



# NAPLES IN FLESH AND BONES: RIBERA'S DRUNKEN SILENUS AND SAINT JEROME

Edward Payne

## Abstract

*Jusepe de Ribera did not begin to sign his paintings consistently until 1626, the year in which he executed two monumental works: the Drunken Silenus and Saint Jerome and the Angel of Judgement (Museo di Capodimonte, Naples). Both paintings include elaborate Latin inscriptions stating that they were executed in Naples, the city in which the artist had resided for the past decade and where he ultimately remained for the rest of his life. Taking each in turn, this essay explores the nature and implications of these inscriptions, and offers new interpretations of the paintings. I argue that these complex representations of mythological and religious subjects – that were destined, respectively, for a private collection and a Neapolitan church – may be read as incarnations of the city of Naples. Naming the paintings' place of production and the artist's city of residence in the signature formulae was thus not coincidental or marginal, but rather indicative of Ribera inscribing himself textually, pictorially and corporeally in the fabric of the city.*

**Keywords:** allegory, inscription, Naples, realism, Jusepe de Ribera, Saint Jerome, satire, senses, Silenus

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## Biographical note

Edward Payne is Head Curator of Spanish Art at The Auckland Project and an Honorary Fellow at Durham University. He previously served as the inaugural Meadows/Mellon/Prado Curatorial Fellow at the Meadows Museum (2014–16) and as the Moore Curatorial Fellow in Drawings and Prints at the Morgan Library & Museum (2012–14). At the Morgan, Payne organised *Visions and Nightmares: Four Centuries of Spanish Drawings* (2014) and was a contributor to the Courtauld Gallery's exhibition catalogue *Goya: The Witches and Old Women Album* (2015). Payne also contributed to the catalogue raisonné of Ribera's drawings (2016) and curated the accompanying exhibition at the Meadows Museum: *Between Heaven and Hell: The Drawings of Jusepe de Ribera* (2017). With Xavier Bray, Payne is co-curating *Ribera: Art of Violence* at the Dulwich Picture Gallery (2018–19).

# NAPLES IN FLESH AND BONES: RIBERA'S *DRUNKEN SILENUS AND SAINT JEROME*

Edward Payne, *The Auckland Project*

## Introduction

Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652) is usefully regarded as a hybrid figure, a man straddling two countries, Spain and Italy, and two artistic idioms, painterly and graphic. Born in Valencia, Ribera spent most of his career in Naples, where he shaped the course of artistic production in the seventeenth century (Felton and Jordan, 1982; Pérez Sánchez and Spinosa, 1992; Felton, 2011, pp.35–77). Although little is known of his youth, training and departure from Spain, Ribera is recorded in Rome in 1606, in Parma in 1611 and in Naples from 1616 until his death in 1652 (Finaldi, 2016, p.21). After arriving in Italy, he encountered the revolutionary paintings of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610), whose distinctive qualities Ribera adopted in his own



Figure 5.1: Jusepe de Ribera, *San Gennaro in Glory*, 1636. Oil on canvas, 276 x 199 cm. Church of the Convent of Las Agustinas Recoletas de Monterrey, Salamanca. (Image credit: © 2017. Album/Scala, Florence)

work, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of Caravaggesque realism towards a raw, visceral form of representation that is deeply inscribed in the city of Naples.

A Spanish territory during the seventeenth century, Naples was governed by Spanish viceroys who were appointed by the king and were Ribera's principal patrons. They commissioned from the artist works for their own personal collections and also for the king of Spain (Finaldi, 2003, pp.379–87). In a celebrated conversation in 1625, reported by the Aragonese painter and theoretician Jusepe Martínez (1600–1682), Ribera explained his reluctance to return to Spain and why he preferred to stay in Naples: 'Spain is a merciful mother to foreigners but a most cruel stepmother to her own. I find myself well admired and esteemed in this city and kingdom, and my works compensated to my complete satisfaction' (Pérez Sánchez, 1992, p.35; Clifton, 1995, p.128, n.33). Ribera remained proud of his Spanish origins throughout his career. He earned himself the nickname *lo Spagnoletto*, 'the little Spaniard', and when signing his works, he often employed the formula *Jusepe de Ribera español*, consciously fashioning his identity by underscoring his nationality and preoccupation with locationality.<sup>1</sup>

Conspicuously absent from Ribera's oeuvre are images of two shattering events in Naples, the



