome* (1442) shows a clean-shaven Jerome in cardinal's robes, head resting on hand, reading, with his lion at his feet. He is surrounded by the paraphernalia of study; what look like scientific instruments may indicate an interest in the natural sciences. There are prayer beads and a skull, and above his head is a shelf laden with books. Unusually there is no crucifix. The furniture and objects give a vernacular, almost secular feel to the space. Crumpled drapery, the tilted floor and shallow space are typical of the Northern artist (c.f. *the Merode Altarpiece* by the Master of Flemalle). A van Eyck *St. Jerome* is known to have been in the possession of the Medici in 1492; paintings of philosopher saints by Ghirlandaio and Botticelli are "clearly based on just such a prototype" (Murray & Murray, 1963, p. 88).

The Catena *St. Jerome in His Study* (1510) is the antithesis of the van Eyck. It shows an orderly formal space with a marble structure which appears to be half desk, half altar; the bearded saint sits in uncomfortable solitude, reading. It is an elaborate exercise in

perspective depicting a classical interior; this, together with the painting of the marble surfaces are reminiscent of Castagno's *Last Supper*. The objects surrounding him and the structure of the study are reminiscent of Antonello's painting, as if Catena has attempted an idealised Italianate version of it, with its Netherlandish references removed.

The engraving *St. Jerome in his Study* (1514) is one of several depictions of the saint made by Dürer between 1492 and 1521. He was devoted to the saint and had probably studied his writings (Waetzoldt, 1950, p.71). It is more complex work, and similar in spirit to the van Eyck, containing the same vernacular furniture and eclectic collection of objects. Jerome is sitting scribbling furiously; there is a sense of his character "...impatient at times, and irascible, strong-minded and intransigent, given to exaggeration and free with vituperation..." (Lawlor, 1963, p. 3). The hour glass and the skull - *memento mori* - both give a sense that time is pressing. Although he is alone, this work is the only one that hints at the presence of other people, since there are chairs and benches for visitors; since Jerome is not referring to books, we may infer that he is engaged in informal correspondence.

Chapter 4

The Iconography of Antonello's *St Jerome in his Study*

One writer in describing Antonello's painting, analyses it thus:

"....the spectator looks through a spacious stone doorway into a great vaulted hall. Its top half looks ecclesiastical, but the effect of the bottom half is domestic: gay rectangular windows (one with seats) and a delicate colonnade. Into this hall a most ingenious piece of carpentering has been inserted, a study for the scholar who has everything. Raised to give a little dignity and freedom from draughts, it is condensed and practical: enough shelves, desk at the right height and slope, plenty of room to push the books back before writing. Potted plants, a sleepy cat, a few ornaments: a wonderful sense of self-containment. The scholar has kicked off his shoes, climbed those few steps and is in a little world, a world within two worlds....." (Hale, 1977, pp. 28 - 29).

Hale's description, though reasonably objective, misses the importance of symbolism, which is well authenticated in many other works of art contemporaneous with Antonello's *St Jerome*.

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?" asked the Painter.

"Come, we shall have some fun now!" thought Alice, "I'm glad he's begun asking riddles - I believe I can guess that," she added aloud.

"Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?" said the Painter.

"Exactly so," said Alice.

"Then you should say what you mean," the Painter went on.

"I do," Alice hastily replied; "at least - I mean what I say - that's the same thing you know."

"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Painter. "I'll show you. Read Chapter Four." And he handed Alice the black and gold book and she settled down to read. When she had done, which took a while, since there were so many long words, Alice said, "It seems to say we're in a riddle. And they tell you that three times, so it must be true."

"Not so," said the Painter, "They *think* we're in a riddle, but

As I have suggested in Chapter 1, Renaissance humanists were much interested in symbolism and concealed meaning:

...the ability to understand an allegory or decipher a rebus or conundrum was a desirable accomplishment in the courtier and helped to set him apart from lower ranks of society. (Hall, 1983, pp. 271-2)

Using a dictionary of symbolism

To help in the process of interpreting symbolism, dictionaries were produced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and are still published today. They seem to offer an apparently foolproof method of “breaking the code” of Renaissance symbolism; their problem is that they draw arbitrarily from sources across cultures and from different periods. There is no guarantee that a symbolism understood by, say, the Romans, would have common currency in another period. An example of this is found by consulting Cirlot’s Dictionary of Symbols on the symbolism of peacocks. Here we find that the peacock was understood by the Romans to represent the “apotheosis of princesses”, which clearly

that book wasn’t written in Tlön,” and he pointed to another book on the top shelf. Alice stood on tiptoe and read: *“Their books are also different. Works of fiction contain a single plot, with all its imaginable permutations. Those of a philosophical nature invariably include both the thesis and the antithesis, the rigorous pro and con of a doctrine. A book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete.”*

“This thesis,” said the Painter, indicating the black book, “does not include the antithesis and is therefore incomplete.”

“And the antithesis,” said Alice slowly, for light was beginning to dawn, “is the answer to the riddle?”

“More than that,” said the Painter, “the answer to the riddle is exactly what you think it is.”

“Or isn’t?” said Alice.

“That’s psychology,” said the Painter, nodding, “For example, some years ago the peace of Tlön was disturbed by a group of intellectuals from Paris, who called themselves The Secret Information Society, (that’s The SIS for short). They thought they’d found a riddle they couldn’t solve and became convinced the answer was hidden in our libraries. So

has no meaning in the context of Antonello's painting (Cirlot, 1962, p. 251). This is a rather facile example, since the peacock is one of the most ubiquitous symbols of Christian art from the earliest times, but it serves to illustrate the problem, from which, it appears not even the Renaissance was immune:

The esoteric, the mysterious, developed a fashionable cachet, and its cult opened the floodgates not only to much of the nonsense of late Neo-platonism, but also to astrology, to the language of emblems, and to the absurdities of late medieval bestiaries, and in the revival of learning was intermingled a great deal of hocus-pocus.....A great artist like Giorgione could give universality to a private and exclusive myth, indeed deepen his genius by indulging in it, but many lesser artists could not. In their hands the mysteries became hollow, the allegories obvious and banal (Plumb, 1964, pp.95-97).

Contextual analysis of the painting's symbolism

To establish the meaning of the symbolism in a particular work, the iconographer often establishes a precedent in other works of the time or contemporary texts. Antonello has shown Jerome with

we invented a nonexistent plan, and they not only believed it was real but convinced themselves that they had been part of it for ages, or, rather, they identified the fragments of their muddled mythology as moments of our Plan, moments joined in a logical, irrefutable web of analogy, semblance, suspicion."

"Imaginative sleuthing?" asked Alice.

"Precisely," said the Painter.

"So the riddle is solved if I want it to be and *that* means I can explain all the poems that ever were invented - and a good many that haven't been invented just yet!" exclaimed Alice.

"Indubitably," said the Painter.

his usual symbols; his lion, cardinal's hat, books and crucifix. The use of these symbols probably derives from de Voragine's Golden Legend which was widely consulted in the Renaissance. The remaining symbolism is not so easy to interpret. To begin with the group in the foreground, for example, the peacock came originally from India and was commonly adopted into Christian art as a symbol of eternal life (*ill. 1*). Its particular interest for the Humanists might be its association with St Augustine:

The popular belief that the peacock's flesh was incorruptible was tested by St Augustine. In an engaging spirit of inquiry he once took a piece home after a banquet and reported with wonder that it had scarcely deteriorated after a whole year and that 'at no time did it emit any offensive smell' (Hall, 1983, p. 82).

The partridge's symbolism was written about by Jerome himself;

"Just as the partridge lays eggs and hatches young birds who will never follow it, so the impious man possesses wealth to which he is not entitled, and which he must leave behind when he is least inclined" (quoted in Cirlot, 1962, p. 250).

The bowl (of water?) is very similar to the bowl to the right of the Virgin in van Eyck's *Lucca Madonna* of c.1435-40 (ill. 4). If it is meant to contain water then it could relate to any number of instances of water in the Scriptures, the changing of water into wine at Cana, for instance, or the symbolism of water in Baptism. (In the San Cassiano Altarpiece, Antonello depicted Mary Magdalen holding a glass of water as a symbol of her penitence.) It is tempting to associate this whole group with its position on the steps as a motif of transition - perhaps the journey of the soul through Baptism, life and into eternity.

Symbolism of formal aspects of the painting

An inference about the symbolism of a formal aspect of Renaissance painting has been made by Meiss. He suggests that the light which falls through windows into ecclesiastical interiors was meant to symbolise the conception and birth of Christ. He cites a Medieval Nativity hymn:

As the sunbeam through the glass

Passeth but not staineth
Thus the Virgin as she was
Virgin still remaineth.

According to Meiss, this hymn is the one referred to by Van Eyck on the frame of the Berlin Madonna (Meiss, 1970, pp. 61-64). Since Antonello is believed to have been influenced by Van Eyck, and since there are many more examples of this particular symbolism in Renaissance paintings it is possible that Antonello also used it to indicate that Saint Jerome is shown at the scene of the Nativity in Bethlehem, where he went to complete his Latin Vulgate (*ill. 1*).

Symbolism related to the function of the painting

The date of Antonello's *St Jerome* given by the National Gallery, London, is 1474, because of its Venetian qualities, but some writers have dated it earlier, around 1450-60. If the earlier date is accepted then the figure of Jerome could be a disguised portrait of Alphonso V of Aragon, King of Naples (*ill. 1*). Penny Howell Jolly draws this conclusion chiefly because of the similarity

between the portrayal of Jerome by Antonello and a portrait medallion of Alphonso by Pisanello. She reinforces the argument with examples of other disguised portraits and suggests that the painting was meant to draw a comparison between the piety and learning of the saint and that of Alphonso, since Alphonso's esteem of scholarship was well known and documented in the fifteenth century (Jolly, 1982, pp. 27 - 9).

Another indicator that Antonello's *St Jerome* may have been commissioned by a wealthy or powerful patron is the fact that it is probably a cabinet painting - made to be viewed in a small room or cabinet, possibly a library. If so, it is likely that the fall of light in the painting would be the same as the fall of light in the room for which it was painted:

The reality of the scene is then increased by a coincidence of the painted fall of light with that from the real external light source....Books and cupboards painted in a library may cause less conflict than, say, the sudden apparition of a coach and four (White, 1957, p. 192).

