SPHINX FINE ART



Willem van Mieris (Leiden 1662 - Leiden 1747)

The Penitent Mary Magdalene

signed and dated 'W. Van/Mieris/Fe/1709' (upper left)
oil on panel
20.3 x 16.2 cm (8 x 6⅜ in)

In this small, exquisitely painted picture, Willem van Mieris has depicted Mary Magdalene, grief-stricken and living in the wilderness. After Christ's crucifixion Mary was believed to have become a hermit, devoting her life to penance and prayer. Here she is seen, clearly upset, staring devoutly at a crucifix. She is instantly recognisable from the ointment jar, her bared breast, and her long flowing hair, all of which are typical aspects of her iconography. The skull is a traditional *memento mori*, an emblem of the transience of earthly life which serves as an aide to Mary's meditations on Christ's death.

Willem van Mieris was perhaps the principle figure in the last generation of the *fijnschilders*, a group of painters based in Leiden who specialised in small scale pictures, filled with detail and defined by miniaturistic precision and refinement of technique. The two leading *fijnschilders* of the previous generations were Gerrit Dou (1613-1675), and Willem's father, Frans van Mieris (1635-1681). *The Penitent Mary Magdalene* demonstrates that Willem had inherited the polished technique, and passion for meticulously rendered detail, that characterised the work of these masters. The foreground is a range of contrasting textures, such as the tough, battered leather of the book, against the cold stone ledge, and these surfaces are rendered with the same painstaking care as the tear-stained puffiness of Mary's eyes.

Dr Junko Aono has recently determined that *The Penitent Mary Magdalene* once had a pendant in the form of the Leiden Collection's *Hermit Praying in the Wilderness*.[1] The earliest mention of both paintings, in 1747, records that they were a pair.[2] Although *Hermit Praying* is dated two years earlier than *Mary Magdalene*, the works are clearly complementary. Both sitters are in similar rocky landscapes, and the way Mary turns her head towards the crucifix connects that painting to its pendant. In addition to the similar setting, in both paintings van Mieris has included the same crucifix, leather-bound book, and skull.

Mary Magdalene was a subject van Mieris returned to repeatedly over his career. In addition to our painting, Cornelis Hofstede de Groot lists five other treatments of the theme, and at least two drawings are known of.[3] It seems plausible that these paintings were intended for Catholic patrons, 'although the sensuous aspects of the theme were apparently what made it so appealing to so many Baroque artists'.[4] The emotion intrinsic to the Magdalene narrative would also have appealed to van Mieris, whose history paintings are full of theatrical gestures.

The Penitent Mary Magdalene is a typical example of van Mieris' work, and a fine representation of what made his paintings so popular. Although his portraits are highly individualised, in his genre and history paintings, women tend to be idealised, with 'almost identical faces, proportions, hairstyles, beautiful skin and décolleté, and graceful gestures with their arms, hands and fingers'.[5] This is evident when comparing *Mary Magdalene* to another work of the same year, *Lot and his Daughters*, which again is set in a rocky landscape.[6] In this larger work, although there are three figures, van Mieris clearly focuses the viewer's attention onto the daughter on the right of the composition, who is the same 'type' as Mary. Both figures turn their bodies and have an almost sculptural quality, due to their poses, porcelain skin and dramatic lighting. This woman is used repeatedly by van Mieris throughout his career, especially after he had come into contact with the ivory sculptures of Francis van Bossuit (1635-1692), from whom he 'directly borrowed poses and gestures'.[7]

Willem van Mieris, like his brother Jan (1660-1690), trained in Leiden as a painter under the tutelage of their illustrious father Frans. Willem's highly refined application of paint and attention to detail, evident in *The Penitent Mary Magdalene*, are a direct result of the influence of Frans, as well as Gerrit Dou. Frans died suddenly in 1681, and it seems likely that Willem and Jan took over the workshop. Willem's first dated works come shortly after, in 1682, and the following year he was elected to the Leiden Guild of St. Luke.

Willem's status as one of Leiden's leading painters is reflected by the fact that he served was elected as the dean of the Guild of St. Luke in 1699, in addition to the post of *hoofdman* (leader), a further four times. However, he also founded the Leiden Tekenacademie (drawing academy), with his fellow artists Carel de Moor (1655-1738) and Jacob Toorenvliet (1640-1719).

