FIGUREHEAD
Nicola Dale
In consolidating Curation and Library Services at Leeds Arts University, it is fitting that our first exhibition in the new gallery should explore a contemporary revision of Saint Jerome — the patron saint of libraries and an enduring figure of intrigue for artists, especially during the Renaissance.

As part of our commitment to Northern artists, we have invited Nicola Dale to be our first resident researcher. In her practice, Dale has been consistently interested in the potential connections between libraries and curation as primary sites of knowledge making. In April 2016 she held the role of ‘library interventionist’, and her return to the University acknowledges the growing portfolio of artist-led activities in our specialist arts library.

Primarily working in the realms of sculpture, installation and performance, Dale’s practice is conceptually rooted. She is chiefly concerned with how knowledge is made visible. Many of her recent artworks have investigated the physical activity of reading, or, more precisely, the ways in which the reader’s eyes move across the page.

*Figurehead* is contemplative and deeply art historical. The exhibition and related performances present the findings of Dale’s research trip to Rome in October 2018. Thirteen contemporary portraits of Saint Jerome are drawn with an innovative use of chenille stems and based on a series of Renaissance paintings. One revelation for Dale was that Jerome is almost always depicted distracted from reading, with his body often contorted into a performative twist. Viewers are invited, in turn, to contemplate their own reading habits and physical encounters with text and images.

We are delighted to be collaborating (for a third consecutive year) with *Corridor8* on a writing residency to augment this timely exhibition. Emerging writer, Saffron Ward, has been commissioned to develop a new text in relation to Dale’s exhibition. ‘Who’s Seen Jerome?’ includes Ward’s detailed reflections on the composition and materials of *Figurehead* as well as insights into its complex semantics. This publication also welcomes an essay by art historian Sara Riccardi who provides the indispensable context for Saint Jerome imagery and interview material with Dale from their time in Italy. We would like to thank the artist and writers for their erudite contributions to this inaugural show in our new Blenheim Walk Gallery.

Curatorial Preface

*Dr Catriona McAra, University Curator*
Today, as we battle to balance and prioritise a multitude of tasks, it is all too tempting to indulge in a world of pixels and perceived perfection. The internet, while seemingly a harmless escape from the overwhelming complexity of twenty-first-century life, can numb us to the real world and make us oblivious to the weight of its histories.

Recognising this modern-day ailment, Nicola Dale delves into the past, questioning the authority of symbolism by revisiting an intriguing historical character. Saint Jerome is best known for translating a large portion of the Bible into Latin, making it widely accessible for his and future generations. For this and other feats (he is said to have tamed a lion by removing a thorn from its paw), Jerome became synonymous with intelligence, modern language and intense piety. Consequently, he was canonised by the Christian Church as the patron saint of libraries.

As the role of the library, and the languages it contains, continues to evolve and diversify, Saint Jerome’s significance seems all but lost — a distant figure disconnected from our fast-paced lives. However, with the opening of Leeds Arts University’s new library and gallery, we find Jerome again, here in a new guise.

Image: GHIRLANDAIO — St. Jerome in his Study, 1480, Ognissanti, Florence
**BEYOND THE SURFACE**

*Figurehead* comprises a series of sculptural portraits of Saint Jerome, eleven free standing and two wall mounted, inspired by historical artworks and executed in wiggly wire lines. A muted colour spectrum of chenille stems (pipe cleaners) are twisted around the wires so tightly that they create a uniform furry coating. For each sculpture, Dale enlarged and traced thirteen Renaissance portraits of Jerome, first encountered during her recent investigative pilgrimage to Rome. Rather than swiping through images on the internet, the artist wanted to experience the sublimity of the original environment, and perhaps access the true essence of the Saint by observing intricate brush strokes and overwhelming scales. The diversity of Jerome’s appearance and persona are subtly altered between each rendition, revealing signs of autonomy, agenda and individual style.

For the exhibition, the minimalist white gallery space at Leeds Arts University is punctuated by eleven cuboid armatures, each with a floating ‘head’. Each frame faces a different corner of the gallery, facilitating new perspectives and conversations as Dale’s Saints simultaneously encounter one another (in a way their originals never will), and viewers moving through the space. The soft lines of their faces contrast with the rigidity of the upright frames, their dimensions reminiscent of scaled-up mobile phone screens. In this way, they evoke a chronology of portraiture from Renaissance drawings to selfies. This comparison is reinforced by Dale’s decision to enlarge or exaggerate certain aspects of Jerome’s attributes, such as the spiralling halo found on the sculpture ‘Lippi’.