Figure 5.2: Jusepe de Ribera, *Equestrian Portrait of Don Juan of Austria*, 1648. Etching, 35 x 27 cm. The British Museum, London. (Image credit: © Trustees of the British Museum)



eruption of Vesuvius and the revolt of Masaniello.<sup>2</sup> Instead he represented the figures that intervened and restored peace: San Gennaro and Don Juan of Austria, respectively. *San Gennaro in Glory* (Fig. 5.1) was painted in 1636 for the convent church of the Agustinas Recoletas de Monterrey in Salamanca. It is a luminous work, in which the saint fills the canvas, soaring on a cloud lifted by angels with merely the hint of a flaming Vesuvius in the lower right corner. During his brief viceregency in Naples, Don Juan of Austria commissioned an equestrian portrait from Ribera, who subsequently improved upon the painting in a print of 1648 (Fig. 5.2). In the etching Ribera depicts a more detailed vista of the city and includes the Spanish fleet at anchor, grounding the sitter in the historical context of his victory over the 1647 revolt of the populace. In both the painting of San Gennaro and the print of Don Juan, Ribera visually minimises the implied acts of violence, emphasising instead the celebrated intercessors and incorporating direct references to the city of Naples.

Ribera's concern with the locational is not limited to these works, however, but is revealed even more subtly in two monumental paintings that he signed and dated in 1626: the *Drunken Silenus* and *Saint Jerome and the Angel of Judgement*, now in the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples (Figs. 5.3 and 5.4). Both pictures bear elaborate Latin inscriptions in which the artist identifies himself as Valencian (*Valentin*) and prominently states that the works were executed in Naples (*Partenope*). This essay explores the nature and implications of these inscriptions and offers new interpretations of the paintings. I argue that these mythological and religious scenes that were destined, respectively, for a private collection and a Neapolitan church, may be read as incarnations of the city of Naples. Naming the city in his signature formulae was thus not coincidental or marginal, but rather indicative of Ribera inscribing himself textually, pictorially and corporeally in the fabric of Naples.



Figure 5.3: Jusepe de Ribera, *Drunken Silenus*, 1626. Oil on canvas, 185 x 229 cm. Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples. (Image credit: courtesy of Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte)



Figure 5.4: Jusepe de Ribera, *Saint Jerome and the Angel of Judgement*, 1626. Oil on canvas, 262 x 164 cm. Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples. (Image credit: courtesy of Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte)

### ***Drunken Silenus: satirising artistic creation***

Ribera's *Drunken Silenus* is noteworthy for the artist's suppression of narrative elements in order to accentuate the bloated body of the protagonist. Although the patron is unknown, this, Ribera's first major mythological painting, was acquired by the

connoisseur-restorer Giacomo de Castro, who then sold it to the Flemish merchant Gaspar Roomer in 1653 (Finaldi, 1992, p.3). The painting depicts Silenus, son of Pan and foster-father of Dionysus, who became the latter's travelling companion. Reclining in the centre of the composition, Silenus raises a shell-shaped cup



to receive wine, while being crowned with ivy leaves by Pan as accompanying satyrs look on and a donkey brays. Pan can be identified not only by his leopard skin and goat horns, but also by his attributes in the lower right corner: a conch shell, which foretells his death; a tortoise, symbolising sloth; and a pastoral staff, referring to Pan as shepherd. In the lower left corner is the detail of a serpent, whose juxtaposition with the figures in the scene permits interplay between themes of creation and destruction, and points to the artist's preoccupation with skin and its removal, revealed most explicitly in his images of Bartholomew and Marsyas flayed alive.

Ribera subsequently translated this painting into an etching, reversing and revising the composition (Fig. 5.5).<sup>3</sup> Reed pipes have replaced Pan's attributes of tortoise and conch shell; the serpent has disappeared; two drunken putti substitute the smiling satyr beneath the donkey; the classical head in profile and outward-staring satyr behind Pan have been recast as a grinning satyr and shadowy figure with a tambourine; the background has been transformed into a spacious landscape with birds in flight; and Ribera's signature on the cartellino in the painting has been fittingly 'incised' into a stone block in the print. All of these changes suggest that Ribera has made the composition more legible for wider dissemination to a Neapolitan audience.

