SPHINX FINE ART



Follower of Jan Massys (Antwerp *c.* 1509 - Antwerp *c.* 1575)

The Penitent Magdalene

oil on panel
74.2 x 102.2 cm (29¼ x 40¼ in)

The Penitent Magdalene is a particularly intimate representation of Mary Magdalene set amidst a dense, sinewy forest. She prays intently towards an illustrated holy book, a vase and a wooden crucifix placed nearby. She appears to have stopped on a country track, the extension of which is seen in the right background, as it continues up towards a mystical citadel or geomorphic structure.

The composition of *The Penitent Magdalene*, a work which is attributed to a follower of Jan Massys displays many characteristics found in Flemish painting of the mid-sixteenth century. The theme and general conception can be traced to Jan Massys and his workshop, however the elongated proportions and the heavier, somewhat triangular face, could be attributed to the influence of the more progressive Flemish painter Frans Floris. The depiction of the partially clad Magdalene kneeling in a landscape was widespread at this period, but here the artist introduces an unusual element by creating a view through the grotto behind the saint's head. A similar but not identical device can be found in the work of another contemporary, Maarten de Vos, known through an engraving by Antonie Wierix.[1]

The present work is attributed to a follower of Jan Massys (*c.* 1509-1575). Massys, son of Quentin Massys (1466-1530), was a master of the Guild of St. Luke in Antwerp. After being exiled from the Brabant in 1544 for his heretical sympathies, it is thought that Massys went to France, possibly Fontainbleu, as well as Germany and Italy around 1549. He returned to Antwerp in 1555, and it was during his second Antwerp period (1555-1578) that he was most productive. Throughout his career he worked in a traditional style often influenced by the works of his father, in particular his satirical genre scenes. Massys' *oeuvre* mainly focused on a small number of popular subjects, which he often repeated: the Virgin and Child, St Jerome and Mary Magdalene. However Massys is best known for his depictions of the female nude and frequently used Old Testament, allegorical and mythological subjects to incorporate the female form.

[1] See Hollstein *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, 1450-1700*, vol. 44, Maarten de Vos, no. 1119, reproduced vol. 46, pl. 100.

Artist description:

Jan Massys was born into a south Netherlandish family of artists. His father Quinten Metsys, who spelt his surname variously, was the leading painter of early 16th-century Antwerp. Jan worked in the style of his father, whose studio he may have taken over following his death in 1530. Two years later, though still under the age of majority, Jan was admitted as a master in the Guild of St Luke in Antwerp.

In 1544, together with his brother Cornelis and other artists, Jan was sentenced in his absence and exiled from Brabant because of his heretical sympathies. His wife remained in Antwerp, and he was registered as a fugitive. He may have gone to France, in particular to Fontainebleau, perhaps also to Germany; he was in Italy around 1549. In 1550 he tried to have his sentence reduced, and before 11 December 1555 he returned to Antwerp. After his return a series of court cases was brought against him by some of his brothers and sisters, because he had defaulted on the distribution of family inheritances. Despite his financial problems, or perhaps because of them, Jan was most productive as an artist during his second Antwerp period (1555–78), when almost all of his dated paintings were executed. Even the town council bought his work; for instance, in 1559–60 he sold them a *Judgement of Solomon* (untraced). Old inventories further reveal that his work enjoyed a certain degree of popularity. In 1569 he took on another apprentice, Olivier de Cuyper.

Only a few works may be attributed with any certainty to the first Antwerp period (1531–43). Jan probably copied a number of his father's works, and they may even have collaborated before the latter's death. Some works designed or left unfinished by Quinten were certainly completed by Jan. The first dated painting generally attributed to Jan is the *St Jerome* (1537; Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), which is completely in the style of Quinten. Only one signed and dated painting is known from the artist's period in exile: a *Virgin and Child* (1552; Genoa).

Throughout his career Jan continued to work in a traditional style. He seems not to have had any contact with his more progressive contemporaries, such as Frans Floris and Jan Sanders van Hemessen. His satirical genre scenes, for example groups of courting couples and unequal lovers, are uninspired variations on themes already treated by his father. Jan stuck mainly to a small number of popular subjects, which he often repeated: the Virgin and Child, St Jerome and Mary Magdalene. However, he is best known as a painter of the female nude. As was often the case in the 16th century, he frequently used Old Testament, allegorical and mythological subjects as a pretext for the depiction of the nude. The sensuality of his figures is reminiscent of the works of the Fontainebleau school, a feature already evident in his early signed *Judith* (1543; Boston, MA, Museum of Fine Arts). His more mature style, of 1555–75, can be seen in compositions such as *Bathsheba Bathing* (Paris, Louvre), *Lot and his Daughters* and *Susanna and the Elders* (both Brussels, Royal Museum of Fine Arts). Among his best works are versions of *Flora* (*Venus Cythereia*), one with a view of the harbour at Genoa (Stockholm, Nationalmuseum) and another with the shipping lanes of Antwerp in the background (1559; Hamburg, Kunsthalle). In these works a large-scale, classicizing figure reclines awkwardly in a rhetorical pose in the foreground, with a topographical view in the distance.

Collections

Massys is represented in the following collections: Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels; Louvre, Paris; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; Kunsthalle, Hamburg; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Palazzo Bianco, Genoa, amongst others.