Although the subject of each sculpture is taken from a pre-existing painting or fresco of Jerome and named after the original artists (male in every case), Dale’s process of cropping and adapting them to three-dimensional frames creates eleven unique interpretations. This demonstrates the Saint’s symbolic versatility, his appearance and attributes changing according to each interpretation. Jerome’s rise to sainthood has contemporary parallels with social media, his persona and popularity fostered through a process of constructing, filtering and idealising. Here, Dale’s sculptures not only evoke the past, but also demonstrate how a lineage of reconstructed images can give fresh relevance to a historical figure.

The sketch-like sculptures are devoid of volume, shading or tone. This emptiness might be read as a critique of our contemporary dependence on the internet. As we swipe through vast amounts of information on a daily basis, much of it is quickly forgotten or disregarded. The spatial void of each sculpture not only hints at this practice, but also how digital images are formed. Millions of tiny pixels give the impression of line, colour and form, but the material essence of the picture is absent. Their minimalist nature asks us to look beyond the obvious; their sparse placement offering an illusion of connectivity. Depending on a viewer’s position, the sculptures can overlap and blend into one another, creating further, messier portraits of Jerome. This underlines the importance of active sight and shows how the surface of an image can be misleading.

**UNFILTERED SIGHT**

The theme of distorted sight continues to dominate *Figurehead* as Dale explores the physical act of looking. Across the thirteen representations, the shape of Jerome’s eyes varies greatly. Some are big and wide, suggesting enchantment or wonder, whereas others are squinted and downcast in a state of deep concentration. To further emphasise these differences, lengths of bright red dowelling are pierced through one eye on each of the standing pieces, adding a secondary structural layer and further enhancing their sculptural quality. The stems work to plasticise their gazes, encouraging viewers to follow each line of sight and consequently notice areas of the gallery which might otherwise be ignored. This provokes thoughtful connections between *Figurehead* and the wider gallery and library, thus bringing Saint Jerome into the present.

The acrylic red poles also point to an iconographical trope of male Saints in scarlet robes, and to the presence of blood. The placement of each pole required the metaphorical piercing of Jerome’s retina, a kind of attack on the religious canon and patriarchal symbolism that surrounds the figure. However, the vibrant colour and powerful focus of each line also conveys the power of Jerome’s gaze. Here Dale recognises both the male-centred history of her source material and her own agency as a woman making art in the twenty-first-century. The red lines also have a likeness to descriptive marks used within anatomy drawings, but instead of sitting neatly within Jerome’s head (or mind’s eye), the glance is left floating in mid-air, beyond the sculpture’s frame. This prompts viewers to question where sight originates, and perhaps how present-day technology influences our vision, viewing patterns and attention spans.

**Viewers** are invited to weave around the exhibition in a fortuitous sequence, focusing on both faces and escaping gazes, simulating a distracted form of viewing. Conversely, the disruptive nature of Jerome’s escaping stare forces viewers to stop and actively look at each portrait. This has parallels with the act of thoughtful observation Dale performed when seeking out and viewing paintings in Rome. Here, viewers utilise Jerome’s gaze to view new spaces for the first time. In a similar way, Dale utilises medieval iconography to assist contemporary sight and reflect on current concerns.

*Image*: LOTTO — Lorenzo St. Jerome
c. 1509, Castel Sant’Angelo, Rome
The trope of distracted viewing is also identifiable within Dale’s source material, particularly through the repeated depiction of Jerome in a twisted pose. After viewing around ninety-five classical depictions, Dale noticed how his figure was often contorted as the Saint was torn between two pressing tasks, dividing his attention. Jusepe de Ribera’s ‘Saint Jerome and the Trumpet of Doom’ (1637) depicts him in a moment of shock as a loud noise interrupts the scene. Previously engaged in the thoughtful act of writing, indicated by an unravelled scroll at the bottom of the painting and a feathered quill held in his raised right hand, Jerome now twists to hear the blast of a horn. By picking up on this subtle trope, Dale’s portraits show how even the most glorified souls are susceptible to distraction.