An example of such a room is the *studiolo* commissioned by

Frederico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino in 1474 for his Palazzo Ducale in Urbino. Over *trompe l'oeil* marquetry panels were portraits of 'illustrious men' including the four Fathers of the Church (Jardine, 1996, pp. 183-6). The framing devices and illusionistic techniques of the intarsia panels are so reminiscent of Antonello's *St Jerome* that it seems likely that it might have been a similar commission.

In summary, apart from Jerome's usual symbols the iconography of the painting is difficult to establish without access to contemporary texts. I have suggested that the foreground group might symbolise transition and that the light falling through the windows might represent the Nativity. It is likely that the painting was commissioned for a *studiolo* in which case the fall of light in the painting would match that of the real room.

The validity of the above analysis, based largely on Panofsky's iconological writings, is severely challenged by Cassidy.

'Disguised symbolism', the notion that details of seemingly straightforward images carried ulterior

meanings, proffered enticements that many scholars were unable to resist. Not only was there the challenge of the intellectual puzzle, but the solution was to be found in the scholar's preferred haunt, the library. Panofsky's iconology was infectious. He swept up in his wake scores of eager young historians in thrall to the sheer intellectual excitement of his approach. In attempting to emulate the master's erudition many abandoned themselves to an orgy of text hunting..... (Cassidy, 1993, p.6).

The evidence offered by Cassidy to uphold his challenge is this:

Imaginative sleuthing among the byways of theology and literature may be justified when dealing with the imagery created for Dominican chapter houses and the *studioli* of Italian noble women. But the large numbers of people who looked upon frescoes in their parish churches, the merchants who commissioned altarpieces,.... were not intellectuals with minds well stocked with abstruse learning.... What is true of the audience is equally true of the artist. With some notable exceptions (Mantegna, Leonardo and Rubens come to mind), artists were rarely scholars. It was not for their learning that they earned reputations.....Only occasionally would artists have had to refer directly to written sources, or receive from the the often cited but rarely sighted humanist or theologian detailed instruction about the subjects they were expected

to represent (Cassidy, 1993, pp. 7-8).

This is rather a harsh judgement on the intellectual abilities of Renaissance artists, and furthermore, the "imaginative sleuthing" of which Cassidy complains was surely what the paintings were intended to inspire:

Poets, philosophers, painters should speak in the language of riddles, of mysteries, which the *cognoscenti* alone could read. Such an attitude bred a sense of singularity, of exclusiveness, which courts and courtiers found as seductive as sin (Plumb, 1964, p. 95).

Chapter 5

The possibility of further symbolism in perspective

The perspective of Antonello's *St Jerome* is problematical, as is the concept of perspective itself; it is a complex of geometry and perception, the rational and the irrational combined. James Elkins illustrates this complexity by describing those areas in the University of Michigan in which perspective is classified:

...perspective is dispersed among the mathematics library, the fine arts library, the architecture library, the engineering library, and both general libraries; and within a given library, it is to be found on various floors and under various headings: in one place for photogrammetry, in another for aerial surveying, another for philosophy and so forth. This disarray is not merely a superficial trait but mirrors the conceptual scattering as a whole (Elkins, 1994, p. xii).

The problem of the perspective of *St Jerome* is this; taken as an exercise in single point perspective, the construction of the painting is 'wrong'. Whilst the parallel lines of the floor tiles

"Pardon me," said Alice, "But there's one thing I still don't understand. Where are we?"

"Chapter Five," smirked the Painter. Alice sighed heavily. "I mean," she said, "where is Tlön?"

The painter smiled and took down a roll of paper from the top of the shelves. "Here's a map," he said, "Find it for yourself."

Alice took the map and unrolled it on the desk. "But it's blank!" she cried.

"Aha!" said the painter and he raised a finger in the air and declaimed:

"What's the good of Mercator's North Poles and Equators, Tropics, zones and meridian lines?"

So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply

"They are merely conventional signs!"

"Merely conventional signs," mused Alice. "That's a new perspective. Tell me more." The Painter lifted down a very

converge to a single vanishing point, the orthogonals of the study only converge to a vanishing area, roughly around the vanishing point (ill. 23). There might be several reasons for this and I shall discuss some suggestions below.

1. Antonello did not properly understand the perspective system he was using.

Since the "invention" of perspective was relatively recent and communication relatively slow, artists like Antonello might not have grasped the geometrical complexity of perspective. Edgerton points out that "...most of the Italian artists during the first half of the fifteenth century did not suddenly adapt to linear perspective" (Edgerton, 1975, p. 24).

However, if one takes into account the Renaissance facility with geometry, its close relationship with painting, and the fact that artists had been experimenting with perspectival representation since Roman times, this becomes hardly a credible view point, especially in the context of what we have observed about Antonello's motivation. According to Elkins,

big book from the shelves, opened it and set it in front of Alice. She read: "*The geometry of Tlön comprises two somewhat different disciplines: the visual and the tactile. The latter corresponds to our own visual geometry and is subordinated to the first. The basis of visual geometry is the surface, not the point. This geometry disregards parallel lines and declares that man in his movement modifies the forms that surround him.*"

"And that's where this book," he indicated the black and gold book, "gets dangerously close to the answer for once. My fault entirely, for if there *is* one rule, it's that you don't demonstrate that you know too much about perspective. Using two geometries in the one painting *was* a bit reckless."

"Two geometries?" queried Alice.

"Look," said the Painter, and he pointed at the archway through which Alice had first entered. And the uprights weren't upright, they were curved, and the arch wasn't arched, it was flat.

"Transitional visual geometric distortion. It's my own invention," said the Painter, not a little proudly.

Few major artists achieve this kind of rational clarity. Antonello da Messina's perspectives are consistently clear, and they are also quite sophisticated: he had to work to achieve the simplicity of the *Virgin Annunciate* or the *Man in a Red Cap* (ills. 24, 15) (Elkins, 1994, p. 127).

Antonello was well travelled and receptive to new methods; the idea that he could master the technique sufficiently to draw in the orthogonals of the floor and then suddenly abandon the method in the painting of the study does not follow.

2. Antonello was using single point perspective correctly, but because the painting is small, minute drawing errors are compounded and exaggerated.

Elkins points out that;

Most paintings depart widely from their ideal geometry, and even myopically accurate constructions such as Carlo Crivelli's *Annunciation* are ultimately rendered inaccurate by the limits of the medium or the steadiness of the artist's hand, if not....by larger 'errors'. If brushwork is sloppy enough or if lines have been drawn freehand, it may not be easy to tell where

"And that's not all," he continued, "For in Tlön, '*man in his movement*' means a little more."

So saying, he took down a blue flask, which had the words "DRINK ME" beautifully printed on it in large letters. The Painter took out the cork and swallowed a large gulp - and disappeared!

"Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice, and in her surprise took a step forward.

"Ouch!" said a voice, somewhere around her knee cap. She looked down and there was the Painter, ten inches high!

"So sorry," said Alice.

"Don't mention it," said the Painter, "Occupational hazard. Now, if I want to do a small painting, I take a swig and bingo! It's as large as life, and twice as natural! Do you see?"

"Myopically!" said Alice, "But I'm still not sure what it all means."

the ruler should be set to trace the ideal geometry" (Elkins, 1994, p. 220).

Antonello may not have been able to choose the scale of *St Jerome* if it was a commission; on the other hand, he may have preferred to work in a smaller format. Most of his surviving work is small scale, with the exception of the *San Cassiano Altarpiece* (114 x 65 cm) and his *St Sebastian* (171 x 85 cm).

3. Antonello made deliberate adjustments to the perspective of the study, either:

- a. because it did not look 'right'; a formal adjustment; or
- b. for some symbolic reason; an iconographical adjustment.

There are many examples of paintings where the perspective has been adjusted to compensate for its limitations. Kubovy uses the example of Uccello's *Sir John Hawkwood* where the artist was asked to change the painting of the horse and rider twice before his patrons were satisfied with it.

....Uccello had discovered that strict adherence to the laws of perspective made for unacceptable paintings and that he had to compromise twice before the result was acceptable to viewers (Kubovy, 1986, p. 118 n.6).

In any case, Antonello had been trained in the Flemish manner, which used an empirical method for the construction of correct perspective, and was influenced by van Eyck. Elkins uses the term 'patchwork' for van Eyck's perspective method which resulted in several vanishing areas; a "hedgehog" of construction lines (Elkins, 1994, p. 237).

That the vanishing point of the perspective of the floor tiles in Antonello's *St Jerome* is at a point between Jerome's eyes and the book he is reading could imply that the subject of the painting was the act of study. Such symbolic use of the vanishing point has been used by other painters, such as Domenico Veneziano; the vanishing point in the central panel of his *Saint Lucy Altarpiece* "...coincides with the Virgin's womb, the spiritual and dogmatic centre of the painting" (Elkins, 1994, p. 146).

An attempt to read significance into a cluster of vanishing points was made by one writer about Raphael's *School of Athens*, claiming that a star shaped pattern was hidden above the philosophers' heads. Elkins dismisses this theory on the basis that it is historically improbable and inaccurate (Elkins, 1994, pp. 229-30).

There is a further possibility that Antonello made a creative use of perspective by combining two systems. The painting very deliberately and theatrically describes a space within a space; the study is an improbable and elaborate construction, having two walls missing, presumably so we can see into it. The larger space is rendered with exact Italian perspective; Panofsky remarks;

Thus even Antonello da Messina, under such strong Netherlandish influence, constructs the study of St. Jerome with a long perpendicular distance, so that, like nearly all Italian interiors, it is basically an architectural exterior with the front surface removed. He also lets the space begin only at (or indeed behind) the picture plane (Panofsky, 1991, p. 69).

The study space, however, is constructed with typical van Eyckian methods; we seem to have here a "picture within a picture", a device which, according to Elkins "defeated the precipitous vanishing lines by capturing them in a further illusion" (Elkins, 1994, p. 151). Elkins goes on to cite several examples of this device in paintings by Michael Pacher, Domenico Ghirlandaio and Colantonio, Antonello's teacher.

