



Mary Magdalene



*Chief Witness,
Sinner, Feminist*

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Sinner, Feminist*

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Foreword

Mary Magdalene is regarded as the woman who perhaps got closest to Jesus. She announced his Resurrection, which made her the apostle of the apostles. Yet she was also considered to be a sinner, a fallen woman, and at the same time a hermit and a saint. How did that all come about? Who was she? Her complex personality is one of the most intriguing in the Bible. The interpretation of the figure encountered there is problematic in itself. In Western Christendom she attracted all sorts of myths and fabrications in the centuries that followed, and they changed her personality out of all recognition. Remarkably, she never lost any of that baggage; she just gained more stories and qualities. In the centuries following the first source texts she became above all a mirror of society. It was through her that people regarded virtue and sin, as well as the role of women in society and the Church. She became a plaything of forces and opposing forces. That is what makes her such a fascinating figure. In Eastern Christendom she remained far closer to the woman who is described in the Bible. Her image as an anointer of Jesus is the same in east and west, and in both traditions she is depicted as a woman with a costly jar of ointment. It is the symbol of tenderness and dignity. But behind that constant, Mary Magdalene's is an incredible story of shape-shifting.

It is no wonder that she has perpetually been inspiring fascinating works of art. The oldest art object in this exhibition is an ivory carving from the end of the eleventh century with two biblical scenes in which she plays an important part: the Descent from the Cross and the Three Marys at the Tomb. In fact, very little is said about her in the Bible, but when she does appear it is at crucial events. She then stands close to Jesus, visited his tomb, and was the person to whom he first appeared after rising from the dead. He asked her to bring that good news to the apostles. Very recent artworks usually stress the feminist interpretation of the story, namely that despite her important role as the first witness to the Resurrection she was not believed because she was a woman. Artists like Marlene Dumas, Kiki Smith and Patricia Cronin hold her character up as a mirror in which to view our own day. There is also an interest in films that have made important contributions to shaping her contemporary image.

This book contains a wide range of views of this fascinating woman by authors from various disciplines and countries. Together they sketch a many-sided portrait of Mary Magdalene, or perhaps more accurately of the periods, societies and viewpoints from which she is seen. The exhibition and book are part of a series of projects in which Museum Catharijneconvent has been turning a spotlight on key figures of Christendom. They explore its many voices, culture and dynamic nature, which are timeless.

We are very grateful to the authors for their contributions, as well as to the members of the scholarly advisory committee for this project: Joanne Anderson, Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, Ann-Sophie Lehmann. Together with our curator Lieke Wijnia and the project group they have greatly enriched the content.

The museum is delighted that its own collection, which supplied exhibits for the show, has acquired a rich context in the form of generous loans from home and abroad. Sending artworks on their travels is no sinecure in this age of corona. We are indebted to Karin Langeveld and Cuby Gerards of design studio Trapped in Suburbia for an exhibition design in which Mary Magdalene speaks to us so well through the works of art. Our thanks, too, to Esther de Vries for the well-matched book design.

Without the financial support of foundations and funds those efforts would have been in vain. We are grateful to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the BankGiro Loterij, and to the funds and foundations that contributed so generously to the realisation of the exhibition and publication. I would especially like to thank the Turing Foundation, Blockbusterfonds, K.F. Hein Fonds, VSB Fonds, Iona Stichting, Sormanifonds, Hendrik Mullerfonds, Professor Van Winterfonds, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Sisters of Providence (Maria Stroot Fonds), Fonds Museum Catharijneconvent and the Friends of Museum Catharijneconvent.

The result is magnificent. We see how Mary Magdalene still appeals to the imagination. How her tenacious image as a sinner also turns her into a figure embodying hope. And although we are learning more and more about her, she still remains shrouded in mystery. There is no such thing as a definitive image of Mary Magdalene, because we ourselves never stop reshaping her.

