

# CHRISTIE'S

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## A LANDMARK REDISCOVERY: ANTONIO CANOVA'S LOST MASTERPIECE

*'Recumbent Magdalene'*

Christie's London, 7 July 2022



Antonio Canova (Possagno 1757-1822 Venice)  
*Maddalena Giacente (Recumbent Magdalene)*  
marble, 1819-1822  
75 x 176 x 84.5 cm (29½ x 69¼ x 33¼ in.)  
Estimate: £5,000,000-8,000,000

**London** – A landmark re-discovery, Antonio Canova's (1757-1822) *Maddalena Giacente (Recumbent Magdalene)* 1819-1822, is the Italian titan's lost masterpiece, which he completed shortly before his death (estimate: £5,000,000-8,000,000). Having accidentally become an art world 'sleeping beauty' over the last 100 years – her authorship gradually forgotten and whereabouts unknown – this outstanding sculpture of Mary Magdalene in a state of ecstasy was commissioned by the Prime Minister of the day, Lord Liverpool (1812-1827). *Recumbent Magdalene* will be a star lot during Christie's Summer edition of *Classic Week* in London. This is an extremely rare opportunity for the market to acquire such an important example of neo-

classical sculpture. First on view at Christie's headquarters in London on 19 and 20 March, it will tour to New York where it will be on view 8 to 13 April and then Hong Kong, 27 May to 1 June, before returning to London for a dedicated three week exhibition in June, ahead of being part of the pre-sale view from 2 to 7 July. This sale is a fitting celebration of Canova's brilliance in the bicentenary year of his death.

**Dr. Mario Guderzo, leading Canova scholar, former Director of the *Museo Gypsotheca Antonio Canova* and *Museo Biblioteca Archivio di Bassano del Grappa* commented:** *"It is a miracle that Antonio Canova's exceptional, long lost masterpiece the 'Recumbent Magdalene' has been found, 200 years after its completion. This work has been searched for by scholars for decades, so the discovery is of fundamental importance for the history of collecting and the history of art. It testifies to the intensive thought process of the work of the Italian sculptor who was a fundamental witness of his time: faithful to Pope Pius VII, sought after by Napoleon, beloved by the English sovereign George IV, esteemed by the world of European collecting and of critical importance for the restitution of works of art seized under Napoleon. The re-discovery of the 'Recumbent Magdalene' brings to a conclusion a very particular story worthy of a novel, of a marble of significant historical value and great aesthetic beauty produced by Canova in the final years of his artistic activity."*

**Donald Johnston, Christie's International Head of Sculpture commented:** *"The rediscovery of Canova's lost masterpiece – the Recumbent Magdalene – is immensely exciting and is a highlight within my 30 plus year career in the field. This sculpture represents an extensively documented commission from a major figure in British history, the Prime Minister Lord Liverpool, whose purchase of the Magdalene is a testament to the love that British collectors had always shown for the work of the great neo-classical sculptor Antonio Canova. It is significant that she is closely related to the famous Endymion at Chatsworth, another celebrated repository of work by the Italian sculptor, both completed in Summer 1822. The Magdalene, which appeared at auction at Christie's in 1852, later slipped into oblivion and was lost to scholars before being recently rediscovered."*

#### THE CELEBRATED HAND OF A GENIUS

The *Recumbent Magdalene* holds an important place in the canon of western sculpture as one of the last two marbles – along with the *Endymion* – executed by one of the greatest proponents of European marble carving. Antonio Canova was an undisputed master both in his compositional talents and in his ability to translate those compositions into marble. The Mary Magdalene is the culmination of his studies of the human form with their languid grace. It also serves as an affirmation of Canova's place in the long tradition of marble carvers in Italy, harking back directly to the work of another of Italy's great prodigies, Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680). Bernini's marble reclining figure of the *Blessed*



*Lodovica Albertoni* (S. Francesco in Ripa, Rome) is another masterwork in marble which Canova clearly knew and consciously quoted.