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, van Mieris had firmly established his reputation, and was enjoying great success. In 1705 he was able to buy a house on the elegant Breestraat, and his work was much in demand, despite the high prices he was able to charge. Naturally he was much sought after by Leiden's leading collectors, most notably the cloth manufacturer Pieter de la Court van de Voort. However, van Mieris was also collected by several foreign collectors, such as The Archbishop of Mainz and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, Lothar Franz von Schönborn (1655-1729), and Duke Anton Ulrich von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (1633-1714). He was one of the most famous painters of his time, until the 1730s, when his sight began to fail, and as a result the quality of his works decreased.

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[1] Aono, J., 'Hermit Praying in the Wilderness', in *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. New York.

[2] Jacques de Roore (1686-1747), sale, The Hague, 4 September 1747, nos. 104 & 105.

[3] Hofstede de Groot, C., *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten Holländischen Maler des XVII Jahrhunderts*, vol. X (Stuttgart/Paris, 1928), pp. 115-116, nos. 32-37. For the drawings see British Museum, London, inv. no. 1862,0614.1277; & Leiden University Libraries,

Leiden, inv. no. PK-2014-T-7.
[4] Baer, R., 'The Life and Art of Gerrit Dou', in *Gerrit Dou 1613-1675: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt*, exh. cat. (Washington, National Gallery of Art 2000) p.49.
[5] Aono, J. Imitation and Innovation: Dutch Genre Painting 1680-1750 and its Reception of the Golden Age (PhD. Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2011), p.114.
[6] Sotheby's, New York, 24 January 2008, lot 319.
[7] Aono 2011, p. 110.

Provenance:

Jacques de Roore (1686-1747);
his sale, The Hague, 4 September 1747, no. 105 (fl. 153, together with no. 104, *St. Jerome*, as its pendant, to Van Spangen);
John van Spangen, his sale, London, 12 February 1748, no. 74 (£20.9, together with no. 73, *St. Jerome*, as its pendant);
Philippus van der Land;
his sale, Amsterdam, 22 May 1776, no. 54 (for 180 florins, together with no. 55, *St. Jerome*, as its pendant);
Caroline Anne, 4th Marchioness Ely, Eversly Park;
her posthumous sale, Christie's, London, 3 August 1917, no. 46;
with Cyril Andrade, London;
Henry Blank (1872-1949), Newark, USA, by 1926,;
his posthumous sale, Parke-Bernet, New York, 16 November 1949, lot 2;
anonymous sale, Parke-Bernet, New York, 8 April 1950, lot 42;
anonymous sale, Piasa, Paris, 13 June 1997.

Literature:

Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten Holländischen Maler des XVII Jahrhunderts*, vol. X (Stuttgart/Paris, 1928), p. 116, no. 37 (with the incorrect dimensions).

Artist description:

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). Willem probably contributed to several of his father's later works. The influence of his father's *oeuvre* cannot be underestimated as the young 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.

Unlike his father, however, Willem also explored history painting, including religious scenes, subjects from Classical and Renaissance literature and pastoral themes. His female figures are frequently nude and the poses were often taken from prints of classical sculpture in the pattern books circulating at the time.

Van Mieris was additionally a skilled portraitist, landscape painter and draughtsman and his dated works go up to the 1730s. 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), he founded a drawing academy in Leiden, which he and Moor directed until 1736, by which time Van Mieris had become partially blind.

During his lifetime Mieris' works were highly prized and he had several notable patrons. He also sold

works to the Dresden gallery of Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland (1694-1733).

Collections

Willem van Mieris is represented in the following collections, among others: Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan; Fitzwilliam Museum at the University of Cambridge, UK; Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; Louvre Museum, Paris; Mauritshuis Royal Picture Gallery, The Hague; National Gallery, London; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; The Royal Collection, London; Amsterdams Historisch Museum, Amsterdam; Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum, UK; Courtauld Institute of Art, London; Manchester City Art Gallery, UK; Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan; Museum Bredius, Netherlands; Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig; Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City; The Wallace Collection, London.