



## JUAN DE VALMASEDA

*The rediscovery of a masterpiece of Spanish Renaissance sculpture.  
A study on a newly revealed Saint Jerome*

Carlos Herrero Starkie

There are occasions when a work of art surpasses the artistic recognition won historically by the author inasmuch as its intrinsic greatness goes beyond everything we know about him and serves to show us the way to rediscover him with modern eyes that may appreciate new aspects of his work. (Fig A1)(Fig A2)

We find ourselves facing a masterpiece of the Spanish Renaissance in which the various aspects of excellence of that period converge as Spanish artistic genius blossoms forth. For this reason it acquires a paradigmatic significance within the IOMR collection. We find fully conveyed in this magnificent representation of Saint Jerome the eternal values of expressivity, immediacy and modernity of Spanish art to the same extent as they are expressed by El Greco, generations later, in his work in Toledo.



Its author is Juan de Valmaseda, a master who, though still relatively unknown, is considered by Spanish scholars to be one of the founders of Castilian Renaissance sculpture and probably the artist who best knew how to render the Catholic religious fervour of Iberian people in a state of exaltation and spiritual grace as the “Reconquista” ended in 1492, with the return of their territory from the Moors following eight centuries of warfare. Valmaseda was an artist who gave to his work a very particular style, which is the result of the fusion of his gothic roots with the new Florentine forms, anticipating the expressionistic style so characteristic of Spanish art. Thus many scholars believe his first masterpiece “Calvario de la Catedral de Palencia” (1519) to be the immediate precedent of Alonso Berruguete, one of the founders of mannerism and the artist who hispanised the repertoire of gestures assimilated in Italy.

Fig. A1 **Juan de Valmaseda**, *Saint Jerome*, Circa 1530, : Polychrome Wood, 73 x 41 x 30 cm, XVI century Spanish School. Exhibited at the Cathedral of Toledo (2017), IOMR Collection.



The first deep studies on Valmaseda's work are carried out by a German, Georg Weiss, a great lover of Spanish art, who assigns many important sculptures of the Capilla del Condestable at Burgos Cathedral to Valmaseda. J. Camón Aznar and J.M. Azcárate both support this very positive opinion of the artist. M. Gómez Moreno concentrates his studies on Alonso Berruguete and Diego de Siloé in his book "Las Águilas del Renacimiento Español" where he consecrates these artists as the interpreters of classical gestures and, to a certain extent, applies discredit to Juan de Valmaseda, considering that his tardo-gothic artistic shapes did not develop into the genius foreseen in his early works. Valmaseda's scarcely documented work has remained virtually trapped by history between those great names. The artistic greatness of the work we are now studying in a way contradicts this historiographic approach and indicates that Spanish Renaissance sculpture has to be revised in the light of the modern manner of Juan de Valmaseda.