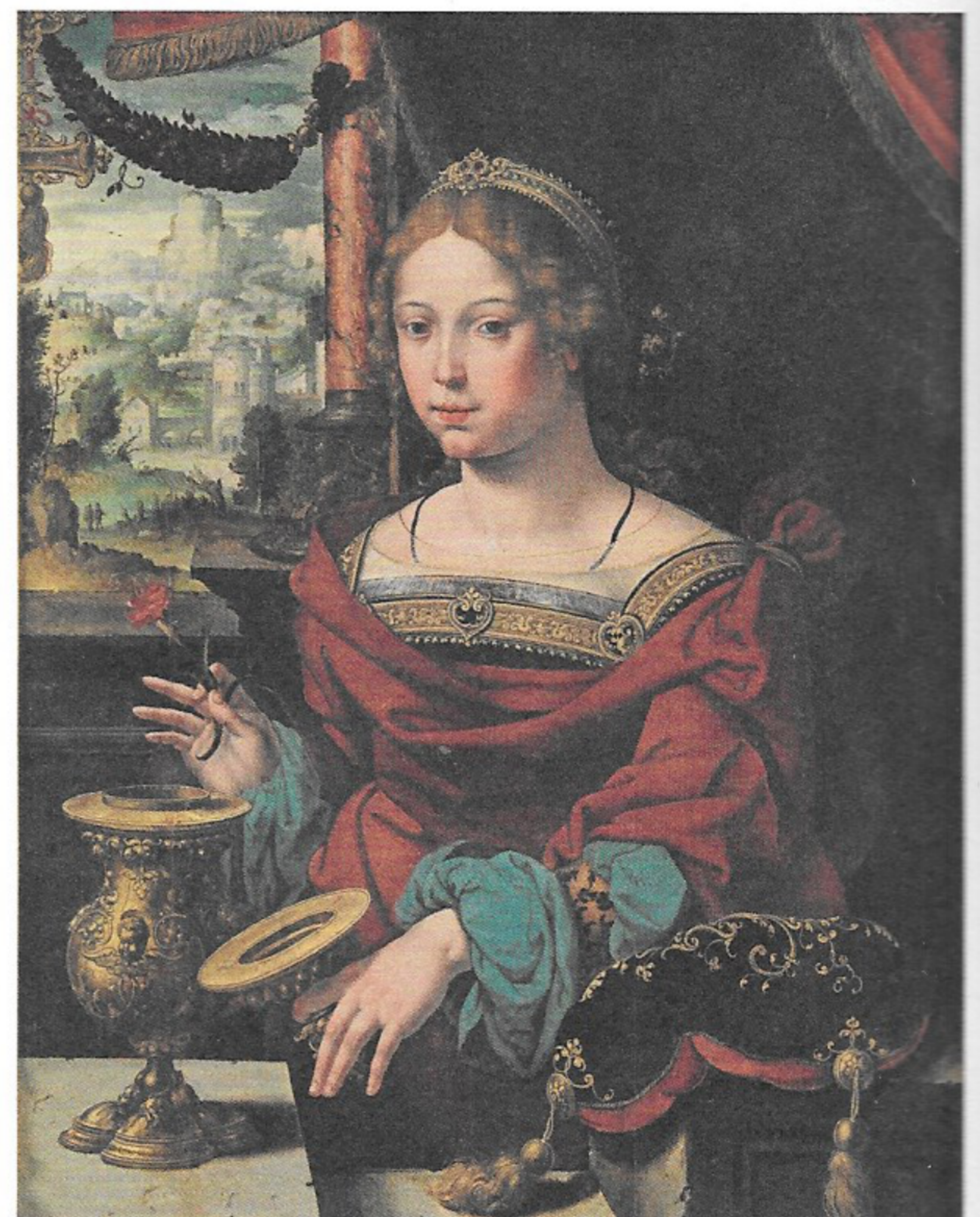
Marieke van Schijndel
Director



48 Still from the video clip *Judas*. (Directed by Lady Gaga and Laurieann Gibson, 2011).



49 Niccolò di Segna, *Mary Magdalene*, 1335-1340. (Collection mr. J.H. van Heek, 's-Heerenberg, Collectie Dhr. J.H. van Heek, Huis Bergh, 26).



