PRESS RELEASE

MARY MAGDALENE
SIN. PRAY. LOVE.

17 SEPTEMBER 2026–17 JANUARY 2027
Exhibition Annex

Frankfurt am Main, 16 September 2026. Somewhere between saint, sinner and close companion of Christ: as one of the most multifaceted female figures in biblical tradition and art history, Mary Magdalene has fascinated for centuries. Her story is one of transformations: from apostle and faithful follower of Jesus to sinner and ascetic penitent, from ecstatic saint to modern, self-determined woman and role model. With “Mary Magdalene. Sin. Pray. Love.”, the Städel Museum and the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung are presenting the first comprehensive exhibition in the German-speaking world dedicated to the extraordinary figure of Mary Magdalene from 17 September 2026 to 17 January 2027. The exhibition portrays her not only as a projection screen for cultural and religious ideas, but also as an independent, multidimensional figure through whom diverse conceptions of the body, faith and social roles are revealed.

Drawing on important works from the collections of the Städel Museum and the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, the exhibition brings together a total of over 100 outstanding paintings, sculptures and prints from the Middle Ages to the present day. These include significant loans from international collections, among them five outstanding works from the National Gallery in London, as well as others from the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Louvre in Paris, the Vatican Museums and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Together, the works offer a comprehensive insight into the artistic and emotional range of depictions of Mary Magdalene and illustrate how each era has imbued the figure with its own questions, ideas and longings. Works by women artists such as Lavinia Fontana, Elisabetta Sirani, Luisa Roldán, Ottilie W. Roederstein, Lotte Laserstein, Kiki Smith, Marlene Dumas and Nieves González are a special focus of the exhibition, alongside major works by eminent male artists including Albrecht Dürer, Pedro de Mena, Guercino, Georges de La Tour, Claude Lorrain, Arnold Böcklin, Max Beckmann and David LaChapelle.

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Philipp Demandt, Director of the Städel Museum and the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung: “Mary Magdalene fascinates because she vividly reflects the changing perceptions of women, faith and society over the centuries. Her story is therefore also always a story of how she has been viewed. For us at the Städel Museum and the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, this exhibition provides a unique opportunity to explore this evolution through a wide variety of artistic media, spanning various eras and geographical boundaries. The collections of both institutions form the starting point for this. In dialogue with significant loans, a panorama emerges that shows how a figure changes as the world around her changes.”

Susanne Völker, Director of the Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain, explains: “Mary Magdalene is a figure who has been reinterpreted time and again over the centuries. We are delighted to support this special exhibition, which brings together the outstanding collections of two Frankfurt museums with impressive loans from Europe and the United States, thereby enabling international collaboration and impact on the basis of a strong regional foundation.”

“Art was an essential part of the life of our benefactor, Dagmar Westberg. It is both our duty and our pleasure to support this extraordinary exhibition at the Städel Museum and the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung. It presents Mary Magdalene in her many facets and reveals how differently this remarkable woman has been viewed and interpreted over the centuries. If the exhibition encourages visitors to question familiar preconceptions and to look with an open mind at one of the most fascinating figures in the Bible, that would be entirely in keeping with Dagmar Westberg’s wishes,” says **Daniel Hoster, Chairman of the Board of the Dagmar-Westberg-Stiftung.**

“In 1910, the Städelverein acquired Pierre Puvis de Chavannes’s *Saint Mary Magdalene in the Desert* (1869) for the Städel Museum’s collection. The fact that, more than a century later, this masterpiece is one of the central works in an exhibition tracing Mary Magdalene’s varied visual history across the centuries fills us with particular pride. Thanks to the exceptional commitment of the Städelfreunde 1815, further outstanding works from around sixty lenders have been brought to Frankfurt. We hope that visitors will have insightful and inspiring encounters with the

multifaceted figure of Mary Magdalene," says **Sylvia von Metzler, Chair of the Städelscher Museums-Verein.**

The exhibition's curators, Bastian Eclercy, Head of Italian, French, and Spanish Paintings before 1800 at the Städel Museum, and Stefan Roller, Head of the Medieval Department at the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, explain: "Over the course of almost a millennium, Mary Magdalene has been depicted time and again in a wide variety of media and eras. This extraordinary diversity makes her visual history a particularly revealing mirror of the respective eras. The exhibition brings together paintings, sculptures and prints from various regions and centuries. When viewed side by side, the works reveal surprising connections, as well as the profound changes that the image of Mary Magdalene has undergone over time."

Introduction to the Exhibition

The exhibition opens with a look at contemporary perceptions of Mary Magdalene and traces how her figure has been repeatedly reinterpreted, reshaped and reconstructed from the earliest biblical accounts up to the modern era.

