With support from the Wanda Hollensteiner Conservation Fund, Beloit College has restored its copy of Albrecht Dürer’s 1514 engraving of St. Jerome in His Study, a quintessential image of Renaissance art. Over the centuries, commentators have repeatedly expressed admiration for the technical achievement of this work, always including it among the canonical compositions in the history of art. Dürer’s engraving also stands at the beginning of a new historical development: the emergence of printed images as major works of art. German art-historical scholarship coined the label “Meisterstich” (“master engraving”) as a pun on “Meisterstück” (“masterpiece”), specifically for St. Jerome in His Study to reflect the elevated status of graphic arts towards that of painting.

The composition of the 1514 engraving draws attention to the artist as a practitioner of geometry. One scholar described it as the “supreme manifestation of the engraver’s ars in union with the perspectivist’s scientia.” Indeed, by the date of this composition, Dürer was already deeply engrossed in the geometrical studies that would finally be published in his artist’s manual of 1525, Course in the Art of Measurement. It is often remarked that the engraving reduces the figure of Jerome to just one of the several accessories in what is primarily a perspectivist’s rendering of a room. Dürer also uses a framing style he developed for the interior scenes of The Life of the Virgin, cutting the picture plane dramatically on the right margin, giving the image a sense of openness that puts the viewer into the space. Unusually self-conscious about style and technique, Dürer appears to be making the perspectival rendering of space (and solids) an important part of the composition’s theme. The vanishing point is located on the extreme right side of the interior, which enables Dürer to create interesting distortions such as the strangely shaped table top. Moreover, the perspective compounds the visual impression of the gourd swelling so impressively from the ceiling.

The lighting of the composition is similarly dramatic, an important feature that the Italian Renaissance master Giorgio Vasari was first to note: “Dürer depicts a room with glass windows through which the sun is shining and reflected in so natural a way that one is utterly astonished.” The low angle of the light suggests the blinding brilliance of a morning or a low Winter sun, but its intensity and especially the partially unnatural illumination of Jerome’s halo suggests that this might be more than ordinary light, that the light may be intended to evoke the Christian concept of “uncreated light,” as experienced in the burning bush or the transfiguration of Christ. Such hybridized natural and sacred light, paradoxically, suggests a physical manifestation of the metaphysical—the material world, portrayed so exactly through the perspectivist’s science, acquires contour and meaning when washed in divine light.

Albrecht Dürer’s oeuvre reflects the pervasiveness of St. Jerome in Renaissance culture. Altogether, the saint appears in roughly thirteen compositions executed in the various media of painting, woodcut, engraving, drypoint, and drawing. If we exclude biblical saints, no other saint appears as often in Dürer’s art as Jerome. Part of the attraction of Jerome to Dürer was the opportunity to introduce Italian Renaissance representations of him to the North. But in his Jerome compositions, as in the iconic image of 1514, we can also see more specifically Dürer’s keen interest in Renaissance scholarship on the Bible, for Jerome was best known as the translator of the Vulgate version of the Bible, the Latin Bible that informed Western Christianity for over a millennium.