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## The Faces of Mary Magdalene: From Fallen Woman to Feminist Icon | Culture

By **Shawna Street** June 25, 2021



'Jesus is my homeboy Anointing' (2003) by David LaChapelle. Studio lachapelle

Few women are immediately recognizable by name alone in history, much less religiously. Mary Magdalene appears in all four Gospels. She was the first to see the risen Christ, and was commissioned to tell others. Represented by artists as a young woman with long loose hair, she has even starred in the so-called Golden Legend, according to which she emigrated to France thanks to divine providence. His image has been adapted to the doctrine and mentality of the time, and has reached popular culture, with reinterpretations as striking as that of the television Kim Kardashian, white dove in hand and profusion of makeup. Or that of the singer Lady Gaga, in the video of her song Judas. Strong and suffering, in ecstasy and close at the same time, Magdalena vertebrates the exhibition that opens this Friday at the Catharijneconvent Museum, a former monastery of the Order of Malta, in the Dutch city of Utrecht. The exhibition underlines for the first time the contemporary footprint of a saint whose liturgical feast – July 22 – has been a mandatory memorial since 2016 on the Roman calendar by order of Pope Francis.



'Shrine for Girls (United Kingdom)' (2015) by Patricia Cronin

There is an attribute that he has not abandoned representations of Mary Magdalene to this day: her hair, blond or reddish, which covers her naked body at times. Even Lady Gaga surrenders to a thousand-year-old hair – platinum in her case – when she sings that “Jesus is my virtue, and Judas the devil I cling to.” His music accompanies the title of the exhibition, Mary Magdalene, main witness, sinner, feminist, which brings together sculptures, richly embroidered priestly chasubles, canvases, tables, passages from the four Gospels, photographic and film adaptations of the relationship between her and Christ, and a disturbing altar. It is made up of aprons like those of the inmates of the Magdalene Laundries, in Ireland, where thousands of women were subjected to forced labor between the 18th and 20th centuries to redeem their alleged sins. Magdalena was a fallen woman to the nuns who ran these centers, and the altar included in Utrecht is by American artist Patricia Cronin. The museum has placed it next to the painting *Magdalena* (1994), by the Dutch painter Marlene Dumas, who sits her with her skirt up to reflect on the accepted beauty of models in fashion magazines, and the almost unacceptable beauty of prostitutes.

“We wanted to present this duality: Mary Magdalene partly as an example of faith, because she repents of her sins, and also as the victim of the label of sinfulness, a condition that today is frowned upon. They are two approaches that coexist and I like the debate they generate”, says Lieke Wijnia, curator of the Catharijneconvent museum. There is an oil painting that illustrates this duality well. It is the portrait of a wealthy woman who poses as Magdalena to perpetuate her own religious



*'The Lamentation of the Dying Mary Magdalene' (1620-1629), by the Flemish painter Melchior de la Mars*  
The Phoebus Foundation

devotion. Signed in 1520 by Tommaso di Stefano Lunetti, presenting oneself as a saint was very popular in the 16th and 17th centuries, and the model carries a vessel of ointment like the one used to perfume the feet of Christ. "She is recognized by some artists as a beautiful and rich woman, and also as a hermit dressed in rags who saddens her faults. We try to illustrate the contrast, because with their contributions, Lady Gaga or Kim Kardashian they also claim their sexuality as something you can be proud of as current women", and Mary Magdalene is named after the four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, John and Luke, and the latter says that [María de Magdala] contributed with his goods to the three years of preaching of Christ in Palestine. Possessed, from her "the seven demons were expelled." Marcos mentions her as one of the women at the Crucifixion. The four apostles agree that he discovered the empty tomb, and John says that she saw him after he was resurrected and called him Rabboni, teacher. There is another Mary, from Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, resurrected by Jesus, who is also identified with Magdalene. And yet a third, called a sinner by the evangelist Luke, who "anoints the feet of the Lord" and dries them with her hair. In the Roman liturgy, the three women converge into one in 591 at the hand of Pope Gregory the Great. "What do those seven demons mean, if not all vices," he said. The Greek liturgy, however, recognizes them separately.

All their faces have reached art, and in the show there is also a Mary Magdalene in the desert, painted in 1869 by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Another that leaves behind luxuries and jewels and whose naked body symbolizes the spiritual purity of repentance, the work of Godfried Schalcken (1654-1706). A ceramic figurine as a hermit, with hair that seems to form a unit with the forest, by artist Kiki Lamers (2020). Or a portrait of a young woman dressed in white looking straight at the viewer, executed in 2019 by Egbert Modderman. At the end of the tour, she appears with tears and splendid hair, painted by Alfred Stevens in 1887. They all illustrate the long march of a woman declared by Pope Francis "an apostle of the apostles" by the example of her love for Christ. And to which another pontiff, Paul VI, withdrew the appellation of fallen woman in 1969. Almost 14 centuries after the demons of Gregory the Great.

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