



The Penitent Magdalene, Titian

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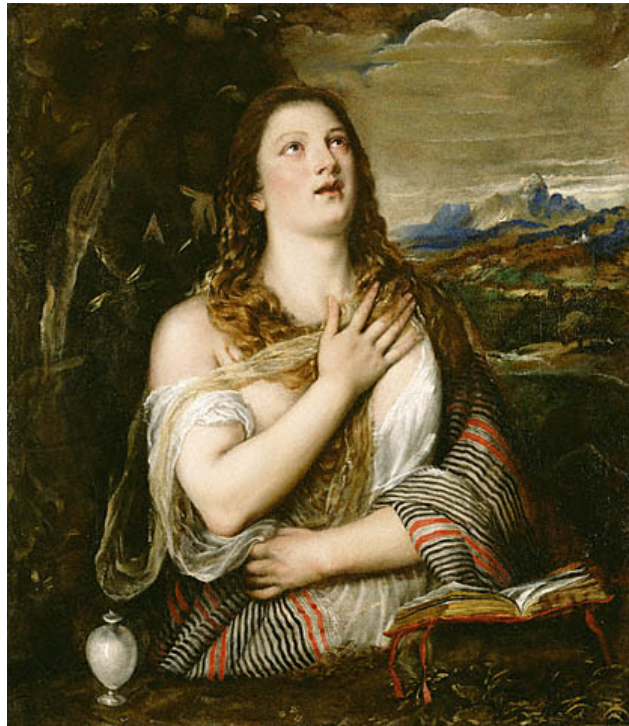
Titian

Italian, 1555–1565

Oil on canvas

42 x 36 5/8 in.

56.PA.1



Questions for Teaching

Look carefully at the woman in the painting. What do you notice about the person depicted here? What do her facial expression and gesture convey?

If she could speak, what do you think she would say? Why do you think that?

How does looking at this work of art make you feel? Can you relate to or empathize with the woman in the painting? (Titian helps engage viewers by depicting a quiet moment when Mary Magdalene is vulnerable. Viewers might feel connected with her because she seems candid and honest, not at all like she is posing for the painting.)

Background Information

This painting of a repentant Mary Magdalene lifting her teary eyes to heaven was meant to inspire a greater spiritual devotion at a time when Catholicism was being challenged by the Protestant Reformation. The subject was very popular at the time, and Titian and his workshop made at least seven versions of this painting. X-rays of the painting revealed that Titian made numerous changes to the composition, suggesting that he used this canvas to work out his ideas over a considerable period of time. This painting is unique because it is the only one of Titian's many versions of the subject that shows Mary Magdalene's Bible resting on a cloth-covered support, rather than a skull, which is a symbol used to invite contemplation of death.

Images of Mary Magdalene, the fallen woman whom Jesus found worthy to redeem and who would spend the rest of her life in solitude to atone for her sins, were especially prevalent during the Counter-Reformation, a period of devout Catholicism that lasted from approximately 1540 to 1640. Upon seeing Titian's conception of Mary Magdalene, the biographer and artist Giorgio Vasari declared that the picture "profoundly stirs the emotions of all who look at it; and, moreover, although the figure Mary Magdalene is extremely lovely it moves one to thoughts of pity rather than desire."

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About the Artist

Titian (Italian, 1487–1576)

A biographer related a telling story about Titian: Emperor Charles V once picked up a brush for him, to which Titian responded, "Sire, I am not worthy of such a servant." The Emperor replied, "Titian is worthy to be served by Caesar." Only Michelangelo's closeness with the popes compares. Legend suggests that at age nine Titian began training in Venice. In 1516 Titian became painter to the Venetian republic, and in 1533 Charles V named him court painter.

Roman painting could match the grandeur of his forms, but Titian's brilliant, expressive color was unprecedented. Titian's portraits combined sensitive characterizations with an opulent treatment of accessories, eventually developing into the official style that inspired Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, and many artists of the 1800s.

After 1555 Titian painted mythological works for Philip II of Spain, rising to new heights in creating sensuous flesh, with colors flowing in harmony rather than contrasting boldly as in his youth. What from a distance appear to be magical combinations of form and color prove upon closer inspection to be blobs of paint, thumb marks, and brush scratches. Titian used oil paint for its expressive rather than representational possibilities.