

JAN WILDENS

(Antwerp 1586 - Antwerp 1653)

The Penitent Magdalene in a Wooded Landscape

oil on copper
66 x 86 cm (26 x 34 in)

Provenance: North-German Private Collection.

MARY MAGDALENE LIES DEEP IN CONTEMPLATION on a crimson shawl in a wooded clearing, with hazy mountains on the horizon. She is immediately identifiable by her characteristically long hair, halo, and her face, which is tearstained from immeasurable grief. She meditates upon a crucifix which she holds thoughtfully in her hand, and nearby is an open book, presumably a bible, propped against a skull. This is a clear reference to Mary's role as a witness of the crucifixion, which took place on Golgotha, the 'place of the skull', as well as an allusion to the saint's constant contemplation of death. Two *putti* emerge, amid golden light, from the clouds and one descends towards Mary, clutching a wreath of flowers in its chubby fist. Jan Wildens has painted the Magdalene within an extensive landscape which recedes into a mountainous background. As our eye wanders down the hill and into the vast valley below, it passes over thick wooded areas and dramatic rock formations. The vibrant orange and green tones of the foreground cool, giving way to the blue-grey hues of the distant mountains.

This technique of colour perspective was employed by Wildens in a number of his paintings, including the Hermitage's *Landscape with Christ and his Disciples on the Road to Emmaus* (fig. 1). The recession is also created and controlled by the path, which is flanked by trees on either side, until it opens out into the rolling fields of the background. The narrative does not detract from the landscape in either work, though the figures do enhance and animate their surroundings through their actions and the vivid colours of their clothing. Not only do these paintings demonstrate Wildens' consummate skill in creating harmonious panoramic landscape compositions but they also show the exquisite detailing he



Peter Paul Rubens, *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*, c.1617, (landscape by Jan Wildens), Alte Pinakothek, Munich (Figure 2)

brings to the natural features of the foreground, such as the thick foliage of the prominent foreground tree in the present work, or the silvered reflection off the water in the Hermitage painting, which is gently disturbed by the soft ripples.

Between 1616 and 1620, much of Wildens' work comprised landscape paintings in collaboration with Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). A typical example is Rubens' *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*, see figure 2, in which the landscape is executed by Wildens' hand making its mountainous, wooded nature comparable to the present work. Wildens' early landscapes, featuring highly effective aerial perspective, were influenced by the work of artists such as Joos de Momper II (1564-1635) (cat. no. 80) and Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625). Under the influence of Rubens, however, Wildens' landscapes developed significantly, resulting in compositions which became more expansive as they frequently included tall trees, wooded areas and country roads.

It is also noteworthy that the figure of Mary Magdalene in the present work displays the influence of Rubens. It seems that the two artists remained close friends, with Rubens acting as a witness at Wildens' wedding, and Wildens acting as an executor of Rubens' will. Wildens' proficiency in the landscape genre meant that he was highly sought after, and he collaborated with many other notable artists such as Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678) and Frans Snyders (1579-1657).



Jan Wildens, *Landscape with Christ and his Disciples on the Road to Emmaus*, 1640s, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; The State Museum Fund from the collection of Lvova, Petrograd, 1924 (Figure 1)

