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Jusepe de Ribera, called
Lo Spagnoletto
St Jerome Writing

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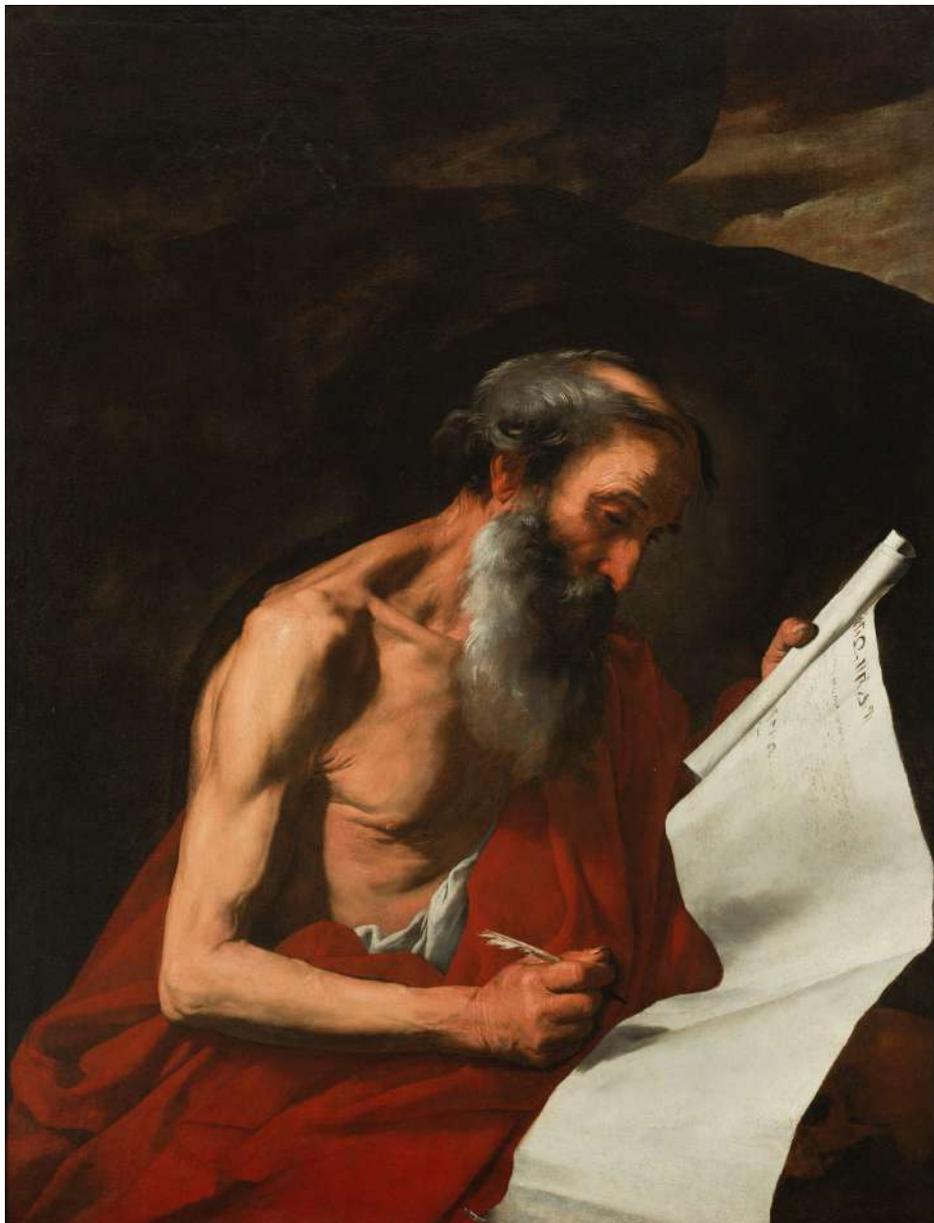
JUSEPE DE RIBERA, called LO SPAGNOLETTO
(Xàtiva 1591 – 1652 Naples)

ST JEROME WRITING

Oil on canvas
125 x 93 cm; 49 1/4 x 36 5/8 in.

Provenance

Juan María Maestre y Gómez de Barreda, Marqués de Gómez de Barreda (b. 1880);
Thence by descent to the present owner.



