

Antonio Canova's Penitent Magdalene, is regarded by some as one of the greatest sculptures in the world. It is one of the few originals by Canova. The first (the Genoa version) was produced in 1796, when Canova was 33 years old. It created a sensation in the art world. A second (the Hermitage version) was the Penitent Magdalene commissioned for Eugene de Beauharnais for his palace in Munich, in 1808 and which is now in the Hermitage State Museum, St. Petersburg in Russia. Research was carried out from recorded sources after visits to the Possagno Museum in Italy, the birthplace of Canova, the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg in Russia, the Museo di Sant'Agostino in Genoa and to the Prado National Museum in Madrid.

After years of gathering fragments of information and research in various countries, enough evidence was found to confirm discovery of the long lost Penitent Magdalene by Canova that Sir Francis Chantrey installed for the British Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, in 1822.

According to a letter from Sir Francis Chantrey the famous British sculptor to G. Bedford which is in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and reordered in The Volume of the Walpole Society, volume 56 page 169, to quote.

“Chantrey was also at this point charged with installing a marble statue of the Penitent Magdalene for Lord Liverpool, Purchased from Canova and completed in 1822”.

When Lord Liverpool died in 1829, the Penitent Magdalene was passed to his half-brother Charles the 3rd Earl of Liverpool. The Penitent Magdalene was in the possession of the Earl for 24 years until his death when it was sold as a celebrated statue of Magdalene by Christie and Mason on 3rd April 1852.



“It was selected from his studio by the late Duchess of Devonshire” who was the sister-in-law of Lord Liverpool, the British Prime Minister.

She requested Canova to change the proposed recumbent Magdalene statue in 1819 when she asked “Canova not to do the holy a statue for Lord Liverpool” (See repentant Magdalene the Penitent Magdalene the discovery of a long-lost masterpiece by Corona Fine Arts, page 49). The Duchess was a great friend of Canova for over 20 years, the Devonshire's were great customers for Canova's work, for the Devonshire and Chatsworth House and she was also a friend of Cardinal Ercole Consalvi who was a great help to Canova when he got Napoleon to return looted statues from Rome to be returned from Paris to Rome in 1815. They were powerful friends of Canova who would carry out the request by the Duchess of Devonshire to change the statue to the Penitent Magdalene which was installed by Sir Francis Chantrey in 1822 as reported in the Walpole publication.

In 1854 the Penitent Magdalene was recorded by Tulse Hill Tenny as Mary Magdalene by Antonio Canova in the Crystal Palace in London.

The Magdalene was celebrated as referred to by Messrs Christie and Mason as “a highly finished beautiful statue of Magdalene”.

It was celebrated because when the first version was exhibited in the Muse Napoleon (now Le Louvre in Paris) “it created a sensation” “it has a miraculous effect on all who saw it”. It was celebrated as the greatest work of modern times. (Novelist Stendhal)

The Viceroy of Italy Eugene de Beauharnais, Napoleon's stepson ordered a Penitent Magdalene for his palace in Munich. It now in the Hermitage State Museum in St Petersburg in Russia. It is also on the pediment of the Church of La Madeleine in Paris. This is why it was referred to as “the celebrated statue of the Magdalene by Canova”.

Some say that this was the reclining Magdalene which appeared not to be seen in the public until the sale that could not be regarded as “celebrated”?

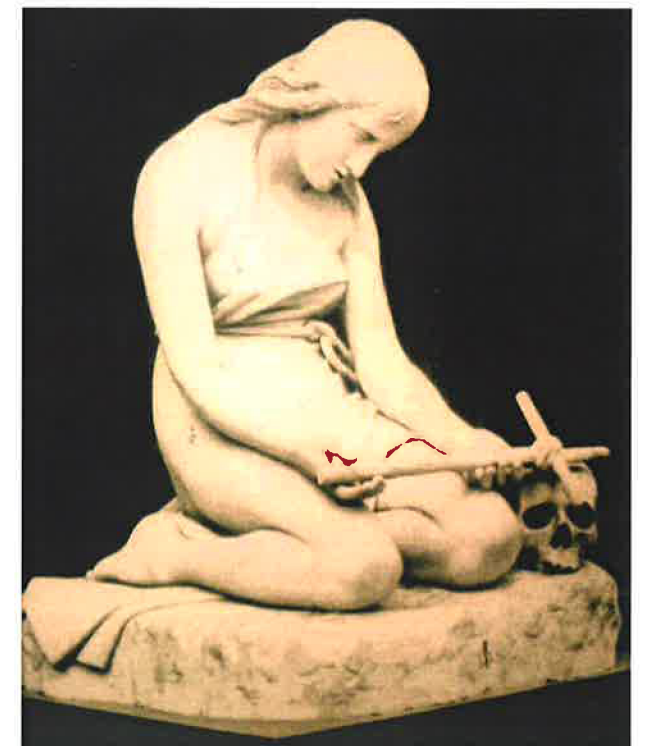
The Penitent Magdalene was acquired by the wealthy Palmers for their magnificent mansion, Kenure House in Rush in Dublin, Ireland. It was there until it was sold by auction in September 1964 as no. 542 “a white marble figure of Mary Magdalene with skull beside her” by James North & Co Ltd with offices in London & Dublin for £40. After 34 years It was resold at Upper Court Manor collection on June 1998 for £4750 and 15% commission.



Antonio Canova.



Lord Liverpool.



The Penitent Magdalene in the Crystal Palace, 19th century. Note the cross in her hands (now missing).



Celebrated poet and songwriter Thomas Moore was in Canova's workshop in October 1819 and saw the cast of the Penitent Magdalene, and also confirmed that the Recumbent Magdalene was “not yet in marble” in 1819. “...saw among other things a cast of his Magdalene that is at Paris Museum “The Penitent Magdalene”; a most touching thing; beauty emaciated, and an attitude full of humility and sorrow: the best of all the Magdalene's I have seen.”¹⁴



Kenure House, Rush, Co. Dublin, showing the stairway with Liverpool's version of the Penitent Magdalene in the foreground.

The Volume of the Walpole Society – Volume 56 – Page 169 ¹³

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Chantrey was also at this point charged with installing a marble statue of the Penitent Magdalene for Lord Liverpool, purchased from Canova and completed 1822 (see letter from Chantrey to G. Bedford, c, 1822, V&A Library)