

THE KIMBELL ART MUSEUM ACQUIRES RECENTLY DISCOVERED PAINTING BY ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI (1593–1654 or later)

Penitent Mary Magdalene—a masterpiece of the Italian Baroque period—will be on view beginning September 6, 2024.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 6, 2024

FORT WORTH, TX— The Kimbell Art Museum announced today the acquisition of Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Penitent Mary Magdalene*, a famous and often-copied masterpiece that has remained in private collections since its creation around 1625–26. The painting will be on view beginning Friday, September 6, 2024, in the Kimbell’s iconic Louis I. Kahn Building.

“The Kimbell has long wished to acquire a work by Artemisia Gentileschi but until now never found the right painting for its collection by this major figure of Italian Baroque art. We are thrilled to present Artemisia Gentileschi’s dazzling *Penitent Mary Magdalene* to the public for the first time since it was painted in the seventeenth century,” said Eric Lee, director of the Kimbell Art Museum. “Although the composition is well known through copies in Spain and Mexico, nothing compares with seeing the newly rediscovered, emotive original in person, with its bold design, delicate brushwork, and subtle variations of light and shadow.”



The painting, created soon after Artemisia’s masterpiece *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (c. 1623–25, Detroit Institute of Arts), represents the artist at her finest. An imposing canvas measuring some three-and-a-half by three feet (42 3/4 x 36 3/4 in.), the *Penitent Mary Magdalene* was acquired (and possibly commissioned) by Fernando Enríquez Afán de Ribera, the third Duke of Alcalá and Viceroy of Naples, while he was serving as Spanish ambassador in Rome (1625–26). The painting was later displayed in his residence, the Casa de Pilatos, in Seville, where, according to seventeenth-century Spanish sources, it became famous and was widely copied. Yet despite its fame, the original painting subsequently disappeared. Notable copies include canvases today in Seville Cathedral and the Museo Soumaya in Mexico City.

Inspired in part by Caravaggio’s groundbreaking paintings featuring Mary Magdalene—notable for the artist’s startling realism, dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, and use of live models—Artemisia

revisited the subject throughout her career. Her exploration of different key moments in the narrative of Mary Magdalene demonstrates Artemisia's remarkable ability to express the saint's spirituality through the intense physicality of the female figure. In the Kimbell painting, Mary Magdalene's languid body has settled into an ornate high-backed chair. Her right arm is propped on the armrest to support her tilted head, with a deep shadow under her extended neck and chin; her cheek rests on her limp hand, which is bent sharply at the wrist. The Magdalene's left arm sinks downward, her hand falling into her open lap. In the shadows, an ointment jar and a small, black-framed hand mirror lie on a table. These discarded items, along with her gold gemstone bracelet and large pearl earring, identify her as the repentant saint who renounces her former life of luxury and vanity. As she closes her eyes, she reflects on the weight of her sinful past, vowing her devotion to Christ. Seemingly unmindful of her appearance, she casts away her riches and enters a spiritual realm, the beribboned strap of her bodice falling behind her and the lace-trimmed chemise revealing her left shoulder in a pool of light.

The composition is enlivened by a delicate play of light and shadow, captured in Artemisia's deft brushwork, describing the Magdalene's flesh, hair, and clothing. The painting's warmth emanates from the red ground that interplays with the lively and at times bold brushwork, particularly in the white billowing sleeve of the chemise. Among the most tender passages are the flushed tonalities of her swollen eyes, nose, and lips, and the waving strands of auburn locks delicately enlaced around her fingers. A sheer, tawny brown veil twists elegantly from her shoulder, commingling with her hair and yellow ochre gown. In the wake of Caravaggio's innovative realistic style, the sensuality of Artemisia's painting not only conveys the story of Mary Magdalene, but also exploits the power of art to connect intimately with the viewer. In contrast to some of Artemisia's more violent narratives of forceful, heroic women, such as Judith and Lucretia, the Kimbell *Magdalene* captures an introspective moment of contrition and reflection, intense in its spiritual power.

The remarkable condition of the Kimbell painting suggests limited conservation intervention over its centuries-old existence, exemplified by the rare retention of its eighteenth-century strainer. Following the death of the third Duke of Alcalá, the painting remained with his heirs in Seville until it disappeared from public record before reappearing at auction in 2001 in France. It was sold into a private collection and remained there until it was purchased by Adam Williams Fine Art, Ltd., New York, on behalf of the Kimbell in 2024. The painting will join other Italian masterpieces of the era in the museum's collection, including Caravaggio's *Cardsharps* (c. 1595) and Guercino's *Christ and the Woman of Samaria* (c. 1619–20).