The painting clearly had considerable significance for Ribera, given that he chose to rework it into an etching, and the interpretation of the subject matter has sparked much debate from Ribera scholars.<sup>4</sup> I propose that Ribera's depiction of the *Drunken Silenus* satirises the activity of artistic creation.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on the god's rotundity and his excessive consumption of wine, Ribera seems to draw a parallel between his rendition of this scene and his allegorical representations of the five senses. The artist's interest in bodily perceptions had its roots planted in an early series of the five senses that he produced in Rome for an unknown Spanish patron (c. 1615) (Figs. 5.6–10). In these paintings Ribera presents no fixed hierarchy of the senses, given that none of the figures is idealised and all are seated behind tables on which objects symbolising the respective sense are placed. Indeed, he explodes the classical tradition of ranking the senses in his multi-sensory depiction of the *Drunken Silenus*, which offers a commentary on the arts through its allegory of the senses, notably the sense of taste, as the consumption of wine has traditionally been connected to artistic inspiration.<sup>6</sup> An allusion to the sense of smell is suggested by the wine-pouring satyr, who brings his face up to Silenus's shell as if to absorb the aroma of the drink. 'Touch' is symbolised by the tortoise at the lower right, an animal that, when approached, retracts into its shell, resisting touch, and it is also invoked in the corpulent body of Silenus, painted with



Figure 5.5: Jusepe de Ribera, *Drunken Silenus*, 1628. Etching with engraving, 27 x 35 cm. The British Museum, London. (Image credit: ©Trustees of the British Museum)



Figure 5.6: Jusepe de Ribera, *Sense of Sight*, c.1615. Oil on canvas, 114 x 89 cm. Museo Franz Mayer, Mexico City. (Image credit: © 2017. Album/Scala, Florence)



Figure 5.7: Copy after Jusepe de Ribera, *Sense of Hearing*, 17th century. Oil on canvas, 96 x 76 cm. Private collection.



Figure 5.8: Jusepe de Ribera, *Sense of Smell*, c.1615. Oil on canvas, 115 x 89 cm. Private Collection, Madrid. (Image credit: © 2017. Album/Scala, Florence)



Figure 5.9: Jusepe de Ribera, *Sense of Taste*, c.1615. Oil on canvas, 114 x 89 cm. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford. (Image credit: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1963.194 / Photo credit: Allen Phillips\ Wadsworth Atheneum)





Figure 5.10: Jusepe de Ribera, *Sense of Touch*, c.1615. Oil on canvas, 116 x 89 cm. The Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena. (Image credit: The Norton Simon Foundation)

thick impasto and loaded brushstrokes in order to accentuate the palpability of the skin and the interplay between themes of creation and destruction.

The juxtaposition of Silenus with Pan and the classical head in profile, which resembles Ribera's depictions of Apollo in his paintings of the Marsyas myth (Fig. 5.11), suggests a confrontation between the Apollonian and the Dionysian conception of the arts. Richard Spear's observation that the pointing gesture of the satyr behind Pan, who engages with the viewer, indicates Apollo's laurel wreath, implies that the satyr functions as a mediator, relating Apollo's crown to the crowning of Silenus and thereby underscoring contemporary associations of the Apollonian with the Dionysian (Spear, 1983, p.133). It seems that the satirical nature of the painting may not be directed at any one specific source or group of sources, but rather pointed more generally at the classical tradition of depicting the reclining nude, and the artist's preoccupation with rendering surfaces and textures. In addition to the human, unidealised skin of Silenus, manifested by his bulging belly and five-o'clock shadow, animal skin is present in the fur of the donkey and the pelts worn by Pan and the satyr at the far left. Moreover, the figure kneeling above Silenus pours wine from a wineskin, which he carries on his shoulder. As one 'skin' is being emptied, another is being filled.



Figure 5.11: Jusepe de Ribera, *Apollo and Marsyas*, 1637. Oil on canvas, 182 x 232 cm, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples. (Image credit: courtesy of Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte)



Figure 5.12: Peter Paul Rubens, *Drunken Silenus*, 1616–17. Oil on wood, 212 x 215 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich. (Image credit: © 2017. Photo Scala, Florence/bpk, Bildagentur fuer Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin)



Figure 5.13: Jusepe de Ribera, detail of *Drunken Silenus*, showing belly. (Image credit: courtesy of Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte)

Ribera's fascination with skin emerges sharply from a comparison of this work with Peter Paul Rubens's (1577–1640) *Drunken Silenus* (1616–17) (Fig. 5.12). Svetlana Alpers declares that 'Rubens gives up skin surface differentiated by the play of light in the interest of solid flesh. One can say that flesh on Rubens's account is not surface, but rather the matter or material out of which all human bodies—men's and women's alike—are formed' (1995, p.129). Rubens, indeed, accentuates the matter of flesh in this painting of the *Drunken Silenus*, notably in the detail of the figure pinching Silenus's thigh while penetrating him from behind. Ribera, by contrast, focuses more on the skin of Silenus. At once delineating the crisp contour of the bloated body, he plays on the border between corporeal and pictorial surfaces in his rendering of the belly, which projects out to the edge of the picture plane in an illusion of relief (Fig. 5.13).