Pieter Coecke van Aelst (circle of), *St Mary Magdalene*, 1532. (Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, 408).

The Magdalene: cultural icon

Lady Gaga's music video, *Judas* (2011), is a moving picture in the two senses of the word: motion and affect. It is a series of images captured on film of Mary Magdalene's conflict about her feelings for Christ and Judas. She is stuck between these moody heart-throbs who appeal to her desire for truth and purity alongside danger and glamour. It is a desire predicated on the inherent virtues and vices she identifies in herself. Like Judas, the renegade apostle who will betray Christ for thirty pieces of silver, Mary Magdalene is compromised by her worldly past as a prostitute. It is a stigma that she simply cannot shake off. As the video runs its course this central story is elevated to a discourse on loyalty and betrayal, love and hate, good and bad that leaves everyone, including us the viewers, in an ambiguous middle ground [fig. 48].

After a frenetic performance of provocative gestures and heightened emotional states that lead to a dramatic apogee, it takes a biblical flood – a catastrophic event – to sweep the Magdalene away, effectively wiping the slate clean. What we are left with are her tear-tracks and an afterlife in which the Magdalene, dressed as the bride of Christ, is stoned by a baying mob. It is a compelling twist in the Passion of Christ – namely an exchange of sacrificial victim – but also a throwing forward of her condemnation in the cultural memory.

Lady Gaga's recasting of Mary Magdalene as a conflicted, rebellious pop icon who falls victim to a hounding public places her in our own time and in a specific cultural framework – the cult of the celebrity, with its provocations and scandals (think Madonna's *Like a Prayer*, 1989). But more generally, it speaks to the Magdalene's shape-shifting profile as exemplified across the centuries by artists using diverse media. This essay takes a few works from *Mary Magdalene: the Exhibition* to reflect upon the journey of Mary Magdalene from religious to cultural icon.

Niccolò di Segna's tempera and gold panel painting of Mary Magdalene, produced in the mid-fourteenth century for the Franciscan convent of San Francesco in Pistoia, helps us to establish her status as religious icon [fig. 49]. In the small painting (only 24 x 18 cm), Mary Magdalene is marked out as a saint by her elaborately gold-tooled halo. She holds a small lidded ointment jar in her left hand, which is covered by her gold-trimmed red robe, indicating that the contents of the jar are precious. While the red robe is a product of late medieval Italian artistic practice and comes with positive rather than negative associations – red refers to the Passion and symbolised fiery love (*caritas*) – the ointment jar does have solid biblical credentials. It refers to Mary Magdalene's anointing of Christ's body after his Crucifixion, as recounted in the Gospel of Mark, where precious spices are brought to the tomb by the women. She is a myrrhophore, and her infamous hair is entirely concealed to focus attention on this role. There is no hint here, at least on the surface, of that notorious sinful past.

Instead Mary Magdalene is depicted as a half-length icon standing reverently before a heavenly golden backdrop and under a rounded arch with exposed rough wood in the upper corners (spandrel areas). These surface losses indicate that the panel once belonged to a larger image complex, namely a large altarpiece with multiple visual fields that would have served as a stunning visual backdrop to the drama of the liturgy. In this context, Mary Magdalene was one of a whole retinue of saints with significance for the Franciscan friars who would have prayed before the altar. But the ointment jar places the Magdalene right at the heart of Christian salvation, as a witness to Christ's death and Resurrection, making her a powerful yet accessible icon of devotion.