Similarly, Domenico Ghirlandaio’s fresco, ‘Saint Jerome in his Study’ (1480), outlines the virtues of the figure whilst depicting a loss of concentration or direction. Enclosed in a cramped, crowded room, Jerome sits at his desk, attempting to write. The scripture is not legible, however the Saint is probably in the midst of translation. With his right hand busy writing, the other supports his heavy head, suggesting frustration or fatigue. Moreover, he is twisted, his lower body and head positioned away from the desk, his gaze extending beyond the frame of the study and composition. While it is unclear whether Jerome is lost in thought or focused on something beyond the image (perhaps the intruding contemporary viewer?), the scene is once again interrupted by a distraction.

Dale’s ‘Ribera’ and ‘Ghirlandaio’ embody the same awkwardness, but without narrative, leaving the viewers to ponder the figures’ strange angles. With this ambiguity, the artist’s choice of materials is ever more important in conveying the physical contortion caused by distracted sight. She uses different colours and lengths of chenille stems to construct each face, selecting shades that correspond with the original images. By wrapping each stem around a skeleton of wavy wire lines, the artist not only injects colour and texture to the otherwise monotone frames, but also replicates the tell-tale twist on a small scale.

Furthermore, the French noun ‘chenille’ translates as ‘caterpillar’, presenting another similarity between the Renaissance paintings and their contemporary interpretations. A chronology of Saint Jerome’s appearance becomes apparent through Dale’s series, questioning why certain characteristics, both physical and psychological, are associated with a nominal leader or figurehead. Symbolic images were pivotal to the Church’s interaction with its followers, especially when illiteracy was prevalent amongst parishioners. Letters and words such as ‘library’ and ‘language’ were attached to figures such as Saint Jerome, and featured within religious depictions of narratives or parables, thus reminding followers of the virtues they represent.

Figurehead reveals how new agendas and authorship can prompt new metamorphoses of Saints. The artist’s choice of material not only emphasises the twist (evident in both the depictions of Jerome and our contemporary modes of distraction), but also implies that, like a caterpillar, the Saint’s appearance is continuously morphing in order to suit the ideals of artists, commissioners or societies — predominately all male-centred. Although there is some resistance to the policies and actions of leaders and their figureheads, many continue to acquiesce and ultimately fall in line with their rhetoric.
Ultimately, *Figurehead* questions the origins of symbolism and queries whether emblematic figures can still have significance in a Western, post-technological context. Dale’s decision to transport Saint Jerome into the physical surroundings of a University gallery and library also asks important questions about the dangers of passive looking and skewed or distracted attention.

The series correspondingly highlights why certain characteristics have been associated with Jerome, and how over time, different interpretations have altered his symbolism. Although our popular understanding of Jerome is dominated by his celebrated virtues, reinforced by symbols of lions and scrolls, some of his work has misogynistic and obsessive overtones (at least by current standards), such as his instructions to women for how to live piously.

Dale’s linear faces consistently show Jerome with a grey beard and startling eyes, pervasive attributes that nonetheless leave us with the question: does the image of an old white man, who was ultimately an anchorite, still suffice as the symbol of libraries? Instead, his distracted looking and penchant for multitasking seems more relevant to our contemporary times. Perhaps instead of re-electing a new Patron Saint of Libraries, we should log off and take a long, focused, thoughtful look around us.

*Image: PINTURICCHIO — The Crucifixion with Sts. Jerome & Christopher 1471, Galleria Borghese, Rome*
Picture this: one old man, weirdly inclined to befriend big wild cats, one artist and one art historian, united by a rather intense fascination with books, knowledge and concepts, and one city, The Eternal City – plus magnificent Florence as a special guest. These are the main characters of the story behind this exhibition, informed by a fortnight of walks, encounters, discussions, and a couple of ice creams in between.

As I (the art historian) and Nicola Dale (the artist) set out for a research trip in Rome (The Eternal City) we had a simple plan to hunt down as many artistic representations of Saint Jerome (the old man with weird habits) as we could find. As an artist interested in knowledge and its transmission, Dale had decided to focus on Jerome, a scholar in the early Christian Church who produced a translation of the Bible in Latin that would then become canonical, from medieval to modern times, exerting ‘an incalculable influence not only on the piety but on the languages and literature of Western Europe’.¹ We did not know exactly what to expect, nor had we any precise idea of what would result from the trip. This exhibition is a part of the outcome but, as it often happens in Dale’s work, the various elements of the story behind it are reshaped through layers of personal interpretation and conceptual translation.

