

Due to copyright restrictions,
this image is only available
in the print version of
Christian Reflection.

Bernini's figure of the penitent Jerome incorporates exaggerated gesture, intense spiritual drama, and inspirational humility to invoke a similar devotion in the viewer.

The Penitence of Jerome

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

Jerome, the fourth century scholar monk and translator of the Vulgate Bible, is frequently depicted in art as a hermit in the wilderness. According to a popular story in the Middle Ages, when a lion raised its wounded paw to him, the saint removed a thorn and the lion became his constant companion. Gianlorenzo Bernini utilizes the iconography of the penitent Jerome and the lion in the dramatic marble figure illustrated here.

Bernini was the most famous sculptor of the Catholic Reformation; he created the oval-shaped walkway with Doric colonnade that still encircles the piazza of St. Peter's in Vatican City. His longtime friend Cardinal Fabio Chigi became Pope Alexander VII in 1655. In the third year of his papacy, Alexander requested that Benini redesign the Chigi family chapel. Inspired by the ancient door that stood behind the chapel, the *Porta del Perdono* or Gate of Forgiveness, Bernini created a dramatic environment within the chapel on the theme of forgiveness. The slightly elliptical chapel contained a Madonna placed on the altar flanked by two sculptures made by Bernini's assistants. Bernini sculpted the ancient symbols of absolution, St. Jerome and St. Mary Magdalen, on either side of the entrance to the chapel. The over life-size marble saints were positioned so that viewers would walk past them as they entered the chapel and only notice them as they exited.

The Jerome statue is top heavy and his weight is only on his right leg. His left foot is buried in the mane of the lion whose paw is also visible. This imbalanced and tentative stance of the figure creates a sense of the momentary that is somewhat disconcerting to the viewer.[†] Jerome's lower body torques to the left as his right hand grasps at the heavy drapery while his upper body leans in the opposite direction to the crucifix barely supported by his left hand. His eyes are closed in prayer as his cheek touches gently the head of Christ. The impact of that touch is compounded by the dramatic effect of the drapery that billows out of the niche.

Bernini's figure of the penitent Jerome incorporates exaggerated gesture, intense spiritual drama, and inspirational humility to invoke a similar devotion in the viewer.

NOTE

[†] See Harriet Feigenbaum Chamberlain, "The Influence of Galileo on Bernini's *Saint Mary Magdalen* and *Saint Jerome*," *Art Bulletin*, 59:1 (March, 1977), 71-84.