While the half-length representation of Mary Magdalene with red robe and ointment jar is shared by the workshop of the Master of 1518's panel (made before 1524-1526), the latter presents a far more complex and intimate picture [fig. 50].¹ The Magdalene has morphed from a solely religious icon into a secular woman in splendid array. Her red robe is elegantly arranged around her shoulders and hips to accentuate rather than detract from the dressed body: the tight cut of the bodice and sleeves, the opulent jewellery and extravagant headdress in lieu of a halo.² Rather than tilt her head downwards in humility, she stares outwards yet beyond any viewer. She delicately holds aloft the lid of her larger, ornate ointment vessel, which being open invites a more sensorial experience of the object, its contents and significance: an invocation of the heady aromas when anointing Christ's body in life and after death, equally to their expense.³ This is the worldly Magdalene, a woman of wealth, position and allure, one who finds synergy with Lady Gaga's modern-day portrayal. But while both painting and video perpetuate the popular casting of the saint as a woman of excess, the painting also situates this characterisation in a moralising context. She is a model of redemption within the expansive cult of saints.

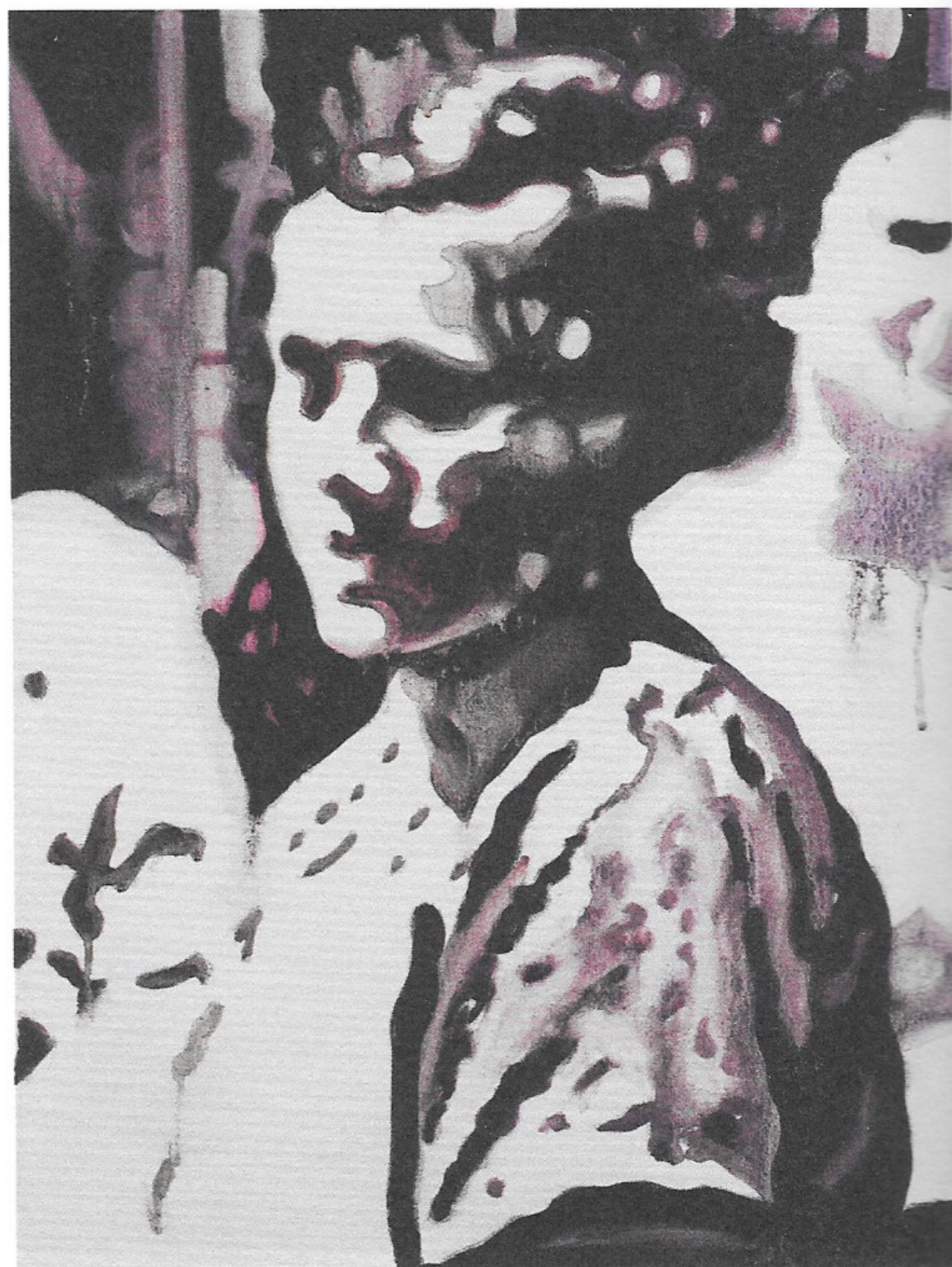
Following the apocryphal legend popularised by Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, after the Resurrection the Magdalene was exiled from the Holy Land. Her sea journey brought her to southern France where she evangelised the populace before retreating to the wilderness to live as a recluse.⁴ After death, her bodily remains were venerated as powerful relics, first in Burgundy and then in Provence, both ecclesiastical sites becoming major cult centres for pilgrims. All of this is packed into the single visual field of the painting in exquisite, accurate detail. A lavish book of hours lies open in a cloth of honour on the low stone bench, alluding to the Magdalene's wealth and education, as well as a meditation on her sexual sins in long isolation. The Renaissance arched window that boldly frames the saint opens out onto a coastal landscape. The sea is navigated by boats to and from a town, most likely Marseille, while pilgrims attempt the dangerous paths up the steep cliffs that lead to La-Sainte-Baume, where Mary Magdalene finally made her retreat. The devotee is thus encouraged to make their own mental pilgrimage within the painting by following the boats and the pilgrims (in full knowledge of the popular legend), a medieval rhetorical concept known as *ductus*, meaning to be guided.⁵

