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BARTOLOMÉ ESTEBAN MURILLO

(Seville 1618 – 1682)

*The Penitent Magdalen in Prayer
in a Mountainous Landscape*

Signed lower left "MURILLO f"

Oil on canvas

196.2 × 144.8 cm.; 77 1/4 x 57 in.

Provenance

(Possibly) Collection of Giovanni Torlonia, Palazzo Bracciano, Rome, end of the 18th century;

Collection of Robert Westall, England, by 1848;¹

William Skinner, Holyoke, Massachusetts;

Grace Congregational Church (latterly The United Congregational Church of Holyoke), Holyoke, Massachusetts, since 1915;

Sotheby's, New York, 28 January 1999, lot 248;

with Matthiesen Gallery, London.

¹ Presumed to be the London landscape painter who exhibited from 1848–49. As stated in S. Stratton-Pruitt and W. Jordan, *Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1619-1682): Paintings from American Collections*, 2002, Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum and Los Angeles. It is not clear what the source for this is as in C.B. Curtis, *Velazquez and Murillo. A description and historical catalogue of the works*, New York 1883, the painting is not listed as being in the collection of Robert Westall.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

Literature

E.A. Reveil, *Musee de Peinture et de Sculpture...*, Paris, Audot 1829, vol. 1, pl. 218.
C.B. Curtis, *Velazquez and Murillo. A description and historical catalogue of the works*, New York 1883, no. 373, p. 261.
F.R. Halsey, *Raphael Morghen's Engraved Works*, 1885, pp. 95-97, no. 109.
'A Fine Murillo', *Academy Notes*, 3 January 1908, p.132, illustrated.
'In the Galleries', *The International Studio*, April 1909, illustrated pl. VIII.
The Matthiesen Gallery, *2001: An Art Odyssey*, London, 2001, pp. 278-285, no. 32.
S. Stratton-Pruitt and W. Jordan, *Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1619-1682): Paintings from American Collections*, exh. catalogue, Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum, and Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum, 2002, chapter 1, p. 8 and note 31.
B.N. Prieto and A.E. Pérez Sánchez, *The Young Murillo*, exh. catalogue, Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao and Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla, 2010, no. 30, pp. 330-331 and pp. 558-559.
Lauraine Diggins Fine Art, *Collector's Exhibition 2016*, 2016, p. 9.

Exhibitions

Ehrich Galleries, New York, 1908-9, s/no.
Exhibition of Paintings of the Spanish School, Boston, Copley Society, 1912, no. 60.
2001: An Art Odyssey, The Matthiesen Gallery, London, 2001, pp. 278-285, plates, no. 32.
The Young Murillo, Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao 19 October 2009 - 17 January 2010 and Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla 18 February - 30 May 2010, no. 30.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



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Est. 1760

This signed *Penitent Magdalen* is one of the most important works by Murillo to be discovered in recent years.² Murillo signed few of his works during his lifetime and most of those that are signed were painted during the early stages of his career, before he became Seville's most famous painter.

The iconographic theme of the Penitent Magdalen was a key element of Catholic devotion during the Counter Reformation period that commenced with the Council of Trent in 1563. Representations of penitent saints were extremely common throughout Europe, but especially so in Spain and Italy. Mary Magdalen symbolises a person who, after a period of debauchery and sin, repents and takes refuge in religion, pursuing, above all, a life of prayer and penitence. The Magdalen was traditionally believed to be a beautiful woman who practiced prostitution until the moment that she met Christ and was redeemed. Later, she withdrew from the world, mortifying her flesh to repent of her sins. During the Baroque period the Church used the symbolism of the Magdalen to exhort the faithful to repent and recognize their sins while offering them the hope of salvation through penitence and spiritual purification.

A favoured subject throughout Murillo's entire career, the present version of the *Penitent Magdalen* was not in fact painted very early in Murillo's career, between 1638 and 1640, as has previously been suggested.³ At that time the artist was still experimenting and his style was yet unformed while he remained under the influence of Juan de Castillo, his master. The painting should rather be dated some ten years later, around 1650, when the artist was beginning to assert his own individual character in harmony with the traditions of Sevillian painting. Murillo began to use *chiaroscuro* during this period to endow his characters with a sense of intense expression and so that he might also heighten the dramatic quality of the composition and imbue it with a spiritual sense of religious purity. There are a number of other penitent saints which date from this period, all equally dramatic, particularly in their body language and especially in their facial expressions. These include the *Saint Francis* in Antwerp cathedral (Fig. 1) as well as another version of the same saint in

² With acknowledgement of the advice of Professor Enrique Valdivieso, Professor of Art History at the University of Seville and Professor William Jordan.