Conclusion to the text

In the first chapter I described the social and economic context of the Early Renaissance. The prevailing philosophy was humanism and there was an eclectic enthusiasm for knowledge, fuelled by the invention of printing. Such knowledge was assumed with an air of nonchalance and the setting and solving of riddles was an important way of differentiating an educated elite. Mathematics was important for trade. The fifteenth century saw a change in status for the artist, on the basis of his skills, although opinions differ as to whether this included his intellectual ability. The influence of Netherlandish art was shown to be important.

From the little known of Antonello we can see that he was self-motivated and well travelled. He was well known in his own time, influencing many other artists and is accredited with the development of oil painting in Italy.

Jerome was an important figure to the Humanists and hence he is very often depicted in paintings with a well established symbolism. As well as the Vulgate version of the Bible he was a prolific letter

The Queen put her head round the side of the study and said, "If there's no meaning in it that saves a world of trouble you know, as we needn't try to find any."

"Oh, but I'm sure if I tried, I might be able to understand some of it," protested Alice, "for instance, is Maths important or not?"

"Tell me first," said the Painter, slowly, "What is Maths?"

"Well," said Alice, "You get a sum and you have to find the Right Answer."

"And how do you know what is the Right Answer?" asked the Painter.

"Well they mark it in your book, you know, with a tick or sometimes a cross." said Alice.

"And what's the point of that?" asked the Painter.

"Well, it's character forming, to struggle to get something Right. And Arithmetic's very useful."

"And what happens to your character if you get it Wrong?" asked the Painter.

"Oh," said Alice, suddenly remembering, "you become

writer in which his problems with sexual fantasy play not a little part. Paintings of Jerome by van Eyck, Catena and Durer were compared to Antonello's.

In chapter four, problems with interpreting symbolism were discussed. A contextual comparison suggested that the symbolic representation of spiritual transition in the foreground of the painting and that the birth of Christ was represented by the light falling through the windows in the background. Other symbolism in the painting might include a disguised portrait of the King of Naples and the painted fall of light replicating that of the room for which it was commissioned.

In the final chapter I discussed the problem of the "incorrect" perspective of the study. The evidence suggests that this was a deliberate use of two perspective systems. From what we can deduce about Antonello's personality I suggested that this was a deliberate and perhaps ostentatious *demonstration* of his skill.

I set out in my research to try to uncover the meaning of the painting but a large part of this has remained hidden. This begs the question

Ambitious, Distracted, Ugly and Derisive!"

"Possibly, though everyone's different. That's why Psychology is the pre-eminent discipline. If you think that there's *always* a Right Answer, if only you could find it, then you go searching for the single, ruling order in everything, and ignore all sorts of things because they're Wrong when they might be simply interesting."

"Oh," said Alice thoughtfully.

"Twaddle," said the Queen, "what happens if I want to wallpaper a room? I need the right answer then, otherwise I don't know how much to buy."

"Wallpaper is merely a conventional sign," said the Painter, pompously, "I could do you a nice fresco though," he added, persuasively.

"I don't think you'll have time," said Alice, "you've got everybody else's paintings to paint."

"Whatever gave you that idea?" inquired the Painter.

"You did. *In Tlön all works are the creation of a single author,*" insisted Alice.

"Oh no, there's lots of painters and writers and so forth. It's just that we don't worry about who did what. Saves a lot of

of whether the still life details carried any particular meaning in the first place. Perhaps Antonello was just slavishly imitating the intimate still life details of Flemish paintings; he certainly does not seem to have been as interested in this type of painting as he seems to have been in depicting, for example, the single figure of Christ. If it does carry concealed symbolism, then it was probably the intention of the artist or his patron that its meaning should remain hidden from all but a small elite. As indeed it has. This leads me to my next question: To what extent are we justified in even attempting to interpret meaning which has been deliberately obscured? If it was meant as an intellectual puzzle then it is reasonable to take up the challenge. But if it was intended for private meditation some of its meaning may be intensely personal and therefore unrecoverable.

A third question which has concerned me is that, assuming that there is hidden symbolism, to what extent was Antonello responsible for devising it? On the one hand we have Alberti's exhortation that painters should be widely read; against this, the evidence that patrons would often specify the content of their commissions. Some commentators, such as Cassidy, are adamant

time and trouble."

"But if you don't know who did something, then..." Alice faltered.

"Then what?" asked the Painter, brightly.

"I don't know. I'd have to think about it. But I'm sure that where I come from a lot of people wouldn't be very happy about it." said Alice.

"Some people aren't happy about it here," said the Painter

"But then again, some are."

Alice began again. "Tell me, why did the old sheep in the boat remind you of Venice?"

"I was wondering that!" said the Queen, who had been getting restless.

"It didn't," said the Painter, "I made that up. You can do that in a story, you know."

"And invention's the oldest rule in the book," said Alice confidently.

"The Problem, if there is a problem," said the Painter, "is that what means something to someone might mean nothing to no-one else."

"There you go again," said the Queen, "What utter balderdash.

that most artists were not scholars; whereas both Plumb and Baxandall give Renaissance artists a good deal of credit for the intellectual content of their work. Durer's representation of Jerome was certainly founded upon an intimate knowledge of the man through his writings. Was Antonello's? Given the unusual nature of the painting in the context of his oeuvre and my, admittedly, extremely subjective assessment of his character as a rather brash exhibitionist I must conclude - reluctantly - that it was not.

And it's not even grammar. I'm off," and she disappeared again.

"You mean, I have to find my own meaning?" asked Alice,

"And what happens if I can't?"

"Then," said the Painter "you make it up."

"With what?" asked Alice.

"The facts," said the Painter.

"But supposing there aren't any?" said Alice.

"But there always are. The facts of the imagination. So you invent it," said the Painter.

"Well," said Alice slowly, "I thought I'd seen your study before. It looks familiar. And that's a fact."

"There you are then," said the Painter, triumphantly.

"But it's impossible. I've never been here before. And there's no use trying to believe impossible things."

"I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Painter,

"When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour every day. Why sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

"Oh," said Alice stamping her foot, "you're impossible!"

"No," said the Painter, "merely a fact of your imagination."

The passages quoted in the subtext are as follows:

Page 26: Borges, 1970, p. 19.

Pages 26-7: Borges, 1970, p. 37.

Page 27: Steadman, 1986, p. 11.

Page 33: Borges, 1970, p. 37 and Eco, 1990, p. 619.

Page 42: Borges, 1970, p. 37.

General conclusion

My focus in these concluding remarks is on the interaction of the text and subtext; how the development of each affected the other and challenged the question at the heart of my research - why does Antonello's painting intrigue me so much? When I refer to the text and subtext in the following, I mean all the processes involved in their composition and not just their final form.

The role of the subtext was to challenge constantly the objectivity of the text. Given the scope of the thesis, and the potential scope of the Renaissance period, some selection of topics for research was inevitable. After a general survey of the literature the areas for further research were selected in the context of the painting itself. I became aware however, that these dealt in the main either with personalities or with areas of personal interest to me; I did not deal with materials or technique for example, nor with the political or economic history of the period. A theme of the research was to establish the intellectual engagement of the artist with his subject matter; also of personal interest to me. In the end, the challenge to objectivity exerted by the subtext was such

that the conclusion was the opposite to that which I wanted to establish. In this sense the subtext acted as a kind of moral conscience in the pursuit of objectivity.

At the same time, issues such as psychoanalysis which were rejected as too subjective for the text could be dealt with in a far more personal way in the subtext; it therefore allowed a greater degree of freedom than would have been possible in a more conventional study. My choice of painting was highly subjective in any case and demanded a more reflective analysis. It is interesting that the form of the thesis itself reflects the form of the painting: a text within a text, which is concerned with a painting within a painting, of a space within a space.

Turning to the effect of the text upon the subtext, the style of the text dominated the composition of the subtext for quite a long time; the freedom of complete subjectivity was almost too much after the rigour of the research. The decision to write a piece of fiction was made almost in a spirit of rebellion against the dominant voice of the text. Furthermore, the overbearing Eurocentric stance of much of what I had read provoked me to

challenge some of its assumptions. One of the most important outcomes of this process is that I have become far more open minded and willing to challenge some long-held assumptions.

As with the text, the subjective choice of the painting had its effect on the subtext. It can be read as a conversation between different aspects of the same person; the Painter, the Queen and Alice are all me.

Alice's reliance on logic and what she has learnt in school reflect the person I was before I began the study, a bit too dependant on the authoritative stance of Panofsky's writing and afraid to challenge the status quo. The Painter deconstructs this, having observed the shortfall in Alice's assumptions about logic, sometimes explaining and sometimes not, opening up arguments and never closing them down. The Queen is just plain confused, bossy and a little tired of the argument (in all four senses of the word), lest any one should think the process is all clear to me now.

The painting itself remains, paradoxically, almost as enigmatic as

it was at the beginning of the study but still as familiar. In refusing to yield up its meaning it has thrown a question back at me. Instead of asking "What is it about this painting that intrigues me?", I have found myself asking "Who am I that I am so intrigued by this painting?"