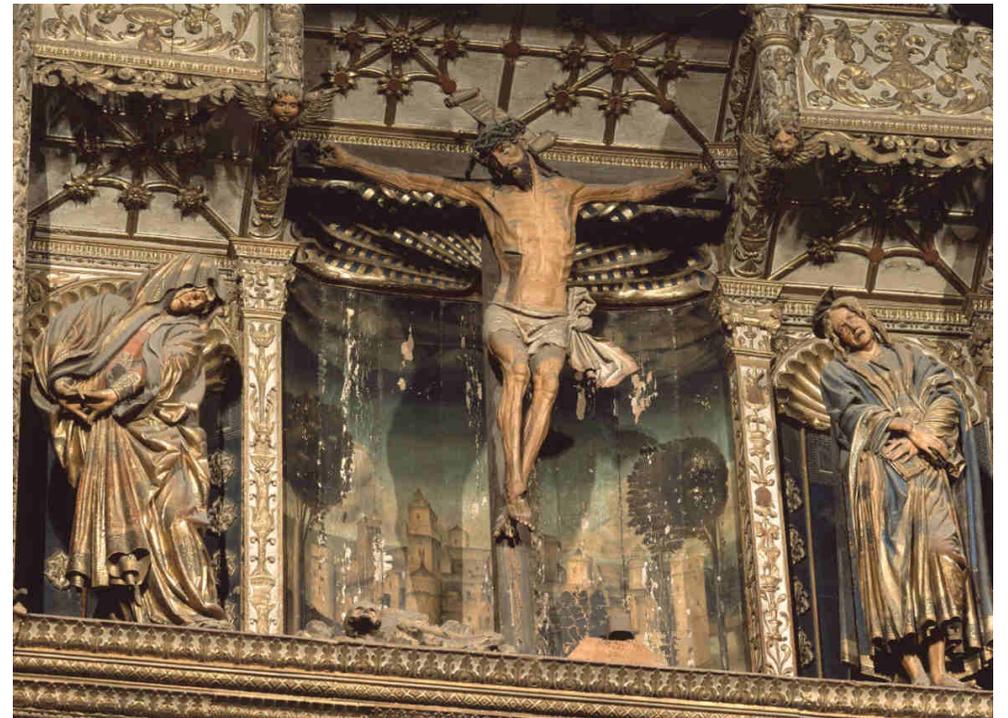


Fig. 1 Juan de Valmaseda, *Calvary of the High altarpiece* at the Cathedral of Palencia.



Fig. 2. Juan de Valmaseda, *Our Lady*, Calvary of the High Altar-piece at the Cathedral of Palencia.



Fig. 3 Juan de Valmaseda, *Saint John*, High Altar-piece of the Cathedral of Palencia.

The artistic environment that Berruguete encounters on his return from Italy in 1518 is essentially constituted by Juan de Valmaseda, Vasco de Zarza (though tremendously Italian) and Felipe Bigarni (of French origin). Valmaseda, however, is the only genuinely Castilian artist endowed with an artistic talent that could receive the influence of the “Eagles of Spanish Renaissance” autonomously without surrendering to them. In fact, Valmaseda is already a formed artist of about 30 years of age, and had contributed to monumental works such as the altarpiece at Oviedo, as well as signing the contract of the Calvary for the high altarpiece of Palencia Cathedral (Fig.1) in 1519. This is a work, which for its monumental size and greatness, may be considered one of the supreme Castilian artistic works of its time and in which Valmaseda demonstrates a great sensitivity and a lack of idealization of forms. He is a sculptor deeply rooted in a late gothic style that clearly defines the religious passion of the Castilian people.

Especially in the Calvary of Palencia Cathedral, we already observe the touches of inspiration that make Juan de Valmaseda stand out as a genius with an immediate and evident artistic style completely his own. He creates a canon of Calvary in which he masterfully combines the absolute rigidity of Christ with the sensational movement of Our Lady (Fig.2) in a delicate contraposto to the Saint John, (Fig. 3) from whose half-open mouth drips an overwhelming sorrow that reminds us of the newly discovered Laocoonte. We shall see something of all this later in Alonso Berruguete – in his altarpiece of Mejorada de Olmedo and in the one of San Benito in Valladolid. This artistic formula, which was so striking, must have been very successful in view of the number of Calvary works attributed to him. We also find other touchstones that reveal his sculptor’s hand, such as a straight nose, lean faces, prominent cheek bones, pointed beards and hair that falls in tangled locks, as well as feet with outstretched toes and hands calmly crossed – all this treated in a succinct, expressionist manner, as it is executed in our St Jerome. (Fig. A3)



Fig. A3 Juan de Valmaseda *Saint Jerome*, IOMR Collection.



Fig. 4 Diego de Siloé, *The Christ between angels*, Altar-piece of Saint Ana, Cathedral of Burgos.

