Oil painting - The Penitent Magdalen

Object: Oil painting
Place of origin: Italy (painted)
Date: 17th century (painted)
Artist/Maker: Titian (painted by)
Materials and Techniques: Oil on canvas
Credit Line: Bequeathed by Rev. Alexander Dyce
Museum number: DYCE.42
Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

Titian (ca.1485/90-1576) was a Venetian painter, draughtsman and printmaker who excelled in all genres of painting including religious subjects, portraits, allegories and scenes from Classical mythology and history. A shift is visible from his early to his later works which move from the 15th-century tradition of meticulous finish and the use of bright local colours to the 16th century adoption of a broader technique, with less defined outlines and mutually related colours. Although based in Venice throughout his professional life, his many commissions for royal and noble patrons, notably for Philip II of Spain, contributed considerably to the spread of his fame. Titian's work had a formative influence on the major European painters of the 17th century, including Rubens and Velázquez.

Titian and his workshop represented the penitent Magdalen in the desert, with her long auburn hair scarcely hiding her nakedness, on many occasions throughout his career from about 1535 onwards. The Magdalen is generally identified with the penitent harlot described in Luke (7:36 ff) who wept tears and wetted Christ's feet which she then wiped with her hair, kissed and anointed. One legend describes her as retreating into a grotto at Sainte-Baume in France as suggested by the cave in Dyce.42.

Titian's Magdalens became widely known early on through engravings by Domenico Tibaldi (ca. 1560-75) and Cornelis Cort (1566), good impressions of which are in the British Museum. The Magdalen in Dyce.42 is depicted with the same physiognomy and executed in a similar style to Titian's works but with differences in the pose, attributes and landscape. It is worth noting that none of Titian's versions depict a scourge whose inclusion in Dyce.42 underlines the Saint's repentant nature, suggesting that the patron for, or original location of, this work may have been a penitent community.

Descriptive line

Oil painting on canvas, 'The Penitent Magdalen', Follower of Titian, 17th century

Physical description

The Magdalen, long hair falling over her shoulders, crosses her hands over her exposed chest, her body turned to the left and her head turned towards the crucifix at right, below it, an open book, a pot of ointment, and a scourge

Dimensions

Height: 129.5 cm estimate, Width: 101.5 cm estimate

Museum number

DYCE.42

Object history note

Bequeathed by Rev. Alexander Dyce, 1869

The Reverend Alexander Dyce:


Science and Art Department of the Committee of Council on Education, South Kensington Museum. A Catalogue of the Paintings, Miniatures, Drawings... Bequeathed by The Reverend Alexander Dyce. London, 1874. A 'Note' on page v comments, 'This catalogue refers to the Art portion of the Collection bequeathed to the South Kensington Museum by the Reverend Alexander Dyce, the well-known Shakespearian scholar, who died May 15, 1869'. The Catalogue. Paintings, Miniatures, &c. by Samuel Redgrave notes of the 'Oil Paintings', 'The strength of Mr. Dyce's valuable bequest to Department of Science and Art does not lie in [this] portion ... which is in its nature of a very miscellaneous character. The collection was made apparently as objects offered themselves, and without any special design.' Dyce's main interest was in literary subjects, and this is reflected in many of the paintings he bequeathed to the V&A.

Historical significance: Titian [Tiziano Vecellio] (ca.1485/90-1576) was a Venetian painter, draughtsman and printmaker. He excelled in all genres of painting including religious subjects, portraits, allegories and scenes from Classical mythology and history. A shift is visible from his early to his later works which move from the 15th-century tradition of meticulous finish and the use of bright local colours to the 16th century adoption of a broader technique, with less defined outlines and mutually related colours. Although based in Venice throughout his professional life, his many commissions for royal and noble patrons, notably for Philip II of Spain, contributed considerably to the spread of his fame.
Titian's work had a formative influence on the major European painters of the 17th century, including Rubens and Velázquez. Titian and his workshop represented the penitent Magdalen in the desert, with her long auburn hair scarcely hiding her nakedness, on many occasions throughout his career (Florence, Galleria Palatina; St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum; Private Coll.) from about 1535 onwards. The Magdalen is generally identified with the penitent harlot described in Luke (7:36 ff) who wept tears and wetted Christ's feet which she then wiped with her hair, kissed and anointed. One legend describes her as retreating into a grotto at Sainte-Baume in France as suggested by the cave in Dyce.42.

Titian's paintings of the Magdalen were made for important patrons such as Phillip II of Spain and Federico Gonzaga as a gift for Vittoria Colonna who had a particular devotion to the saint. One version is recorded by Vasari as hanging in Duke Guidobaldo della Rovere's guardaroba (wardrobe), revealing how the viewing of such a sensual representation was restricted. Titian's Magdalen became widely known early on through engravings by Domenico Tibaldi (ca. 1560-75) and Cornelis Cort (1566), good impressions of which are in the British Museum. The Magdalen in Dyce.42 is depicted with the same physiognomy and executed in a similar style to Titian's works but with differences in the pose, attributes and landscape. It is worth noting that none of Titian's versions depict a scourge whose inclusion in Dyce.42 underlines the Saint's repentant nature, suggesting that the patron for, or original location of, this work may have been a penitent community.

**Historical context note**

Paintings for private devotion. Christians in the Middle Ages and Renaissance periods expressed and strengthened their faith through public rituals, such as celebration of the Eucharist, and personal devotions conducted in a private chapel, monastic cell, or simply in a secluded part of their home. In western Europe, a form of spirituality that emphasised the emotional involvement of the faithful emerged by 1300. Believers were encouraged to contemplate events from the life of Christ, the Virgin, or the saints, as if they were present.

**URL**

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O123935/the-penitent-magdalen-oil-painting-titian/