

T O M A S S O



Bartholomeus Spranger (Antwerp 1546 – Prague 1611)

St. Mary Magdalene

Oil on canvas

63.6 x 51.6 cm

Signed upper right

Born in Antwerp in 1546, Bartholomeus Spranger began his training in the workshops of the Netherlandish landscape painters Jan Mandijn, French Mostaert and Cornelis van Dalem. In 1565 he traveled via Paris and Lyon to Milan, where he was introduced to the fresco technique, and subsequently to Parma, where he worked with Jacopo Bertolotti and Bernardino Campi and had the opportunity to study the masterpieces of Emilian painters Correggio and Parmigianino, a lasting influence throughout his career. In 1566 Spranger arrived in Rome, where he joined the group of artists surrounding Federico Zuccaro and soon garnered the illustrious patronage of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese and Pope Pius V. Spranger reached the height of his fame when he headed north: first in Vienna, where he was appointed court painter by the Holy Roman emperor Maximilian II, and then in Prague, where he was summoned by Emperor Rudolf II, a notable patron of the arts, in the early 1580s. Once established in Prague, Spranger emerged as one of the principal artists at the Rudolfinian court and the most eminent Northern mannerist painters of his generation. His workshop was located within the imperial palace, which certainly allowed him to develop a close relationship with the emperor, often working under his direct supervision. The present painting can be dated to the last decade of Spranger's court employment at the beginning of the 17th century. Many of Spranger's Rudolfinian paintings depict mythological figures, mostly amorous couples or single nudes entwined in complicated poses, with a strong erotic charge.

The penitent Mary Magdalene, identified by her long flowing hair which she wears down over her shoulders and the crucifix she holds, emerges from the dark background with her gaze turned upwards in prayer, while her elegantly outlined hands rest on a book. A drapery is loosely wrapped around her shoulders, revealing her left breast and her porcelain-white skin. The saint is represented with a skull, one of her other main attributes. This vanitas object, symbolising death and the transience of earthly pleasures, refers to her role as a witness of the crucifixion, which took place on Golgotha, the 'place of the skull'. With this picture Spranger excelled in creating an exceptionally moving treatment of the subject matter, imbued with spirit.

A true virtuoso, Spranger excelled as painter, draftsman, and etcher. He was one of the major artists of the Prague School and represents an important force in European art in the late 16th century. Early in his career, Spranger distanced himself from the more classical, naturalistic canons of the early 16th century, developing a distinctive personal late mannerist style, unique amongst his contemporaries, by drawing from diverse sources and coalescing elements of Netherlandish painting with Italian influences. Especially the characteristics of the central Italian mannerists, such as Tibaldi and Parmigianino, are very apparent in the elongated limbs, graceful gestures, decorative composition, strong chiaro-scuro and the vivid colours that exude a pearly sheen of the present work.

Spranger executed the Saint Mary Magdalene in the late 1590s, the same decade in which he painted *The Three Marys at the Tomb* in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum and *Saint Sebastian* in the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart. Her golden locks, typically mannerist hands, angular drapery and dramatic light-shadow contrasts are evocative of Spranger's particular style of this period. The darker colouring and softer forms of the female figure find their analogies in other paintings by this master datable around 1600, as does the iconography. Stylistically the picture is closely comparable to *Venus with Cupid and Mercury* in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, dating from 1597. The subject, combining pleasure with moral instruction, responds to the taste of the Rudolfiner Court. Religious paintings commissioned by the imperial court often aimed at bringing together the aesthetic as well as religious themes. Given the size and the subject matter we can assume the picture was commissioned for a private chapel. It is rare that a true Rudolfiner masterpiece such as this can be seen outside a major public collection and must be viewed as one of Spranger's most successful and exciting works.

Spranger's work can be found in important public collections around the world, such as the Ambrosiana in Milan (*The Conversation of St. Paul*), the Galleria Pallatina in Florence (*The Holy Family*) the Art Institute of Chicago (*Saint Dominic Reading*), Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (*Venus and Adonis*), the Louvre Museum in Paris, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the National Gallery in London (*The Adoration of the Kings*), the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (*Wedding of Cupid and Psyche*) and the Wawel Royal Castle in Poland (*Vanitas*), Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, in Brussels (*Flight into Egypt*).

The present painting was exhibited from 10 April 2007 to 20 February 2009 at the National Gallery in Prague at the exhibition entitled '*Rudolfiner Beauty*', along with other significant artworks by masters of the Rudolfiner era. '*Bartholomeus Spranger: Splendor and Eroticism in Imperial Prague*' is the first major exhibition devoted to this fascinating artist will be on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art beginning November 4, 2014 to February 1, 2015.

Provenance:

Private Collection, South America

Exhibitions

Rudolfiner Beauty, National Gallery, Prague 10 April 2007 – 20 February 2009