In 1520 Valmaseda is active in Burgos where he most probably worked in the Capilla del Condestable at the Cathedral. G. Weise, J. Camón Aznar, J. M. Azcárrate and even, for a while, M. Gómez Moreno, have attributed a magnificent group of works: a deceased Christ sustained by angels in the altarpiece of Santa Ana<sup>(Fig 4)</sup>; the San Cristóbal and the San Sebastián in the altarpiece of San Pedro; and the figures of Our Lady and Saint John, swaying together in a movement so characteristic of him, in the high altarpiece of this chapel. All these attributions were later rejected by Gómez Moreno and by Francisco Portela, ascribing them to Diego de Siloé. No doubt the attributive points questioned regarding these two masters were confused until Manuel Gómez Moreno, patriarch of Spanish Renaissance scholarship, solved the polemic by deciding in favour of his choice Spanish Renaissance sculptor, Diego de Siloé.



Fig. 5. Diego de Siloé or Juan de Valmaseda, *Pietà*, Iglesia de Santiago de la Puebla, Salamanca.

In 1524 Valmaseda carries out the Calvary for the chapel of Christ in León Cathedral, accompanied by four Apostles. The best one is Saint John, with eyes lost in reverie and a face of a rather feminine and childlike beauty, which we constantly encounter in Valmaseda's later work. In this group, Saint John leans against a tree whose gnarled knots and branches remind one of Siloé. His San Lucas wears spectacles just like those worn by Saint Jerome in the "Pietà de Desplá" by Bartolomé Bermejo. From 1524 onwards we clearly see the influence between the styles of Berruguete and Siloésque. The splendid altarpiece of Santa Columba of Villamediana (Palencia) belongs to this decade. Its quality, however, is rather unequal, though in the relief work of the "Lamentación" and in the fabulous "San Jerónimo sedente" Valmaseda rises to celestial heights in the expression of pathos. The Our Lady and the St John, now in the Lázaro Galdiano Museum, also belong to this period. Most scholars attribute the "Lamentación" of the church of Santiago de la Puebla (Salamanca) to Bigarni. But after a comparative study with other "Lamentaciones", it should also follow the stream that links Siloé and Valmaseda and thus distances him from Bigarni (Fig 5).



Fig. 6. **Juan de Valmaseda**, *Altarpiece of the "Capilla de San Ildefonso"*, Cathedral of Palencia.

The 1530 decade, to which our St Jerome corresponds, marks the highest development of Valmaseda's style when his work reaches a synthesis between his underlying Gothic background, loaded with its strong expressivity, and the Italian influences filtered by Alonso Berruguete's and Diego de Siloé's interpretations. The masterpiece of this period is without any doubt the altarpiece in the chapel of San Ildefonso of Palencia Cathedral (Fig 6), which possesses markedly strong Siloesque characteristics in its smooth composition in which Valmaseda masterfully combines medallions with figures in contraposto so that the scene seems to acquire an almost musical rhythm. We must draw attention to the magnificent relief work of St Jerome with its meticulous pictorial technique, whose lion is very similar to the one of our sculpture (Fig A7) and the beautiful relief representing a nativity with the Wise Kings (Fig 7). The medallion, however, which crowns the altarpiece and represents the "Pietà", recalls the other "Pietà" from Alonso Berruguete in 1529/1530 for the chapel of the Colegio de Santiago de Fonseca. It conveys a strong Michelangelesque spirit, especially in the way Christ lets Himself fall into Our Lady's lap - although, in Valmaseda's case, taking the form of an arabesque with a certain Gothic mannerism.



Fig. 7 **Juan de Valmaseda**, Relief representing the Wise Kings, Capilla de San Ildefonso, Cathedral of Palencia.

We find ourselves facing a sculptor little known in modern times who, had nonetheless been better able than anyone else to create compositions that became easily recognisable archetypes in his time – not to mention their great success in Castile during the first half of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century. Valmaseda creates various compositions that become canons during the Spanish Renaissance, such as his Calvaries (Fig 1), his active Virgins Mary (Fig 2) who appear to dance with swaying motion, with the Saints (Fig 3); his allegorical representations of death, which influence so much Spanish XVII century sculptors (Fig 8); his childlike youths with rather feminine features, which our sculptor likes to repeat in his St Johns and his many San Sebastians which we see in Palencia Cathedral, in Santa Columba or in the Rodriguez Acosta collection (Fig 9).



