

2020

Peter Wtewael, Dutch, 1596-1660

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Peter Wtewael

DUTCH, 1596–1660

- 19 *The Repentant Magdalene*, c. 1625–27
oil on panel
20³/₁₆ × 14³/₈ in.

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JOSLYN ART MUSEUM ASSOCIATION AND COLLEC-
TORS' CHOICE VIII, 1999, 1999.15

Painted in Utrecht in the 1620s, *The Repentant Magdalene* is a testament to the biblical figure's enduring appeal and to the city's Catholic sympathies. Of the Dutch provinces, Utrecht retained strong ties to the Catholic Church. Although Catholic worship was prohibited, several clandestine churches were located in the city. Too small to be an altarpiece, this work was likely intended for private devotion.

Peter Wtewael was the son of a leading Mannerist painter in Utrecht, Joachim Wtewael. One of several artists who contributed to Utrecht's development as a prominent artistic center, Joachim was likely responsible for his son's artistic training. Despite Peter's great artistic promise and innovative style, he remained active as an artist for a relatively short period. Painting primarily in the 1620s, he focused his attention on his family's flax business after 1630 and eventually pursued political office.

Peter Wtewael's integration of the dominant stylistic trends in Utrecht, Mannerism and Caravaggism, is reflected in his innovative approach to *The Repentant Magdalene*. Mannerist tendencies include the strong twisting pose, opalescent flesh, and the artist's favorite color combination of dusky blue green and plum red. His paintings display a familiarity with the Utrecht Caravaggisti, a group of artists who, having worked in Rome, brought the style of Caravaggio north to their native city. Here his positioning of the Magdalene and still-life elements in the immediate foreground are reminiscent of Caravaggio and his followers. The strong contrast between the dark background and the brightly lit three-

quarter-length figure also harken back to Caravaggio. Versions of the theme by Caravaggisti in Utrecht inspired the details of the representation, but Venetian artists such as Titian first popularized images of the tearful yet erotic Magdalene. Wtewael's style, which is more dramatically expressive than that of his Utrecht counterparts, includes robust form, large hands with spread fingers, and broad paint application.

A significant saint since the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene is portrayed here in her role as a hermetic penitent. Identified as Luke's anonymous sinner and beloved disciple of Christ, she spent the final years of her life in contemplation in a grotto at Sainte-Baume in Provence, according to legend. Her most significant attribute, the ointment jar, rests prominently in the foreground. The saint's sumptuous attire and costly jewelry recall her noble birth and her sinful life as a courtesan before converting to Christianity. The skull, which symbolizes mortality and the fleeting quality of life, rests on a spiritual text.

The depiction of the Magdalene as a penitent had broad appeal. In the religious sphere, it supported the Counter-Reformation emphasis on conversion and the sacrament of Penance. The popularity of images of weeping women, the Magdalene included, reflects Dutch mores about public displays of emotion, which were not acceptable for men. Simultaneously enforcing stereotypes of women as weak and vulnerable, the combination of erotic overtones and pious content allowed male viewers to transcend their base emotions and feel compassion. **AMM**

