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ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI
1593 - 1654

PENITENT MAGDALENE
c.1620-22

Oil on copper
49 x 40 cm

PROVENANCE:

Private collection, Switzerland;
Until sold Sotheby's, London, 3 July 1996, lot 44 (as attributed to Artemisia Gentileschi);
Walpole Gallery, London;
Private collection, London.

EXHIBITED

Phoenix, Phoenix Arts Museum, *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper, 1575-1775*, 19 Dec. 1998 - 28 Feb. 1999;
Kansas City, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper, 1575-1775*, 28 Mar. - 13 Jun. 1999;
The Hague, Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen, 26 Jun. - 22 Aug. 1999), New York, 1999, no. 21 (as "Orazio Gentileschi")

LITERATURE

Sotheby's, London, 3 July 1996, lot 44, pp. 80-81 of the printed catalogue ("Attributed to Artemisia Gentileschi"); M. K. Komanecky, in *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper, 1575-1775*, exhibition catalogue (Phoenix [AZ], Phoenix Art Museum, 19 December 1998 - 28 February 1999; Kansas City [MO], Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 28 March - 13 June 1999; The Hague, Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen, 26 June - 22 August 1999), New York, 1999, pp. 190-192, no. 21 (as "Orazio Gentileschi"); R. W. Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné*, University Park (PA), 1999, p. 338, no. X-32 (as "Orazio Gentileschi") and figs. 240-241; J. W. Mann, "Artemisia and Orazio Gentileschi," in K. Christiansen, J. W. Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*, exhibition catalogue (Rome, Museo del Palazzo di Venezia, 15 October 2001 - 6 January 2002; New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 14 February - 12 May 2002; Saint Louis [MO], Saint Louis Art Museum, 15 June - 15 September 2002), New Haven (CT) - London, 2001, pp. 254-255, fig. 98 ("Attributed to Artemisia or Orazio Gentileschi").

This *Penitent Magdalene* emerges as a rare and exceptionally refined work within Artemisia Gentileschi's corpus, distinguished by a level of execution that ranks among the most accomplished expressions of her art.

The uneven and, at times, elusive nature of Artemisia's *oeuvre* is inseparable from the extraordinary circumstances of her life and career. Born in Rome in 1593, the eldest child and only daughter of Orazio Gentileschi, she trained in her father's workshop where she revealed her precocious talent. Her early career was deeply affected by the assault she endured in 1611 at the hands of Agostino Tassi and by the highly public trial that followed in the following year, events that are unusually well documented and that had lasting consequences for both her personal life and her professional path. Shortly thereafter, she left Rome for Florence, where she established herself as an independent artist, became a member of the Accademia del Disegno in 1616, and worked in the Medici court.

Over the following decades Artemisia led a peripatetic career unmatched by most of her contemporaries, working in Rome, Florence, Venice, Naples, and even London, and receiving commissions from the highest levels of European society, including the Grand Duke of Tuscany and Philip IV of Spain. After returning to Rome in 1620 - where she remained for a decade, aside from a brief sojourn in Venice - she settled permanently in Naples from 1630, directing an active workshop until the time of her death, documented as late as August 1654. These frequent moves, shifting patronage networks, and the demands on the workshop help explain the complexity and uneven preservation of her artistic legacy.

In both scale and quality, this copper stands as a compelling testament to Artemisia's work at its highest level, free from any intervention by collaborators or studio assistants. Executed on





copper—a support rare but not unprecedented within her oeuvre—the painting exploits the medium’s luminous potential with exceptional assurance, enhancing the subtle modulation of flesh tones and the crystalline clarity of the surface. Its significance is further amplified by the fact that the work has remained outside the public eye since its rediscovery some thirty years ago.

The present *Magdalene* first came to light in 1996, when it was then attributed to Artemisia. Shortly thereafter, R.Ward Bissell reconsidered the attribution, proposing her father Orazio Gentileschi instead (op. cit.), though it must be noted that, at the time, the difference in perceived relevance (and value) between father and daughter likely directed the judgement of higher-quality works (such as the present one) to Orazio. A comparable fate befell another painting on copper, the *Danaë* in the Saint Louis Art Museum, now regarded as one of Artemisia’s early masterpieces and, likewise, formerly attributed to Orazio.

The thirty-year gap between rediscovery and today was only briefly punctuated in 2001 when a black and white photograph of the *Magdalene* was published in the 2001 *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi* exhibition catalogue (op. cit.) with the exhibition’s curators suspending judgment as to whether the painting should be assigned to the father or daughter.

However, the remarkable expansion of research on Artemisia over the last 25 years has provided a much more solid framework for evaluating works from this phase of her career. The result of this scholarship is that the painting can now be confidently placed among the small - but significant - group of works she produced shortly after her return to Rome in 1620. Close stylistic comparisons can be drawn between the *Magdalene*’s conception and the subtle handling of her flesh and the *Susanna and the Elders* at Burghley House, Stamford, dated 1622 and likely commissioned by Cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi (fig.1). It may not come as a surprise that the Burghley picture’s authorship was also debated on account of its refined and elegant style, though that matter was settled when restoration revealed the signature and date: ‘Artemitia Gentileschi lomi facilibat A.D MDCXXII.’