Fig. 8. Juan de Valmaseda *Allegorical figure representing Death*, Museo Nacional de Escultura de Valladolid.



Fig. 9 Juan de Valmaseda *San Sebastián* from the Rodríguez Acosta Collection.



Fig. A7 Juan de Valmaseda *Saint Jerome*, IOMR Collection.

The work we are now studying represents a Saint Jerome in a state of ecstasy, due to a supernatural vision of Christ. The scene is set in rocky surroundings. He holds in his hand a stone (Fig A5) and is accompanied by a lion. (Fig A7) In this scene we observe strong Berruguetesque influences, above all, as Parrado indicates, in the composition “en serpentinata” and the unbalanced position of the Saint. (Fig A9) It presents analogies in design between this sculpture and the St Jerome by Siloé in the chapel of the Condestable of Burgos Cathedral, (Fig.10) especially due to the saint’s firmly out stretched arm, the crouching position of his legs and the lion. All this gives us stylistic reasons to confirm the date of execution in the decade of the 1530s, suggested by Parrado, which is when Valmaseda’s art reaches its highest quality, thus excellently fulfilling the fusion between his tardo-Gothic roots and the Italian influences of Alonso Berruguete and Diego de Siloé, which increasingly irritated his heavy expressionism and had become a canon of beauty.



Fig. A5 Juan de Valmaseda, *Saint Jerome*, IOMR Collection



Comparison between the *Saint Jerome* (1522) by Diego de Siloé, capilla del Condestable, Cathedral of Burgos (Fig. 10) and the *Saint Jerome* (1530) by Juan de Valmaseda, IOMR Collection (Fig. A1).



Fig. A6 Juan de Valmaseda, *Saint Jerome*, IOMR Collection



Fig. A 14 Juan de Valmaseda, *Saint Jerome*, IOMR Collection



However, upon facing a masterpiece, we discover that the greatness of our St Jerome lies in its originality. For this reason it would be wise to compare this sculpture with the other Saint Jerome masterpieces of the Spanish Renaissance, which would make a wonderful exhibition in themselves

In opposition to the meticulous technique of Siloé in his St Jerome (Fig 10), Valmaseda simplifies the sculptural moulding of the muscles, sketchily rendering bones and tendons (Fig A6). He scarcely carves the outlines of feet even to the point that, if we observe the sculpture at the back, we shall see legs in oblique position, which is typical of Valmaseda, but formed in a succinct way that surprises us by its tremendous modernity, and by not making the slightest error in design. It is all-perfect in its simplicity (Fig A14).

Facing the Laoconesque character of the St Jerome by Berruguete (Fig11), we are overwhelmed by the expression of a both human and animal sensation of tremendous suffering regarding the chaos of the universe, without the slightest trace of any religious sense. Valmaseda, on the contrary, is completely devoted to rendering the link between the saint and the supernatural, expressing a profound faith (Fig A8).

Comparison between the *Saint Jerome* (1530) by Alonso Berruguete, from the High altarpiece of the Church of San Benito, Valladolid, Museo Nacional de Escultura de Valladolid (Fig. 11) and the *Saint Jerome* (1530) by Juan de Valmaseda, IOMR Collection (Fig. A8).

On the other hand, Valmaseda surpasses the St Jerome of Torrigiano, who is excellent in his artistic technique and in the originality of his design due to his movement forward, but lacks, in my opinion, any religious expression. In the passionate expressivity of his St Jerome and in the impressionistic nature of his technique, lie the magnificently natural and the real presence in space that Valmaseda gives to the St Jerome we are presently studying (Fig A9).

Finally, if we compare it with the St Jerome of the Church of San Francisco at Medina de Rioseco, by Juan de Juni, there we would find ourselves facing a work of comparable expressivity, imbued by an early baroque style. Valmaseda offers us a composition captivated by the sense of movement worthy of Michelangelo's slaves or Miron in his "discipolo", based on a simple sloping diagonal. In such evident simplicity lies the beauty of the sculpture (Fig A11).