³ Sotheby's, New York, 1999. Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, however, in *Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1619-1682): Paintings from American Collections* catalogue (chapter 1, p. 8) dates the picture to just before 1640. His training by Juan del Castillo is still evident, but the predominantly brown tonalities indicate his awakening interest in a more naturalistic manner. It is interesting to note, in the light of the focus of this exhibition, that this *Magdalen* was on view in the United States in 1908, even earlier than the two paintings of the same subject included in *Murillo in America* (cat. nos 4 and 5).

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

the Museo de Bellas Artes in Seville. A similar sense of drama can be seen in a *Saint Jerome* in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, in which the kneeling saint is intensely absorbed in the act of penitence (Fig. 2).

Murillo's works executed c. 1650 are tenebrous and show a strong use of *chiaroscuro*. Thus, he experimented with a Sevillian form of Caravaggism, which he probably derived from his knowledge of Jusepe Ribera. At the same time the intensity of expression and devotion evident in these compositions was almost certainly due to the influence of Guido Reni's early work. Several works by Reni once hung in Seville cathedral and his engravings were widely circulated. The characterisation of the head of the Magdalen in the present version owes much to Reni.⁴

The dramatic sense of expression that Murillo utilised between 1650 and 1655 gave way to sweeter or softer, almost vaporous figures in later years. It is enough to compare this *Magdalen* with the *Magdalen* in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne, which was painted around 1670. The Cologne *Magdalen* shows Murillo's tendency to progressively sweeten and beautify his models, the result of a move towards a more open-minded doctrine within the Spanish Catholic Church. Inevitably this doctrinal tendency inspired Murillo to produce compositions with a softer, more delicate slant than his early Counter Reformation pictures.

The present *Penitent Magdalen* should be compared to four paintings by Murillo executed during the period 1648-55 on the theme of the Magdalen. The earliest version is in the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid and bears many distinct similarities to the *Penitent Magdalen* exhibited here (Fig. 3).⁵ There is a similar depth of *chiaroscuro* and a raking light source from the upper left, spotlighting the saint and highlighting the open book. The saint looks to the left in the same way with hands clasped, and mouth open with eyes ecstatically rolled back in a Reni-like way. A slightly later example, which may be dated around 1655, is the version in the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin (Fig. 4).⁶ Here the saint is shown full-length kneeling rather than seated. Her shoulders are bare and she holds her robe up to cover her breasts. This is a more progressive image than our *Magdalen* where, in greater harmony with the restrictions of the Counter Reformation, the saint is shown fully

⁴ Compare Reni's female heads before 1625. For instance, *The Martyrdom of Saint Catherine* of 1606 (Albenga, Diocesan Museum), the kneeling figure in the 1611 *Massacre of the Innocents* (Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale), or the celebrated 1631-32 *Magdalen* (Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica).

⁵ D. Angulo, *Murillo*, Madrid 1981, II, no. 359 and III, pl. 67.

⁶ Angulo 1981, II, no. 357 and III, pl. 68.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

clothed. Another version, also dating c.1655, was formerly in the church of Saint George in New York and is now in a Madrid private collection.⁷ The *Penitent Magdalen* in the San Diego Museum of Art is the fourth version dating from this period and is in many ways similar to the Dublin version except that the saint has been rotated to face to the right and the lighting is much more suffused so that not only is the physiognomy and bodice softer, but the drapery folds have lost their crisp Reni-like character and are no longer picked out with highlights (see Fig. 5).⁸

