

He saved me neither from death nor from harm nor from crime, since it's through them that one is saved. He saved me from happiness.

Marguerite Yourcenar, "Mary Magdalene and Salvation", in *Fires*

Pino Blasone

Magdalene's Iconography, between Passion and Melancholy



1 – Lippo Memmi, Sainte Marie Madeleine; Petit Palais, Avignon

A Red Purple Veil

In the Christian iconographic tradition, no saint as Mary Magdalene owns so many symbolic identifying attributes: an ointment jar or a spice pot, a skull, a book, a mirror, a small cross, a scourge or a cilice used as penance instruments. Surely, the rarest and strangest object is a red egg. According to an ancient legend from the Byzantine East, after Jesus' ascension to heaven the Magdalene journeyed to Rome. There, she was admitted to

the court of Tiberius Caesar, and so honoured as to have dinner with him (in some, quite different tales, Tiberius' guest was also Saint Veronica).

During the banquet, she told the tragic circumstances of Jesus' death, and how he had risen from the dead. While testifying his resurrection, she picked up an egg from the table. The Roman emperor responded, a human being could no more rise from the dead than the egg in her hand turn red. Actually, the egg turned red miraculously. That is why still today auspicious coloured eggs are exchanged at Easter, indeed not only in the Orthodox area.

We may read this apologue in the *Synaxarion of the Lenten Triodion and Pentecostarion*, an account of the lives of saints and commentary on the related feasts during such a period, according to the Orthodox tradition. Since early Christian art, the egg is a symbol for the Resurrection: usually, new life emerges from it. As to the attribute of an alabaster jar, instead it might be that of nard perfume oil used by the Magdalene to anoint Jesus' feet, if we share a medieval identification of her with the nameless woman in the episode at the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50) and/or with Mary of Bethany in a similar passage of John's Gospel (12:1-8).



2 – Segna di Bonaventura, Sancta Maria Magdalena; Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Yet a more correct and the prevalent interpretation is that the content of the jar is myrrh or aloe. In fact, at those times and places, the myrrh was the principal spice balm used for salving a body before burial. Mary Magdalene is one of the women who went to his tomb, to anoint Christ's body. As a "Myrrh Bearer" she remained or returned there, until he appeared to her unexpectedly risen (cf. Mt. 28:1-10; Mk. 16:1-11; Jn. 20:1-18).

If red is the egg attribute of the Magdalene, at least following the legend here above, seldom she was figured red haired and often red dressed. This passionate colour was associated with her, particularly during the Middle Ages. In the Sieneese painting of the 13th-14th century, her figure with a red cloak covering the body and veiling the head, around her face, became so stylized, that all these icons look alike. It occurred the same way, whether the image was standing alone, as in the panel of a polyptych, or inside the composition of narrative scenes as *Deposition from the Cross*, *Holy Women at the Tomb*, *Noli me tangere...*

Today, especially exemplars of the former type are disseminated almost all over. They are by several authors: Duccio di Buoninsegna (Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena), Ambrogio Lorenzetti (Museo dell'Opera del Duomo and Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena), Pietro Lorenzetti (National Gallery, Washington), Angelo Puccinelli (Petit Palais, Avignon), the Master of the Palazzo Venezia Madonna (National Gallery, London), Bartolomeo Bulgarini (Musei Capitolini, Rome, and Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia), Ugolino di Nerio (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

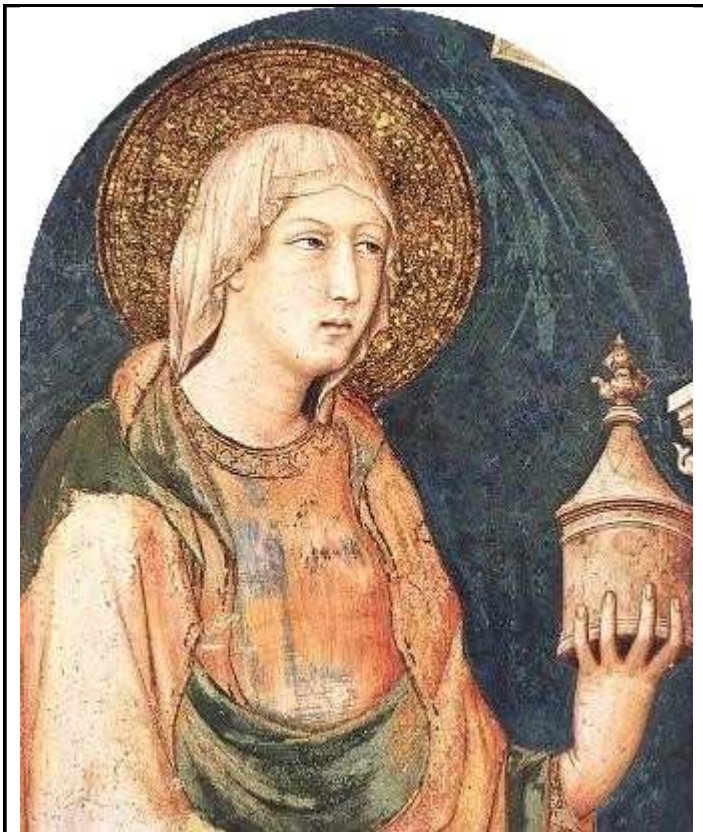


3 – Antonio Veneziano, Sancta Magdalena,
Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome

Unfortunately, in this last case the image has been cut off from a wider painting. Yet, we can reliably infer, the object held in a hand of the Magdalene is a jar as in the other cases. In a tempera on wood table by Lippo Memmi, at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, a difference is that she holds a jar in the left and a short cross in the right hand. A picture by the same painter shows the singularity of a Mary of Magdala, holding up an edge of her own cloak. In the background, it can be discerned a discoloured, cross haloed silhouette, likely the shadow of Jesus himself (Musée du Petit Palais, Avignon).

In the Rinuccini Chapel at Santa Croce, Florence, Giovanni da Milano frescoed five scenes from Magdalene's life. And Spinello Aretino will paint an enthroned Magdalene, holding a jar and a crucifix (processional banner; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). A coeval icon better documents the dependence on the Byzantine tradition. It is by Segna di Bonaventura, another exponent of the Sieneese pictorial school. There, the red veiled saint bears a red egg in a hand, a jar in the other. Portrayed in a three quarter position, against the usual golden background, she gazes at us out of the picture (Alte Pinakothek, Munich).

In the 14th century itself a novelty is a work by Antonio Veneziano, probably born in Venice, mostly operating in Tuscany. In his imaginary portrait, the Magdalene is depicted red dressed, with no veil on her head and a long fair hair. In her hands there are the jar and, this time, a book: reliably, a holy one (Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome). We see a long blonde haired Magdalene also in a *Crucifixion* by the Florentine Nardo di Cione (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; 1350-60). The Florentine Gherardo di Jacopo di Nero, alias the Starnina, will represent her unveiled too, but with put up hair (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin; ca. 1404-07).



