

# TOMASSO BROTHERS

## FINE ART



**Benedetto Buglioni (1459 - 1521)**

Saint Jerome in the Wilderness, c. 1510-15

Polychrome terracotta

56.5 cm (22 ¼ in.) high  
42.5 cm (16 ¾ in.) wide

This rare and refined glazed terracotta panel – most likely originally intended for the purposes of private devotion and characterised by a vivacious narrative and picturesque landscape setting – depicts the illustrious Dalmatian theologian and Father of the Church Saint Jerome (Sofronius Eusebius Hieronymus, Stridon c. 347 – Bethlehem c. 420). Specifically, the saint is here portrayed during his period of penance as a hermit in the Syrian desert, as described in his Letters (XXII), later recounted in the *Legenda Aurea*, Jacopo da Varazze's famous hagiographic account, and consistently evoked in the established iconographic tradition relating to Jerome (see Russo, Paris, 1987). The eremite, a commanding example of moral rigour, has relinquished his cardinal hat, which lies on the ground by his side, next to a skull outlined with particular realism. The latter represents an allusion to the vanity of secular power, scorned by the uncompromising Jerome who, emaciated by his fast and accompanied by the faithful lion he famously tamed, appears in the act of beating his chest with a stone while directing his gaze passionately to the Crucifix standing in front of him. The narrative is set at the feet of a rocky ravine, cut through by a small stream that wells up from under the Cross, a probable reference to the cathartic and regenerating function of Christ's sacrifice for humanity. Distinctively outlined trees frame the scene to the sides, whilst a turreted fortification (possibly Bethlehem, where the saint had founded a monastery) extends the picture plane in the background, topped by the mossy edges of the ravine,

which partly cover the relief's moulded border. The relief, as already noted when it was first recorded in the Bruschi collection in Florence (Gentilini 1992, p. 371, note 24), is related to an interesting group of works, known to scholars, constituted by three comparable glazed terracotta panels (Florence, Casa Buonarroti; London, Victoria and Albert Museum; formerly New York, Stefano Bardini sale, 1918), which are inspired by a composition formulated in a fine marble relief, purchased in 2001 by the Metropolitan Museum in New York (Wardropper 2011, pp. 23-25, no. 5), which is the starting point for the present work too.

The marble panel (42.6 x 38 cm) – which differs from the present relief especially in terms of the landscape populated by various animals (a dragon, a stag, a squirrel and a lioness), the upright pose of the tamed lion (recumbent in our case), and in the background, which features a merchant leading a dromedary instead of the present citadel – has a considerable provenance, having passed through the collections of the most prominent Florentine antiquaries (Stefano Bardini, Luigi Bellini, Carlo de Carlo) and, more recently, of Salander-O'Reilly in New York, who proposed identifying it with a work recorded in the 1553 inventory of Cosimo I de' Medici's possessions at Palazzo della Signoria in Florence (Butterfield, in *Masterpieces* 2001, pp. 20-31). This marble relief has been repeatedly, and with good reason, attributed to Antonio Rossellino (Settignano/Florence 1427-28 – Florence 1479) since its appearance in the New York Bardini sale of 1918 (American Art Galleries, 23-27 April 1918, lot 420), with reference to its affinities with the disputed reliefs in Faenza cathedral, ascribed by Vasari to Benedetto da Maiano (Maiano 1442 – Florence 1497), a sculptor who trained alongside Rossellino.

The delicate version in polychrome glazed terracotta in the Museo di Casa Buonarroti (43 x 38 cm), faithful to the marble relief in the setting too (yet without the dragon and with the lion roaring, a deer instead of the stag and a stag daringly foreshortened in place of the lioness), is generally attributed to Luca della Robbia the Younger, circa 1510/15 (Florence 1475 – Paris 1548), the most refined and capable amongst Andrea della Robbia's sons and aides (Gentilini 1992, p. 361; A. Bellandi, in *I Della Robbia* 1998, pp. 291-292, no. IV.1). The version in the Victoria and Albert Museum (41.3 x 34.3 cm), polychrome but with partial glazing, has also been attributed, yet with some uncertainty, to Luca the Younger (R. Caterina Proto Pisani, in *I Della Robbia* 1998, p. 292). This relief appears to be even more closely related to the marble one in some aspects, for example in the tame lion sitting upright and in the stag on the right hand-side, but rather detached in others, such as the absence of the squirrel and the fact that the stag on the left is represented scratching its muzzle. Above all, the saint's pose, with his open arms, his beard and corpulent appearance are not related to the marble model and may indicate a slightly earlier execution date, or the hand of Luca's brother Girolamo (Florence 1488 – Paris 1566, see Gentilini 1992, p. 361). The panel offered in the 1918 Bardini sale (45.7 x 31.8 cm, American Art Galleries, 23-27 April 1918, lot 370), also polychrome and partially glazed, is almost identical to the London one, with the exception of the saint represented beating his chest. Its whereabouts are currently unknown and its attribution contested, though it definitely originated in the della Robbia workshop circa 1510, where a cast of the marble was presumably kept.