This modestly sized painting is thus an indexical marker of devotion, most likely for a female patron (it may even be an allegorical portrait). But it also gives viewing pleasure through its display of exoticism and material excess, which might point to the sin of vanity commonly ascribed to Mary Magdalene. In this context, the Magdalene functions as the vehicle of complex and typically opposing forces that would have found purchase within a specific section of sixteenth-century northern European society.⁶ More boldly, however, the artist has attempted to animate the picture as a living presence while at the same time stilling it in a timeless fashion. We are invited to smell the expensive spikenard in the jar and to see, feel, and hear the wind that whips the Magdalene's yellow headscarf up against the blue sky, but pictorial composition and arrangement of objects determine that such vitality is contained, rendering it iconic in both function and appearance.





51 This altar is dedicated to girls and women who were put to work in Magdalene Laundries. The other altars in the *Shrine for Girls* installation are dedicated to rape victims in India and girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Patricia Cronin, *Shrine for Girls*, 2015. (Courtesy Studio Patricia Cronin).



52 Patricia Cronin, *Magdalene Laundry Girl*, 2016. (Courtesy Studio Patricia Cronin).

Containment is equally apt to Patricia Cronin's *Magdalene Laundry Shrine*, which forms part of her multifaith installation *Shrine for Girls*, shown at the Venice Biennale in 2015. In this work, Mary Magdalene is taken back to the altar but this time it is about a large group of sacrificial victims associated with her name and sinful reputation. The wooden crate that emulates the consecrated altar is heaped with pale-coloured aprons [fig. 8.4]. They are contact relics symbolising the punishment meted out to girls and women in the predominantly Catholic world, but most notoriously in Ireland, who were deemed fallen and worthless to society.⁷ Their punishment took the form of forced labour in laundries run by nunneries dedicated to St Mary Magdalene. Treatment was brutal, regardless of age or condition, with inmates losing their names and identities as part of the 'reforming' process. Cronin's 2016 painting of a Magdalene sister drives home the effects of this dehumanising process, which resulted in hundreds of deaths [fig. 8.5]. The portrait operates like a negative of an original image. It is stripped of both colour and detail; the girl's face is like a vacant skull. She is present yet absent, being interchangeable with any of those who linger in the background. In the absence of any kind of personhood, we behold the apron as identifying attribute. And this is the key point. Piled high and indiscriminately on the altar in the installation, the aprons force the viewer to contemplate the girls' martyrdom, and with that Mary Magdalene's vexed status as both sinner and saint. The shrine is a critique of a patriarchal system that condemns women as weak and sinful, all the while celebrating their ability to rise above such abuse, to find beauty in their martyrdom through the humblest of materials. And it is in these dualities that the Magdalene emerges as a site of modern political protest about women's rights and freedoms.