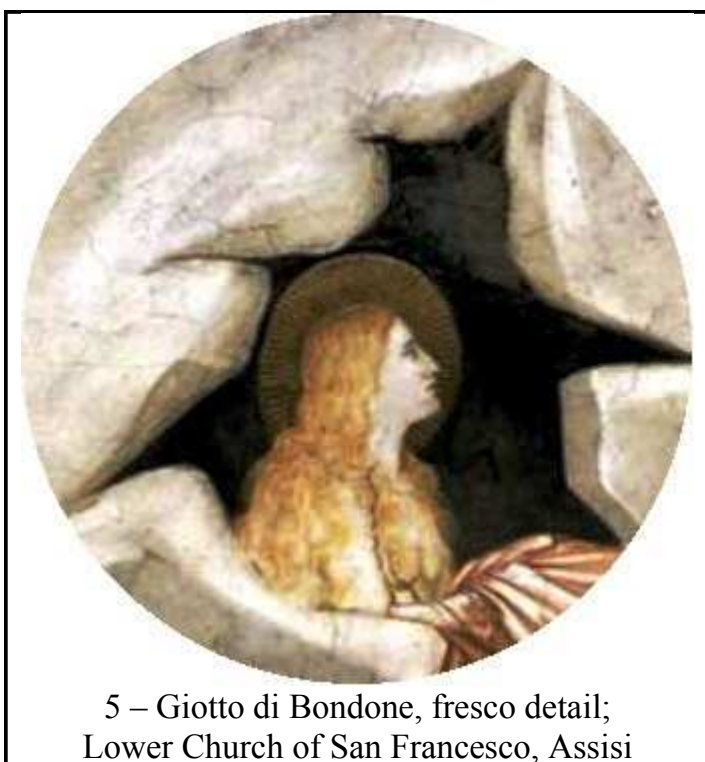
4 – Simone Martini, fresco detail;
Lower Church of San Francesco, Assisi

A different exception is by the Sieneese Simone Martini. Whereas his Magdalene in a polyptic in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo at Orvieto is a red veiled "Myrrh Bearer", in a fresco inside the Lower Church of San Francesco at Assisi, executed in 1317, he had pictured her nearly at the same manner. Yet her robes are no longer red or purple coloured.

Slowly, these variations on our theme concur to change those conventions, typical of an iconic approach. They are all steps, on the way of a gradual emancipation from the influence of the Byzantine style. Nonetheless, still in 1461-62 the Sieneese Sano di Pietro will include an old fashioned Magdalene – the "Lady in Red" – into an altarpiece with

Madonna and Saints, inside the Cathedral of Pienza. And so to say, of course in the *Santa Trinità Altarpiece* by Fra Angelico (Museo di San Marco, Florence; 1437-40) we can find more than one traditional images of the Magdalene, veiled or unveiled.

That is, the red veil or cloak will continue to recur in her iconography, even if not so much as the main distinctive element, such as it had been in the Sienese painting era, since the most famous masterpiece by Duccio di Buoninsegna: the altarpiece with predella, so called of the *Maestà* (Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena; 1308-11). There, the Magdalene is painted in the group of *Three Marys at the Tomb*, each one dressed with a different colour and bearing an ointment jar; and together with the risen Messiah, in another type of scene commonly titled *Noli me tangere* ("Do not touch – or, keep – me"; cf. John 20:11-18).



5 – Giotto di Bondone, fresco detail;
Lower Church of San Francesco, Assisi

The Unveiled Magdalene

According to the Byzantine tradition, after her alleged meeting with Tiberius Caesar, Mary Magdalene left Rome for Ephesus. She retired to this Greek city in Asia Minor, with Jesus' mother and John the Evangelist, where she died and was buried. In 886, Emperor Leo the Wise moved her relics to Constantinople. This tradition is so ancient, that in the sixth century the historian Gregory of Tours had referred to it. With regard to the female evangelical characters, in 951 Pope Gregory I identified Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and with Luke's sinful woman. She was also associated with the adulteress Jesus had saved from public stoning, in John's Gospel. Only in the 16th century, first the scholar Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples will try to critically explain all such a confusion.

Meanwhile in Western Europe, during the Middle Ages, a syncretic version of her biography begins to form and spread, from the *Life of St. Mary Magdalene and of her Sister St. Martha* by Rabanus Maurus to the hagiographic *Golden Legend* by Jacopo da Varagine. In part at least, this is a literary contamination with the story of another venerated saint of the past: Mary of Egypt, a repented harlot from Alexandria, who had lived the rest of her

lifetime as a hermit in the Palestine desert, after her religious conversion to Christianity; her biography had been written by Sophronius patriarch of Jerusalem, in 634-38.

The legend narrates that Lazarus and his sisters Martha and the Magdalene, all Gospel's characters, sailed from Palestine to the south of France. A popular variant wants they were the "Three Marys" – Mary of Cleopas, Mary the mother of James and Mary Magdalene. Thirty years she would have spent in the wilderness, within a grotto of the Provence, to expiate her sins (cf. the seven devils expelled from her by Jesus, in the evangelic account), to mourn Christ's death in spite of his resurrection, to meditate about the biblical *Vanity of vanities, all is vanity*: that is, emptiness of the things of this world.



The dark trouble of a mystic, longing for the light of a redemptive ecstasy and of a superior wisdom, replaces the deep red passion of the pristine character. Paradoxically, this Magdalene is an unveiled one. Her fluent hair becomes her veil or cloak. An early reflection of such an extraordinary transformation may be watched in the painting of Giotto di Bondone, the greatest Florentine artist between the 13th and the 14th century.

In the frescos of the Magdalene Chapel, inside the Lower Basilica of San Francesco at Assisi, actually she seems emerging from her cave to a new life, like out of a stone egg (*Scenes from the Life of Mary Magdalene*; ca. 1320). And in a polyptic inside the old Church of Santa Reparata at Florence, in 1315, Giotto with his assistants had proposed her in a strange ascetic guise, that is completely covered by her hair itself.

As it is foreseeable, that is also what opens the way to later representations, where female nudity gets more visible and appears more profane, contrasting with a new

identifying detail. More and more often this is a skull, the most appropriate and gloomy symbol for the *Vanitas*. Not seldom, the cranium is now accompanied by a book, we have already noticed in a picture by Antonio Veneziano. What does mean this Magdalene is a literate and learned woman, nay a thoughtful one, when most women and generally people were illiterate. A skull, a book, a scourge and a jar, are all found together in a marble bas-relief, at the Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas of Madrid (16th century).



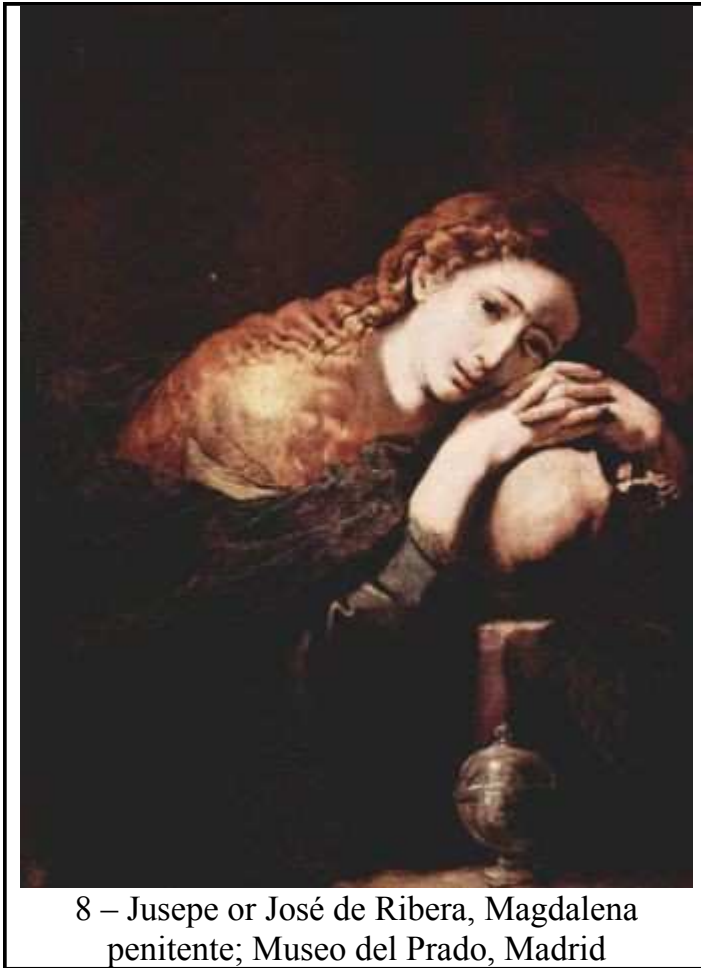
7 – Marble bas-relief, Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas, Madrid

Otherwise, about in the same period, the transition from a hair-clothed figure to a sensuous or idealized nude may be well observed by confronting two wooden statues: the former by the Florentine Donatello (Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence; 1454-55), the latter attributed to the German Gregor Erhart (Musée du Louvre, Paris; ca. 1500).

