

The Power of Being Incomplete

By Jennifer Vignone for <http://www.NY-ARTNews.com>

They shuffle through the darkened gallery, stopping to reflect over a once-in-a lifetime experience:

It's unfinished."

"He didn't finish it."

"Who was Jerome? Why is he a Saint?"

"Is that the way it is supposed to look? It doesn't look done."

From within the darkened gallery, daVinci's painting, "St. Jerome in the Wilderness", catches the Saint in the reverie of intense prayer. The painting is on loan from the Vatican to [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) in celebration of the 500th anniversary of daVinci's death.



St. Jerome in the Wilderness. Leonardo daVinci. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Copyright 2019 JVignone.

The comments imply that the visitors are curious about the state of the work -- and the wonder of displaying something so unfinished. The Met Museum states that the primary goal of the exhibit is to reveal how daVinci worked. Yet, complexity arises as one considers the subject matter, the content, the creative process and the end result.

Whether or not the painting is “complete” is a legitimate question. Does the unfinished state makes it less valuable and distract from the ability to appreciate it, or is its imperfect state part of the story daVinci is relating?

Jerome was a monastic who found renown as a scholar, theologian, and historian. Initially embarking upon a life of experimentation in various types of pleasure, after a long illness in 373-374, he had a vision resulting in his conversion to Christianity. Afterwards he pursued a life of asceticism, mainly studying the Bible. Around 378 AD he was ordained by Bishop Paulinus under the condition that he could continue his life of penance. Throughout the remainder of his life he studied grammar, rhetoric, philosophy, and linguistics. He undertook revisions and translations of scripture and is known for his Latin translation of the Bible.

The painting finds Jerome, living as a hermit, alone in the wilderness. Captured in prayer, he holds a stone in his right hand, used for beating his chest in penance. His upturned gaze calls out to the heavens -- the devotion and supplication in his eyes indicate that he is in a dialog and awaiting a response with God.

The unfinished state of the painting shows daVinci’s work process. The lion, a symbol of strength, is sketched into the foreground as a reminder of the Gospel of Mark that Jerome translated into Latin. A landscape off to the left side of the painting grounds the figure in nature and this world — daVinci’s fingerprints worked into the surface imparting his personal connection. The church and crucifix, lightly indicated on the right, reference Jerome’s connection to his faith and his role with the church.

St. Jerome’s figure varies in detail to symbolize the ascetic state of his corporal being, as well as a harkening to some of daVinci’s anatomical drawings — the sketchier treatment a reminder of man’s transience in this world. Organizationally, the figure works as a trapezoid, the placement of the other elements around him always drawing us back to the face of St. Jerome. It is in the areas worked on in greater detail, where the real storytelling occurs — the intent — where man is connecting with God. Jerome’s eyes look liquid and show the effect of his spiritual bond. The technique revealed by the painting’s unfinished condition shows not just how daVinci constructed a composition and approached painting, but the importance of the work’s theme in bringing it to an emotional conclusion. The focus on the key elements draws the viewer into the real message. What is unfinished actually helps complete the piece.

To stand in front of St. Jerome is a powerful experience. The painting is a statement of life never really being “done”, the dialog within oneself and with one’s faith is never completed; it is eternal. Through Jerome’s enraptured state, we encounter God and consider our own existence.

Art speaks of the “happy accident” and the greatest innate gift an artist has is knowing when to stop. Maybe it was lack of funding, distraction by another project or abandonment for some other reason — we will never know — it nonetheless resulted in a work that communicates with

each of us in a unique way. Thankfully, until October 6th, you can enrich your spirit and knowledge in a moment of true art-inspired awe at [The Met](#).



A moment with St. Jerome at The Met. Copyright 2019 JVignone.