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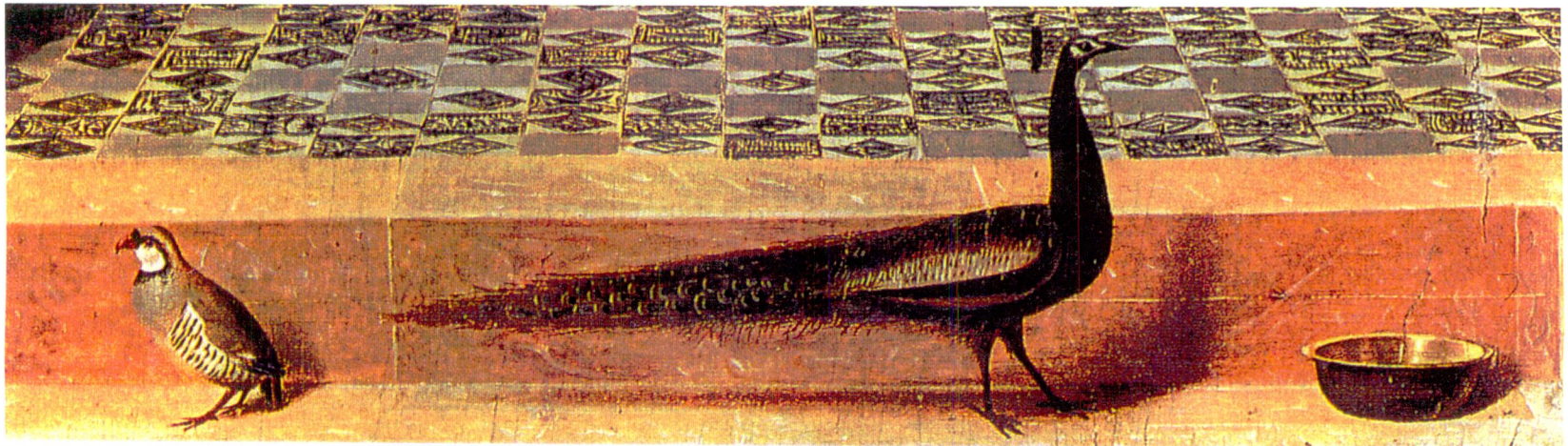
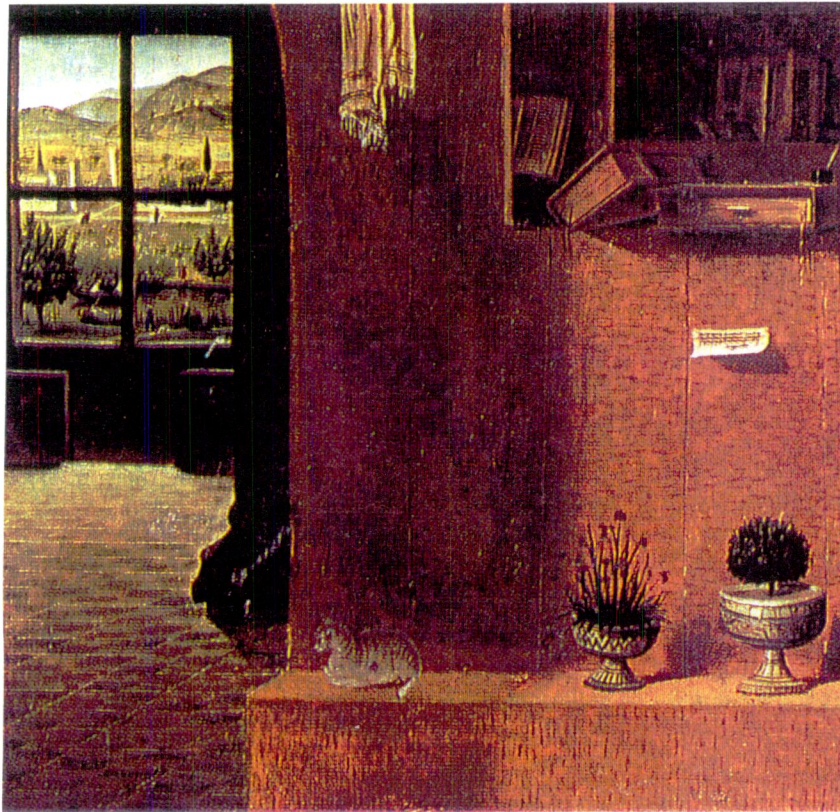
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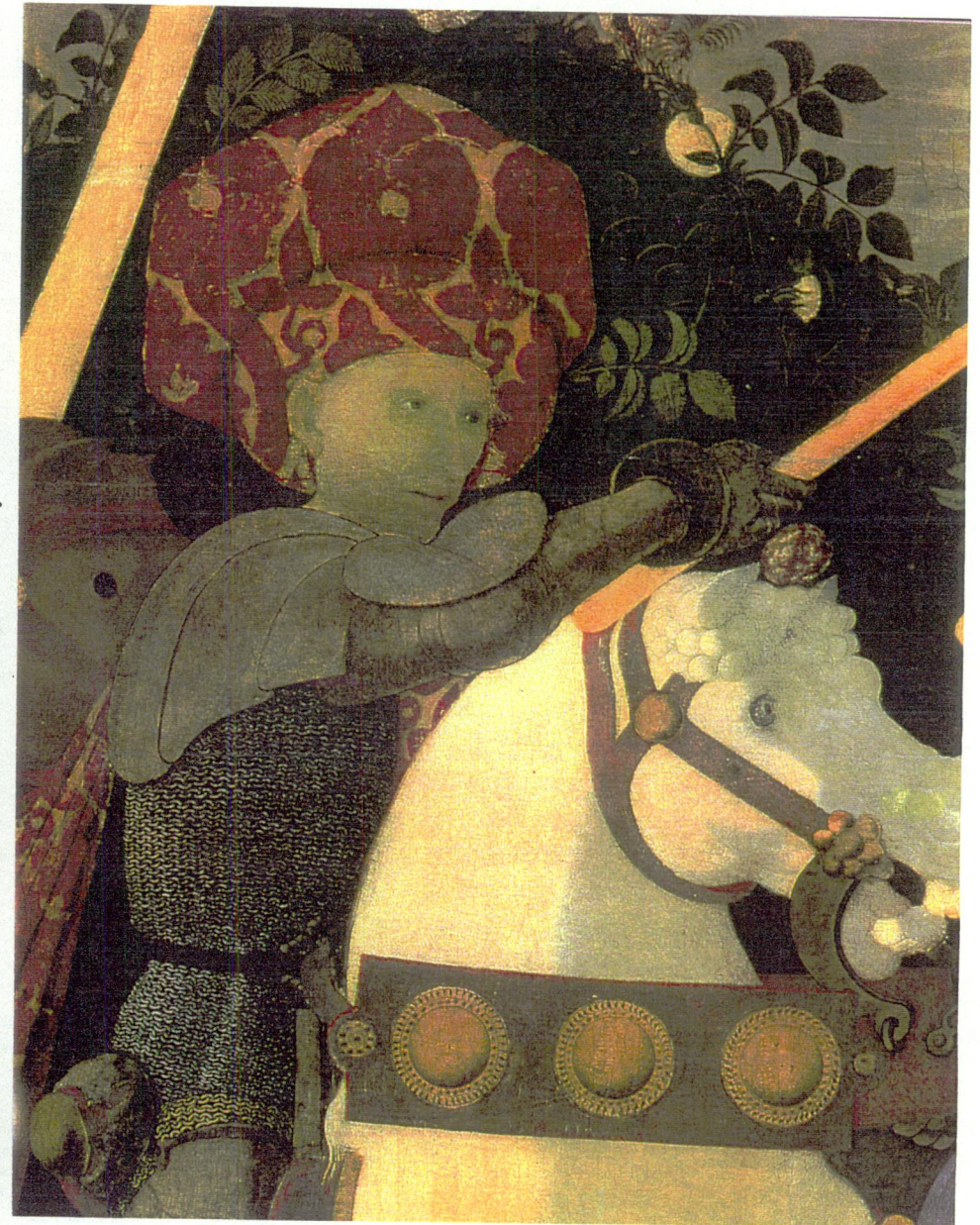
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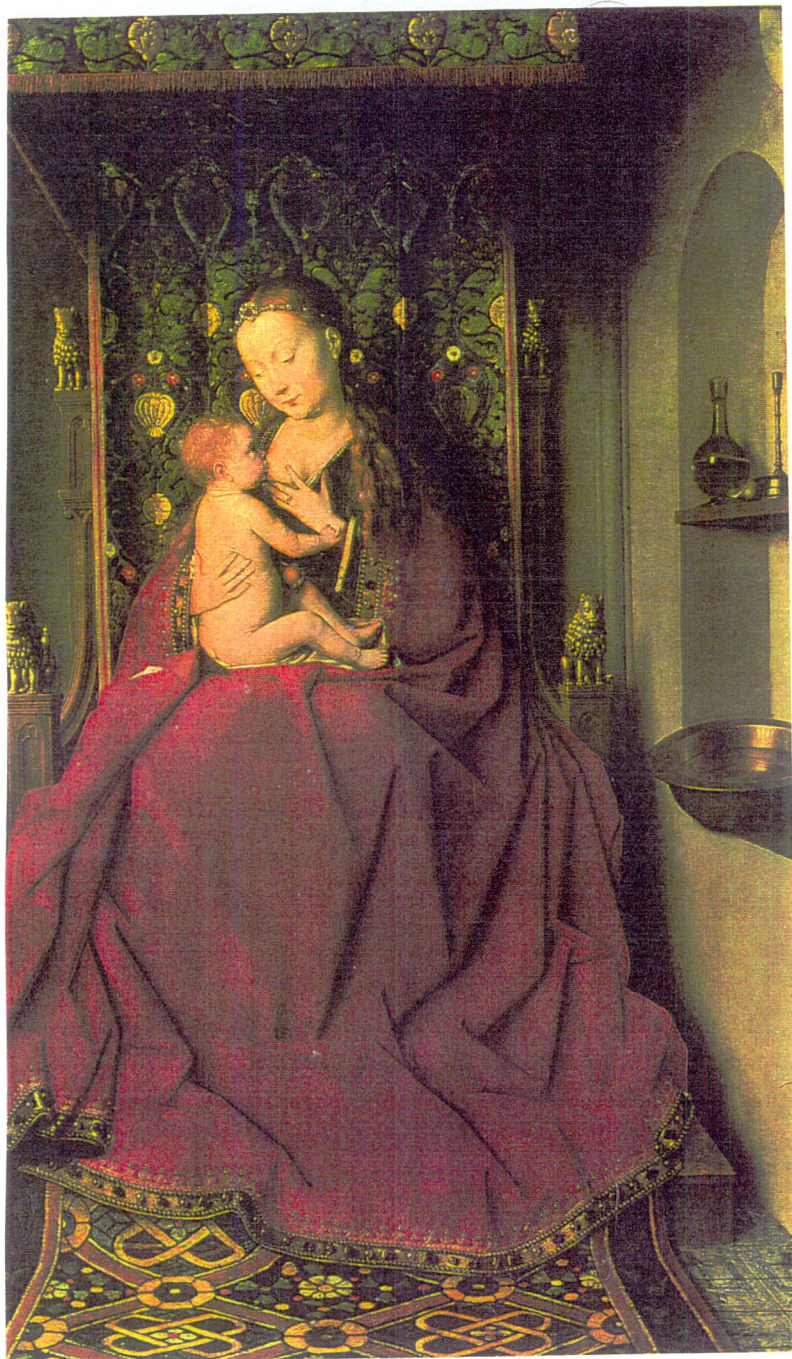
1. Antonello da Messina *St Jerome in his Study* - details.