Mary Magdalene has been an icon of redemption since 591, when Pope Gregory the Great drew up her composite character. This fatal act of misogyny and its later medieval appendages was to influence the way people saw and thought about the Magdalene for centuries. It was only in 1969 that the Vatican rejected the identification of Mary Magdalene with the unnamed female sinner in the Gospel of Luke (and any other New Testament figure) but by then the damage was long done. She would remain the patron saint of fallen women throughout the world, a daughter of Eve tainted by sins of the flesh, an object of beauty and education which threatened male power, all the while maintaining her position as the woman who was close to Christ and would witness the miracle of his Resurrection. Mary Magdalene occupies ambiguous, yet alluring ground in a restrictive binary framework, and it is her lack of stability that makes her such an enduring and enigmatic icon around the world.

Mary Magdalene has figured in over two thousand years of cultural production, recurring with archetypal ease. But what does the future hold? Are we beyond the drama of sexual intrigue and excess as played out through the performative lens of art and celebrity culture, does she still empower the disenfranchised, are we satisfied by greater authenticity? ⁸

As I write during the pandemic, it is evident how our homes have become our lives, a form of enforced retreat from the physical world as part of lockdown measures. We have become more reliant on technology to fill the gaps that normal social contact provides, creating a measure of dissonance. My screen offers up a digital mosaic of Magdalenes, one tile carries the image of the reclining penitent Magdalene in the wilderness, a popular visual type. It is a piece of domestic needlework from early modern England [fig. 53]. Each stitch laid down by the female hand represents a meditative step in the pious instruction that such work was believed to instill. Might the hermit Magdalene become a modern icon of mindfulness, as a means for coping with isolation? Or will controversy win out every time? Time will surely tell.

- 1 In this essay, I am working across differences of period, geography and style.
- 2 For a full description of the painting and high resolution imagery, see the National Gallery online catalogue: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/workshop-of-the-master-of-1518-the-magdalene> [accessed 23 August 2020].
- 3 For discussion of the Magdalene as vessel and performative viewing, see Jolly 2014, ch. 3, esp. p. 131-136.
- 4 *The Golden Legend (Legenda aurea)* by the Dominican archbishop, Jacobus de Voragine dates from around 1260. This compilation of the lives of the saints, organised according to the liturgical calendar, was originally a tool for the clergy but soon became popular with the laity. It was translated into multiple languages over the centuries, facilitating its circulation throughout Europe.
- 5 See Carruthers 2010, p. 190-213.
- 6 It is one of a series of paintings on this theme by different artists. The prototype is Quentin Massys' Magdalene in the Louvre, Paris. For discussion of this painting type, see Jolly 2014, ch. 3..
- 7 It began with prostitutes but soon encompassed unmarried mothers and any other girl or woman who went against tradition and morality as maintained by the patriarchal church. For a recent historical account of the atrocities, see Smith 2007.
- 8 See chapter 2 for Mary Magdalene in film, including her restrained portrayal by Mara Rooney in *Mary Magdalene*, Garth Davis 2018.



53 Anonymous, *Mary Magdalene Surrounded by Instruments of the Passion*, England, mid-seventeenth century. (London, Victoria & Albert Museum, T.18.1940).

Divine light falls on Mary Magdalene. It ends precisely where her fingers are pulling at her necklace. With her other hand she is pushing away the luxurious objects on the table. Schelte Adamsz Bolswert, *Mary Magdalene*, Half-Length, 1625-1659. (Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, BMH g1737).



S. MARIA MAGDALENA.
Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas. Ecclesiastes 1.
S. a Bolswert fecit et excud. cum privilegio.