The contrast is not only in dressing. The former is a precociously old Magdalene, at an advanced stage of her penitence. The latter is a young one, at the acme of her beauty. All the melancholy is concentrated in the expression of her nice face. It is, also, a transition from the Gothic to the Renaissance artistic style. Yet a full modern realization is achieved by the Baroque art. Especially in the 17th century, the penitent Magdalene grows a dramatic, almost obsessive, sometimes even morbid subject.

At that epoch, the Italian art centre was no longer Siena or Florence; rather, Rome or Naples. In the figurative field, the Caravaggism extends its influence from Italy to Spain or France and to the Flemish or Dutch area. It balances between formal and intimate realism, mostly subtracting shapes and lights from a dark background representing the unconscious

depths of the soul, as well as a golden one had symbolized the sacred dimension in the Byzantine painting.



8 – Jusepe or José de Ribera, Magdalena penitente; Museo del Prado, Madrid

A repentant Magdalene is one of the favourite subjects of the Spanish Jusepe de Ribera. In particular, we wish to compare his oil today in the Museo del Prado at Madrid (ca. 1638-40) with an analogous canvas by the Dutch Johan P. Moreelse (Museo de Bellas Artes de Cañ, Spain) and with a contemporary one by the so identified “Maestro della Maddalena di Capodimonte” (Bernardo Cavallino? Museo di Capodimonte, Naples), or with *The Repentant Magdalene* by the Flemish Nicolas Régnier (Detroit Institute of Arts), or else with a *Magdalena penitente* ascribed to Trophime Bigot in the Museo del Prado at Madrid.

In all these impressive cases, the still young woman puts both hands on a skull, or literally is hugging it. The contact with this object results so close and intense, as to overcome any conventional symbolism. What she is contemplating seems to be the mystery of death itself. In the work by Moreelse (in more paintings, he was a philosophical artist), a book is open on the skull, as if she was searching for an explanation of her tragic destiny in the holy texts, which should work as a barrier against the nothingness below.

All of a sudden, a supernatural light distracts her from reading. In a religious way, we may suppose, that is the illumination of a transcendental grace. Without its help, even the Bible remains only an important book. As to the skull, we may also hazard an analogical interpretation. It stands for our selfish ego. Metaphorically, it must die, for our higher self – paradoxically an unselfish, and wider one – could break its egg and emerge from it.



9 – Johan Moreelse, Magdalena penitente;
Museo de Bellas Artes de Cañ, Spain

Double flames and Subtle Smiles

Indeed, the skull is a shared element most likely inherited from the iconography of Saint Mary of Egypt (cf. the paintings of *Maria Aegyptiaca* by Jusepe de Ribera, in the Museo Civico Gaetano Filangeri, Naples, and at the Musée Fabre, Montpellier; this aged Mary is more akin to Donatello's Magdalene than to the seductive ones by other masters).

Nevertheless, if compared with Mary of Egypt, the Magdalene has one resource more than the Scriptures and her hope in a providential grace. She keeps the precious memory of her direct frequenting the Christ and listening to his words. Reliably, this is the allegoric sense of the alabaster jar. That one pictured by the Florentine Francesco Furini (1603-1646), now at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, has been one of the favourite paintings of Sigmund Freud. It belongs to a series of Magdalenes portrayed by several authors, while disclosing such a jar. Yet in this case it is already open, exhaling all its nostalgia scent.

In fact, that persistent scent is strictly associated with Jesus' memento. Even inside the vanity, evidently there may be something, which is not vain at all. Although melancholic as well, this type of nostalgic Magdalene results more touching than any one depicted else, with an exception as *Mary Magdalene as Melancholy* by Artemisia Gentileschi in the Cathedral of Seville. Other times, the *Vanity of vanities* can be also represented by means of a smoking flame, which is burning, purifying and consuming any form of existence. In a sermon about the penitent Magdalene by the Florentine friar Aldobrandinus de Cavalcantibus (1217-79; *Sermones festivi*, part 2 no. 53), instead it was a signal of *quod fit per ignem compunctionis*, of "what happens thanks to the fire of compunction".

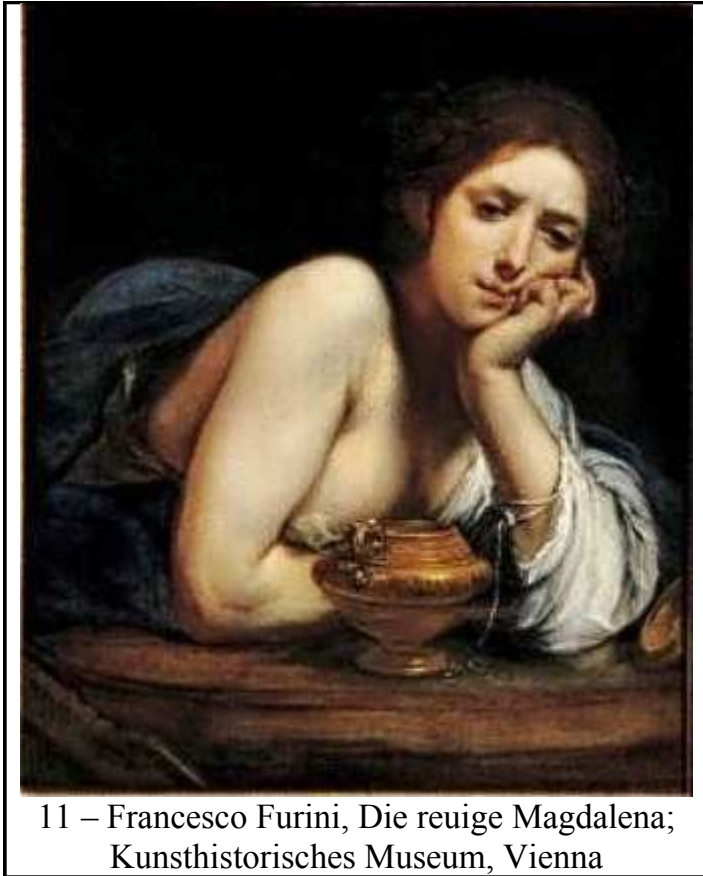


10 – Maestro della Maddalena di Capodimonte,
Maddalena penitente; Museo di Capodimonte, Naples

Whereas the skull is a negative image, a simple reminder of bodily mortality, the flame is rather a positive one, since evoking a metaphysical luminous, surviving being. This is the case of the French Georges de la Tour (1593-1652). He painted some variations on the theme. In these scenes, the technique of the Caravaggian chiaroscuro becomes a nocturnal setting virtuosity. They form like a varying angle shot sequence, on the same scene. Mostly we cannot see Magdalene's face, as if she prefers to conceal her mien and identity, and so that our attention is diverted and concentrated elsewhere.

We have five of such pictures, at least: in the Musée du Louvre, Paris; at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; at the National Gallery of Art, Washington; a *Magdalene with Crucifix*, copy of a lost original currently in a private collection. Various objects enter or disappear from the setting room: a mirror, a skull, few books, a scourge, a crucifix; strangely, never a jar. They may change disposition, perspective or mutual association. Yet the lamp remains the true focus of the view. What happens also when it is doubled by the reflection into the mirror, occulted by the skull or even removed out of the frame.