The detail of the serpent at the lower left further reveals Ribera's manifold preoccupation with skin. Jeanne Chenault Porter argues that its symbolism 'was probably not of great interest to Ribera', since 'the serpent and paper are eliminated in the print [...]



they too are probably dispensable from a symbolic standpoint' (1979, pp.43–4). But the opposite is the case. The motif of the serpent is saturated with meaning – its associations ranging from death, the hereafter, fame and prudence, to wisdom, sorrow, genius and nemesis – and its slippery connotations can thus be related to the slippery significance of Silenus himself. Given the connection between the serpent and wisdom, its presence in the painting may refer to the duality of Silenus who, like Socrates, is associated with wisdom and vulgarity as well as prophecy and inebriation (Pérez Sánchez and Spinosa, 1992, p.77).

The serpent may have further significance. A reptile which sheds its own skin as it regenerates, the serpent relates to the prominence of Silenus's skin in the picture and to the concept of creation by destruction, 'making' by 'unmaking', a notion which is central not only to interpreting Ribera's flaying imagery, but also to unravelling the meaning of this work (Payne, 2015, pp.92–3). In the Hebrew Bible, the serpent is associated with evil as it tempts Eve to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Denying that death will follow, the serpent convinces Eve that like God, her eyes will be opened and she will know good and evil, a prominent reference both to the powers of vision in giving rise to knowledge and to the dangers of sight in its potential for deception (Genesis 3:1–24). The juxtaposition of the serpent with Silenus, whose swollen belly resembles that of a pregnant woman, appears to allude to Eve and to The Fall of Man, as God subsequently punishes Eve with painful childbirth.

In the lower left corner of the painting is a cartellino on which is inscribed: 'Josephus de Ribera, Hispanus, Valentin / et academicus Romanus faciebat / partenope ... 1626' (Fig. 5.14).<sup>7</sup> The cartellino was frequently employed by contemporary Spanish artists. Francisco de Zurbarán's (1598–1664) striking *Saint Serapion* (Fig. 5.15) transforms the motif into a trompe l'oeil device, blurring the boundaries between the sphere of the spectator and the realm of representation,



Figure 5.14: Jusepe de Ribera, detail of *Drunken Silenus*, showing cartellino. (Image credit: courtesy of Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte)

the artist's hand and the divine brush.<sup>8</sup> Although the cartellino in the *Drunken Silenus* has been repeatedly described in the literature as being 'held' in the fangs of a serpent, closer inspection reveals that the serpent is, in fact, tearing at the parchment (Felton and Jordan, 1982, p.110).

Significantly, the section of paper that is being torn bears the word 'faciebat' or 'made' on it, and like the other elements in the inscription, the place of production – 'partenope', Naples – is a notable protagonist. As Gabriele Finaldi states: 'The lengthy signature [Ribera] inscribed on his painting of the *Drunken Silenus*, the masterpiece of his early maturity, indicates that he was keenly conscious of his accumulated inheritance, in which nationality, province of origin, place of formation and city of residence all play a significant part' (2016, p.12). The illusionistic paper support with its prominent inscription, bracketed by artist and city, can be related visually to the pictorial surface of the canvas, on which is portrayed the bloated figure of Silenus. Implicitly, Ribera sets up a parallel between the twinned protagonists of the inscription – painter and 'partenope' – and the protagonist of the painting. Just as the artist associates himself with the work's place of production, so, too, the figure of Silenus may be connected to the city of Naples. Moreover, the



Figure 5.15: Francisco de Zurbarán, *Saint Serapion*, 1628. Oil on canvas, 121 x 104 cm. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford. (Image credit: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1951.40 / Photo credit: Allen Phillips\ Wadsworth Atheneum)

serpent – a skin-shedding, regenerating reptile – here tearing a parchment on which is signed the name of the work's maker, further accentuates the painting's satire of artistic creation.

