

Reviews of Books

MARTA P. CACHO CASAL, *Damaged Soul: Visual Cultures of the Penitent Magdalene in Spain*. Preface by Jonathan Ruffer. Madrid: Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica/Bishop Auckland: Spanish Gallery. 2024. 213. pp.; 83 colour illustrations.

In this beautifully illustrated book, Cacho Casal focuses on three portraits of Mary Magdalene produced in Spain during the seventeenth century and now part of the collection of the Spanish Gallery in Bishop Auckland. Following a brief Introduction, which explains how Mary came to be regarded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a symbol of the Sacrament of Penance, Chapters 1 and 2 locate the Magdalene in context, considering questions of nudity and sensuality, womanhood and the process of repentance, and the position of the saint in Spanish material culture and devotional practice. The main interest of the book, however, is in the chapters that follow, each of which is devoted to a different painting. In Chapter 3, Cacho Casal studies Juan Bautista Maíno's *Penitent Magdalene*, which is thought to have been produced in around 1609. After a reappraisal of Maíno's status, her study shows how the painting, which is by far the most sensual of the three, was at some point cut down to size, transforming a devotional image into one that depicts a type of Christian Venus. Of particular note is that in contrast to the other extant version, now at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias in Oviedo, the Spanish Gallery painting is focused almost exclusively on Mary's scantily clad body and exquisitely painted robes, omitting reference to the series of objects that originally appeared on the right: a crucifix wedged into a rock, a waterfall, an upturned skull, a snail, and a sawn tree trunk sprouting signs of new life. The result is that a sombre meditation on life, death, and the prospect of rebirth becomes markedly more secular in orientation, and may even invite some members of the audience to engage with sexual thoughts rather than reject them. In Chapter 4, the focus moves on to Luis Tristán's *Penitent Magdalene*, which was painted in around 1620. Cacho Casal explains that, far from a mere pupil of El Greco, Tristán developed a style of his own, revealing the influence of the Caravaggisti and the general aesthetic approach of the Counter-Reformation. Although the painter died young, and may only have been active for some fifteen years, he succeeded nonetheless in producing a catalogue of more than 250 works. In contrast to the sensual vibrancy of Maíno's cut-down portrait, Tristán's treatment of the saint is markedly more sombre and meditative, depicting her in half length, with her elbows resting on an improvised table among the gloomy rocks of her cave. As she clasps her hands firmly together in prayer, her vision is focused on the skull that seems to glare menacingly upwards towards her. The composition is completed by the books that provide a support for the skull and a blood-stained scourge wound round a plain wooden crucifix, a detail that suggests that the painting may have served as a catalyst to acts of self-mortification. Chapter 5 discusses the last of the three portraits, Mateo Cerezo the Younger's *Penitent Magdalene*, which was produced in around 1655. Cacho Casal explains that, in contrast to both Maíno and Tristán, whose styles changed after spending time in Italy, that of Cerezo is more eclectic, blending echoes of a Titianesque palette with Flemish art, specifically that of Ruben's pupils, Anthony van Dyck, and to a lesser extent, Jacob Jordaens. Although Cerezo was only active for a decade, he painted Mary Magdalene on a number of occasions, eventually alighting on a masterful formula that proved extremely popular with prospective clients. The most notable evidence of its success is a small oil-sketch study, which, uniquely among Spanish artworks, is currently displayed alongside the full painting in the Spanish Gallery. Cacho Casal's book is completed by a short conclusion, an extensive list of works cited, and a full subject index, making it a must for scholars of Spanish art, and in particular, visitors to the Spanish Gallery. Many of the points that are made could inevitably have been expanded and further clarified, but my only substantive criticism is that, despite the quality of its layout and its generous complement of colour illustrations, the book is marked by a high number of misspellings and typographic infelicities, which, unfortunately, cannot easily go unnoticed.