I think the weird iconography, in terms of facial features, depends on the culture of the artist […] some elements, that are those needed to actually make the communication work, are still there, but others are freely re-elaborated.

And that’s actually one of the things that I’ve really enjoyed, just how many different men represent him, apart from the actual use, apart from the style of painting, just all the different faces, different men, every time.

The above conversation happened in front of a small head-and-shoulder painting of Saint Jerome from the sixteenth century, in the beautiful Galleria Borghese. The artist is named as ‘Unknown master from Northern Italy’. The bust’s status as an arguably minor example, when compared to those by the likes of Ribera or Mantegna, and its very simple iconography offered us the opportunity to reflect on the ‘many different men’ that represent Jerome. When everything else — artistic quality, composition, interpretation of the subject matter — was stripped back, we could still appreciate the aspect of the representation of an individual. As the work in the exhibition manifests, Dale has been evolving that initial thought, expressed in front of the small portrait, resulting in the series of ‘different faces’ found in Figurehead.

Artists have long been fascinated by the multiple aspects of Jerome: through his life he came to embody many aspects of Christian spirituality, ‘from ascetic meditation to preaching and anti-heterodox activity’,² and his iconography reflects this multiplicity. Although our research in Rome put us in contact
mainly with Southern-European examples from the fifteenth to nineteenth century, with an obvious prevalence of Italian ones, we came across all the various typologies of Saint Jerome’s image.

**Jerome** was a Christian in fourth-century Italy. After developing a passion for Latin literature, he later devoted himself to the study of Christian writing, and in his early thirties he retired to the Syrian desert to spend time in penitence, vowing to abandon once and for all the study of pagan texts and the luxuries of his youth.

In front of Federico Barocci, ‘Saint Jerome in Prayer’, second half 1590s, oil on canvas, Galleria Borghese, Rome.

So, he is holding his rock […] and this time he’s really staring at the Crucifix.

Yes, he’s almost crying. He has a very tormented attitude.

Including the pose.

[…] I can almost hear him asking for forgiveness […]

And he’s a very old man.

The years in penitence in the desert inform the iconography of the Penitent Saint Jerome, where the man is set in a landscape — often beautifully described and not very desert-like — and is shown meditating in front of a Crucifix, beating himself with a stone. Although he was actually fairly young in his penitence years, he has been passed on in the visual tradition as an older man, authoritative and sorrowful, especially when seen physically suffering. The extreme thinness or a certain weakness of his body in some representations reflect the rigour of Jerome’s ascetism, described in his letters, particularly in those addressed to a group of wealthy Roman widows who would refer to him for directions on how to lead an ascetic life — a tutelage that some members of the Roman clergy regarded with some suspicion.

In front of Domenico Ghirlandaio, ‘Saint Jerome in the study’, 1480, fresco, Church of Ognissanti, Florence.

This feels like a real study, with the objects on the shelf, his reading glasses, and two different inks, the black and red ink on the side […] and did you see the red and black ink have got little spatters of ink around them on the wood? Like he’s been dipping his pen and as he’s dipped in it, it sprayed […] so, this is obviously Jerome the scholar, writing, translating, but taking a moment to look at the viewer.

**Jerome** the Scholar is then a different iconography, which focuses on the Saint’s contribution to theology and
mainly on his Bible translation work. Often though, the different iconographies merge and he is represented with both his books and the penitence attributes, bare-chested and set in caves or in the wilderness, especially in the Italian and Spanish tradition. In some cases, these scenes present the additional element of a trumpet, blowing from the sky and interfering with the scholar’s work — a reference to a mystical vision experienced by the Saint, in which he could hear the sound of the trumpets of the Last Judgement.

In front of Lionel Spada, ‘Saint Jerome’, 1515, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

So, apparently this is the most popular iconography, the one that actually brings together different elements of his life […] because again, he’s the hermit, but he’s working.

Jerome died in Bethlehem in 419, leaving a radical mark in his time, not only with his scholarly work but also through his active engagement in the politics of the Church and the fight against heresy. The corpus of his letters and his theological writings gained him the title of Doctor of the Latin Church.