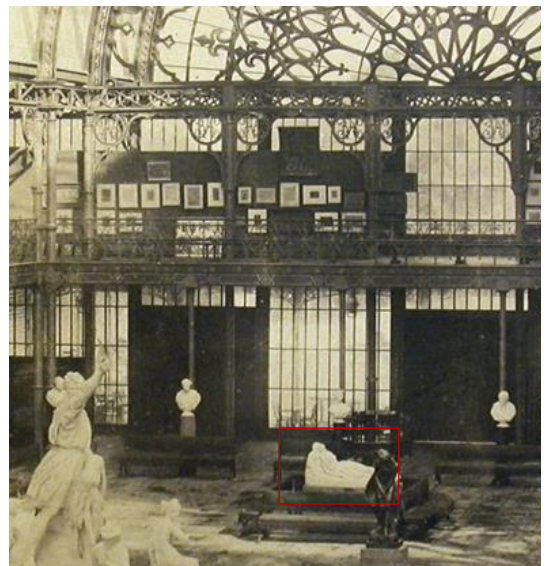
Commissioned in 1819 by Lord Liverpool, Canova first made a plaster model for the *Recumbent Magdalene*, which is now held at the Canova Gipsoteca Museum, Possagno, Italy, dated '1819 in the month of September'. Canova exhibited the model in his studio in October that year and recalled in a letter to his friend Quatremère de Quincy the following month: '*I exhibited another model of a second Magdalene lying on the ground, and almost fainting from the excessive pain of her penitence, a subject that I like very*

*much, and that has earned me a lot of indulgence, and very flattering praise.*' One such admirer was the Irish writer, poet, and lyricist of the time, Thomas Moore who recorded that Canova '*Took me to see his last Magdalen, which is divine: she is lying recumbent in all the abandonment of grief; and the expression of her face, and the beauty of her figure . . . are perfection*' (November, 1819, in *Memoirs, Journal and Correspondence*, published in 1853).

Following the artist's death and ahead of the delivery of the commission to the Prime Minister, the Duchess of Devonshire wrote to Lord Liverpool from Naples on 11 November, 1822: '*My dear Lord Liverpool . . . You will with the rest of Europe have mourned over Canova – it is a loss truly irreparable, & which I cannot think of without tears . . . you & Duke of Devonshire [who commissioned the Endymion] have the last strokes of his chisel . . .*'.

### FROM ACCLAIM TO OBSCURITY

Having been commissioned by Lord Liverpool – whose interest and influence in the Arts is best exemplified by the founding of the National Gallery under his government and direction – recent research led by Alice Whitehead (Francis Outred Ltd.) has unearthed a fascinating extended provenance. Upon his death in 1828, just six years after the completion of the sculpture, Lord Liverpool's title and estate passed to his brother, Charles, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Liverpool, after whose death it was offered by Christie's almost exactly 170 years ago, in 1852, in an auction at Fife House, Whitehall, London. Listed as 'The Celebrated statue of the Magdalen by Canova', it was described in the auction catalogue as 'one of the finest and most highly finished works of Canova'. It was in the collection of Lord Ward (later Earl of Dudley) – one of the pre-eminent collectors of his time – in 1856 when it was in his Egyptian Hall Exhibition, Piccadilly, London, as well as the 1857 Manchester exhibition of *Art Treasures*, which was opened by



His Royal Highness, Prince Albert, from which the earliest known photograph of the marble dates (*illustrated page 3*).

It is extraordinary that in less than a century the significance and authorship of the *Recumbent Magdalene* had been forgotten. After Lord Ward's death his estate and collection passed to his son who at a moment of personal tragedy in 1920 sold his great house, Witley Court, and its entire contents to Sir Herbert Smith, a carpet manufacturer. It was at this point that the attribution to Canova appears to have been lost. Following a disastrous fire which destroyed much of the Court, the sculpture changed hands once again at an auction of the house and contents in 1938, where it was unattributed and described as a 'classical figure'. It has now been established that it was purchased by Violet van der Elst – an eccentric entrepreneur and campaigner, famous in her time, but now largely forgotten – who built and lost a fortune and was instrumental in bringing about the abolition of the death penalty in England. Though not recognised as a work by Canova at that stage, the sculpture was nevertheless treasured and remained with her as her fortune dwindled, her many houses were sold and her vast collection of art and antiques was dispersed, largely to fund her humanitarian activism. The *Magdalene* was recorded as being in the garden of van der Elst's house, in Addison Road, Kensington, where it is known to have remained after the sale of the property in 1959 to a local art dealer; it is reported to have been sold again with the house in the late 1960s. The lost attribution continued as recently as 2002 when it was sold in a *Garden Statuary and Architectural Items* sale, where it was acquired by the present owner. Only recently has the authorship and significance of the *Recumbent Magdalene* been re-established, presenting the market with this unique opportunity to acquire an autograph marble by Antonio Canova.

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