In two of those pictures, very alike, a different detail is disconcerting. The seated long haired woman looks pregnant. Indeed this is not an unique in the history of painting, but rarely so evidenced (cf. suspicious precedents as Lippo Memmi: *Sainte Marie Madeleine*, Petit Palais, Avignon; and Hugo van der Goes: *Sts. Margaret and Mary Magdalene with Maria Portinari*, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence). There are plausible explanations about. For instance, this Magdalene has become a generic character allusive to an unlucky female situation, like in the then popular concept – and, sometimes, a bias – of “being a Magdalen”. The Caravaggesque art was also an early way to mind about social reality around. Paradoxically, in this case such a new attention could be compatible with the moral cliché of the repented sinner and “fallen woman”, worthy of pity and needing help.

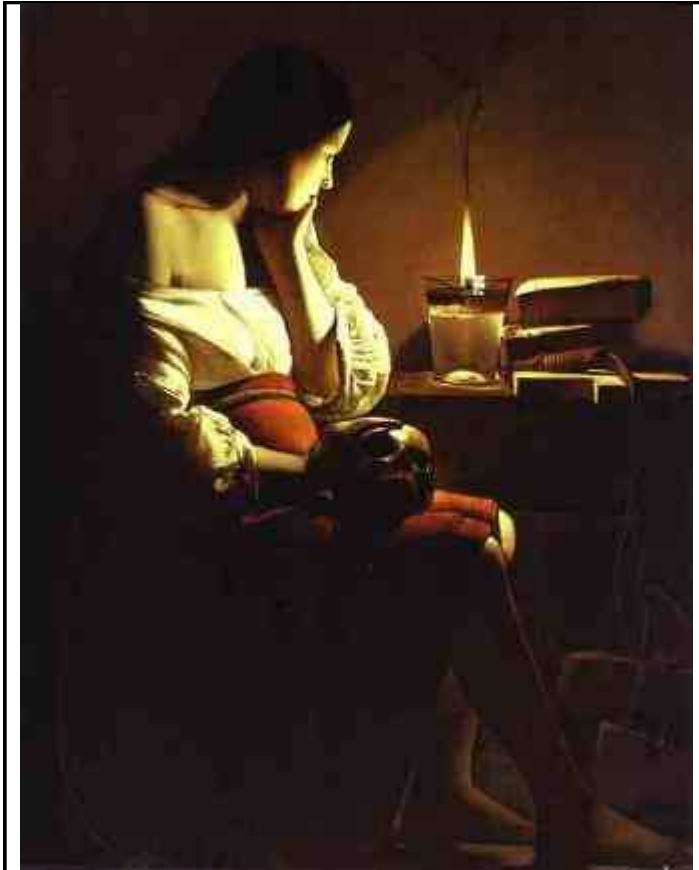


11 – Francesco Furini, Die reuige Magdalena;
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

A scene similar to those depicted by De La Tour is illuminated by the flame of an oil lamp in the artwork of another author, who has been formerly identified as one Candlelight Master, later as the French Trophime Bigot (1579-1650). Nowadays in the Galleria di Palazzo Barberini at Rome, the painting has been titled *Allegory of Vanity*. In the dark, a young woman is pointing at a skull with a hand; the other is put on a table mirror.

Like in the pictures by De la Tour, no longer the looking glass reflects a fading beauty, but the lamp itself. This rests on some books. The fair lady has a turban on her head. Above all, she is subtly smiling. May a repenting Magdalene smile, and why, while indicating an emblem of death? Is she the Magdalene, or rather an allegory of the Justice, as suggested by a small balance in the foreground? Let us attempt to answer the last question first, by comparing this masterpiece with a painting by the Dutch Hendrick ter Brugghen.

In this one, titled *Melancholia or Mary Magdalene* (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; 1627-28), instead our heroine does not smile. Rather, she is a sorrowful one. She is lighted by the flame of a candle, beholding the skull in his left hand. The right one is put on her forehead and holds up her own head, as if she is terribly sad and tired at the same time.

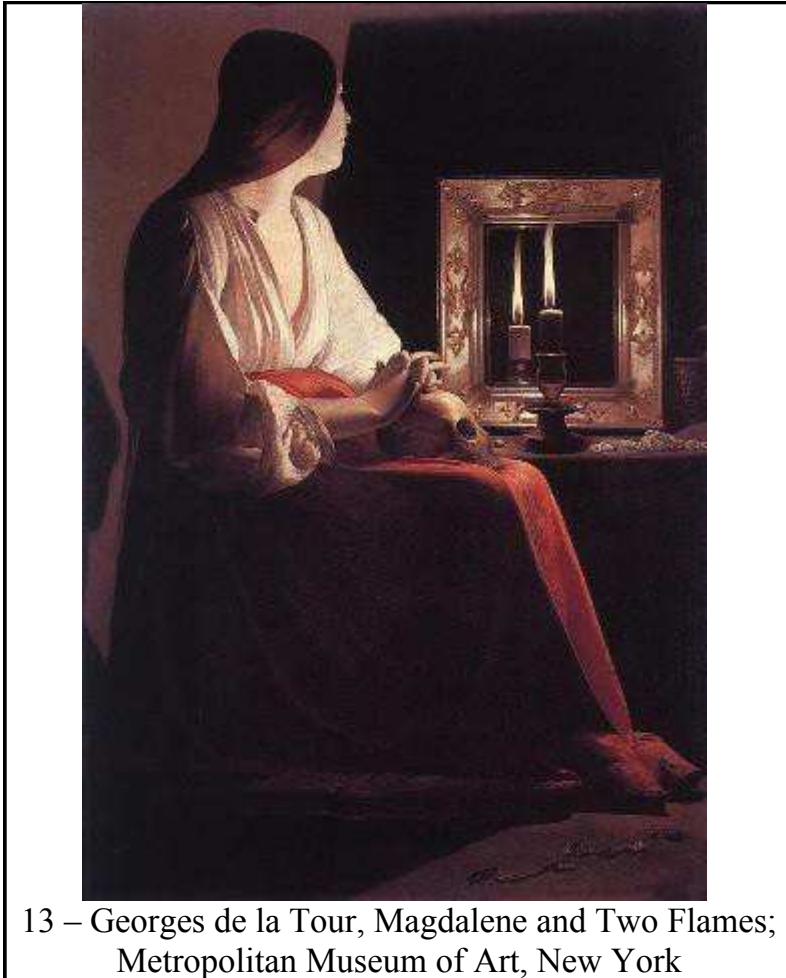


12 – Georges de la Tour, Magdalene with the Smoking Flame (or in a Flickering Light); Los Angeles County Museum of Arts

Despite a similarity of the context, such an image of the Magdalene is apparently the opposite, with regard to that pictured by the Candlelight Master and attributed to Trophime Bigot. Nonetheless, they share an interesting detail. Both of them have a turban on the head. This headgear is nearly identical, in its shape as well as in the fabric design. That is just only a clue. Yet, if we add the analogies with the pictures by De la Tour, with good probabilities the woman in the *Allegory of Vanity* is the Magdalene. From this contrasting recognition, her smile grows more enigmatic. Bigot seems to have been influenced by the Jansenism. Is his Magdalene ironical on a then young modernity, proud of its just conquered rationality?

Nothing better than the *Thoughts* by the French mathematician, scientist and Jansenist thinker Blaise Pascal, can render the troubled atmosphere of such an adolescence of modernity. Implicitly referring to the discordant views elaborated by Reformists or Counter-Reformists about human nature, his thoughts no. 416-17 might well agree with the image of the double flame as depicted by De la Tour and Bigot (1660; trans. W. F. Trotter):

“The one party is brought back to the other in an endless circle, it being certain that in proportion as men possess light they discover both the greatness and the wretchedness of man. In a word, man knows that he is wretched. He is therefore wretched, because he is so; but he is really great because he knows it. This twofold nature of man is so evident that some have thought that we had two souls. A single subject seemed to them incapable of such sudden variations from unmeasured presumption to a dreadful dejection of heart”.