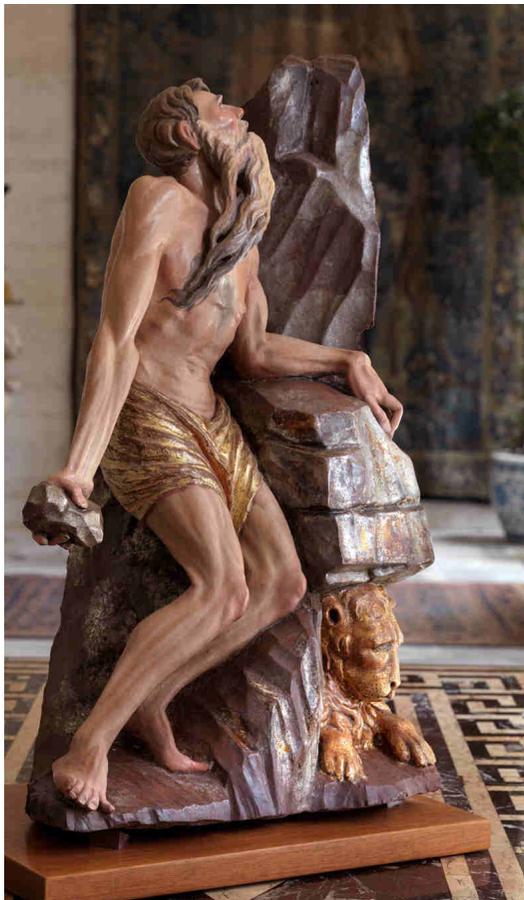


Fig. A9 Juan de Valmaseda *Saint Jerome*, IOMR Collection.



Fig. A11, Juan de Valmaseda *Saint Jerome*, IOMR Collection

Our St Jerome calls on fervent Castilian believers to understand the irrational strength of the passion that the saint (Fig A8) feels. It is a question of faith and Divine Grace that Valmaseda expresses, and he does so with an absolutely masterful scarcity of resources (Fig A8), such as maintaining the saint's balance with an outstretched arm and the extremely upright position of his face, which directs his look at the rock. A diagonal composition adjusts according to the physical inclination of the sculpture itself and, therefore, of the Saint who, due to this circumstance, seems to be alive and to maintain his balance thanks to Divine Grace itself (Fig A10).



Fig. A10, Juan de Valmaseda *Saint Jerome* (1530), IOMR Collection.

We find other examples representing the same sentiment of faith in Titian's saints, especially in the St Jerome (Fig12), a small panel at the Escorial and, above all, in the magnificent St Jerome by El Greco (Fig 13), today in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. All three of these works follow a similar composition. In fact, due to his spirit and his expressionist painting, all of El Greco's work emits an evident parallelism to Valmaseda. We also find it in the obsession with movement of the baroque, especially in Bernini. For this reason we can affirm that Valmaseda, like Berruguete, anticipates the new artistic currents that triumphed generations later.