### **Saint Jerome: body as hieroglyph**

Ribera's emphasis on the human body and collapse of narrative components may be observed not only in his *Drunken Silenus*, but also, more explicitly, in his images of Saint Jerome. While the classical theme of the *Drunken Silenus* was unique in Ribera's oeuvre, save its return in print, Saint Jerome is the artist's most frequently portrayed subject, suggesting a personal affinity with the figure and a broader popularity for the saint in seventeenth-century Naples. Nicola Spinosa has identified at least forty-seven paintings of Jerome by Ribera or his workshop, almost half of which are certainly autograph works (Tapié, 1990–1, p.112). They span the artist's career from one of his earliest pictures of about 1613 (Fig. 5.16), to what may be his very last work, signed and dated 1652 (Fig. 5.17). Jerome also features in five drawings and three prints by Ribera.

The multiple personae of Jerome – churchman, intellectual, polemicist, hermit and penitent – lend themselves to different types of representation where the saint is focused on different activities, from spiritual

contemplation to bodily mortification.<sup>9</sup> Ribera's depictions vary in format – half, three-quarter and full-length figures – and in iconographic type: Saint Jerome at work reading or writing, startled by the Angel of Judgement, hearing the last trumpet and engaged in meditation. It is noteworthy that the artist restricts his portrayals of the saint to these four types, omitting the more common narrative depictions of Jerome.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, Ribera's images demonstrate a shift away from the narrative accoutrements of the classicising versions by his Bolognese contemporaries, Agostino Carracci (1557–1602) and Domenichino (1581–1641). The iconic, non-narrative form that Ribera adopts, transforms the body of Jerome into a kind of hieroglyph in lieu of narrative, while nevertheless presenting the figure at various moments in time and space within the biography of the saint.

During the seventeenth century, Italy and Spain witnessed a proliferation of images of Jerome, a saint whose fashion never waned across the Catholic-Protestant divide (Felton and Jordan, 1982, p.114). Inventories of Neapolitan painting collections attest to the striking popularity of representations of Saint Jerome.<sup>11</sup> It is curious, however, that relatively few churches in Naples were dedicated to the saint (Galante, [1873] 1967, pp.152–3, 311).<sup>12</sup> Jerome was the patron saint of the Hieronymite order, one of whose most important seats was the Monastery of Guadalupe in Extremadura.<sup>13</sup> His role as translator and scholar makes him a figure inherently associated with communication, notably with reading and



Figure 5.16: Jusepe de Ribera, *Saint Jerome*, c. 1613. Oil on canvas, 126 x 100 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. (Image credit: Art Gallery of Ontario, Gift of Joey and Toby Tanenbaum, 1995, 95/150 / Photo credit: © Art Gallery of Ontario)



Figure 5.17: Jusepe de Ribera, *Penitent Saint Jerome*, 1652. Oil on canvas, 78 x 72 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. (Image credit: Museo Nacional del Prado)



writing. Jerome's most celebrated achievement was his translation of the Scriptures into a standard Latin text of the Bible, which became known as the Vulgate. As a text upon which practically all Christian exegesis was based for over a thousand years, the Vulgate ensured the longevity of the veneration of Jerome. In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent sanctioned the saint's translation as the official Latin Bible for the Catholic Church (Felton and Jordan, 1982, pp.113–14). Ribera would have known Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend* and the account given there of the Church Doctor's extensive career as a writer, which began in his youth when he excelled in the learning of classical languages and literature. It recounts how Jerome 'laboured day and night in the study of the divine Scriptures, drawing deep draughts from them and later pouring out his knowledge in abundance' (Voragine, 1993, p.212). It was not until after having spent four years in the desert as a hermit, however, that the saint, versed in the Greek and Hebrew languages, undertook the monumental task of translating the Scriptures into Latin, at which he toiled for 'fifty-five years and six months' (Voragine, 1993, p.213). Ribera habitually conflates the personae of Jerome the hermit and Jerome the scholar, depicting him emaciated and at work on the Vulgate.

Furthermore, the artist exploits the subject of Jerome in a non-narrative, non-landscape way in order to highlight the body's own legibility. Bernardo De Dominici comments on Ribera's numerous representations of the saint, applauding in particular his naturalistic treatment of wizened male bodies:

[Ribera] painted that figure from the live model, having procured some old and decrepit men such as are seen in his pictures, notably Saint Jerome, whom he portrayed ingeniously on countless occasions, perhaps to demonstrate the depths of his fertile imagination through the figure's range of activities, as well as through the individualised skulls, realistically rendered, creating a marvelous effect.