13 – Georges de la Tour, Magdalene and Two Flames;
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Last but not least, we may resort to a hagiographic interpretation. Even more than young and charming, the Magdalene of the Candlelight Master may be a transfigured and idealized image, after her trip through the night of nothingness (cf. the *Noche obscura*, a poem by the modern Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross) and her victory on death. What she is pointing at while smiling is only a cranium now, and nothing more. Instead, what the mirror is reflecting is the pure light of the Being.

Moreover, in the history of painting she is not the only smiling Magdalene. Let us think of an artwork by Stefano Maria Legnani (Milan, 1661-1713; today in a private collection, at Milan). There, she seems smiling to the skull held in her left hand, almost a silent interlocutor like in a similar picture by Artemisia Gentileschi. And, in a painting by the Milanese Bernardino Luini (National Gallery of Art, Washington; ca. 1525), she subtly smiles while opening her treasure jar, as if restored by one Messiah's old scent. By the way, let us read a passage of the Old Testament adaptable to the circumstance (Psalm 45:7-11):

“Your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows. Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad. Daughters of kings are among your ladies of honour. At your right hand, stands the queen in gold of Ophir. Hear, o daughter, consider and incline your ear. Forget your people and your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty”.



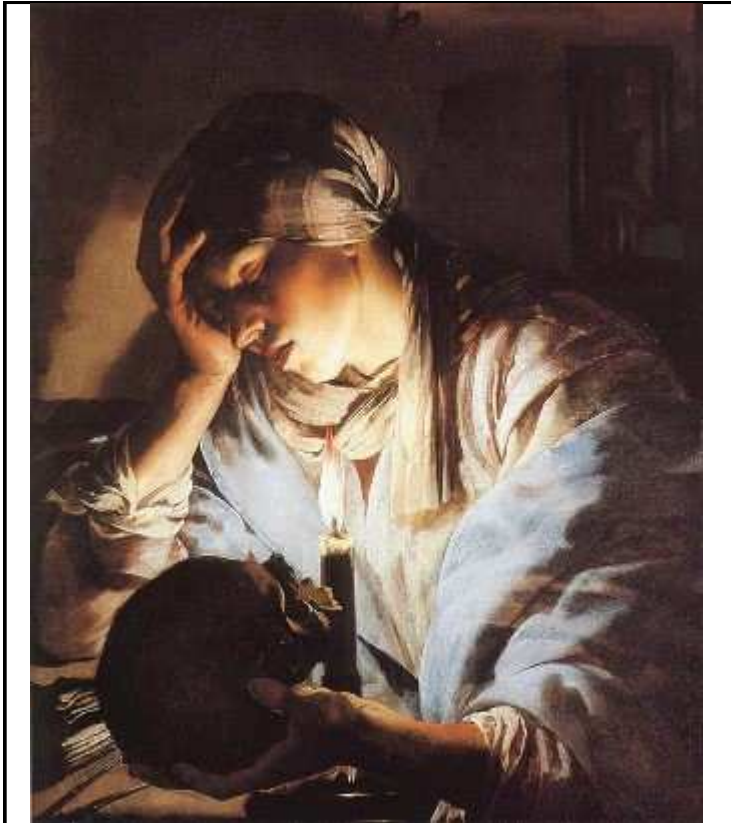
14 – Trophime Bigot (?), Allegory of Vanity;
Palazzo Barberini, Rome

The Books and the Skull

Whereas the pagan Celsus in his *True Discourse*, contested by Origen, had defined her a “half frantic woman”, already in the 3rd century Hippolytus of Rome in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* compared Gospel’s holy women as the Magdalene to Christ’s apostles. In both clashing cases, a significance of the personage begins to stand out. Even if precedent pictures of the Holy Women altogether are not lacking, one of the earliest images of a “Myrrh Bearer” holding an unguent pot emerged in 1990-92 from beneath the Basilica of S.ta Susanna in Rome. It is a fragmentary fresco of the Madonna and Child with two female Saints, dating from the 7th-8th century. Unfortunately we cannot be sure whether she is Susanna, another once mentioned evangelical character, or the Magdalene herself.

Whoever she is, a detail of this “Myrrh Bearer” is unusual. In fact, she is nimbed and crowned at once. Emblem of royalty or martyrdom, the crown is what she has in common with the Madonna, and distinguishes her from the other saint in the same picture. The attribute appears in two wall paintings more of the Magdalene. Very damaged, the former is in the Basilica dei SS. Martiri at Cimitile, near Naples; the latter, in a Crypt of the Santuario del Crocefisso at Bassiano, in Central Italy. That is a rare iconography, of a Magdalene in majesty or blessing with a hand, or else enthroned as that by Spinello Aretino here above: almost the repository of a peculiar “Sophia”. What raises a perplexity, about the actual reasons why the fresco in S.ta Susanna’s was destroyed and concealed in the Middle Ages.

In the Byzantine Orthodox tradition, the Magdalene as well as that Susan are included in the group of the myrrh bearing women. Yet the former has been considered not only a *myrrhophore*, “myrrh bearer”, but an *isapostolos* too, “equal to apostles”. That is a woman able to meditate and preach the good news of Christianity, received from a primary source as the Christ himself. No wonder, in the Middle Ages both Jesus’ mother and Mary Magdalene – presumed of Magdala – began to be represented accompanied by or absorbed in reading from a sacred book; seldom writing holy texts, as later the *Madonna of the Magnificat* by the Florentine Sandro Botticelli (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; 1481).



15 – Hendrick ter Brugghen, Melancholia or Mary Magdalene; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Magdalene's portrayals while reading the Scriptures or associated with books are so many, that it is impossible to give a list of them here. When the books are more than one and disposed too close to a skull, we can even imagine that their argument is secular. Then, they might stand for an allusion to the vain wisdom of this world, a kind of vanity more insidious than that of the jewellery or luxury gowns the Magdalene had stripped of (the most famous one, portrayed soon after divesting of her jewels, is by the Italian Michelangelo Merisi, the Caravaggio himself: today at the Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome).

However, in such cases we have the type of an intellectual Magdalene, one of the first images of female thinker. Surely thinking women are those depicted by the Flemish Rogier van der Weyden (fragment of a lost altarpiece; National Gallery, London; before 1438), or by the Florentine Piero di Cosimo (Palazzo Barberini, Rome; about 1500-10), or else by the Flemish Ambrosius Benson (National Gallery, London, and Galleria Franchetti, Venice; 1525 and ca. 1530). All these paintings precede the Protestant Reformation or are shortly subsequent to it. In Benson's case, an effect may be that his Magdalenes show some a profane appearance, just dealing with the Reformist dislike for religious iconography.

At any rate, all these Renaissance Magdalenes reflect a new feminine ideal, even though a privileged one. Their quiet reading attitude, their composed refined dressing do not denote yet any disquieting anguish – nor even show any “spontaneous” and generous neckline, indeed – of their later sisters, in the Baroque figurative arts. But the jar in the foreground recalls its content of a higher wisdom. Furthermore, a wedding band on the ring finger of the left hand of Benson's Magdalene presumably reminds her fidelity to Christ's memory. In fact that is the same custom, which the nuns are used to. In one painting at least,

by the Florentine Michele Tosini (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; ca. 1570), she holds a book in the right and a jar in the left hand, almost balancing two kinds of wisdom at once.



16 – Stefano M. Legnani, La Maddalena;
Private Collection, Milan

If the figure of a reading Magdalene is frequent, that of a writing one is an exception, particularly limited to an anonymous Flemish artist: the so called Master of the Female Half Lengths, active in Antwerp from 1500 to 1550. Specific paintings ascribed to him have been titled *Saint Mary Magdalene Writing* or *St. Mary Magdalene at her writing desk*, currently housed at the Galerie de Jonckheere in Paris or in the Czartoryski Museum at Cracow. Another one alike, *Portrait of a Lady as the Magdalene*, is found in a private collection. What is she writing, that is left to the imagination of spectators. Certainly, the painter could not be informed of the far later discoveries of apocrypha, centred on the Magdalene herself.