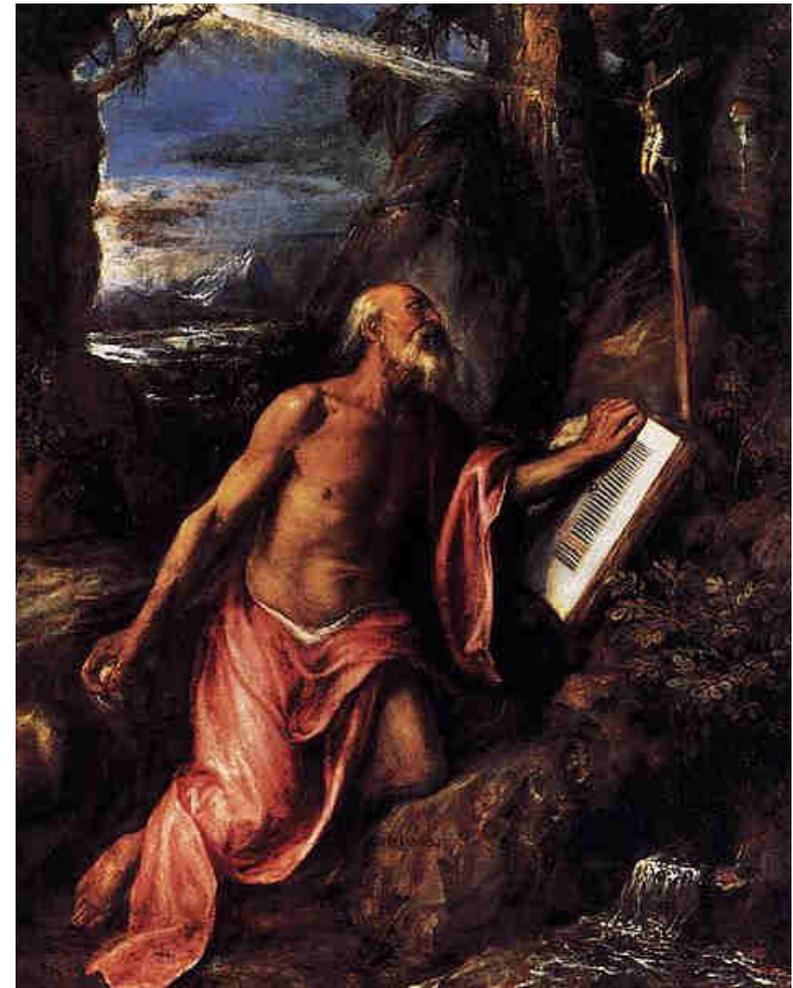


Fig.12 Titian, *Saint Jerome in Penitence* (1575), Nuevos Museos in the El Escorial.



Fig. 13 El Greco. *Saint Jerome Penitent* (1614). National Gallery of Art.