(De Dominici, [1742–5] 1840–6, vol.3, p.137)<sup>14</sup>

De Dominici here refers to the painting of Saint Jerome now in the Museo di Capodimonte and formerly in a chapel on the Epistle (right) side of the main altar in the Neapolitan church of Santissima Trinità delle Monache. Vittoria de Silva, a Neapolitan noblewoman of Spanish origins, founded the convent of the Trinità and its attached church (Pérez Sánchez and Spinosa, 1992, p.83). After becoming a Franciscan nun named Sister Eufrosina in the convent of San Girolamo, she transferred to a new convent, the Santissima Trinità,

where she was mother superior and the first patron to give Ribera a public commission between September 1621 and late 1628 (Farina, 2014, p.478). In addition to *Saint Jerome*, Ribera was also commissioned the large altarpiece of the *Terrestrial Trinity with Saints*.

One of his most striking renditions of Saint Jerome, the Capodimonte painting depicts the saint viewed from below, startled by the sound of the trumpet. Flanked by his attributes – lion, skull, books, parchment and quill – the saint is not set against a tenebrist backdrop (as in Fig. 5.17), but instead against ominous, stormy clouds that break to reveal a patch of blue sky at far left. Jerome throws his arms in the air in a gesture of surprise that heightens the drama of the scene. Ribera creates a visual rhyme of angles in the bent arms of the saint and the angel, who bursts through the clouds. Compositionally, the painting recalls Caravaggio's *Saint Matthew and the Angel* (1601), painted for the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome, which Ribera would have seen (Felton and Jordan, 1982, p.115). The artist depicts the emaciated Jerome with such attention to detail that it later earns him significant praise from De Dominici, notably for his rendering of surface textures:

Apart from the pose and the fine mass of the figure, it is admirable for the texture of the nude, showing the aged saint withered by his years, macerated by penance and extenuated by his fasting, with his skin clinging to the bones and wrinkled in all the joints of the body, and especially so on the soft part of the flanks, so that it is easier for the eye to take it in than for the pen to describe it: so wonderfully is this picture painted, and so excellently conceived.

(De Dominici, [1742–5] 1840–6, vol.3, p.127)<sup>15</sup>

De Dominici's commentary invokes the artist's practice of working from the live model, recalling Caravaggio's view of a good painter as one who is able to paint nature well. James Clifton further analyses Ribera's depiction of the figure's skin, for Jerome's bronzed right hand and almost lily white arm display a 'farmer's tan' appearance, recalling either the 'realism' of the saint, who wandered the sun-scorched desert wearing long sleeves, or the 'realism' of Ribera's live model, whose hands were tanned by the sun, but whose arms remained covered by garments (1995, pp.113–14). Indeed, the artist's prominent portrayal of Jerome's rough, weather-beaten body contrasts with the soft, smooth flesh of the angel, creating a subtle tension between the earthly and the ethereal realms in the painting. The signature at lower right, 'Josephus de Ribera / Hispanus Valentin / Setaben...Partenope F.

1626', with its explicit reference to the painting's place of production, is proof that 'Naples' carried a particular significance for Ribera. It further reveals how he grounds this work in its Neapolitan context and cements his reputation as the painter *par excellence* of Saint Jerome in Naples.

### Conclusion

In addition to their visual and conceptual complexities, Ribera's paintings of the *Drunken Silenus* and *Saint Jerome* were executed during an especially fertile year of the artist's life (Finaldi, 2016, p.150). Proud not only of his Spanish nationality but also of his status as a Roman Academician, Ribera executed in 1626 his touchstone drawing in red chalk of a *Hermit tied to a Tree (Saint Albert?)* (Fig. 5.18). The only surviving drawing that is both signed and dated by the artist's hand, this sheet parallels Ribera's paintings of the *Drunken Silenus* and *Saint Jerome* in demonstrating his virtuosity as a draughtsman. It may be speculated that Ribera recorded his authorship and the date of execution so prominently because the drawing was commissioned or conceived as a gift (Finaldi, 2016, p.148). Ribera essentially depicted an academic nude in the Roman tradition, which he then transformed into



Figure 5.18: Jusepe de Ribera, *Hermit tied to a Tree (Saint Albert?)*, 1626. Red chalk, 23 x 17 cm. The British Museum, London. (Image credit: ©Trustees of the British Museum)

a hermit saint, exploiting his mastery of the medium through subtle modelling and portraying the figure in a complicated, anatomically impossible position, thus revealing what drawing can achieve that cannot be done in nature.

