

**The Penitent Magdalen (about 1660) Bartolome Esteban Murillo (1617 - 1682)  
Spanish, 82.23, Gallery 311 (July 2011 OOM)**

The striking young woman in this painting certainly made history in her life time and through the mystery, tradition and legends that surrounded her after her death. Her name is Mary of Magdala and she was painted by Bartolome Estaban Murillo in about 1660.



**The Artist**

Murillo was born in 1617 and was influenced by Ribera and Zurbarán as well as the Flemish masters Rubens and Van Dyke. He was one of the leading religious painters of the Spanish School in the last half of the 17th C and perhaps the last great painter of Spain's Golden Age. He was the leading artist in Seville during the mid-seventeenth century.

Mary Magdalene was frequently portrayed by Seventeenth-century painters, for she was seen as the great example of the penitent sinner whose faith in Christ guaranteed salvation. Murillo painted her no less than seven times. The Roman Catholic Church saw Mary Magdalene as a penitent sinner, who lived as a hermit. and so Murillo portrayed her that way.

**Mary Magdalene**

Mary Magdalene was a follower of Jesus and she lived in Palestine. She is mentioned in the Christian gospels several times. The references were as follows: a) Jesus healed her of seven demons; b) She was mentioned as one of the women who gave material support to Jesus; and c) She was present at the time of Jesus' crucifixion and was a witness to his resurrection.

She has captured the imagination of Christians over the centuries. Stories about her included conjectures that she became a hermit and spent 30 years in the wilderness. She was painted in the art of the middle ages as a long haired beautiful woman. Pope Gregory in the sixth century claimed that she was a prostitute. The circumstantial evidence was that a story about her was near one of the women being stoned for adultery. Modern biblical criticism does not believe that woman was Mary of Magdala. Historians find no mention of this until Pope Gregory (in the Sixth Century) condemned her and he did not give his sources.

Legends and traditions about her were many. One in our contemporary culture is found in the Davinci Code - a book written by Dan Brown and a film starring Tom Hanks. The Davinci Code claimed that Mary Magdalene came to France bearing Jesus' child and that

a group of followers faithfully protected and followed her descentents. This was based in part on a legend that grew up after Mary Magdalene's death.

By the time Murillo was the leading religious painter of Spain, in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the view of Pope Gregory that she was a sinner who repented and was saved because of her faith was the one endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church.

With this background, I invite you to examine this painting by Murillo.

The Painting: The Penitent Magdalene

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts received this painting as a gift of the Richards Memorial Fund in honor of Marguerite Sexton Richards. It was accessed in 1982. It is oil on canvas and is 48 1/2 by 42. The number 629 in the lower right hand corner of the canvas is an item number in the royal inventory of Queen Isabella Farnese of Spain.

### **KEY POINTS**

The painting conveys the devotion of Mary Magdalene as her face is bathed with light and she looks upward, perhaps in prayer. She is wrapped in a purple robe. The inappropriateness of her garment in the desert is beside the point, it signifies her penitence.

The cave has a number of symbols that were significant to those who viewed this painting. They are a Bible (Signifying her personal devotion), a cross (She was a follower of Jesus.), and a skull (Calling attention to the brevity of lie and human failing.).

Mary Magdalene's painting would have been a devotional for Roman Catholics of Spain in the latter part of the 17th C. It was most likely commisioned for a church.

The Roman Catholic Church published a document in 1969 exonerating Mary of Magdala of being a prostitute. There is no evidence of this.

Today we remember Mary Magdala as a faithful follower of Jerus in his life time and after his death. She has symbolized over the centuries the importance of meditation and penitence in Christian life.

### **POSSIBLE QUESTIONS**

What emotions do you see and feel in this painting?

What is revealed in her face?

What is striking about the painting?

Her hair? Her clothing? The light and colors?

Is what she is wearing appropriate for life in the desert?  
How old do you think she is in this painting?

Why would Murillo have painted her garments purple and white?  
(church today uses purple for penance - Lent)

What do you see in the landscape and her surroundings?

What symbols do you see?  
Skull – brevity of life and human failing  
Cross – follower of Jesus  
Bible – aid to devotion, story of Jesus

### **POSSIBLE TOURS**

Spirituality and Art  
Women in Art  
Christian Paintings

### **RESOURCES -**

Artsconnected: Tools for Teaching the Arts  
Docent Art Object File, MIA  
MIA Library File  
The Christian Scriptures (New Revised Standard Version)  
The Internet various files  
Nina A. Mallory, *El Greco to Murillo: Spanish Painting in the Gold Age, 1556 - 1700*,  
New York: Harper Collins Incorporated, 1990. Specifically Chapter 10: “Baroque  
Painting in Seville.”

Submitted by Carol Joyce, July 2011