

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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RARE PAINTINGS BY FRENCH ARTIST GEORGES DE LA TOUR

PAIRED IN FOCUS EXHIBITION AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY

Washington, D.C. -- Georges de La Tour's Repentant Magdalene brings together for the first time one of the masterpieces of French seventeenth-century painting at the National Gallery of Art, the newly conserved Repentant Magdalene, and a similar painting by La Tour from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The show honors the 400th anniversary of the birth of this singular master of light and shadow. It opens April 25 and continues through September 6, 1993 in the National Gallery's West Building.

Representing two versions of Mary Magdalene in contemplation, illuminated by a single flame, the paintings are powerful depictions of psychological and spiritual intensity.

"It is with great pleasure that we present these rare and riveting images for comparison," said Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery of Art. "The recent cleaning of our painting dramatically reveals La Tour's exquisite painterly virtuosity in his bold presentation of the Christian penitent."

The Gallery's Repentant Magdalene, c. 1635, depicts the saint seated alone at a table, her head resting on one hand

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as she meditates before a mirror. Reflecting on appearance and reality, the eternal life of the spirit, and the vanity and transience of this world, the subject is shown with her special attribute, a skull, the symbol of death. Also present in the picture is a jar of ointment, alluding to Mary Magdalene's traditional association with the anointing of Christ's feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee, as told in the Gospels.

The Los Angeles County Museum's Magdalene with the Smoking Flame (c. 1636-1638) is similarly spotlighted in a dazzling play of light. Facing the opposite direction from the figure in the Gallery's version, she meditates upon scripture and gently fingers a skull. In addition, she is contemplating a simple wooden cross on the table and reflecting on mortifying her flesh by flagellation with the knotted whip, another attribute of the penitent Magdalene.

Both saints are portrayed as monumental forms invested with dignity. Filtered light reveals details in the lower portion of the Los Angeles painting, contributing to its profound air of contemplation and mystery.

La Tour produced four known full-length paintings of the penitent Mary Magdalene. The others are located at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Louvre in Paris. A horizontal version recently has been rediscovered.

The Magdalene appears briefly in the Gospels. A reformed courtesan, she was pardoned and purified by Christ, followed him in Galilee, and was present at the Crucifixion.

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Her story took on greater dimensions in the late thirteenth century with publication of The Golden Legend by Jacobus de Voragine, a book that remained a popular and important source for artists' depictions of the life of Mary Magdalene and other saints for centuries to come. The work ascribes three phases to her religious development -- penance, inward contemplation, and heavenly glory -- and describes her as "enlightened." La Tour fully explored this light-laden imagery in his paintings of the Magdalene.

During the Counter-Reformation after the Council of Trent (1545-1563), renewed interest in the lives of the early saints and martyrs especially favored Mary Magdalene's legend. Not only was she a direct follower and witness of Christ; as a sinner who underwent spiritual conversion she also was considered an exemplary role model. In the style typical of the seventeenth century, Mary Magdalene is portrayed as an ordinary woman rather than an idealized saint so that people could more easily identify with her life and penance.

Great demand for the Magdalene's image by churches and devout private patrons prompted La Tour's production of a variety of paintings of the saint. Engravings and painted copies of the Gallery's version appeared. While La Tour created full-scale pictures of other saints, such as saints Jerome and Peter, he returned to the theme of the Magdalene more often than to any other.

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Born in 1593 at Vic-sur-Seille, a village in the bishopric of Metz, La Tour spent most of his life in Lunéville in the duchy of Lorraine, which was absorbed by France in 1639. The artist visited Paris in 1638 and received the honorary title Peintre ordinaire du roi (Painter in Ordinary to the King). A contemporary of the brilliant printmaker Jacques Callot (c. 1592-1635), who also lived in Lorraine, La Tour left few records of his life. Only a total of about forty paintings by the artist are known to exist.

Like many other artists of the time, he was influenced by the innovations of Caravaggio (1573-1610). The Italian painter realistically depicted everyday models as religious subjects presented with dramatic contrasts of light and shade. Since La Tour's death in 1652, the artist was virtually forgotten until his rediscovery in the twentieth century. He is now appreciated as one of the greatest and most original seventeenth-century French painters, an artist whose work is distinguished by an exquisite mastery of the effects of chiaroscuro and artificial illumination.

The brochure accompanying the exhibition was written by Philip Conisbee, currently curator of European painting and sculpture at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Conisbee has just been appointed curator of French paintings at the National Gallery of Art. The exhibition will be on view in Los Angeles from October 6, 1993 through January 16, 1994.

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