

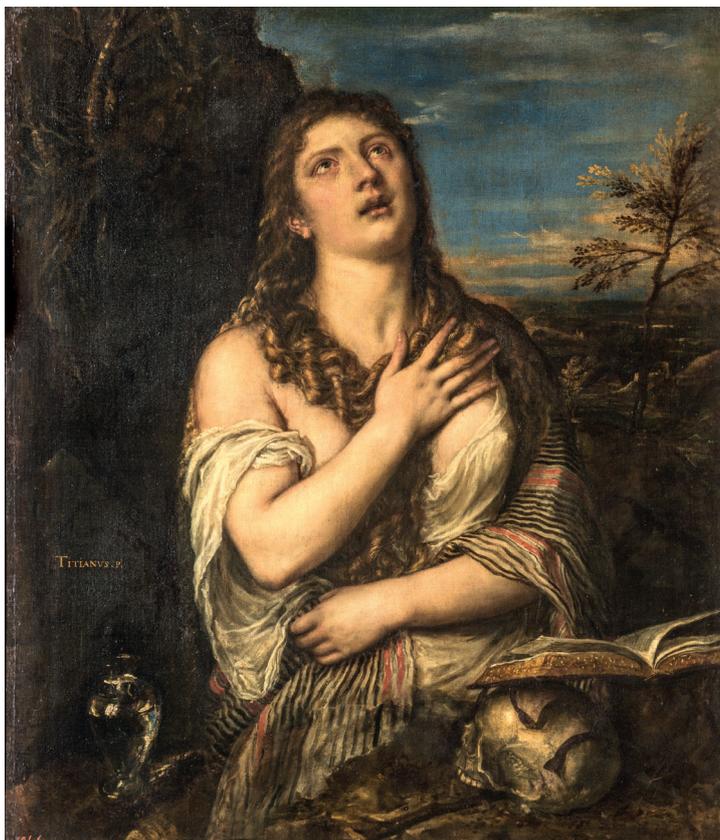
**“REPENTANT MARY MAGDALEN”**

TICIANO

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**IT IS CERTAINLY** nothing more than a pious legend, but the story goes that, when the painter Tiziano Vecellio (Titian) died in Venice in 1576, he was holding this painting depicting Mary Magdalen, known as the *Repentant Mary Magdalen*, which today belongs to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. That this was a work for which he had a special affection is proved by the fact that Titian kept it in his possession until the end of his life. Only afterwards, in 1581, was it sold by his son, Pomponio, to the Venetian noble Cristoforo Barbarigo, whose collection remained undivided at the family's town palace until 1850, when it was bought in its entirety by the Russian museum, including four other works by the great master.

Considered to be his most successful representation of Mary Magdalen – a faithful follower of Christ, referred to in the four gospels as the first witness of the Resurrection, and transformed, in some of the Apocryphal Testaments, into a repentant sinner – this painting forms part of a large group of pieces dedicated to a theme that was particularly beloved by the artist. Titian is known to have painted many other versions throughout his career for the most demanding and exclusive collectors of his time, beginning with the one dating from 1531, commissioned by the fifth Marquis and first Duke of Mantua, Federico Gonzaga, and including those sent to Philip II of Spain (1561) – and to aristocrats from the Spanish court, his close friends, such as Cardinal Granvela and the Duke of Alba – or also to Cardinal Alexandre Farnesio (1567), all of them having as somewhat remote models an iconographical type originally created within the circle of Leonardo da Vinci. An engraving made in 1566 by the Flemish engraver Cornelis Cort from the version that belonged to Philip II, and widely disseminated throughout Europe, helped to ensure the success of the artist's paintings of Mary Magdalen, which became some of the most frequently copied works in western art. As can be seen, kings and patrons fought keenly over Titian's productions, and the artist made the most of this situation: his familiarity with the rich and powerful and his keenly developed business sense (which some of his contemporaries took for greed) made him a wealthy and courtly



Ticiano Vecellio  
(Pieve di Cadore, c. 1488 - Venice, 1576)

***Repentant Mary Magdalen***

c. 1560

Oil on canvas

119 × 97 cm

St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum

artist, an eloquent example of one of the most characteristic figures of the Italian Renaissance.

Titian was born on an uncertain date in Pieve di Cadore, in Veneto (c. 1488?), and, at a tender age, he was sent to Venice by his father, together with his brother, to learn the art of mosaic. After this, he attended the workshop of Gentile Bellini and, later, that of his brother, Giovanni Bellini, the most highly regarded painter in the Republic of Venice, popularly known as *La Serenissima*, which at that time was the dominant power in the Mediterranean,



Cornelis Cort, **Repentant Mary Magdalen**, 1566  
Engraving

thanks to its role as a commercial hub between the East and the West and its special economic (and also cultural) relationship with Byzantium. A republican government, based on the power of an urban patriarch with sophisticated tastes, provided the Veneto artists with important artistic commissions, many of which were destined for the huge palaces, churches and monasteries that were then being built in the lagoon city, sometimes inspired upon a vague neo-Byzantine style and at other times upon the most modern creations of Roman classicism. A strong bond of friendship with Giorgione, one of the most original Venetian painters of his time, who disappeared at a prematurely early age and played an important role in the development of Titian's style, was decisive for the artist's gaining a public recognition that promoted him to the official painter of the Republic of Venice and involved him in various artistic endeavours of great prestige, leading him successively to Padua (1511), Ferrara, Mantua and Rome, on a belated journey already in 1545, at the invitation of Pope Paul III. His talent was also recognised by the emperor Charles V, whom he met for the first time in 1530. The latter awarded Titian the title of Count Palatine (1533), marking the be-

ginning of an intense artistic relationship with the Habsburgs, which Mary of Hungary, the emperor's sister, and Philip II greatly cultivated, with the king of Spain becoming one of his greatest admirers.

Skilled in the composition of vast religious scenes painted on canvas or as frescoes, such as the ones that he painted for the churches of La Salute or Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari (1516), as well as in evocations of mythological scenes or in portraits, with these latter paintings denoting his highly sophisticated psychological observation and his careful sense of pictorial construction, Titian was one of the exponents of what artistic historiography has conventionally come to describe as the "Venetian" style. It was Giorgio Vasari who, in his famous collection of biographies of the most prominent artists of the Italian Peninsula (1st edition, 1550) explained the theoretical enshrinement of two distinct ways of painting – the Florentine style, a more methodical form of creation, based on the primacy of the line and of drawing, which Vasari considered superior and of which Michelangelo was the main exponent, and the Venetian style, which was more interested in the expressive use of colour. It was this taste for the freer use of the brushstroke and the modelling of forms through the painting of "patches", something that was particularly evident in Titian's later production (and was further developed in the works of Tintoretto and Paolo Veronese), that aroused the criticism of Vasari, who considered it imperfect for this reason, since it was a style of painting that was apparently unfinished and slapdash, capable of destroying the foundations of Renaissance art and its search for a conception of beauty that was based on an idealised reality.

Stressing the carnal sensuality of the repentant woman and the dramatic and climactic moment in which she discovers the death of the Redeemer, marked by the luminous trail of tears running down her face, Titian commits himself, in this magnificent version of the passion of Mary Magdalen, to a painting of loose, but highly expressive brushstrokes, which, in some sections, merely suggest forms and motifs, as is the case with the jar of ointments, rescued from the penumbra through nervous applications of white paint. The saint's pathetic and painful appearance finds its exact match in the crepuscular sky in the background and the rugged nature of the rocks and trees that surround her, with the result that this painting far excels the other versions that are known to have preceded it, through its tragic intensity, the mastery of its composition and its chromatic inventiveness.