Despite the usual presence of an identifying jar in those pictures, their aristocratic look is so contemporary with the painter, that actually they seem rather portraits of ladies “as the Magdalene”. Twice, there is a wall clock too. Yet it is true that the same can be said of other painted Magdalenes of those times. Fine oils of this type are by Jean Gossaert, or attributed to the Giampietrino, almost a specialist on the subject. Obviously, such ladies could not be represented as the Virgin Mary, but the Magdalene was considered the next degree of female sanctity. Anyhow, they contributed to draw the sketch of a well read or learned woman, which will exert unexpected influences in the history of iconography itself.

For example, let us scan the 20th century photography, when it occurs to represent intellectual women. In 1926, the German Jewish philosopher Edith Stein, later Sancta Benedicta de Cruce, is half length portrayed, holding a book in her hands. Although in a

more modest way, in the black and white photo posture and expression of the young studious woman keep something of the Renaissance reading Magdalenes. We may suppose, this is not completely a coincidence. A wrist watch reminds us the changed epoch. Yet we can remember the detail of a sand glass – or a pendulum clock – in a couple of penitent Magdalene paintings at least, as a warning signal of the inevitable lapsing of time.



17 – Bernardino Luini, Mary Magdalene;
National Gallery of Art, Washington

In the early second half of the century, we have an artistic photograph of the French feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir. Like a Magdalene by the Master of the Female Half Lengths, she is sitting at her writing desk, even if smoking a cigarette at once. On the table, a set for a cup of coffee or tea resembles an old pictorial “still life”, the profane remainder of Magdalene’s pottery. Whereas Edith is looking upwards, rather mature Simone’s gaze is an oblique one. The two discordant pictures well illustrate an hesitating evolution in the perception of a saint or a thinking woman, both of which the Magdalene presumably was.

A further approach to our topic might be examining how poets and writers, especially modern ones, perceived Magdalene’s figure. Her reflective inclination, joined with her passion and nostalgia for the embodied Love, could not leave them insensitive, as well as they worked as a source of inspiration to innumerable artists of the past. Long before the bestselling North-American novelist Dan Brown in the *Da Vinci Code*, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke feigns her mother to Jesus’ child in a 1898 poem, *Visions of Christ*.

In the 20th century the Russian Boris Pasternak and Marina Tsvétaïeva (also written as Cvetaeva), the Austrian Georg Trakl and the French Marguerite Yourcenar or the North-American Hilda Doolittle, devote their verse or prose to the Magdalene. She is also an important character in the novels *The Last Temptation of Christ* by the Greek Nikos

Kazantzakis, and *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* by the Portuguese José Saramago. A criticism about would be a long and difficult task. We just like to focus on *Jesus, the Son of Man* by the Lebanese Kahlil Gibran (Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān, 1928), in particular on the thoughtful chapter *Mary Magdalen Thirty Years later*.



18 – Piero di Cosimo, Portrait of a Woman as Mary Magdalene; Palazzo Barberini, Rome

There, the Magdalene herself is imagined speaking to us, soon after leaving her dark hermitage. According to the main legend, thirty years she had spent in that cave, during her musing penance. So many, we may well imagine, to expiate mankind's faults far more than her own sins. Now it is the moment when she explains the divine essence of her attained illumination, as well as the human reasons of her confirmed faith. A conclusion is that no quest for the Absolute Other can leave out of consideration any relative one, what evidently deals with the Christian commandment to love your neighbour as yourself. In other words, no reduction of our ego can really accede to a higher self, if this is not a wider one too:

“Once again I say that with death Jesus conquered death, and rose from the grave a spirit and a power. And He walked in our solitude and visited the gardens of our passion. He lies not there in that cleft rock behind the stone. We who love Him beheld Him with these our eyes which He made to see; and we touched Him with these our hands which He taught to reach forth. I know you who believe not in Him. I was one of you, and you are many; but your number shall be diminished. Must you break your harp and your lyre to find the music therein? Or must you fell a tree ere you can believe it bears fruit? You hate Jesus because someone from the North Country said He was the Son of God. But you hate one another because each of you deems himself too great to be the brother of the next man”.

Opening the Alabaster Jar

Just only a parenthesis, regarding a possible psychoanalytic interpretation of Magdalene's iconography. Its recurrence in the history of art exceeds any strict religious meaning, assuming the value of an archetype of the collective unconscious. Its vitality is confirmed by the circumstance, that almost never it ran the risk to become a stereotype. On the contrary, variations on the theme were well adapted to different times and places.



19 – Master of the Female Half Lengths, St. Mary Magdalene Writing; Galerie de Jonckheere, Paris

Even pure philosophers as the German Friedrich Hegel and, after him, the French Jacques Derrida, were fascinated by Magdalene's emblematic character. Derrida's opinion argued in his treatise *Glas* (1974), that she represents above all the life of nature dying in order to give birth to a spiritual one, frankly sounds a bit too idealistic and reductive at once. Renowned Renaissance or Baroque landscapists as the Flemish Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the French Claude Lorrain and the Italian Annibale Carracci, fully immersed their *Magdalena poenitens* into the nature, and this is not always or simply a wild one to be tamed.

If we visit the personal collection of monochrome photographs in the Freud Museum at London, among other artwork reproductions will discover *Die reuige Magdalena*, a sensual and pensive Magdalene by Francesco Furini, which then could be admired in the Kaiserlichen Gemäldegalerie at Vienna. She is portrayed while opening her alabaster jar. Nay, in this case it is already open. What might have been Sigmund Freud's concern about?

Likely, a specialist scholar would find interesting connections between that pictorial image and his 1917 essay *Mourning and Melancholy*. In the meantime, we can hazard to suggest that the open jar may stand for the unconscious itself, as well as other details in Magdalene's traditional representations may have a psychological relevance. First the skull appears a symbol of a removed self or, even better, of a deep self we could wish to sublimate and convert into a wider and nicer dimension. Not by chance, it is often accompanied by a book, which is a quite obvious metaphor of the conscience.



Another Freudian theme is a jarring mixture of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, eroticism and feeling of death, especially sensible in the 17th century Penitent Magdalenes: even by a young paintress as the Bolognese Elisabetta Sirani (*Magdalene in the Desert*; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Besançon). By other authors, such a feeling grows a sense of the macabre. Their murkiness is not only pictorial. Rather, it is the expression of unconfessed soul's tendencies. Then, we can well speak of "tenebrism", the dark side of Baroque art. A Caravaggist example is the Milanese Francesco Cairo (see his *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* lately at the Peyton Wright Gallery, Santa Fe; ca. 1650: indeed, a dissacrating picture).

As to the twin flames conceived by De la Tour or Bigot, easily they seem to work as an allegory of the unconscious and the conscience. Then the looking glass, which produces such a mirroring, comes to be the medium of a desirable translation from the unconscious to conscience, might it represent a mystical ascetics or the psychoanalysis itself. Of course, there is no coincidence between mysticism and depth psychology. They are different ways to reflect and approximate an intimate reality, which is supposed to be either transcendent or immanent. Still in the 17th century, soul and psyche were regarded as the same thing. Yet already the Magdalene could begin to be considered a mediator, between the two ideas: let us remember that mysterious pair of scales, in the *Allegory of Vanity* here above.