Alongside the strong affinities with the *Susanna*, Giuseppe Porzio has further underscored the relevance of comparisons with Artemisia’s *Cleopatra* (Fondazione Cavallini-Sgarbi, fig. 2), pointing to the shared construction of the female anatomy and the distinctive, almost tactile rendering of flesh—features he identifies as characteristic of Artemisia’s work circa 1620. Porzio also observes that the physiognomy of the *Magdalene* closely aligns with that of Artemisia’s female heroines more broadly, figures that frequently appear to echo the artist’s own features, a recurring and highly distinctive trait of her mature production (Porzio 2026, written communication).

This highly naturalistic treatment of the female body, together with the soft and nuanced handling of flesh and drapery, is precisely what distinguishes Artemisia’s approach from that of her father. Orazio Gentileschi, by contrast, tends toward a more idealised and at times static conception of the female form, as can be seen in his contemporary depictions of *Danaë* (Getty Museum, Los Angeles) and the reclining *Magdalene* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

Further parallels, in this sense, can also be drawn from the saint’s facial features, which closely recall those of the *Lady with a Fan* in the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. The landscape background, moreover, displays echoes of Guercino’s early Roman manner, confirming both the proposed dating and the cultural milieu in which the work was conceived.

We are grateful to Maria Cristina Terzaghi and Giuseppe Porzio for confirming the attribution of this painting on copper and for proposing the dating and comparative framework discussed above. Both scholars are preparing independent studies on the work, and Maria Cristina Terzaghi has indicated her intention to publish it in a dedicated scholarly context.

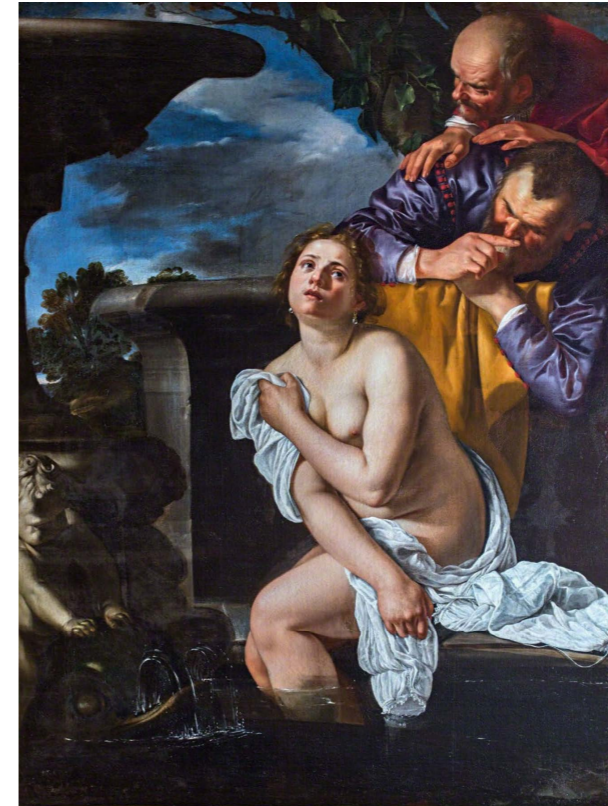


Fig.1 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, oil on canvas, 1622, Burghley House, Stamford

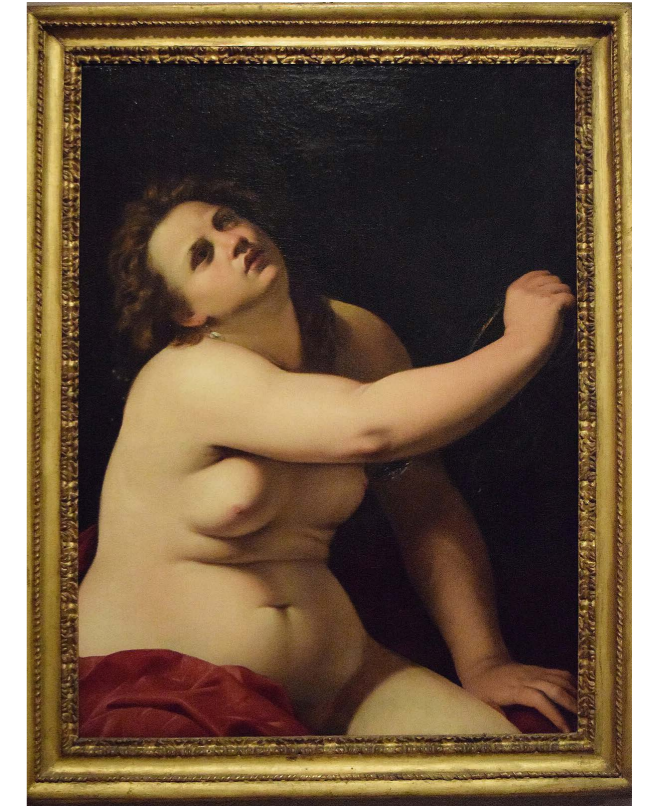


Fig. 2 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Cleopatra*, c. 1620, Fondazione Cavallini-Sgarbi, Ferrara

