

# WILLEM VAN MIERIS

(Leiden 1662 - Leiden 1747)

## *The Penitent Mary Magdalene*

signed and indistinctly dated 'W: Van Mieris fe 170[1?]' (upper left)  
oil on panel  
20.3 x 16.2 cm (8 x 6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in)

**T**HE PENITENT MARY MAGDALENE IS A SENSUOUS and powerful representation of Mary Magdalene repenting her sinful past. She is both monumental and graceful, her face rendered with a smooth, porcelain-like finish yet simultaneously capturing the inner turmoil she experiences as a result of her profound penitence. Willem van Mieris has exploited his considerable painterly skill, within the style of the Leiden 'fine painters', with his soft rendering of the various fabrics worn by Mary Magdalene and the highly detailed still life elements that surround her on a nearby table.

Mary Magdalene was frequently painted as a penitent in reference to her apparent past life as a prostitute and adulteress for which, according to legend, she spent many years in the desert atoning. This misnomer has been maintained throughout the centuries although none of the New Testament gospels refer to her as either. However, in keeping with this tradition, van Mieris depicts Mary with her hair worn down, her soft locks flowing over her bare shoulder and her right breast tantalisingly revealed.

The motif of one bare breast was particularly popular in art of the seventeenth-century and Mary Magdalene was the most popular figure where, 'her naked breast seemed to become one of her saintly attributes, a newly coined image of vulnerability and penitence, superimposed on the established theme of pleasure.'<sup>1</sup> Indeed the exposure of her right breast and highly emotive body language recalls the figure of Potiphar's wife in van Mieris's *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* now in the Hermitage (fig. 1).

Though it would have been considered scandalous to present any other woman in such a revealing state of undress it was a particular iconography associated with Mary Magdalene, seen for example in Titian's (c.1480/85-1576) much reproduced masterpiece *The Repentant*

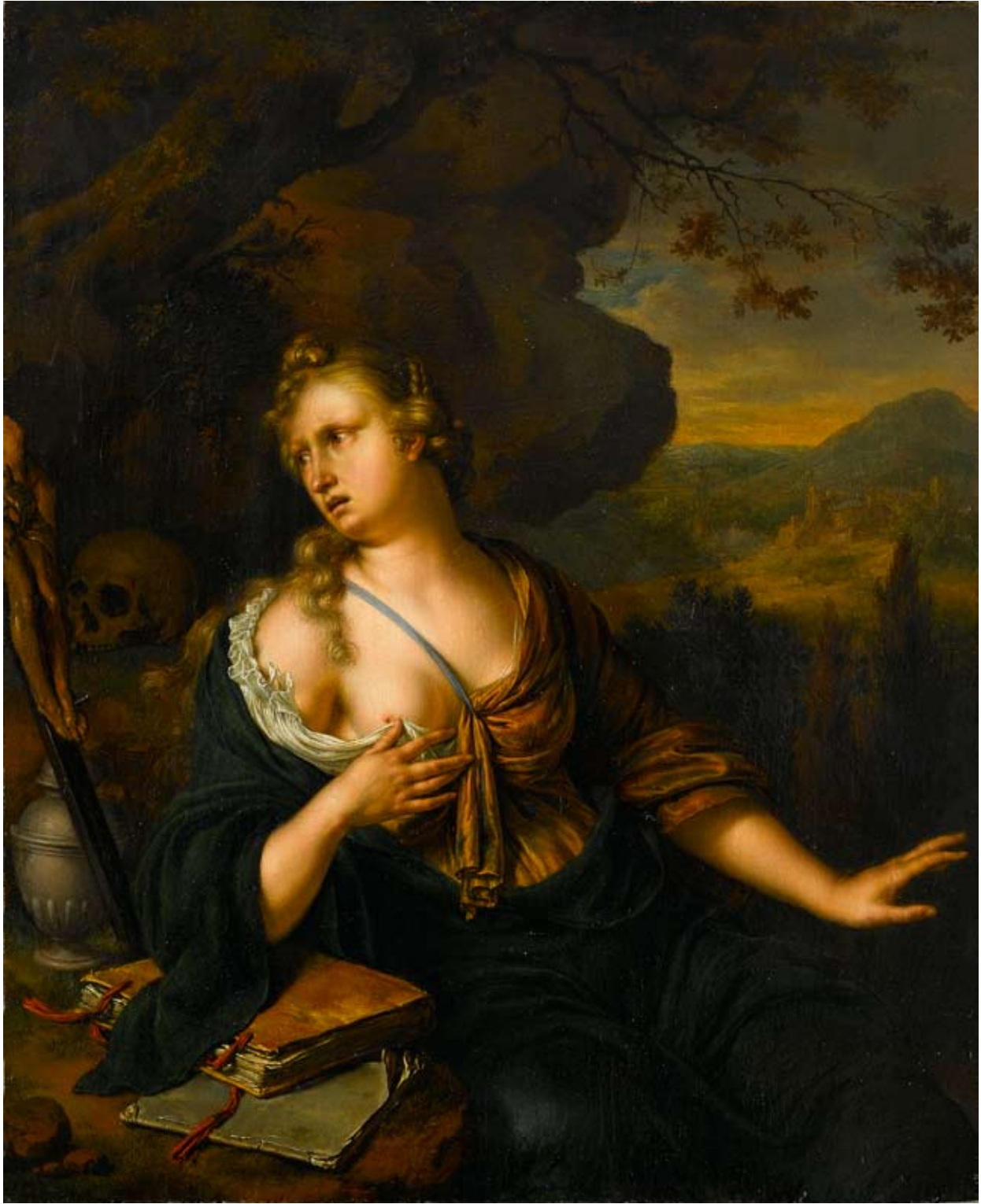
<sup>1</sup> Hollander, A., *Seeing Through Clothes*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993) p. 198.



