

*Conversion of the Magdalene*, by Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1652/53)

Art selection and comment by [Heidi J. Hornik](#) and [Mikeal C. Parsons](#)

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Artemisia Gentileschi is the most famous female artist of the Italian Baroque period. Her *Conversion of the Magdalene* was likely executed in Florence in 1615–16. In post-Tridentine theology, Mary Magdalene was an exemplar of the penitent sinner. Artemisia captures a delicate balance between the Magdalene’s sensuality and her faith through both her attire and the gesture of clutching her breast. Her disheveled hair echoes the physical manifestation of her conversion made popular by the

Venetian priest, Francesco Panigarola, who described her transformation in dramatic, even theatrical terms (“violently wringing her hands, she trembled and declared, ‘Oh floor, why don’t you open up [and] . . . swallow me?’”). Artemisia has captured a moment of contemplation after this tumultuous conversion, signified by the inscription on the mirror, OPTIMAM PARTEM ELECIT (“she chose the better part”), a reminder of Jesus’ words to Martha in Luke 10 that, in sitting studiously at Jesus’ feet, Mary had chosen a better path.