In the Virginia Museum of Art, Richmond, there is yet another painting on the theme of the Magdalen which also dates from the same period (Fig. 6). This version does not show the Magdalen as a penitent but instead shows her at the moment of her salvation as a beautiful woman who has decided to renounce her sinful life and follow Christ.⁹ Elegantly dressed, the Magdalen casts some jewellery and a ribbon, symbolising her worldly possessions, upon a tasselled cushion on the floor. She is a handsome figure shown in the first moments of her repentance as she makes the decision to abandon her sinful life and convert to Christianity. All these versions show that there was a considerable demand for iconographic representations of the Magdalen in seventeenth-century Seville. Finally, a further painting worthy of comparison is the *Saint Francis in Ecstasy* which was formerly with The Matthiesen Gallery and which is now in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection. This painting has also been dated to the period 1650-55 by William Jordan on the basis of its dramatic light and strong chiaroscuro.¹⁰

It is worth remarking that this *Penitent Magdalen* is the only version from the period that shows the saint outdoors, surrounded by rocks and seemingly at the foot of a gully with the light source filtering from high above, upper left. Rocks and shadowy shrubs make up the Caravaggesque right background. The saint kneels in front of a substantial slab of rock on which are placed a book, a crucifix and her pot of ointment

⁷ Angulo 1981, II, no. 360 and III, pl. 69.

⁸ Angulo 1981, II, no. 362 and III, pl. 70.

⁹ Angulo 1981, II, no. 361 and III, pl. 93. This rather startled pose with the Magdalen looking left across her right shoulder echoes a slightly later example formerly in the Bourdet collection, Le Havre and with The Matthiesen Gallery in 1981. This latter painting is dated by Angulo to 1660 but was previously dated by Mayer to 1650-55.

¹⁰ Jordan compared the *Saint Francis* to *Saint Anthony's Vision of the Christ Child* in the Birmingham City Art Gallery as well as to several of the paintings noted in the text above. Though close in date the slightly softer handling in this *Saint Francis* with its softer, more sensuous modelling and long smooth brush strokes probably means that it postdates *The Penitent Magdalen* by a few years.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

with which she anointed Christ's feet. A skull, in conjunction with the crucifix, indicating a contemplation of the transience of life on earth and the rewards of the life eternal, is also present. The Magdalen appears covered with a white shift, tied at the waist with a cord, while a mauve mantle envelops her entire body. Her facial expression, eyes upturned towards heaven, translates into a profound plea for the forgiveness of her sins. Her contemplative, praying posture is indicative of her profound state of repentant piety.

As previously remarked, this early Magdalen figure by Murillo differs in its sense of modesty from his later versions and from both Flemish and, more particularly, Italian representations. There is no naked flesh except for the forearms. Reni for instance was to make his Magdalens dazzling figures of seduction while even Murillo in his Dublin picture radically increases the amount of flesh as a distraction to the viewer, perhaps at the special request of the client. As the impact of Counter Reformation mores receded, Murillo carefully adapted his Magdalens from a purely spiritual penitent figure to a beguiling woman, whose very body alludes to her past activity. This *Penitent Magdalen* is among the most restrained in its sexuality, a fact probably explained by the power of the Seville Inquisition which at this time still strictly monitored the moral content of paintings.

There is an engraving of this painting by Raphael Morghen dated 1801, and this again testifies to the popularity Murillo enjoyed in the nineteenth century.¹¹

¹¹ C.B. Curtis, *Velazquez and Murillo. A description and historical catalogue of the works*, New York 1883, lists a number of engravings taken from R. Morghen, 1801, proving that this painting was a very popular and well-known image.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Fig. 1. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *St Francis of Assisi at Prayer*, c. 1645-1650.
Oil on canvas, 182 x 129 cm.
Antwerp Cathedral.

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Est. 1760



Fig. 2. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *The Penitent Saint Jerome*, c. 1650.
Oil on canvas, 187 x 133 cm.
Madrid, Museo del Prado.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Fig. 3. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *The Penitent Mary Magdalene*, c. 1650.
Oil on canvas, 161 x 109 cm.
Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando.

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Est. 1760



Fig. 4. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *The Penitent Mary Magdalene*, c. 1655.
Oil on canvas, 152 x 104 cm.
Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland.

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Est. 1760



Fig. 5. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *The Penitent Mary Magdalene*, c. 1655.
Oil on canvas, 160.7 × 105.4 cm.
San Diego Museum of Art.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Fig. 6. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *Saint Mary Magdalene Renouncing the Worldly Life*, c. 1655.
Oil on canvas, 165.7 × 116.2 cm.
Richmond, Virginia Museum of Art.

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