Similarly, having tested and mastered the process of etching in his images of saints, anatomical studies and grotesque heads, Ribera executed one of his most ambitious prints, the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig. 5.19). This elaborate etching is the only one of his prints to bear a dedication. In the lower margin is inscribed: '*Dedico mis obras y esta estampa al Serenis<sup>mo</sup> Principe Philiberto mi Señor / en Napoles año 1624. / Iusepe de Rivera Español*'.<sup>16</sup> As in the *Drunken Silenus* and *Saint Jerome*, the city of Naples here features prominently, underscoring the artist's alignment with the print's place of production. The dedicatee, Prince Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy (1588–1624), was a nephew of Philip III of Spain, and in 1622 he was appointed viceroy of Sicily. Previously, Filiberto had commanded the Spanish armed forces as admiral of the fleet in naval engagements against the Turks, and he was also employed as an informal minister of Italian affairs (Brown, 1973, p.18, n.8; Salomon, 2012, pp.23–8). If, as this dedication suggests, Ribera was attempting to secure the prince's patronage, it was to no avail, as



Figure 5.19: Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1624. Etching and engraving, 32 x 24 cm. The British Museum, London. (Image credit: ©Trustees of the British Museum)



Filiberto died of bubonic plague the same year the print was executed (Brown, 1973, p.18). Notably, an identical inscription appears in a single impression of Ribera's *Saint Jerome Reading* (Fig. 5.20).<sup>17</sup> It seems that the artist subsequently removed the inscription, possibly in response to the prince's death, as it does not appear in any other impressions of the print (Dreyer, 1990, pp.180–1).<sup>18</sup> Since Filiberto was a nephew of Philip III of Spain, and considering the close connections between the Hieronymites and the Spanish monarchy, Ribera's print of *Saint Jerome Reading* would have been a fitting subject for another dedication to the viceroy of Sicily.

In addition to honouring the prince, the dedicatory inscription reinforces Ribera's allegiance to Emanuele Filiberto, viceroy of Sicily and active patron of the arts. Although he here acknowledges a particular viceroy, Ribera also identifies the figure of the viceroy in general as one to which he wishes to be affiliated. The dedication, therefore, reveals that the artist is endeavouring to establish himself as court painter to the Spanish viceroys in the wider kingdom of Naples. Ribera took advantage of his unique role as a Valencian-born artist living in Spanish Naples in order to obtain royal patronage. The printed dedication is at once an advertisement of the dedicatee's importance and self-promotion of the artist's abilities, as it not only features

Filiberto's name, but also Ribera's. His typical signature, followed by a reassertion of his nationality, advertises Ribera's strategic position as a man between two countries.

Naples – city of residence, place of production and centre of the arts – appears textually, visually and symbolically in Ribera's paintings of the *Drunken Silenus* and *Saint Jerome*. On a practical level, its inclusion in the signature formulae suggests that the artist has firmly planted roots in the city, having resided there for a decade by 1626. On a professional level, Ribera has aligned himself with the city of Naples, to which he affords particular emphasis, and which forms as much a part of his identity as his nationality, province of origin and place of formation. On a conceptual level, the figures of Silenus and Jerome, with their bodies carnal and mortified, serve as icons or 'hieroglyphs' for the city, as much indexes of Naples as hallmarks of their maker's attentiveness to the painted body, its flesh and bones, folds and textures.



Figure 5.20: Jusepe de Ribera, *Saint Jerome Reading*, 1624. Etching with some engraving and drypoint, 19 x 25 cm. The British Museum, London. (Image credit: ©Trustees of the British Museum)

\* My sincere thanks to Helen Hills for her close reading and astute criticisms of this essay. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> His earliest signed painting is *Saint Jerome*, c. 1613. Oil on canvas, 123 x 100 cm. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario.

<sup>2</sup> Although the account is unclear, Ribera may have depicted an *Eruption of Vesuvius* (exhibited in the Palazzo Reale), which Giovanni Lanfranco copied in 1639. See Pérez Sánchez and Spinosa (1992, p.54).

<sup>3</sup> Two later editions of the print bear inscriptions by Giovanni Orlandi and Giovanni De Rossi, the latter dated 1649.