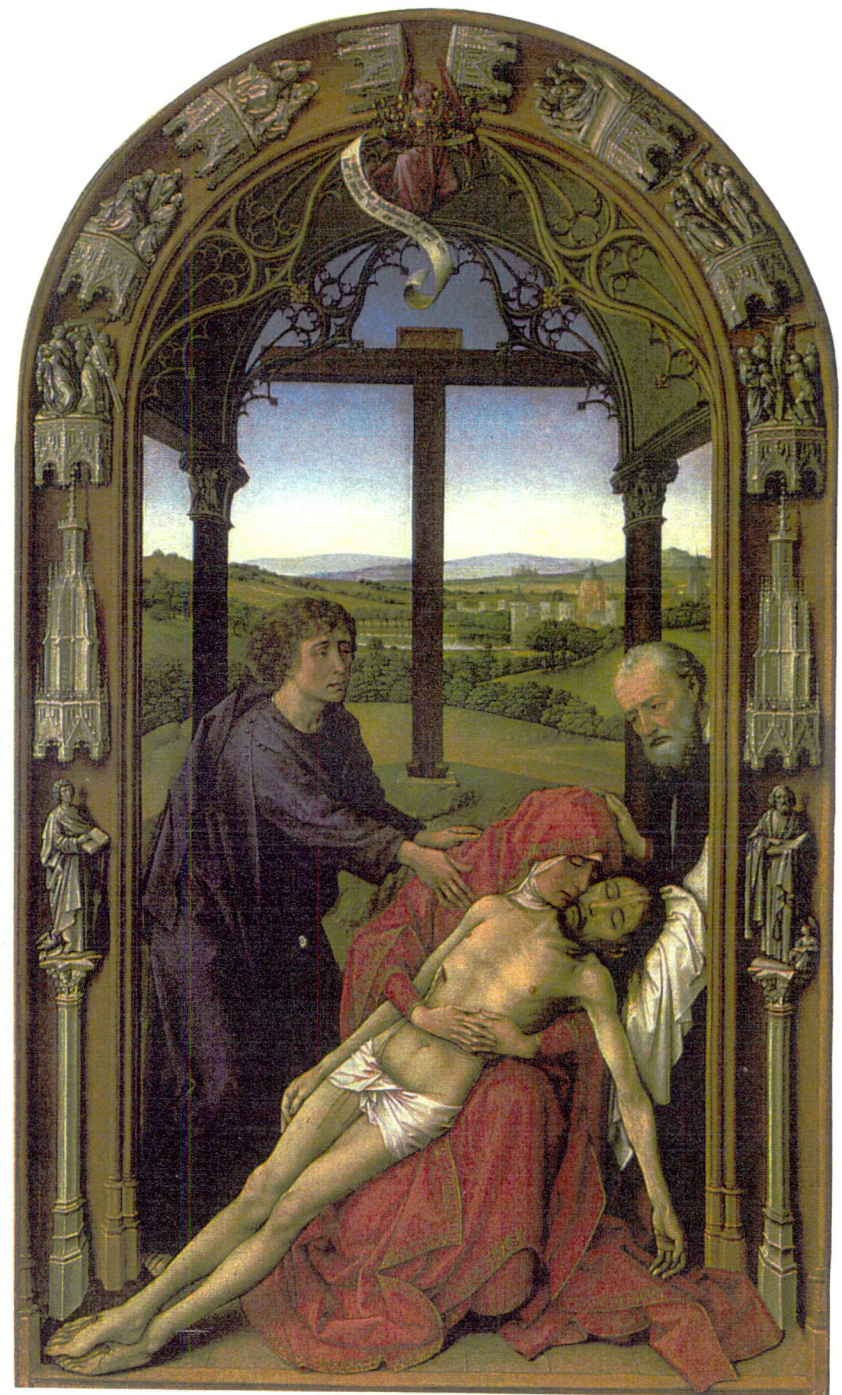
2. Bellini, *The Doge Leonardo Loredan*, National Gallery, London.



3. Uccello, *The Battle of San Romano*, (detail) National Gallery, London.



4. Van Eyck, *The Virgin Enthroned Nursing the Child (Madonna of Lucca)*, Städelches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt.



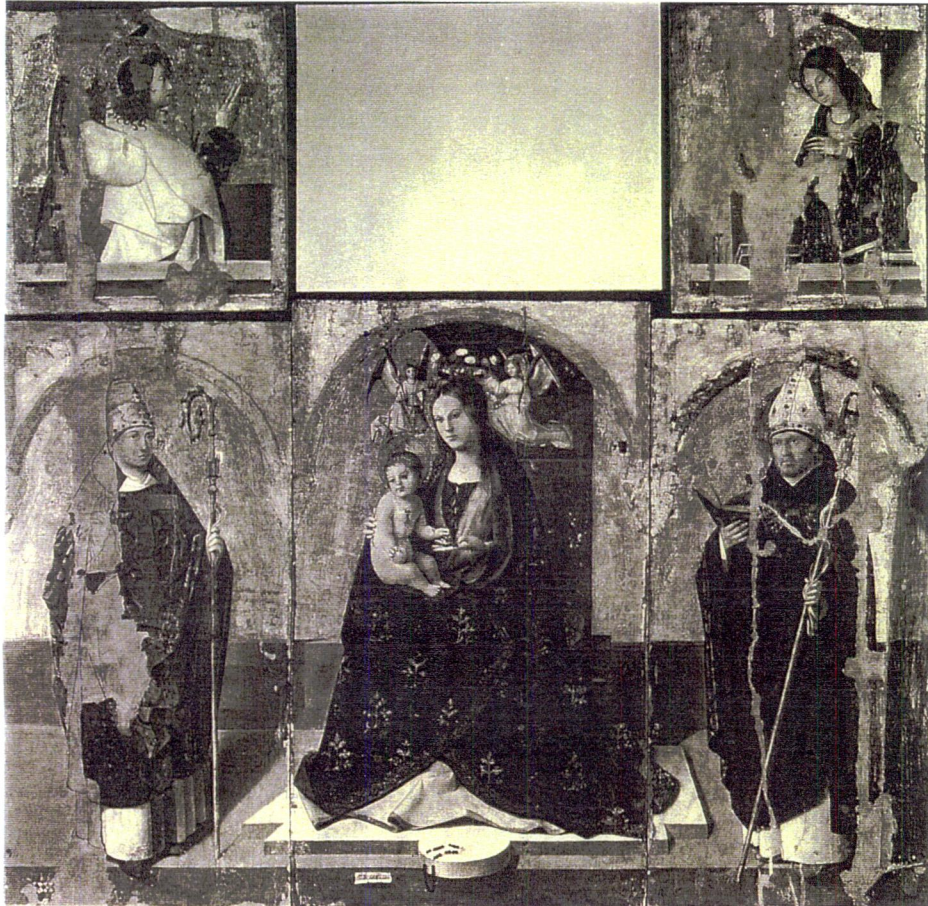
5. Rogier van der Weyden, *Pieta*, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.



6. Petrus Christus, *St Eligius*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



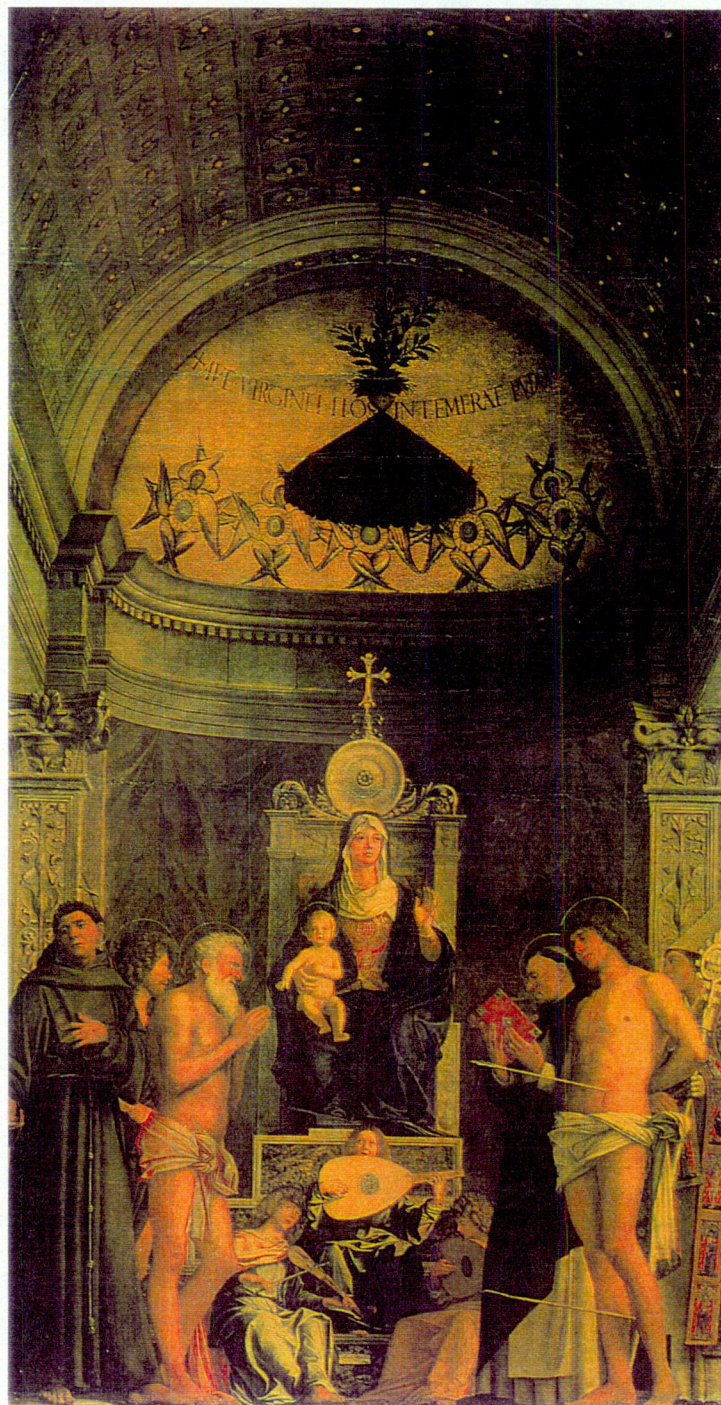
7. Van Eyck, *St Jerome*, Institute of Arts, Detroit.