As discussed above, the present terracotta reinterprets the marble with greater autonomy, especially in the landscape, devoid of animals but featuring the fascinating addition of the turreted citadel, in the lion's recumbent pose, and in other details, which distance it from the three published versions from the Della Robbia workshop, such as the thick tufts of grass at the top of the two rocky peaks. On the other hand, the emaciated figure of the hermit adheres to the marble model even more closely than the terracotta in Casa Buonarroti, reprising verbatim the outstretched left hand, which seems to invoke the comfort of Christ, used in the della Robbia version to indicate the Crucifix, which suggests that in our case the artist also possessed a cast of the marble, allowing him to ignore the iconographical variations adopted in the della Robbia workshop.

As already proposed (Gentilini 1992, p. 371, note 24), the panel presented here is without doubt the work of Benedetto Buglioni: an enterprising sculptor who had trained under Verrocchio and established himself in Florence and throughout Central Italy thanks to a prolific production of glazed terracotta works (later continued by his nephew Santi). Akin, in technical and typological aspects, to that of Andrea della Robbia and his workshop, Buglioni's oeuvre strived for greater clarity and formal simplicity, and was appreciated by very sophisticated buyers, such as Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici, son of Lorenzo the Magnificent and the future Pope Leo X, who around 1495 commissioned from the artist numerous decorations for the sanctuary of Santa Cristina in Bolsena (Marquand 1921; Gentilini 1992, pp. 390-

449). The affable simplicity and clarity of expression of the works of Benedetto responded well to the demands of popular devotion promoted at the time by the preaching of Girolamo Savonarola, which had become deep-rooted in Florence's most learned circles: a sterner religious belief, geared towards meditation on the sacrifice of Christ, which could find a perfect parallel in this ascetic image of Saint Jerome immersed in dialogue with the Crucifix.

Benedetto Buglioni's authorship, circa 1510/15, is evidenced by the vibrant modelling of Jerome's figure and the incisive one of the landscape, defined with quick strokes of the spatula, the tender and sharp quality of the physiognomies, and especially by the type of glazing, liquid and speckled (as recurrent in the glazes of this workshop), enlivened by rapid graphic touches of manganese, which renders to great effect the brown and green hues of the damp mossy rock. The parallels between the present work and Benedetto's output are infinite, from his early lunettes featuring ascetic subjects such as in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo (The Penitent Magdalene), in the Bandini Museum in Fiesole (The meeting of Christ and John the Baptist as children in the desert), or in the Pieve at Cavriglia (Saint John the Baptist in the desert), to the one depicting Christ and the Samaritan at the Well today in the Museum of Palazzo Taglieschi in Anghiari (formerly Florence, Sant'Onofrio di Fuligno), dating to the second decade of the sixteenth century, where the background features a fortified city, with high towers and bell towers with pointed spires. The figure of the penitent Saint Jerome can indeed be found, identical to the present one even in the gestures, in various predellas by the master - often set within a rocky background characterised by the same mottled hues - such as in the Madonna with Saints Sebastian and Anthony Abbot in the Pieve at Montemignaio, datable towards the end of the fifteenth century, in the two altarpieces in the Museo della Collegiata at Empoli (from Santa Maria in Ripa, from the first years of the sixteenth century, or in the Nativity of Santa Maria in Camporena in San Vivaldo, datable to around 1510 or shortly thereafter.

In addition to this, the fact that the present relief closely derives from a composition by Antonio Rossellino further confirms its attribution to Benedetto Buglioni, as it was his established practice to translate and reinterpret in glazed terracotta the marble works of the most renowned Florentine sculptors of the second half of the fifteenth century, including Desiderio da Settignano, Andrea del Verrocchio, Benedetto da Maiano and specifically Antonio Rossellino, so much so that some have considered Buglioni to have been his pupil (Marquand 1921, p. XIII). ] Buglioni often revisited Rossellino's Marian images such as the Madonna Nori in Santa Croce or the Adoration of the Child in the Bargello Museum, and even the monumental Nativity with the Adoration of the Shepherds carved by the master in 1470-75 for the Piccolomini chapel in Sant'Anna dei Lombardi in Naples, quoted in very timely manner by our artist in his glazed panel dated to 1490 today in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. In his terracotta compositions Buglioni often used casts taken from the original marbles, or replicas in terracotta and stucco, but perhaps he sometimes also used models or other materials originating from the masters' workshops, as suggested by his 1497 purchase of an "almost finished predella" from the studio of Benedetto da Maiano (Gentilini 1992, pp. 390-391). It is therefore possible that the present relief derives directly from a sketch or clay model of the penitent Saint Jerome sold after the death of Rossellino in 1479.

Professor Giancarlo Gentilini  
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### **Provenance:**

Private collection, France  
Bruschi collection, Florence

### **Literature:**

G. Gentilini, *I Della Robbia. La scultura invetriata nel Rinascimento*, Florence, 1992, p. 371, note 24

### **RELATED LITERATURE**

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G. Gentilini, I Della Robbia. La scultura invetriata nel Rinascimento, 2 vols., Florence, 1992

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