ABOUT ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

Artemisia Gentileschi (1597–1654 or later) was one of the most important and accomplished seventeenth-century Italian painters and an iconic model of perseverance, resolve, and achievement despite the numerous personal and professional obstacles she faced as a woman. She was trained in Rome in the studio of her father, Orazio Gentileschi (1563–1639), who had adopted the revolutionary style of his friend Caravaggio. In spite of various setbacks and challenges, including the early death of her mother; the arduous trial and testimony of her rape at age seventeen by her father's associate, which was perceived as dishonoring her family and redressed with an arranged marriage and move to Florence; the loss of four of her five children; and financial distress, the indomitable Artemisia tenaciously pursued her professional ambitions on her own terms. She established an independent career at the court of the Medici Grand Duke of Tuscany in Florence, where she was the first woman to gain admittance to the Accademia del Disegno. With no formal education, Artemisia learned to read and write and cultivated artistic and intellectual alliances that included the poet Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger, the astronomer Galileo Galilei, and other writers, artists, and musicians. Instead of limiting her repertoire to still life, portraiture, and other genres to which women painters were often restricted, Artemisia treated dramatic multifigure narratives and the female nude. Her protagonists—biblical heroines, saints, and female mythological and classical subjects—embody a range of emotions and actions expressed with empathy and vivid physicality. Artemisia soon achieved fame, not only for her rare status as a woman artist, but for the brilliance and immediacy of her fluid style. In 1620, Artemisia returned to Rome, where she became friends with the French artist Simon Vouet, corresponded with the scholar and collector Cassiano dal Pozzo (who owned her portrait painted by Vouet), and earned the attention of elite patrons such as the nobleman Pietro della Valle, with whom she exchanged sonnets, and the third Duke of Alcalá, Spanish ambassador to the Holy See and the first owner of the Kimbell *Penitent Mary Magdalene*. A series of poems by literary academicians praising Artemisia testifies to her renown during a sojourn in Venice from 1626/27 to 1630. Artemisia settled in Naples in 1630. She traveled, around 1638, to London, where her father, who died soon after her arrival, was serving at the court of King Charles I. Not content with the English crown's patronage, Artemisia returned to Naples by 1640. Despite ill health and financial struggles, she maintained a successful workshop with a range of production until her death in 1654 or soon thereafter. While in Naples, her international patrons included the Sicilian collector Antonio Ruffo and the Spanish monarch Philip IV. Artemisia insisted on compensation worthy of her talent, writing to Ruffo, "with me Your Illustrious Lordship will not lose, and you will find the spirit of Caesar in the soul of a woman," later assuring him that her works "will speak for themselves."

In recent decades, new documentation of Artemisia's life and career has come to light, along with rediscovered paintings, letters, and poetry, to provide a richer profile of this remarkable artist, who

today has achieved canonic status. Despite this trove of historical records—including Artemisia’s own, often intimate, words—tantalizing questions remain about her life (and the evidence of her death), the attribution and chronology of her work, and her studio practice, patronage, and cultural milieu.

SUPPORT

Promotional support for the Kimbell Art Museum and its exhibitions is provided by American Airlines, PaperCity, and NBC 5. Additional support is provided by Arts Fort Worth and the Texas Commission on the Arts.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Admission to the museum’s permanent collection is always free. Admission to special exhibitions is half-price all day on Tuesdays and after 5 p.m. on Fridays.

The Kimbell Art Museum is open Tuesdays through Thursdays and Saturdays, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.; Fridays, noon–8 p.m.; Sundays, noon–5 p.m.; closed Mondays, New Year’s Day, Juneteenth, July 4, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. For general information, call 817-332-8451.

ABOUT THE KIMBELL ART MUSEUM

The Kimbell Art Museum, owned and operated by the Kimbell Art Foundation, is internationally renowned for both its collections and its architecture. The Kimbell’s collections range in period from antiquity to the twentieth century and include European masterpieces by artists such as Fra Angelico, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Bernini, Velázquez, Vigée Le Brun, Monet, Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse; important collections of Egyptian and classical antiquities; and the art of Asia, Africa, and the Ancient Americas.

The museum’s 1972 building, designed by the American architect Louis I. Kahn, is widely regarded as one of the outstanding architectural achievements of the modern era. A second building, designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano, opened in 2013 and now provides space for special exhibitions, dedicated classrooms, and a 289-seat auditorium with excellent acoustics for music. For more information, visit kimbellart.org.

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PRESS IMAGES

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IMAGE CAPTION

Artemisia Gentileschi, *Penitent Mary Magdalene*, 1625–26. Oil on canvas, 42 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 36 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (108.8 x 93 cm). Kimbell Art Museum

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