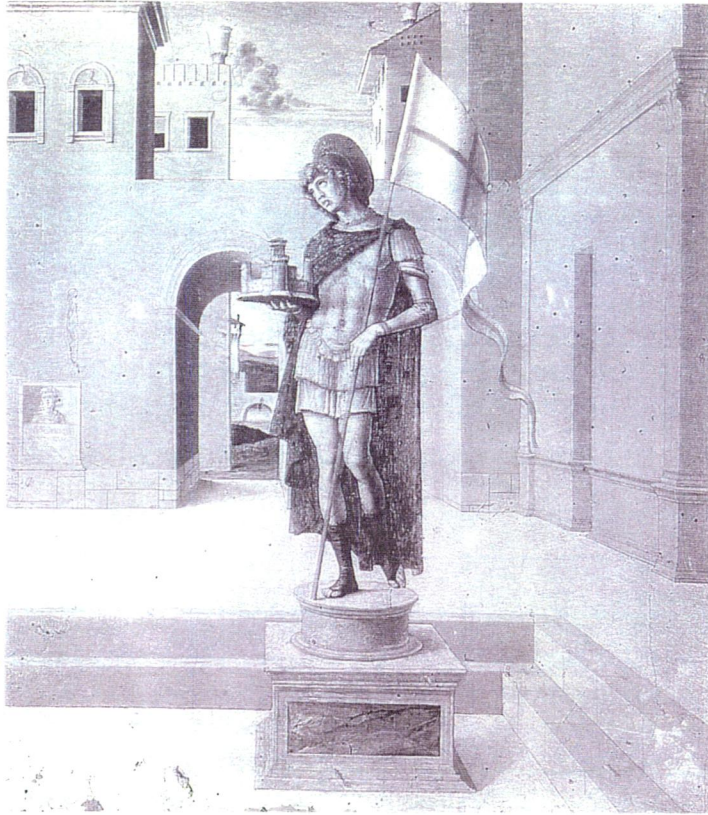
8. Antonello da Messina, *San Gregorio Altarpiece*
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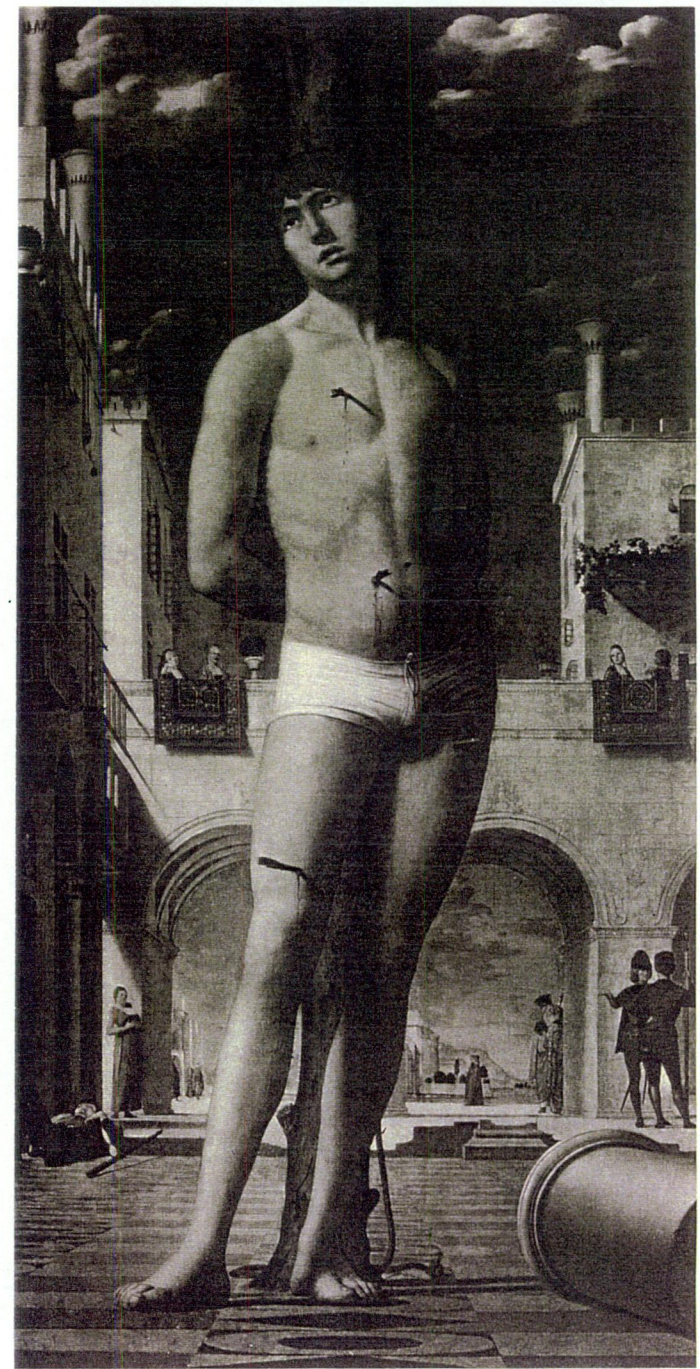
9. Antonello da Messina, *San Cassiano Altarpiece*,
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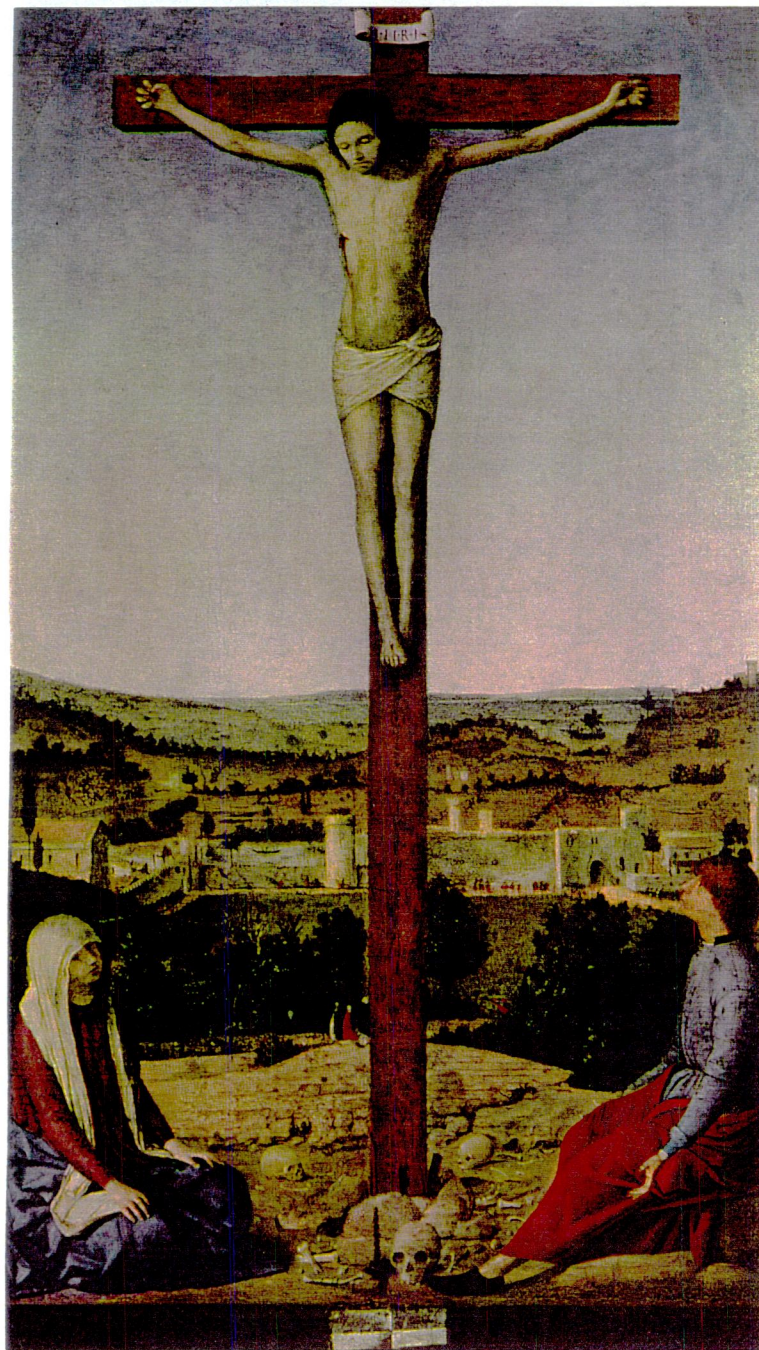
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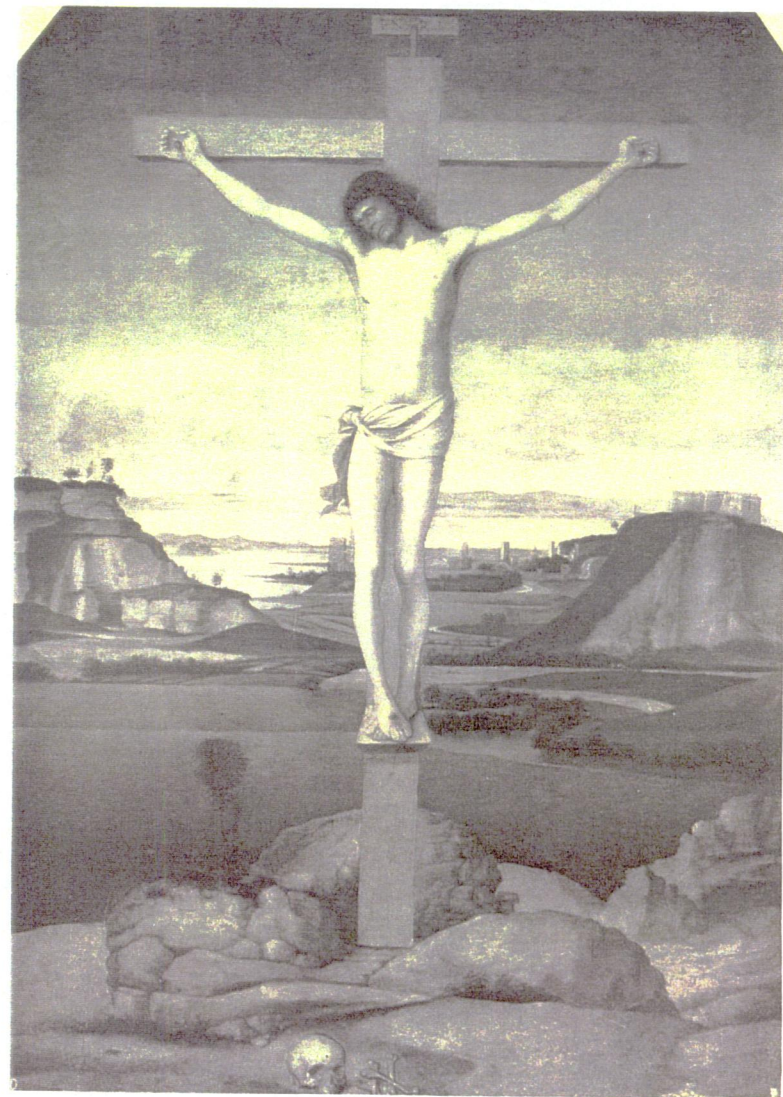
11. Bellini, *Pesaro altarpiece, detail*, St Terentius, Patron Saint of Pesaro, Museo Correr, Venice.