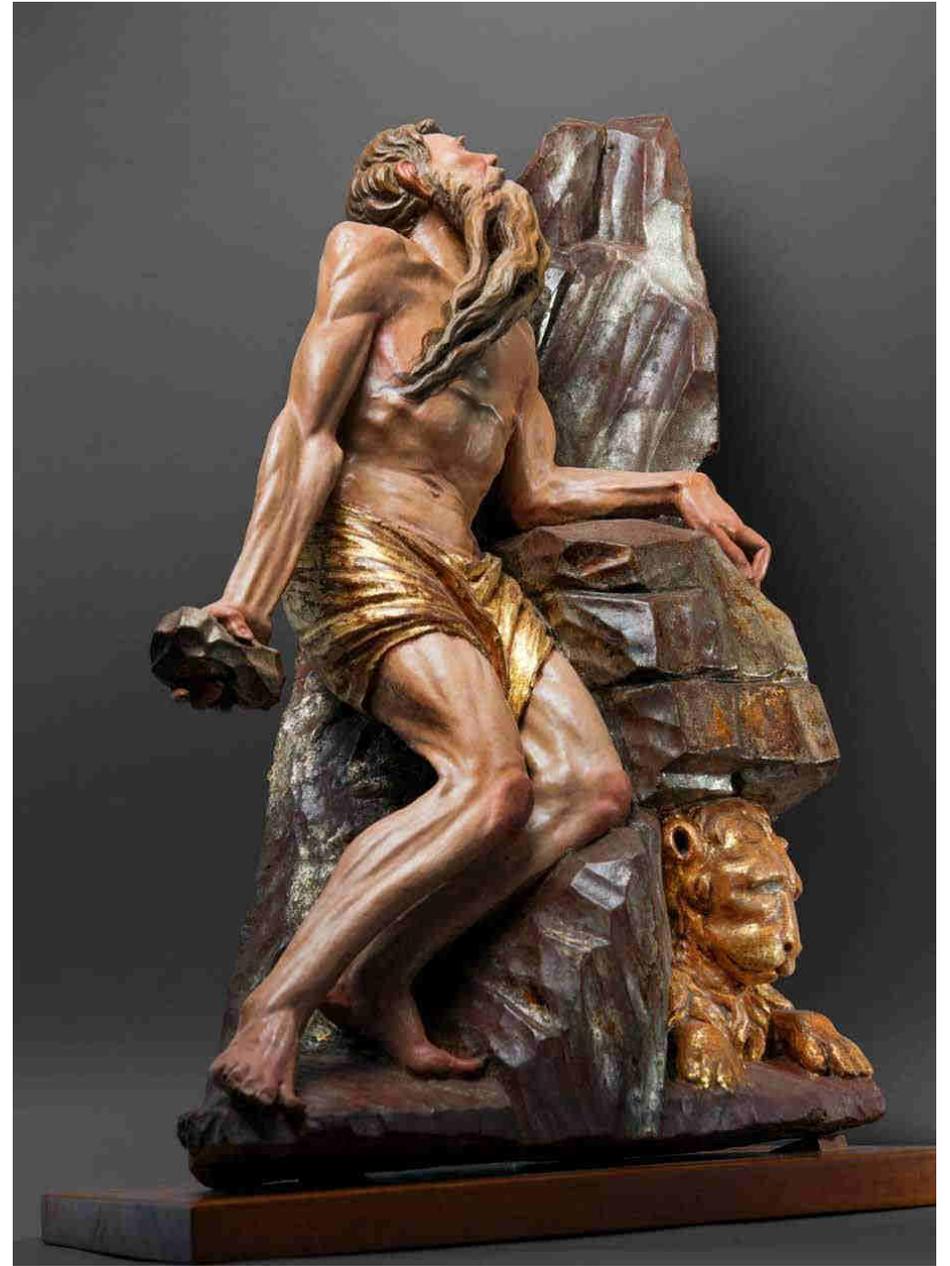


Fig. A15 Juan de Valmaseda *Saint Jerome*, IOMR Collection.

The rock that provides a setting for the saint with polychromed silver “corlada” (Fig A15) decoration at the front and with all nature’s rough strength on its reverse, enriched with a beautiful knot, fulfils a fundamental function in the work. On the one hand, it prolongs the saint’s look towards a supernatural scenery that we only intuitively imagine and, on the other, it surrounds the sculpture so that it allows the spectator to have a different vision depending on the angle from which they look.

Here lies another of the great achievements of the sculpture. By means of a mechanical rotation system applied at the base of the sculpture, the spectator discovers unknown angles of the work, which are incredibly beautiful. Viewed from the side (Fig A12), the Saint appears virtually leaning on the rock, with only his hand and his mystical expression perceived. The vision of the Saint’s back is perfect in its unfinished state and conveys a Greek elegance that ends in sketchily rendered legs folded in an almost symphonic movement (Fig.A11). Lastly, when we contemplate the reverse side of the sculpture, the piece shows all its modernity as the walnut wood trunk, shaped like a flint stone, gains as the protagonist, and St Jerome’s face scarcely stands out revealing his unfinished part (Fig A13). Can there be any more modernity in this scene? How much it reminds us of Michelangelo (Fig 14) and his slaves; how much we are moved emotionally by this struggle between the spirit and the material, between polished and unfinished areas in this conflict produced by forms in their attempt to free themselves - in this case, from a wooden trunk!



Fig. A11 Juan de Valmaseda *Saint Jerome*, IOMR Collection.



Fig. A12 Juan de Valmaseda *Saint Jerome*, IOMR Collection.

