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Unidentified Artist
Bolivia, Potosí
The Penitent Magdalene
Second half of the 17th century
Oil on canvas, 56 x 41 1/2 inches

Mary Magdalene was an early, very devoted follower of Christ. She mourned at the foot of his cross and was the first witness to his resurrection. Artists have pictured her as sinner, penitent, and witness. In this painting from South America, she is shown in prayerful contemplation, in the cave in the wilderness to which she consigned herself (as did Saint Jerome, who is often similarly pictured). The unguent jar beside her holds the oils with which she anointed the feet of Jesus. The skull is a *memento mori*, a reminder of the ephemeral nature of life and the necessity of prayer to achieve life everlasting. The rough mats on which she leans and her coarsely woven, torn garment reflect the ascetic existence she has chosen.



Fig. 1. Rafael Sadeler I, after Domenico Tintoretto, 1602. London: British Museum, inv. no. 1929,0715.28.



Fig. 2. Engraving after Sadeler, perhaps by a later member of the Sadeler family.

The composition of the Thoma painting is based on an engraving by the Antwerp printmaker Raphael Sadeler I after a painting by Domenico Tintoretto, as indicated by the small inscription at bottom right (fig. 1). However, in the painting Mary Magdalene faces left instead of right, so that we know the painter was looking at another version of Rafael Sadeler's print, one in which the image is reversed. The debt of Spanish colonial artists to prints imported from Europe is fully recognized; however, the process of transmission was somewhat complicated. Probably, the most expensive engravings, which were highly valued in Europe, did not travel to the Americas. It is more likely in most instances in which correspondences can be found between Spanish colonial paintings and European compositional models that the print carrier was a copy of an original, or even a copy of a copy. This is the case with the Thoma painting and the print after Sadeler by an unidentified Flemish hand (fig. 2).

The painter's style, which is notable for the dark background; smooth, creamy, brightly lit flesh and sharp features drawn with hard contours somewhat resembles that of Francisco de Herrera y Velarde, a Spanish painter who arrived in Potosí around 1653 and died there in 1694. Herrera brought the dark palette called "tenebrism" from Seville to Potosí. The Thoma painting may well reflect Herrera's influence in Potosí. Herrera y Velarde painted a *Penitent Magdalene*

(Fig. 3) that enables us to see what his followers could have learned from his artistic example. Both works are characterized by bold contrasts of light and dark, hard contours (with even the hair painted as a solid mass), and bold, sharply defined features.



Fig. 3. Francisco de Herrera y Velarde, *The Penitent Magdalene*, oil on canvas, 127.5 x 129 cm, second half of the 17th century. Potosí, Bolivia: Museo de la Casa Nacional de Moneda.

The painter of the Thoma *Penitent Magdalene* has deviated from the print source in several ways. He has “tidied up” several details, such as the unravelling edge of the coarse mat, and he has clothed Mary Magdalene in a woven garment which gives her modesty as well as emphasizing, with its ragged holes, the austerity of her chosen path.

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