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Alonso Berruguete

(Paredes de Nava 1490 – 1561 Toledo)

The Penitent Saint Jerome

oil on panel

25 x 18.5 cm.;

9 7/8 x 7 1/4 in.

Provenance

Private collection.

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The importance and relevance of the role played by the painter and sculptor Alonso Berruguete in the overall context of Spanish Renaissance art was emphasised as early as 1941 by the art historian Manuel Gómez Moreno in his book *Las águilas del Renacimiento español. Bartolomé Ordóñez, Diego Silóe, Pedro Machuca, Alonso Berruguete. 1517 – 1558*. Subsequent research into both the artist's style and the corpus of his work was recently brought together for the exhibition *Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of the Renaissance*, held at the National Gallery of Art, Washington (3 October 2019 – 17 February 2020) and at the Meadows Museum in Dallas (20 September 2020 – 20 January 2021).

Berruguete's assimilation of Italian art during his formative years was noted at an early date by the painter and art theoretician Giorgio Vasari in his chapter on Michelangelo in the *Lives*. Vasari refers to the painter Francesco Granacci (c. 1469 – 1543) and to 'Alonso Berugetta Spagnuolo' among the artists who had access to Michelangelo's cartoon for *The Battle of Cascina*. That work was made in preparation for the unrealised fresco in the Sala del Consiglio in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, and is known from a copy in oil by Bastiano da Sangallo now at Holkham Hall, Norfolk (UK).

In a letter to his brother of 2 July 1508, Michelangelo states that he will make the preparatory cartoon for *The Battle of Cascina* available to a '*giovane spanuolo*', whom specialists have identified as probably being Berruguete.

In Rome, Berruguete had first-hand access to the discovery of the sculptural group of *Laocoön and his Sons* in 1506 in a vineyard next to Santa Maria Maggiore, a work stated in Roman literary sources (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*) to be by Agesander, Polydorus and Athenodoros of Rhodes. The *Laocoön* marked a key turning point and was the subject of artistic debate in the Roman art world in the early years of the 16th century.

Laocoön and his Sons, a masterpiece of Hellenistic sculpture, which following its rediscovery was installed in one of the niches in the octagonal Belvedere Courtyard in the Vatican, had a powerful influence on the young Berruguete. As various experts have

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observed, a number of his sculptures are indebted to this classical group depicting the death of the priest Laocoön and his sons, strangled by sea snakes.

With regard to Berruguete's indebtedness to the work, it should be noted that Vasari refers to him as a participant in the informal competition organised by Bramante to sculpt a replica of the *Laocoön* group, which was won by Jacopo Sansovino whose wax model was declared unrivalled in terms of its beauty and exactness.

This previously unpublished *Penitent Saint Jerome* by Berruguete depicts the saint in a landscape at dusk, executed in a Mannerist style and employing a highly expressive, unique and distinctive language, which makes it possible to justify the addition of this small oil on panel (undoubtedly an independent work of a devotional nature rather than part of an altarpiece) to the *oeuvre* of the renowned painter and sculptor Alonso Berruguete.

The artist presents the Church Father Jerome (Stridon, Dalmatia, c. 340 – 420 Bethlehem) as an elderly man with a long white beard, locating him in a thickly wooded landscape with an extensive blue sky above. Through the slenderness of Jerome's body, his gestures, figurative movement and the combination of elements associated with physical suffering and penitence, Berruguete clearly and beautifully conveys the saint's state of mind.

Located in the foreground, Jerome is shown kneeling, wearing only a white loincloth of flowing, curved folds that allows for an appreciation of the Herculean nude. In his left hand the saint holds a skull and looks towards a crucifix, beating his breast with a heavy stone. Hanging from a branch are his cardinal's robe and hat while behind him is the tame lion that is frequently associated with Jerome's iconography.

This recently rediscovered *Penitent Saint Jerome*, now accessible again to experts and the public, offers a strikingly eloquent visual testament to Berruguete's artistic ideal, which focused on the importance of line, invention, concept, polychromy, the study of the human body and the use of an elongated canon of proportions.

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There are evident stylistic parallels between this refined oil on panel and other autograph works by the artist, including *Flight into Egypt* and *The Burial of Christ* (figs. 1 & 2), and the important pictorial ensembles in Salamanca (*The Fonseca Altarpiece* in the Colegio de Santiago del Mayor, fig. 3) and Toledo (*The Visitation Altarpiece* in Santa Úrsula, fig. 4).

The reassessment of Alonso Berruguete's pictorial output, which is so notably influenced by the Italian *Cinquecento*, has continued in recent years with new discoveries such as the present *Saint Jerome*, a work of deep religious and spiritual sentiment. This has not, however, impeded a continued appreciation of the artist's activities in the field of sculpture, which have traditionally been the subject of greater attention in the specialist literature.

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Figure 1. Alonso Berruguete, *The Burial of Christ*.
Parish Church of Fuentes de Nava, Palencia

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Figure 2. Alonso Berruguete, *Flight into Egypt*.
National Museum of Sculpture, Valladolid

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Figure 3. Alonso Berruguete, *The Fonseca Altarpiece*.
Colegio de Santiago del Mayor, Salamanca

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Figure 4. Alonso Berruguete, *The Visitation Altarpiece*.
Santa Úrsula, Toledo

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