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Jusepe de Ribera originated from Xàtiva, near Valencia in Spain, but settled in Naples in about 1616 when he married the daughter of Giovan Bernardo Azzolino – a late Mannerist painter of Sicilian origin with a busy workshop – and set up his own studio. According to his contemporaries, Ribera had worked first in Parma (where he may have arrived about 1611) and later in Rome, where his paintings in Caravaggio's naturalistic manner had enjoyed success amongst collectors. His style was highly sought after in Naples: a kingdom with a Spanish viceroy and an opulent court. Native artists had encountered difficulties in meeting the needs of both the aristocracy and the clergy, who had recently undertaken a vast construction programme of new churches and monasteries including the Certosa di San Martino, where Ribera was later to execute magnificent work. Building on the relationships which he had established with important fellow countrymen in Rome, Ribera became court painter to successive viceroys, including Fernando Alfán de Ribera (1583 – 1637), 3rd Duke of Alcalà, and Manuel de Zúñiga y Fonseca (d. 1637), Count of Monterrey, who sent back shiploads of his paintings to Spain.

As Sir Ellis Waterhouse pointed out, Ribera, although a Spaniard, is 'an Italian painter with a Spanish accent and the dominant figure of the earlier Seicento in Naples and the only one with a truly European reputation'.¹ Sir Ellis also remarked that 'he introduced new themes into Italian painting and the bent of his taste can be paralleled by certain trends in Neapolitan literature of the time – not only Marino's doctrine that "the purpose of art is to astonish", but [also] Basile's interest in local folklore. Both are reflected in Ribera's use of common models as vehicles for religious expression. He painted best precisely what he had before his eyes'.²

The present unpublished work was reviewed in person after cleaning by Professor Nicola Spinosa, who has supported the attribution. The expert dated it to around 1628 for manifest affinities with the other Saint Jerome in the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples (fig. 1) and for the presence of the same model in the canvas at the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan (fig. 2).

This would place the canvas before Ribera turned away from the strong naturalism of his earlier years for Neo-Venetian colouring – see the painting of the same subject in the Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome, which is signed and dated 1629 (fig. 3).³ There is also identical attention to the careful rendering of skin and flesh and similarly wrought details in the scroll the Saint is writing on. The contrast between the dark, muted background and the crimson red of Jerome's clothing are also particularly comparable across these late 1620s renditions of the subject.

¹ E. Waterhouse, *Italian Baroque Painting*, London 1962, pp. 174-175.

² Waterhouse 1962, p. 175.

³ Spinosa 2003, p. 272, no. A66, reproduced in colour on pp. 74 & 75.

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Father of the Church and translator of the Vulgate, St Jerome was born in Dalmatia in 342. As a young man he travelled to the Holy Land, and later went to live as a hermit in the Syrian desert where he studied Hebrew with, in his own words, 'only the scorpions and the wild beasts for company'. During this period, he experienced vivid sexual hallucinations which he fought off by beating his breast. He held office in Rome under Pope Damasus I (366 – 384). In 386, St Jerome settled in Bethlehem where he began work on his translation of the Old and New Testaments into Latin, which occupied him for many years – hence the writing activity in the present canvas. St Jerome is often depicted in Western Art, but rarely as a young man. He is usually shown as an ascetic elderly hermit or, especially in Renaissance painting, in full cardinal's regalia in a library.

Note on provenance

Traditionally the present painting remained in the Maestre family for several generations. Established in Seville by the seventeenth century, the family cultivated a longstanding tradition of collecting. It was then recorded in the personal collection of Juan María Maestre y Gómez de Barreda (b. 1880), the son of Nicolás Maestre Lobo and Dolores Gómez de Barreda y Gómez de Barreda and his title granted by Pope Leo XIII. By the 1930s Maestre was active in the ceremonial and charitable life of Seville. In 1933 he is recorded as having been appointed Hermano Mayor of the Santa Caridad of Seville, and in 1934 contemporary press notices described him as Marqués pontificio de Gómez de Barreda and Maestrante de Sevilla.

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Fig. 1. Jusepe de Ribera, called Lo Spagnoletto, *The Vision of St Jerome*, 1626.
Museo di Capodimonte, Naples

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Fig. 2. Jusepe de Ribera, called Lo Spagnoletto, *The Penitent St Jerome*.
Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.

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Fig. 3. Jusepe de Ribera, called Lo Spagnoletto, *The Vision of St Jerome*, 1629.
Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome

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COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com