12. Antonello da Messina, *St Sebastian*, Gemälde Galerie, Dresden.



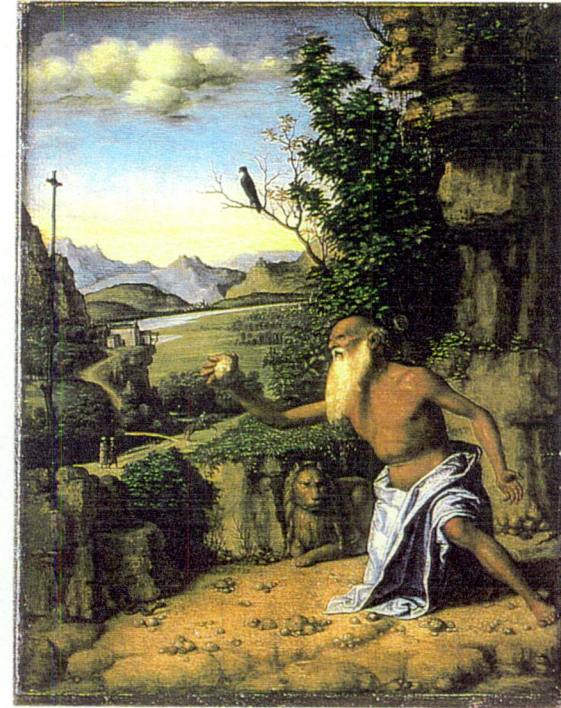
13. Antonello da Messina, *Crucifixion*, National Gallery, London.



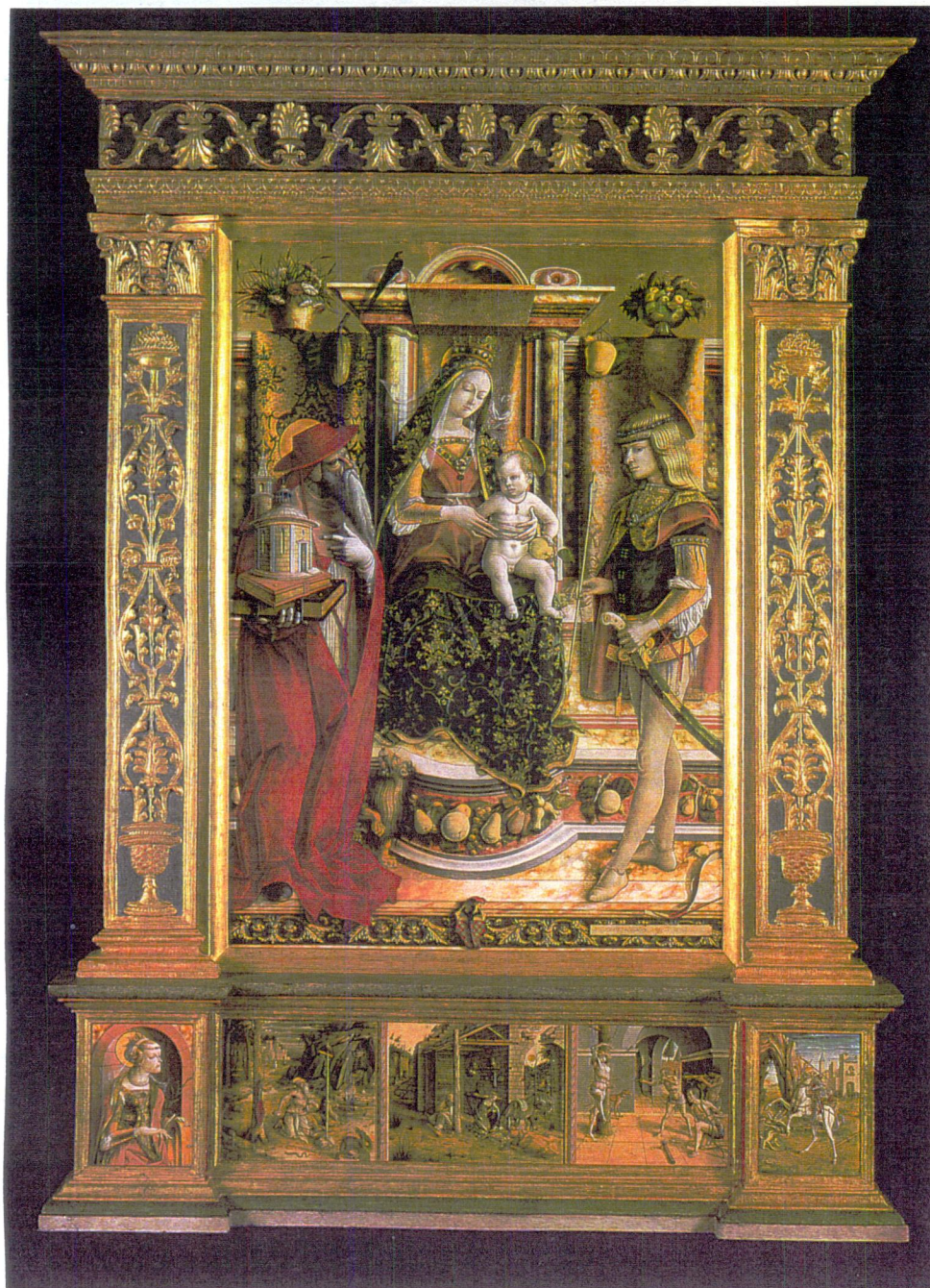
14. Bellini, *Crucifixion*, principe Corsini, Florence.



15. Antonello da Messina *Man in a Red Cap*, National Gallery, London.



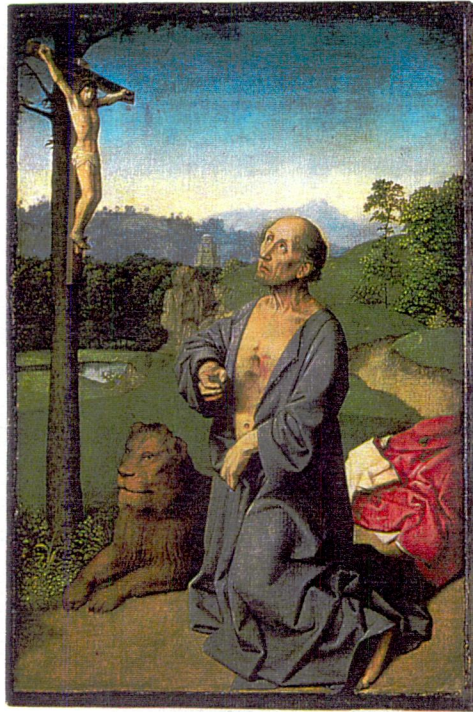
16. Cima da Conegliano, *St Jerome in a Landscape*, National Gallery, London.