Willem van Mieris, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, first half of the eighteenth century, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Acquired between 1763-1774 (Figure 1)

*Mary Magdalene*. Van Mieris, like Titian, has chosen to show Mary Magdalene as a troubled soul. In *The Penitent Mary Magdalene* she gazes out of the picture plane lost deep in thought, her left hand extended in bewildered exasperation. Both the present work and *The Repentant Mary Magdalene* show her alone in a grotto, a far reaching landscape in the background only further emphasising her isolation and solitude.

From an early Christian tradition, Mary Magdalene is three different women, who either met or followed Christ, combined: the unnamed sinner who, during a meal at the house of Simon the Pharisee, smears the Lord's feet with perfume and dries them with her hair; Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, who joined Jesus' followers, received him in her house and persuaded him to raise her brother from the dead; and



(Actual Size)

finally Mary of the town of Mandela, who was possessed by devils that Jesus exorcised, and who is present at both the Crucifixion and at the Entombment, and whom Christ graces with his first appearance as a Redeemer in the episode known as the *noli me tangere*.

The misidentification of Mary Magdalene and ensuing confusion was exacerbated by Pope Gregory the Great who, in 591 A.D., preached, 'she whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary [of Bethany], we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark.' Pope Gregory had identified Mary with the adulteress brought before Jesus, and so Mary Magdalene became the 'sinner' in Luke who bathes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses and anoints them. 'Her many sins have been forgiven, for she loved much', (Luke 7:47) and the idea of Mary as a repentant prostitute was formed. It was not until 1969 that the Vatican officially separated Luke's sinful woman, Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene as part of a general revision of the Roman Missal and calendar.

Throughout *The Penitent Mary Magdalene*, van Mieris has scattered a host of symbolic messages and iconography. She is placed within a grotto setting - a reference to the French legends of Mary Magdalene in which she is said to have retired to a grotto in the St. Baume mountain range for thirty years - the lower part of a crucifix and skull still clearly visible. The skull may be a reference to Mary's role as a witness of the crucifixion, which took place on Golgotha, the 'place of the skull'. The



Frans van Mieris, *A Lady at her Toilet*, c.1659-1660, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Collection of Count von Brühl, Dresden, 1769 (Figure 2)



Willem van Mieris *The Penitent Mary Magdalene* (Detail)

skull, a *vanitas* symbol serves as a *memento mori*; a reminder of the brevity of life and the contemplation of death.

At the base of the crucifix we see Mary's primary attribute, an alabaster anointing jar. This jar may possibly refer to the belief that Mary Magdalene performed the anointing of Christ after his crucifixion. More than that, however, it serves as a reminder of her role as witness to one of the most powerful and important events in the Gospels underpinning the Christian faith - the Resurrection of Christ.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, as one of the main protagonists in the Resurrection, Mary encounters the resurrected Christ and steps forward to touch him only to be told, 'do not touch me' (*noli me tangere*). Christ's hand gesture - a symbolic pose used in countless paintings of the Resurrection - is poignantly echoed in Mary Magdalene's outstretched hand in the present work - a further reference to her key role as witness to Christ's resurrection.