<sup>4</sup> The subject can be traced back to Virgil's sixth Eclogue in which Silenus, bound with his own garlands and forced to sing by two satyrs and a nymph, is both mocked for the vulgarity of his drunken state and celebrated for the creativity of his poetic song (Virgil, 1983, pp.25–8). Richard Spear rejects the interpretation that Pan is supporting the head of Silenus, suggesting that he is, in fact, crowning him with ivy leaves (1983, pp.133–4). Wolfgang Prohaska in turn rejects Spear's reading, proposing instead that Ribera has depicted an event described in Ovid's *Fasti* where Priapus tries to take advantage of the nymph Lotis, but is exposed by Silenus's donkey, which begins to bray (Pérez Sánchez and Spinosa, 1992, p.77).

<sup>5</sup> Contemporary appetite for this type of visual satire can be further noted in the staging of a burlesque rendition of Orpheus and Eurydice, performed between 1610 and 1616 during the viceregency of the count of Lemos (Trapier, 1952, p.40).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the relationship between alcohol consumption and artistic inspiration, see Moffitt (2005) and also Boudier and Desbuissons (2011).

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Du Gué Trapier has suggested that the motif of the serpent and the cartellino may derive from a detail at the lower right of El Greco's *Martyrdom of Saint Maurice* at the Escorial (1580–1) (1952, p.39). However, it is questionable whether Ribera is in fact alluding to this one specific painting and if he ever saw it.

<sup>8</sup> The inscription reads: 'B. Serapius. franco de Zurbaran fabt. 1628'. For an analysis of Zurbarán's use of the cartellino, see Stoichita (1995, pp.117–20) and Ostrow (2017, pp.67–96).

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of Saint Jerome's multiple personae, see Favez (1958), in which each chapter examines a different 'face' of the saint: *Le savant, Le lettré, L'écrivain, Le polémiste, Le satirique, L'ami, Le chrétien*.

<sup>10</sup> These include visions where Jerome is tempted by Roman maidens or where he dreams he is haled before the judge's tribunal when charged with being a Ciceronian and not a Christian. Furthermore, Ribera does not realise images of the saint removing a thorn from the lion's paw, nor portray the last communion of Saint Jerome.

<sup>11</sup> Gérard Labrot lists 124 depictions of the saint, nine of which are recorded as autograph works by Ribera (Labrot and Delfino, 1992, pp.553–4, 622–4).

<sup>12</sup> The pages refer to S. Girolamo de'Ciechi and S. Girolamo delle Monache, respectively.

<sup>13</sup> In the late 1630s Zurbarán received a commission to paint eight portraits of Hieronymite monks and two scenes from the life of Saint Jerome. The Hieronymites became intimately associated with the Spanish crown, as both the order and the monastery were protected by the kings of Castile. The brothers of the order served as councillors and confessors to the kings, and occasionally they were given high-ranking positions in government.

<sup>14</sup> '[Ribera] dipingeva quella figura col naturale presente, avendosi procacciato alcuni vecchi secchi, e decrepiti, come si veggon dipinti nelle sue opere, e massimamente di S. Girolamo, che ne ha dipinti infiniti per un genio particolare, forse per mostrare la fecondità della sua immaginazione nel farli tutti di variate azioni, e con le teste di morte anche diverse, e così vere, che hanno del meraviglioso.'

<sup>15</sup> 'Oltre all' attitudine, e alla bella mossa della figura, ella è ammirabile per la tessitura del corpo, rappresentando il santo vecchio inaridito dagli anni, macerato dalla penitenza, ed estenuato dal digiuno, con la pelle attaccata su l'ossa, e tutta aggrinzita nelle piegature del corpo, e massimamente nel molle de' fianchi; ch'è più facil cosa all'occhio il comprenderlo, che alla penna il descriverlo: tanto questo quadro è meravigliosamente dipinto, ed ottimamente ideato.' See Whitfield and Martineau (1982, p.228).

<sup>16</sup> 'I dedicate my works and this print to the Most Serene Prince Filiberto my Sir / in Naples in the year 1624. / Jusepe de Ribera, Spaniard'.

<sup>17</sup> Brown originally thought this impression to be a trial proof (1973, pp.74–5).

<sup>18</sup> Although Peter Dreyer argues that a later hand may have pasted on the dedication and extended the paper, it is equally plausible that Ribera himself may have added it to this single impression of *Saint Jerome Reading*.



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