17. Crivelli *The Virgin with St Jerome and St Sebastian (The Madonna della Rondine)*, National Gallery, London.



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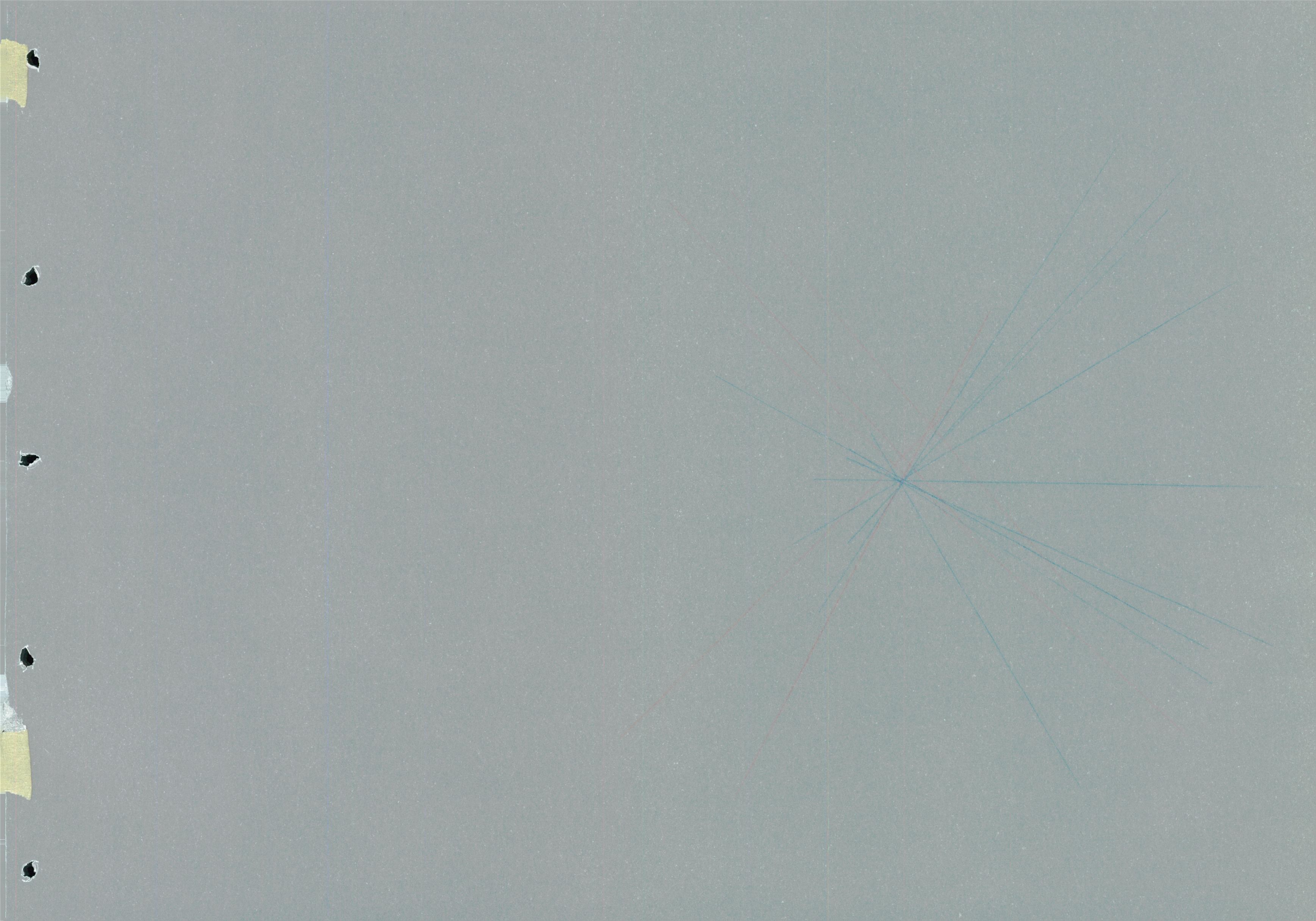
20. Antonello da Messina, *St Jerome*, Galleria Nazionale, Palermo.

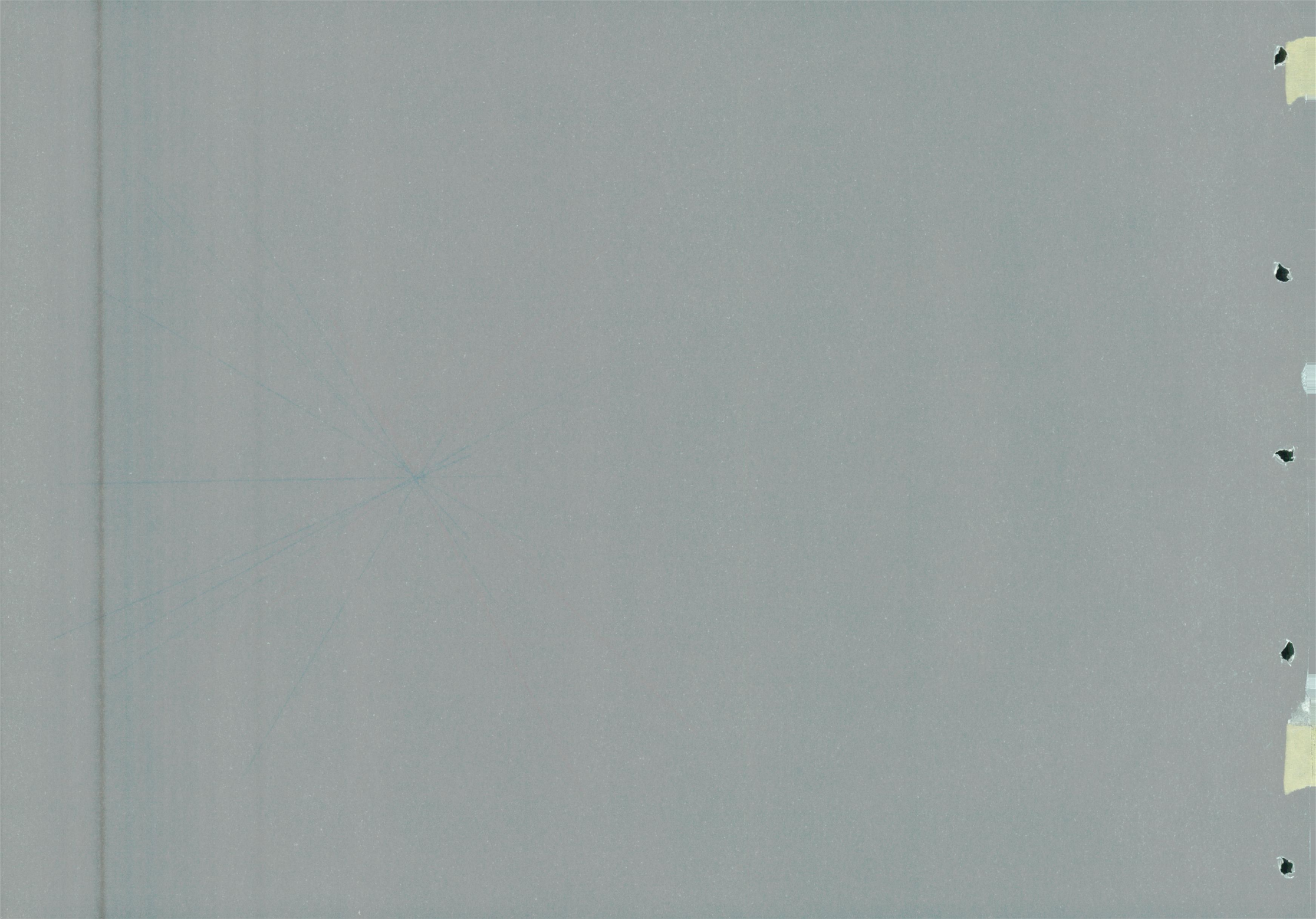


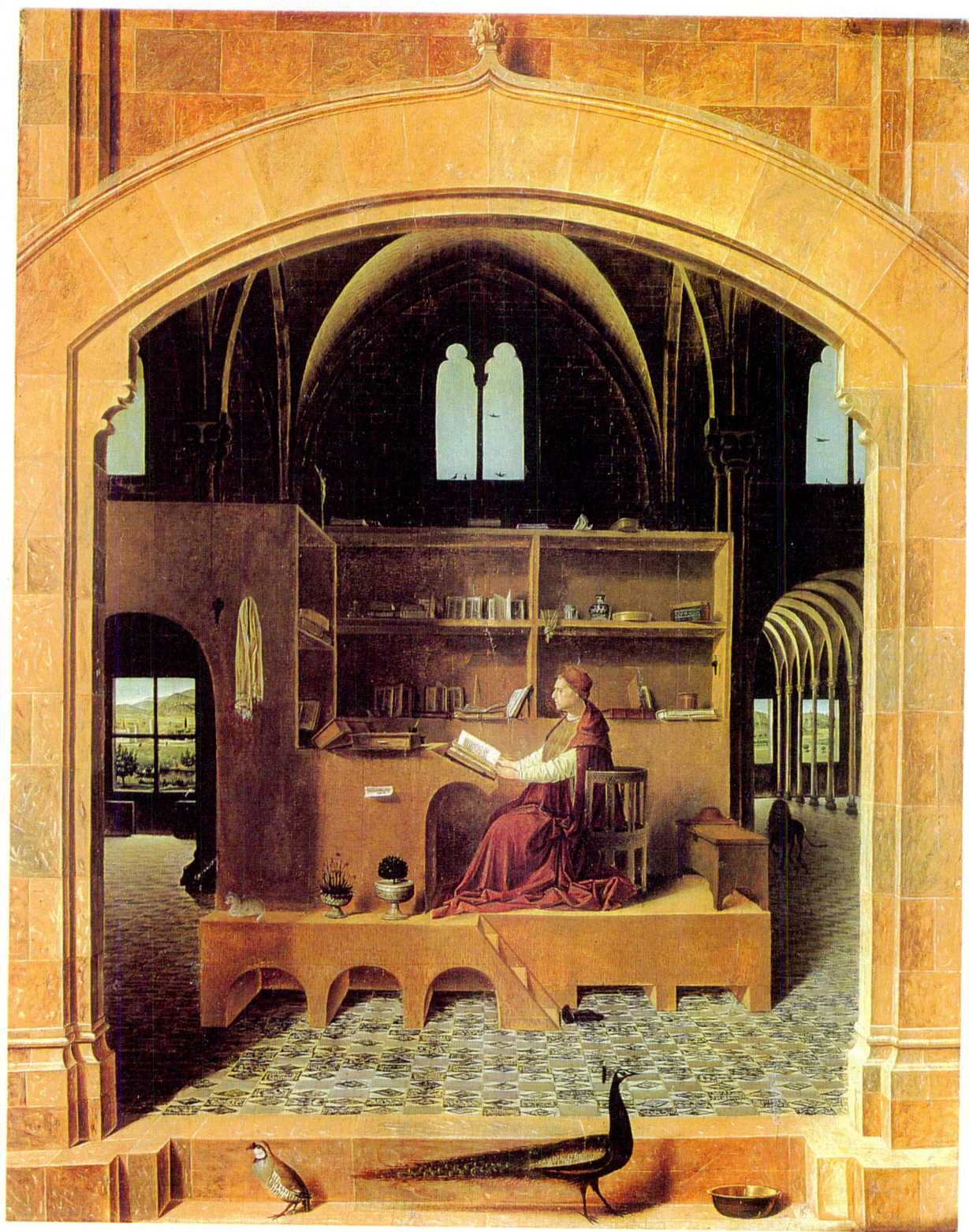
21. Catena, *St Jerome*, National Gallery, London.



22. Dürer *St Jerome in his Study* (engraving)









24. Antonello da Messina, *Virgin Annunciate* Galleria Nazionale, Palermo.