Mary rests her right arm on two well-worn leather covered books, the fabric from her shawl loosely draped over. As in the many pictorial representations of scholar-hermits in the empty wilderness, the inclusion of books alludes to the contemplative life of reflection and penitence incurred by those in spiritual isolation.

Willem van Mieris spent his life working in Leiden where he was trained by his father Frans van Mieris (1635-1681) one of the most important of the Leiden 'fine painters' (*Leidse fijnschilders*) alongside Gerrit Dou (1613-1675). The influence of his father's work cannot be underestimated as the young van Mieris followed the technique and subject matter of his father's later paintings, which display the same enamel-like smoothness, harsh reflections of light and an emphatic display of virtuosity in the rendering of detail and figures.

The Leiden 'fine painters' - principally active in the seventeenth century - produced small-scale, mostly genre scenes full of minute detail executed in a highly polished manner. Such was the acute attention to detail in these works that the general reaction was of amazement at the virtuosity and perfection they could produce with paint. Frans van

<sup>2</sup> As well as the representation of Mary Magdalene as a penitent, she was frequently depicted holding the anointing jar. For examples see Bernardino Luini, *The Magdalene* (c.1525, National Gallery of Art, Washington), Rogier van der Weyden, *Mary Magdalene* (c.1445, National Gallery, London) and Jan van Scorel, *Mary Magdalene* (c.1528, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).



Willem van Mieris *The Penitent Mary Magdalene* (Detail)

Mieris was exceptionally gifted and the prices paid for his work were amongst the highest received for Dutch paintings in the seventeenth century. Frans van Mieris' superb skill as a painter is still recognised today, as exemplified by the 2008 sale at Sotheby's of his *Young Woman in a Red Jacket Feeding a Parrot* which sold for a record £3,200,000.

The highly refined application of paint and attention to detail evident in *The Penitent Mary Magdalene* - most especially in the sumptuous fabrics falling from Mary's radiant skin and the book, skull and crucifix on the table - closely echoes the work of his father, for example *A Lady at her Toilet* (fig. 2). Frans van Mieris has used a direct stream of light, here from the opened window, to accentuate the delicate surface textures of the varying fabrics seen - the cream fur lining the edges of her over-jacket being particularly fine. Willem van Mieris has employed a similar technique in the present work with the strewn light illuminating the crinkled edges of her undershirt and the almost tangible, thick leather covers and worn pages of the two books in the foreground.

Unlike his father, however, he also explored history painting, including religious scenes, subjects from Classical and Renaissance literature and pastoral themes. His female figures are frequently nude



Willem van Mieris *The Penitent Mary Magdalene* (Detail)

and the poses were often taken from prints of classical sculpture in the pattern books circulating at the time; one can imagine the pose of Mary Magdalene to have derived from such a prototype. *Expulsion of Hagar* is further illustrative of van Mieris's appropriation of the forms of classical sculpture on his figures (fig. 3). Here the figure of Hagar is particularly dramatic as her exposed alabaster skin contrasts with the darkened background and the red robes worn by Ishmael and Abraham.

The majority of Willem van Mieris' *oeuvre*, however, consisted of the genre scenes and subjects developed by his father and the previous generation of Leiden 'fine painters', thus *The Penitent Mary Magdalene* is an exceptional example of his infrequent foray into the realm of religious iconographical and painting.



Willem van Mieris, *Expulsion of Hagar*, 1724, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Collection of Johann Gotzkowski, Berlin, 1764 (Figure 3)

Van Mieris was additionally a skilled portraitist, landscape painter and draughtsman and his dated works go up to the 1730s when he became partially blind. He became a member of the Leiden Guild of St. Luke in 1693 acting several times as headman and once as dean. Furthermore around 1694, together with the painters Jacob Toorenvliet (c.1635-1719) and Carel de Moor (1655-1738) (cat. no. 5), he founded a drawing academy in Leiden, which he and de Moor directed until 1736.

During his lifetime his works were highly prized and he had several notable patrons, as well as selling works to the Dresden gallery of Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland (1694-1733).