

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215 extension 224

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

RARE 17TH CENTURY GEORGES DE LA TOUR MAGDALEN,

MOST IMPORTANT NATIONAL GALLERY ACQUISITION SINCE LEONARDO

WASHINGTON, D.C. Thursday, September 26, 1974. One of the rarest paintings of the 17th century, by one of this century's most outstanding "old master" discoveries, Georges de La Tour (1593-1652), has been acquired today by the National Gallery of Art, it was announced by J. Carter Brown, Director of the Gallery. The picture will go on view Saturday, September 28, 1974 in Lobby B on the Main Floor.

The Gallery's most important acquisition since the purchase of Leonardo da Vinci's Renaissance portrait of Ginevra de'Benci in 1965, De La Tour's Repentant Magdalen (oil on canvas, 44 1/2 x 36 3/8 inches) has been acquired for the Nation through the Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund.

The Gallery's new acquisition, the first De La Tour to have entered its collections, is thought to have been painted between 1639 and 1643. It was considered by scholars the outstanding example of its kind in the seminally important 1972 De La Tour exhibition in Paris organized by the National Museums of France. This show, in which virtually the entire surviving output of De La Tour was seen together for the first time, was one of the most popular "old master" exhibitions ever held in Paris, dramatizing to an international public De La Tour's place in the ranks with Vermeer, El Greco and Piero della Francesca as a major rediscovery of modern times.

Virtually unknown at the beginning of this century, the pure geometry of his forms and his highly personal vision have been

(more)

recognized with increasing popularity as the revolution in 20th century art took place. The inclusion of thirteen De La Tours in an exhibition, Painters of Reality, in Paris in 1934 caused a sensation, and the literature on the artist has been growing at an increasing pace ever since. (During the exhibition the Louvre purchased De La Tour's Le Tricheur with a special government grant authorized by the then Minister of Finance, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.)

As with Vermeer, the rarity of paintings by De LaTour is extreme, with only thirty-eight known pictures by him, of which some eight are either in ruins or fragments. Of his surviving paintings, seventeen are daylight scenes (mostly genre subjects), and the rest (largely religious subjects), are "nocturnes," exploiting the drama and spirituality of illumination from a single light source.

The hidden candle in the National Gallery's Magdalen adds to the special quality of the painting, which Director Brown describes as "intensely inward, hauntingly spiritual." The saint is depicted as a hermit, lost in meditation after a life of sensuality. She stares into a mirror, index of introspection, as the onlooker sees reflected instead a skull, symbol of death; in opposition is the flickering flame, symbol of the temporality of human life, beautifully modelling her face and arms.

The picture was acquired directly from M. André Fabius, a Paris collector, with whom Mr. Brown has been in discussions about the possible acquisition of the picture since the mid-1960s. The painting, acquired by M. Fabius in 1936, was before that in the collections of the Comtesse d'Andigé and the Marquise de Coulaincourt. The purchase was consummated today on its arrival at the Gallery with an export license granted by the Government of France.

Georges de La Tour returned repeatedly to certain themes.

(more)

The Gallery's Magdalen is one of four known variations on the subject by him, and represents the culminating stage in her conversion. It is thought to be the latest in the series, after De La Tour had himself meditated on the theme over a period of many years.

Georges de La Tour remains somewhat of a personal mystery in spite of his reputation today. Although documents concerning him exist, they reveal little about his training and his possible travels. He appears to have spent most of his life in Lunéville in the provincial duchy of Lorraine, where he enjoyed a good reputation as an artist. Unlike his French contemporaries he appears never to have travelled abroad even though his style has close affinities to the 17th century Italian master, Caravaggio, and his followers, many of whom were Dutch. In 1639 he was named peintre du roi after the duchy fell to France.

The new De La Tour joins one of the world's most comprehensive surveys of French painting, known not only for its impressionists, but for its 17th century representation of works by Nicolas Poussin, Claude Lorraine, Phillipe de Champaigne, Simon Vouet and the brothers Le Nain.

END

---

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director, or Pamela Jenkinson, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565. area code 202, 737-4215, ext. 224.