



2017.073

Unidentified Artist

Saint Jerome Meditating on the Four Last Things

Peru

Seventeenth century

Oil on canvas, 50 3/8 x 38 inches

In early medieval monastic culture, the Latin word *novissima* referred generally to the fragility of life and the inevitability of death, but in the twelfth century the Last Things became more standardized as Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. In the movement called the Modern Devotion (*Devotio Moderna*) the Four Last Things developed into a major subject of meditation, the self-scrutiny of the soul, death being the moment in which the soul is separated from the body. In these meditative practices, Judgment is God's individual judgment of the soul at the moment of death. In paintings, Judgment is more commonly represented as the Judgment at the end of the world. Among the fifteenth-century treatises that remained influential through the seventeenth was that of Denis the Carthusian, whose work was simply titled *De quatuor hominis*

novissimis – the Four Last Things of Man: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell. Denis the Carthusian’s concept found visual expression in an engraving of around 1600 by Hieronymus Wierix (fig. 1), here pictured alongside a colonial painting in the convent of Santa Teresa in Ayacucho (fig. 2). The painting is signed and dated 1704 by a nun, Sister Basilio de Jesús, who added to the Wierix composition the figure of a contemplative Saint Jerome, who experienced the sound of angelic trumpets prefiguring the Last Judgment. Saint Jerome points to a skull, symbolizing death.

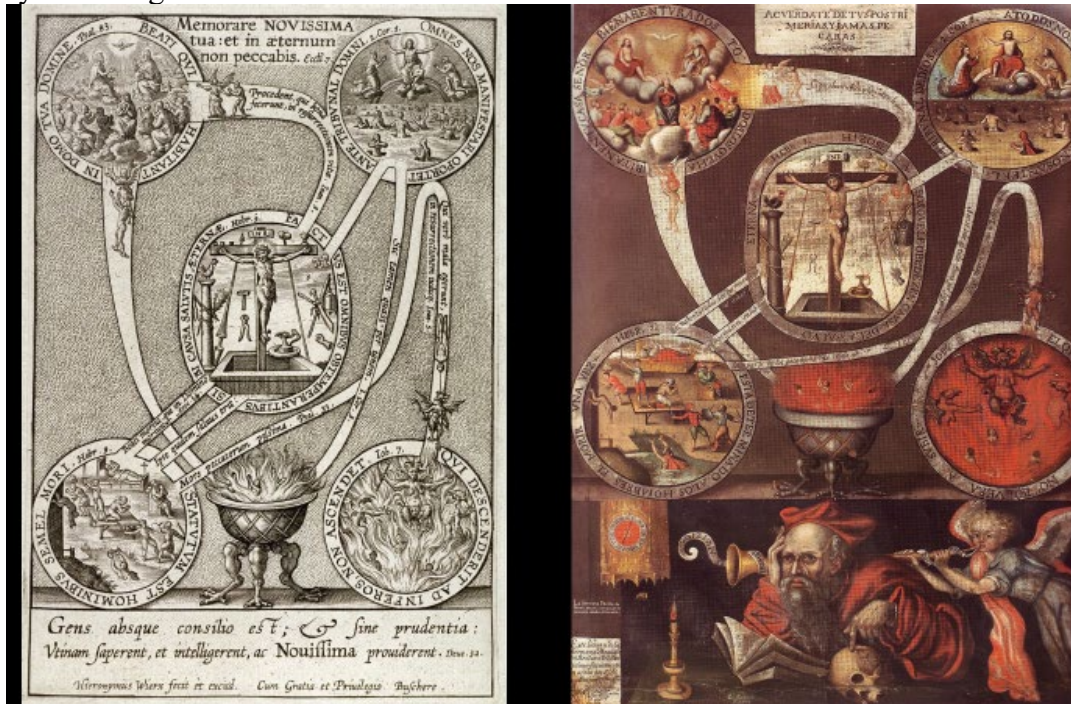


Fig. 1. Hieronymus Wierix, engraving, *Memorare novissima tua*, c. 1600.

Fig. 2. Sister Basilio de Jesús, *Saint Jerome with the Four Last Things*, 1704, oil on canvas, Ayacucho, Peru: Convent of Santa Teresa.

In the Thoma painting from viceregal Peru an angel gestures to Saint Jerome to ponder the Four Last Things, with naturalistic portrayals of the dead emerging from their graves in the foreground. These words are attributed to Saint Jerome: “Always the terrible trumpet sounds in your ears, saying, ‘Arise ye dead and come to your judgment.’” One figure, a skeleton, does not arise. Its skull wears a crown, reminding the viewer than even the great and powerful can fall victim to their sins. The serpents winding their way through the crown remind us of Denis the Carthusian’s fearsome description of Hell, followed by many treatises on the Four Last Things, that included a reference to the “loathsome worms” to be found there. In the distance, angels embrace the souls destined for Heaven and guide them on their way to be blessed by the trio of Christ, Mary, and John the Baptist awaiting them on a heavenly rainbow.

The Thoma painting, with its realism and contrasts of light and dark, represents colonial painting in Peru in the seventeenth century. A much later version of this subject (fig. 3) that is based on the same graphic model, exemplifies Cuzco painting of the eighteenth century, with its bright colors, less than perfect grasp of anatomy, and generous applications of gold, contrasts vividly with the earlier painting. The entire composition has been radically simplified, and Saint

Jerome's faithful lion takes the place of two figures arising from the dead to meet their judgment. In the seventeenth century, Spanish colonial painting in the Andes tended to be closer to European styles, but in Cuzco in the eighteenth-century indigenous and mestizo artists often spun away from European modes to create works with a markedly different aesthetic.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt



Fig. 3. Unidentified artist (Cuzco, Peru), *Saint Jerome Meditating on the Last Judgment*, 18th century, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown. Church of Nuestra Señora de Belén, Cuzco. Photo: Raúl Montero Quispe.