Notoriously, some as Carl Gustav Jung have deemed the former not seldom a valid antecedent of the latter. Both conceptions deal with the irrational, trying to draw it into the light of a religious faith or of the laic reason. We rely on the assumption that the history of

culture is made of paradoxes too. Opposite and complementary with the virginal Madonna, as a legendary repentant whose the Magdalene herself was a paradox. Her redeemable abjection made her a character, able to rival the heroines of the Greek tragedy. Sometimes, such a dynamic ambiguity was better fruitful in the iconography than in the exegesis.



21 – Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86)

The Colour of Charity

In 1516, the French priest François du Molin de Rochefort published a *Vie de la Magdalène*, illuminated by the Flemish Godefroy le Batave (Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris; ms. fr. 24.955). Got aware of some contradictions with the evangelic narration, Du Moulin called for help the humanist Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples. In 1517 and 1519, he issued *De Maria Magdalena* and *De tribus et unica Magdalena disceptatio secunda*. The aim was to prove that Mary, sister of Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, and the sinful woman anointing Christ's feet in Luke's Gospel, were distinct persons. This conclusion was refuted by the French Noël Bédier and Marc de Grandval, by the English John Fisher, by the Florentine Giovanni Maria Tolosani. In 1521, it was condemned by the Sorbonne University too.

The criticism by Jacques Lefèvre was also a reaction to the risk that the medieval veneration for the Magdalene could turn into a worship, what was in concordance with the Protestant aversion to the cult of saints. Indeed, the only important Reformist who approved of his rationalization was John Calvin. A long time had to pass, before it could be understood that the medieval veneration had an antecedent in a more ancient one, such as might have been developed in some Gnostic milieus of the early Christian communities. In 1955, it was fully published a papyrus codex acquired by a German scholar in 1896 at

Cairo, the so called *Papyrus Berolinensis 8502*. It contains a Coptic version of few Gnostic texts: the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* and the *Gospel of Mary*.

That is an alleged and fragmentary Gospel, according to Mary Magdalene in the sense that she is one of the main characters, though named only as Mary. Another is the risen Saviour. They are surrounded by the Apostles. When Jesus takes his farewell and disappears, after introducing the doctrine of an inner self, then the Magdalene becomes the central personage. She starts to preach and narrates a vision of her, about the soul. St. Andrew and Simon Peter object, that is only an opinion of Mary; there is no reason that the Christ has imparted such a secret to a woman, not to his apostles. Nevertheless, at last there is a reconciliation. They have to admit that the Master had loved her more than any other.



The simple scene is dramatic and impressive. Really it looks like the anonymous author intends to throw a pebble over the centuries, into the still water of our spirituality. And the vision reported by the Magdalene is a poetical allegory, but does not own neither the realism, nor the force of the evangelical parables. Reliably it expresses, as Andrew insinuates, a “different opinion”, even if that may be a complementary one. In one sense, the contesting brothers were not completely wrong. Is this a Gnostic apologue, or confronting and mediating different positions?

Polemizing against a sectarian Gnosticism, the Church Father Clement of Alexandria wrote that a true Gnostic is the real Christian. However, the whole tale can help to make clearer the nature of some attributes, which will appear in Magdalene’s iconography much later. For instance the egg and the skull, symbols of life or death, are not so antithetic as may look at first glance. They well represent the soul and the self. The soul, or an inner self, needs to break our outer self, to be born to a new life.

A painting by the British artist and poet Dante G. Rossetti portrays a Pre-Raphaelite styled, red haired Magdalene (Delaware Art Museum, 1877). In a hand, she shows an odd spherical object. It keeps some roundness of an egg, but is no longer red. That is white, actually seeming to be a synthesis between the shapes of an egg and a skull. It evokes the myrrh egg of the legend of the Phoenix, a symbol of immortality for early Christians too.



23 – Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys,
Mary Magdalene; Delaware Art Museum

The sensitivity of artists foreran philological discoveries and spiritual fashions. Rossetti painted also the Magdalene with a jar or a chalice, proposed as the fabulous Holy Grail, and dedicated a sonnet to her. Yet the fairest is by Frederick Sandys (Delaware Art Museum; ca. 1860). More than medieval models, these new Magdalenes recall some an esoteric approach. If set inside a Gnostic view, the alabaster jar may be guessed as the symbolic vessel of a secret wisdom. First Clemens of Alexandria contested, Gnostic or esoteric it might be called, a privileged doctrine is not consistent with universal fraternity.

Thus, here we wonder what the historical Gnosis was especially wanting in, in order to grow a true Christian one as in the wish of the ancient Doctor of the Church. A hint can be found in the above quoted sermon by the Franciscan medieval preacher Aldobrandinus de Cavalcantibus, where interpreting the colour then associated with the Magdalene. Evidently, it is not simply a matter of passion: *color rubeus, signum caritatis, [...] quoniam dilexit multum* (“the red means charity, since she loved much”).

White Flowers and Butterflies

After our patient review of so many different Magdalenes through centuries, now we are ready to enjoy a “truer” set of her images, one of the most extraordinary in the history of

art. That was pictured by a genius in the field of sacred painting, such as Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. Better than others, he allows us to choose among a Magdalene of devotion, of history, of literature or art. His Magdalenes no longer need to be accompanied by strict recognition symbols, simply because they “are” the Magdalene in herself. At most, a context of the represented scenes drives us to restore her to a narrative development.

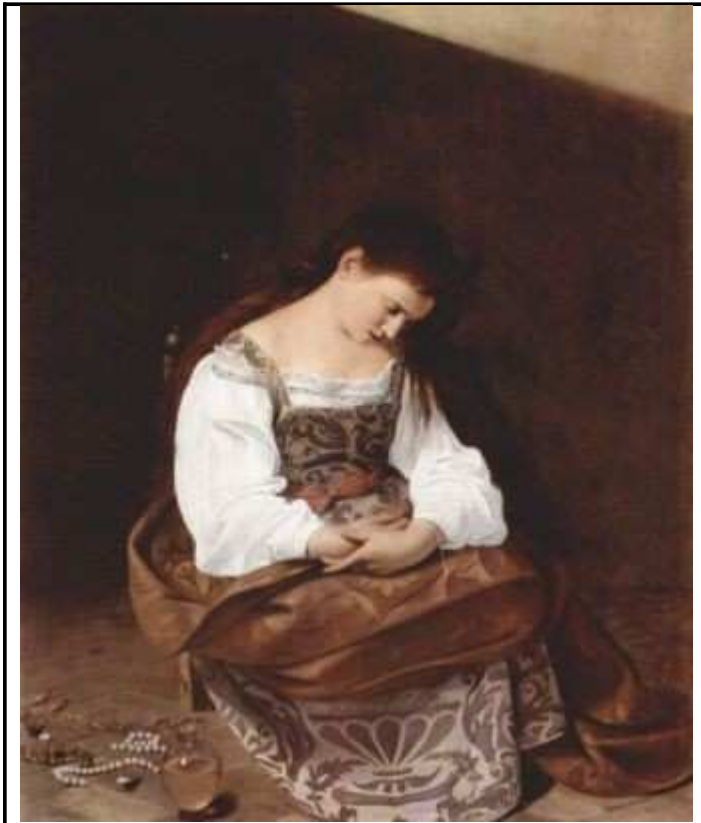


24 – Caravaggio, *The Conversion of the Magdalene*; Institute of Arts, Detroit

That is a kind of transcendental realism. Such an apparent tautological paradox is rooted inside the ineffable depths of aesthetics, but also in artist’s ability to exceed and overcome his own times, while intensely living and rendering them. His masterpiece *The Conversion of the Magdalene* (Institute of Arts, Detroit; ca. 1598) looks contemporary with the author in every detail, but set here and now in its essence. Otherwise frequent in the 16th and 17th centuries, the pictorial theme depends upon an identification of the Magdalene as Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus (Luke 10:38-42, and John 12:1-11).