Mary Magdalene Today

Even today, Mary Magdalene continues to be reinterpreted in literature, film and music. Dan Brown makes her the wife of Christ in his bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* (2004), and the German pop singer Sandra celebrates female self-determination in her song *(I'll Never Be) Maria Magdalena* (1985). In contemporary art, which forms the focus of the first section, Mary Magdalene serves as a starting point for reflections on femininity, gender roles and her representation in art and culture. In this context, religious interpretations, which were primarily shaped by men for centuries, recede into the background. For example, in her paintings, Marlene Dumas blurs the boundaries of traditional notions of femininity, sexuality and identity. In her work *La sfida* (*The Challenge*, 2025), the painter Nieves González depicts Mary Magdalene not as naked, ascetic or erotically charged, but wearing a voluminous modern down jacket. At the same time, she incorporates classical Magdalene iconography, including a skull, which the figure does not passively regard as a *memento mori*, but rather actively presents.

The Story of Mary Magdalene

The Bible first mentions Mary Magdalene in connection with her healing by Jesus from seven demons. She also witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Over the centuries, however, her story has become increasingly embellished. The altarpiece from the Palazzo Madama in Turin, dating from around 1295–1300 and

featured in the exhibition, depicts both scenes from the life of Saint Mary Magdalene, as well as events from the legends that have been widespread since the 9th and 10th centuries, which recount Magdalene's story after Easter: together with her siblings and other Christians, Mary Magdalene is cast adrift in the Mediterranean in a rudderless boat by "unbelievers"; she reaches the south of France, preaches in Marseille and Provence, performs miracles and finally withdraws into solitude as a penitent for thirty years until her death.

In the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene's role in the Passion narrative was also significantly expanded. Not only does she appear as a witness to the crucifixion, she also becomes a central figure in numerous depictions of the Passion. One example is Girolamo di Benvenuto's *Passion Triptych* (early 16th century) from the Städel Collection, which depcits her in scenes ranging from the Carrying of the Cross to the Lamentation of Christ. As a repentant sinner, she is depicted clinging to the base of the cross at Christ's feet. This iconographic type was particularly shaped by the Franciscans from the 13th century onwards and became widespread as a symbol of penance, forgiveness and redemption. In the *Crucifixion Triptych of the Humbracht Family* (c. 1504–1508) by the Master of Frankfurt, also from the museum's own collection, Mary Magdalene appears in strikingly sumptuous courtly attire, the inappropriateness of which particularly emphasises her role as a wealthy and distinguished sinner.

As the first witness to Jesus's resurrection, Mary Magdalene plays a central role in the Easter narrative. In his work from the 1530s (London, National Gallery), Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo allows the viewer to share in this role as the first witness, while at the same time charting his own unique course beyond the classical iconography of the resurrection narrative, such as the "Noli me tangere" motif (Latin for "Do not touch me"). The encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus on Easter morning, known by this title, inspired many artists to create works dealing with physicality and touch, mistaken identity and astonishment, as well as closeness and distance. Lavinia Fontana, for example, depicts in her 1581 painting (Florence, Uffizi) how Mary Magdalene initially mistakes Christ for the gardener. When she recognises him, she seeks physical proof of the resurrection, but he asks her not to touch him, as he has not yet ascended to heaven. In contrast, Laurent de La Hyre depicts Jesus touching Magdalene's forehead in his 1656 work (Grenoble, Musée de Grenoble), thereby alluding to a skull relic attributed to her. According to legend, her skin is said to have remained intact at the very spot where the Risen One touched her.

Due to differing interpretations of the Bible, Mary Magdalene became conflated with other female figures in the first centuries after Christ, including the anonymous sinner and Mary of Bethany. Her sister Martha is regarded as a moral authority: in *Martha Rebuking Mary Magdalene for Her Vanity* (c. 1621; Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), Simon Vouet captures the moment when Martha moves her sister, who is devoted to worldly pleasures, to repentance. The story of Mary of Egypt, a saint with a sinful past, also shaped the image of Mary Magdalene. Following her conversion as a repentant penitent, she withdrew to the desert until her death. In the visual arts, she is often barely distinguishable from the figure of Mary Magdalene; only the attribute of the loaves of bread held by Luis Salvador Carmona's sculpture (second third of the 18th century; Valladolid, Museo Nacional de Escultura) reveal that this is a depiction of Mary of Egypt.

Around the year 600, Pope Gregory the Great reinterpreted Mary Magdalene's seven demons as the seven deadly sins. Consequently, she came to be increasingly associated with the sin of lust and, erroneously, with a past as a prostitute. In the wake of the Counter-Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries, Mary Magdalene, who attained sainthood through penance, became a popular role model and one of the most favoured subjects in Catholic art. In these works, the "sinfulness" falsely attributed to her and her penance often intertwine in a remarkable way, as demonstrated by Johann Liss in *The Temptation of Saint Mary Magdalen* (c. 1626; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art). Religious ecstasy sometimes comes very close to the erotic, as in Guido Cagnacci's *The Repentant Magdalene* (c. 1622–1627; Rome, Palazzo Barberini), which the painter Elisabetta Sirani interpreted in her own way. In her 1663 version (Besançon, Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie), she tones down the overt eroticism and imbues the painting with an atmosphere of devout contemplation. In his version (c. 1635–1640; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art), Georges de La Tour focuses on inner reflection and melancholy.