Jerome and the lion became canonical. As for the lion, the episode of Jerome extracting a painful thorn from the animal’s paw while in Bethlehem, gaining its eternal loyalty and friendship, is a legendary one. It shows that even the wildest beasts recognised Jerome’s exceptional status as a Saint: ‘in a Christian perspective […] the holy man who tames a lion by removing the thorn from its paw possesses divine powers’. And yet, literary sources from the seventh century tell the story in connection to another Saint, an abbot called Gerasimus. It is only with later accounts, from the ninth century onwards, that the episode is found in the life of Saint Jerome. The similarity between the two Latin names (Gerasimus/Hieronymus) is most probably the reason for the confusion in the first place, but then the mistake was repeated in hagiographic literature and the association between Jerome and the lion became canonical. Biographers of the Saint from the sixteenth century were aware of the mistaken association, and yet one of them defended its inclusion regardless, arguing that ‘without the animal the faithful might not recognize the saint’.

In front of Andrea Lilli, ‘St. Jerome’, after 1585, fresco, Chapel of St. Nicholas of Tolentino, Church of Sant’Agostino in Campo Marzio, Rome.

I’ve just realised he’s not actually looking at the book, he is looking away.

No, again, he has that swirling position […] more than all of the other three [Doctors]!

It’s a strange attribute to describe, but it is an attribute, that his gaze is always, well, not always, his gaze is often…

…yes! Yes! Yeah, very often his face is not in line with the rest of his body: there’s a torsion that sometimes starts from the shoulders, sometimes starts from the waist, but often there’s a movement…

…there’s a twist. Although we’ve noticed it before, it’s the first time I thought of it as an attribute — but it is one, isn’t it? It happens so often.

Yes, and I’m realising it feels like something that helps me recognise him […] it feels familiar that he is in that position, and now that I look at the other three, they are not.

The above fragment of conversation represents a pivotal moment in the research trip: the identification of what Dale and I went on to describe as ‘the twist’, a feature of Jerome’s representation that appears regularly. Attributes or features of a Saint’s iconography are transmitted throughout the centuries by mutual influences, repetition and contamination. Some aspects, such as Jerome’s twist, might never be consciously codified, yet become part of the visual tradition of the subject.

Dale’s new body of work enters into direct dialogue with this tradition, taking as a fundamental point of reference exactly one of those aspects that developed in a less-structured way. Rather than citing the physical objects that regularly accompany Jerome — the lion, the books, the stone — the artist has been fascinated by two subtler and less material aspects: the twist, which has become the material means to the realisation of the pieces, and the many sides of this ultimately unknowable figure.

Jerome went back to the original languages of the Bible to produce his final Latin translation, while Dale has been facing the task of translating painting into sculpture, returning to the unifying element between them — drawing. A very small selection of the paintings we observed during the trip have been sketched by the artist, and on these sketches she based the sculptures that now inhabit the new space of the University gallery, pointing their gazes in a multitude of directions.
Picture this: one old man, a man who embodies the many paths to sanctity and whose contribution to knowledge and culture in the modern Western world is immense. Then, picture a contemporary artist and combine them in the contemporary world. Dale grounds her work in the authority of the past, basing her modern sculptures on his historical paintings (which include a Leonardo), and brings them into the present by exploring the formal possibilities of sculpture and the conceptual challenge of defining one’s identity. *Figurehead* reflects on the power and threat of distraction, of pointing our gaze in all directions, of twisting ourselves in multiple occupations. As detrimental as it can sometimes seem in our increasingly distracting times, Jerome shows us that, if done constructively and creatively, it can also lead us to achieve exceptional things, such as having a lion for a pet.

In front of Domenico Beccafumi, ‘St. Jerome’, first half of 16th century, oil on canvas, Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome.

In front of Domenico Beccafumi, ‘St. Jerome’, first half of 16th century, oil on canvas, Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome.

The lion doesn’t really look like a lion.

No, it looks like a man with a moustache pretending to be a lion.

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6. The most important Doctors of the Latin Church, often represented in a group of four, are Saint Jerome, Saint Augustine, Saint Ambrose and Saint Gregory the Great. They all contributed to the foundation of Christian theology in the first centuries of life of the Church.
7. ‘While the title ‘Cardinal’ became current during the barbarian invasions of Eastern Europe, especially in the sixth century […], it was only in the eleventh century that the Sacred College at Rome took institutional form, the Roman Cardinals becoming the principal counsellors and assistants of the popes’. Kelly, *Jerome*, p. 334, note 6.