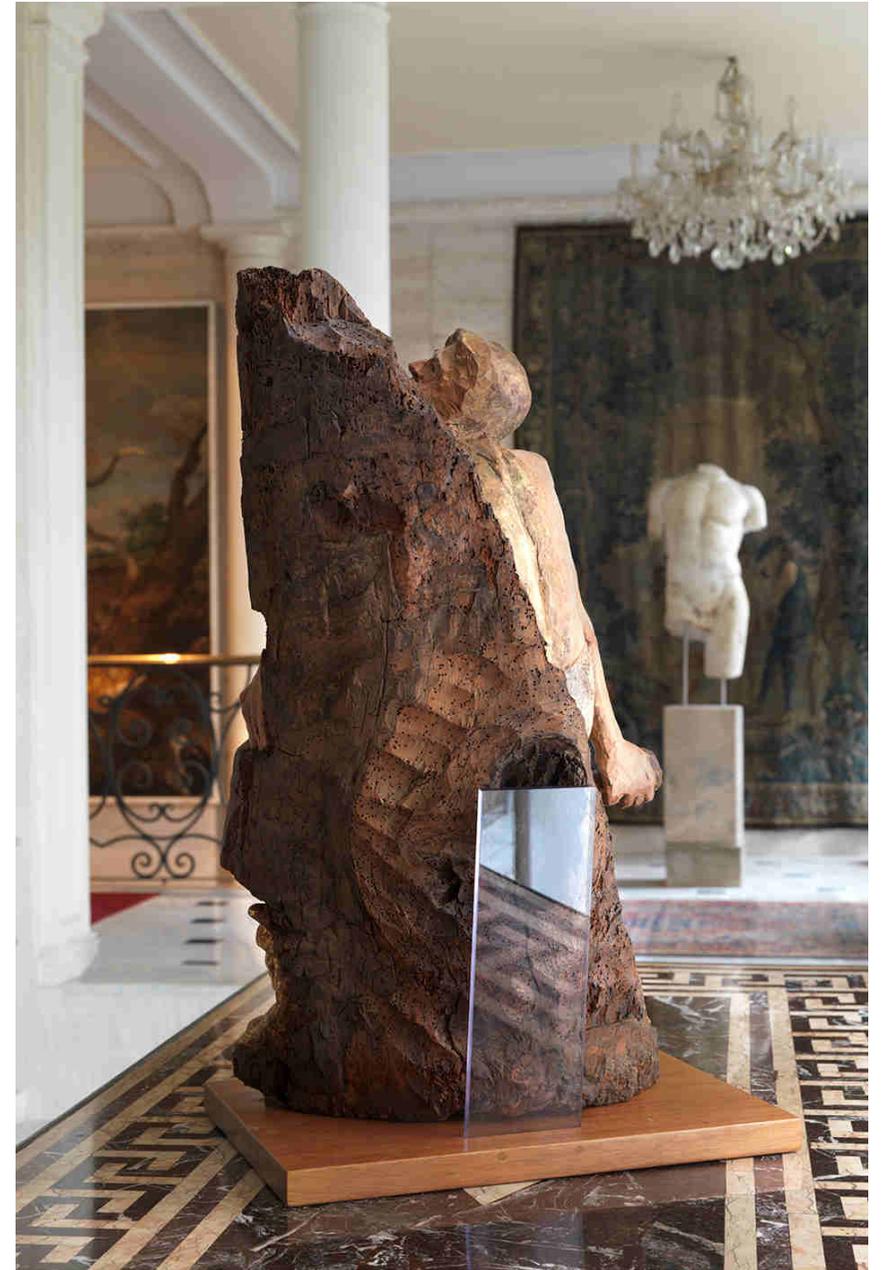


Fig. A 13 Juan de Valmaseda, *Saint Jerome* by, IOMR Collection

Without any doubt, as indicated by J. M. Parrado del Olmo, we shall not be exceeding ourselves if we consider our St Jerome as one of Juan de Valmaseda's works where his art shines out in all its splendour. Armed with this credit, it should strive for the place fitting for him among the sculpture of the Spanish Renaissance, with the same rights as the already-consecrated great figures of Alonso Berruguete, Diego de Siloé and Juan de Juni, whose representations of St Jerome cast no shadow on this sculpture, but indeed enhance it with a greater and more expressive passion that is all the more profoundly Spanish, and therefore more essentially modern.



Fig. A16 Juan de Valmaseda, *Saint Jerome* (1530) by, IOMR Collection



Fig. 14 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici* (Circa 1530), San Lorenzo Basilica, Florence