According to legend, Mary Magdalene lived as a hermit in the Sainte-Baume cave in Provence for thirty years before she died in Aix-en-Provence. Giovanni Lanfranco's painting (c. 1616/17; Naples, Museo di Capodimonte) depicts the scene known as the "Elevatio" (Ascension), in which angels carry her up to heaven seven times a day. There, she is sustained by the singing of the heavenly hosts. Two related panels on display in the exhibition depict *The Last Communion of Saint Mary Magdalene* and *The Burial of Saint Mary Magdalene* (c. 1500; Würth Collection). To this day, Saint-Maximin is regarded as her burial place and the Grotto of Sainte-Baume as one of the most important places of pilgrimage. Numerous relics and reliquaries bear witness to her enduring veneration, including a reliquary from the Metropolitan

Museum of Art in New York containing one of the saint's teeth, as well as Michel Erhart's reliquary bust (c. 1475; Ulm, Museum Ulm).

Since the late Middle Ages, women, often of noble birth or high social standing, have been depicted as Mary Magdalene in portraits. Barent van Orley's *Portrait of Margaret of Austria as Mary Magdalene* (c. 1520–1530; Munich, Alte Pinakothek), exemplifies this devout identification with the saint, while Jean Ranc's *Portrait of Madame de Montespan as the Penitent Mary Magdalene* (c. 1700; Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum) combines religious symbolism with Baroque self-presentation.

With the increasing secularisation of Europe in the 19th century, the image of Mary Magdalene underwent a transformation. Although the figure lost significance as a religious subject, her iconography remained an important source of inspiration. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, new interpretations of the saint emerged, serving as a figure onto which individual artistic positions could be projected. In salon painting and Symbolism, she became the prototype of the *femme fatale*, as demonstrated by Jean Béraud's *La Madeleine chez le Pharisien* (1891; Paris, Musée d'Orsay). At the same time, her religious iconography was reinterpreted from an often secular perspective, for example in Max Beckmann's *Christ and the Sinner* (1917; Saint Louis, Saint Louis Museum of Art). The spectrum ranges from the eroticisation of the figure to an existential examination of her story, as illustrated by Lovis Corinth's *Weeping Magdalen* (1911; Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie).

An exhibition by the Städel Museum and the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung

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Curators: Dr Bastian Eclercy (Head of Italian, French, and Spanish Paintings before 1800, Städel Museum), Dr Stefan Roller (Head of the Medieval Department, Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung)
Exhibition Dates: 17 September 2026–17 January 2027
Press Preview: Wednesday, 16 September 2026, 11.00 am

Location: Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main
Information: staedelmuseum.de/en/
Visitor Services and Guided Tours: +49 (0)69-605098-200, info@staedelmuseum.de
Tickets: €19, reduced €17, Tuesday Special: every Tuesday from 3.00 to 6.00 pm, €10; admission free for children under 12. Groups of at least 10 persons who would normally be charged the full admission fee: €17 per person. Registration is generally required for all groups, by telephone +49 (0)69-605098-200 or info@staedelmuseum.de. Special opening hours can be found at staedelmuseum.de/en/.

Digitorial®: The free Digitorial® provides a multimedia introduction to the exhibition, featuring informative short texts, interactive modules and fascinating background information. Drawing on artworks from the Middle Ages to the present day, the exhibition explores the diverse history of the reception of Mary Magdalene, whose interpretation has been continually re-examined for almost 2,000 years within the interplay of society, the Church, politics and art. The digital application is available at

mariamagdalena.staedelmuseum.de from 15 September 2026 and can be used on smartphones, tablets and desktop computers. The Digitorial® is a registered trademark of the SCHIRN, Städel and Liebieghaus. Conceived as a digital educational programme by the three Frankfurt institutions, it has already been realized many times.

Audio Guide App: The audio tour, which lasts around one hour and features more than twenty-five stations, is available in both German and English. The German version is narrated by Katharina Schüttler. The free exhibition app will be available for iOS and Android in the App Store and Google Play Store from the start of the exhibition and can be downloaded onto smartphones at home or via the Städel WLAN.

Catalogue: A catalogue in German, edited by Bastian Eclercy and Stefan Roller, is being published by Hirmer Verlag to accompany the exhibition. It features a foreword by Philipp Demandt and texts by Bastian Eclercy, Svenja Grosser, Christian Hecht, Siobhán Jolley, Silke Petersen, Stefan Roller and Matthias Weniger. 256 pages, €49.90 (museum edition).

Accompanying Booklet: An accompanying booklet in German will be published to coincide with the exhibition, €9.50.

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