Spectacles in Art

from John Gregory Roberts & David Kaufman

Following the spread of the use of spectacles for reading the the 14th century, the only people to use them were those who were educated and literate. Portraits of famous people of the time were therefore often painted with a pair of spectacles as they became to be seen as a mark of wisdom.

In addition, painters of that era, who were portraying religious topics, such as the birth of Jesus or episodes in his early life, often showed individuals in the picture with a pair of spectacles to show their status or wisdom. Hence the wise men at the Crib are sometimes shown wearing or holding a pair of spectacles. Paintings of the circumcision of the infant Jesus may show one of the group of men wearing spectacles are reading from a book.

Nose spectacles in depiction of Jesus' circumcision

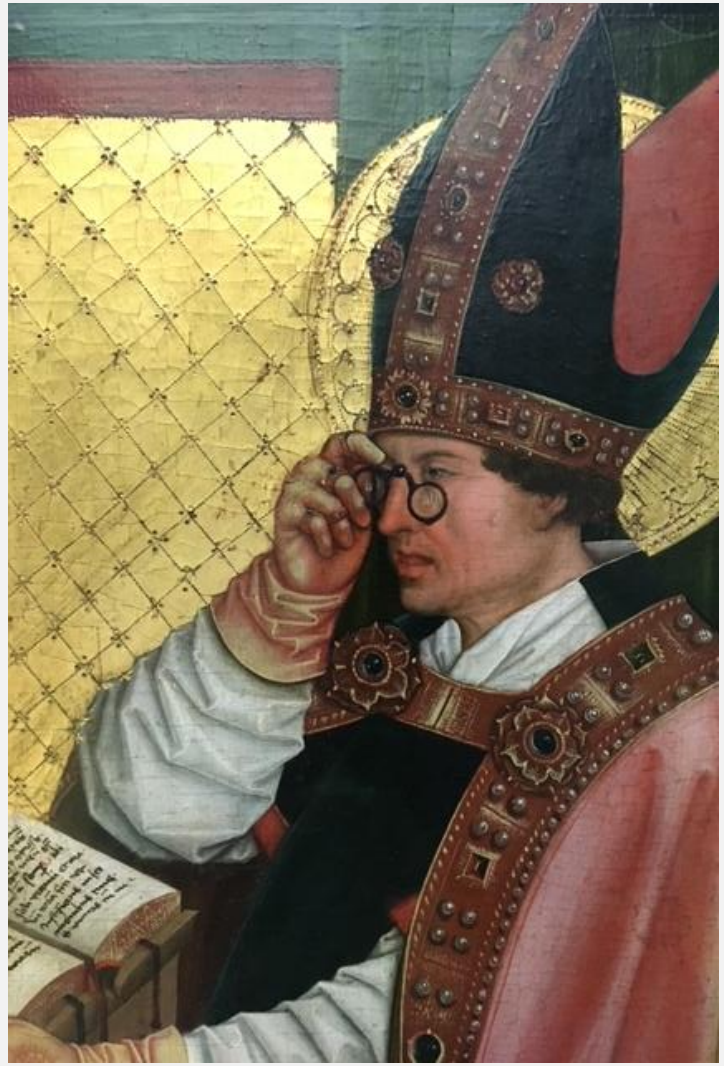
St Jerome pondering

A fourth century theologian and moral philosopher.
The skull as a reminder of his mortality.
The spectacles represent wisdom despite not having been invented until the 15th century.

Joos van Cleve ~ 1540

This panel of the altarpiece shows the unknown donor reading his Latin bible with his spectacles, typical for the time.

Artist: Bernhard Strigel (1460-1526)
This work c1505 Germanic National Museum, Nuremberg



16-17th century nose spectacles with metal frames

Canon van der Paele's glasses

The spectacle frames are bone or leather with a reading lens shown by the magnification of the Latin breviary. In the 15th century not many people other than the clergy could read so the presence of the spectacles in the painting indicated Van der Paele's intellectual training.

Artist: Jan van Eyck (1390-1441)

These folding nose spectacles are probably made of bone

Date: c18th century

Oil on panel of the Virgin & Child with the donor, Canon van der Paele

Shows the spectacles magnifying the breviary held by the Canon.

Date: c1435
Artist: Jan van Eyck (1390-1441)

Artist: Jean Leon Gerome

Date: 1902