The scene is at their home. Presumably, the virtuous Martha herself has introduced her fair sister to Jesus’ presence and message. Now, while the former is preparing a meal for the guest, the latter listens to him. Martha complains that Mary does not cooperate with her. The Christ replies, once for ever she has made the right choice. That is the very moment, when this Mary begins to convert into the Magdalene. Like Bernardino Luini before him, in a homonymous picture today at the San Diego Museum of Art, the Caravaggio imagines a confidential talk between the sisters, occurred before or after the incident.

A looking glass on a toilet table mirrors the scene, as if still reflecting an old Mary’s image, which is going to fade out and be left behind. Any searcher for an improbable historical one will agree, this is the Magdalene who matters. She holds a small white flower in his hands. One may wonder why a pretty but banal flower. Painter’s inventiveness goes as far as to recreate the conventional symbolism. That might well be a premonition of Magdalene’s meeting with the risen Christ, whom at first she will mistake for a gardener: the subject of so many paintings, titled *Noli me tangere* (cf. John’s Gospel, 20:11-18). At the same time a sort of cryptic, alchemical transition, from red to white has begun.



25 – Caravaggio, *Penitent Mary Magdalene*;
Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome

We meet with her again in the synthetic composition *The Entombment of Christ* (and “Deposition”, Pinacoteca Vaticana; 1602-03), while she grievously weeps for Jesus’ death. And in the *Penitent Mary Magdalene* at the Galleria Doria Pamphilj (Rome; 1596-97), she is sitting in the dark, abandoned on a low chair. Some jewels and a luminous glass bottle of unguent are spread on the floor, near her. No loneliness had been ever better portrayed. Like a *Virgin Annunciate* by the Caravaggist Bernardo Cavallino in the National Gallery of Victoria at Melbourne, above all she is a modern figuration of the human soul.

Either symbolic or not, so many objects recur in the traditions concerning the Magdalene, that easily painters showed their skill in depicting Still Lives integrated with the context. When this subject is a penitent Magdalene, mostly those details are of the so called “Vanity” pictorial genre. In the *The Conversion of the Magdalene* too, we have a Still Life of toilet accessories. Yet in the *Penitent Mary Magdalene*, the jewels of which she has just divested, particularly a broken pearl necklace, form a small Vanity composition, a picture inside the picture better expressive than not few skulls in other Repentant Magdalenes.

The fourth image is a detail of *The Death of the Virgin* (Musée du Louvre, Paris; 1605-06). Even more than in *The Entombment*, Magdalene’s face is hidden, for her head is bent down while weeping. In the rear, the lying body without life of Jesus’ mother is terribly close to the other Mary, seated in the foreground. A hand of the Madonna is hanging down, as if she has just left Magdalene’s hand. The whole was so striking, as to give rise to a scandal. The work was rejected by the buyers, since the Caravaggio was said to have resorted to the model of a drowned prostitute. A more credible motive is that such a depiction was contrasting with the Catholic belief in an Assumption of the Virgin Mary.



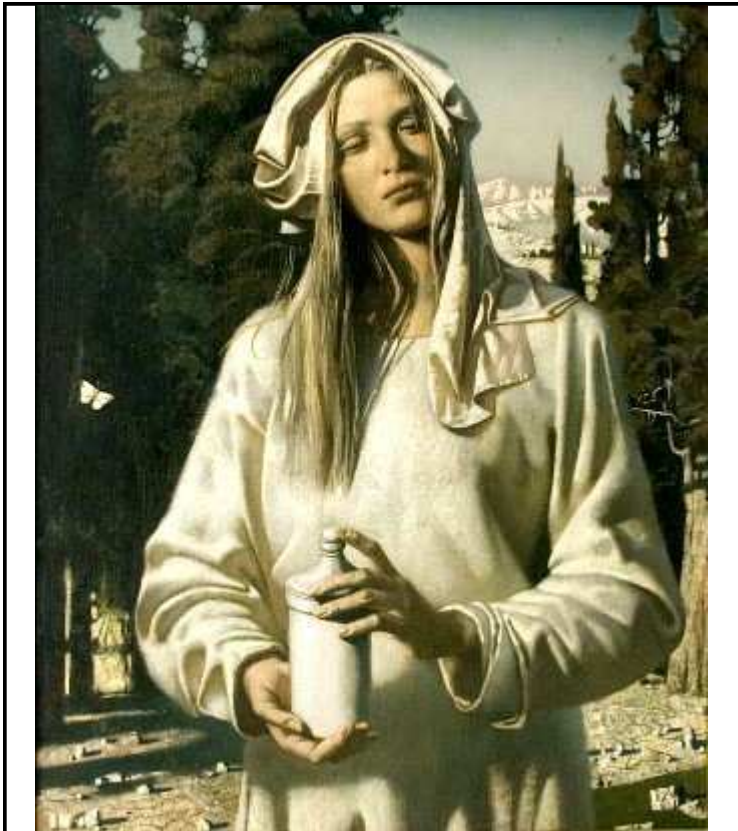
26 – Caravaggio (?), *Mary Magdalen in Ecstasy*; Collection Croce, Rome

The last image is *Mary Magdalen in Ecstasy* (1606). There, her eyes are half open as if contemplating a freeing vision. Her interlocked hands still betray a feeling of pain. Along with her loose hair, the red cloak returns to be a marked element in the picture. Currently in a private collection at Rome, it is not the only copy of a likely lost original. Despite this, through that we may realize how and why the pristine painting worked as a model to emulate, in the Baroque art. No beatific angels appear, in the specific case. In the Caravaggio, we cannot yet perceive any rhetoric or even “tenebrism” often associated with the Baroque style. Rather, a kind of empathy between artist and artwork, between him and the characters he portrays. We have to note, peculiarly the Magdalene is not an exception.

At first, Caravaggio’s details may look not strictly symbolic. Indeed, they are like predisposed to grow in such a way, according to times and circumstances. A kind of virtual symbolism, open to the acquisition of meaningful senses. For instance, the image of the broken thread of pearls will be resumed in *Mary Magdalene Removing her Jewelry* by Alonso del Arco, a 17th century deaf and dumb Spanish artist (Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias, Oviedo). An allusion to the existence of the Magdalene herself is quite obvious, and a reflection of stormy vicissitudes in the life of the Italian author is most probable.

More generally, such a breaking can be interpreted as a crisis of our existences or of history itself, then landing to Modernity from the Middle Ages. It is also true, when the pearls are untied, they may be recomposed into a new jewel. Thus we like to conclude this survey with a good wish, found in a Postmodern painting. This is *Resurrection Morning: Maria Magdalena*, by the Russian Julia Bekhova (Private Collection, 1997). The detail is a white butterfly, an ancient allegory of the soul, flattering about a “Myrrh Bearer” clad in

white with dark cypresses in the background. What might be rather expected in a Still Life. Yet it is what makes that not so still, as to be not susceptible of becoming a full one again.



27 – Julia Bekhova, Resurrection Morning: Maria Magdalina; Private Collection, Saint Petersburg (?)

Copyright pinoblasone@yahoo.com 2009

Articles by the same author on like subjects, at the Websites below:

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/2531940/Space-and-Time-of-the-Annunciation>;

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/2681466/The-Cat-and-the-Angel-of-the-Annunciation>;

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/2913375/The-Hands-of-Mary-States-of-Mind-in-the-Annunciate>;

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/2988387/Hail-Mary-Nazarene-and-PreRaphaelite-Annunciations>;

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/3817130/Women-and-Angels-Female-Annunciations>;

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/4597267/Byzantine-Annunciations-An-Iconography-of-Iconography>;

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/5837944/Marian-Icons-in-Rome-and-Italy>;

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/8650381/The-Flight-into-Egypt-A-Transcontinental-Trip>;

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/9568413/A-Long-Way-to-Emmaus-Almost-a-Samaritan-Story>;

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/11517241/The-Bodily-Christ>.