

WALL TEXTS

MARY MAGDALENE

SIN. PRAY. LOVE.

17 SEPTEMBER 2026–17 JANUARY 2027**Exhibition Annex****MARY MAGDALENE**

Mary Magdalene was and is one of the most fascinatingly ambiguous female figures to be found in the Bible and in its reflection throughout European culture. Almost everyone knows her – or thinks they do. Cinema, literature and the visual arts have all had a part in influencing how we envisage her. And yet, when we take a deeper look into her history, we find that she is in fact an artificial construct. For, in around 600, theologians effectively “created” her through merging the identities of several female figures mentioned in the New Testament. Since then, Mary Magdalene has occupied an indeterminate zone, her role mediating between those of sinner, penitent and saint. We encounter her now as first witness to Christ’s Resurrection, now as one of a few women consorting with his male disciples, now as the contrite former sinner, now as the ecstatic saint, now as a female preacher, now as a figure with whom women everywhere can identify.

The multifaceted image of Mary Magdalene has always intrigued artists of either gender as well as the primarily male individuals who have been their patrons. Many of the most outstanding painters and sculptors have been inspired by her to devise striking artistic innovations, which also reflect something of the era of their creation. Our exhibition, the first of its kind to be staged in German-speaking Europe, offers a comprehensive account of Mary Magdalene: in painting and in sculpture, in works from north and south of the Alps, made by male and female artists, spanning the period between the Middle Ages and the present day.

Mary Magdalene today. A female archetype

Mary Magdalene has always been among the most multi-faceted female figures to feature in the history of art. Alternating in her role between sinner, saint and close companion to Christ, she has, over the centuries, been very variously interpreted, albeit chiefly under the influence of the teachings of male theologians. It is primarily on account of this enduring variability and ambiguity that Mary Magdalene has retained her relevance for the artists of our own time. Nowadays, she is often the starting point for an interrogation of the status of women both in the past and in the present: How

were women represented in the art and culture of the past? What sort of roles were assigned to them? And how can contemporary artists make use of these traditions? The approaches adopted have been no less diverse than are the artists themselves: from feminist critique, by way of enquiry into art-historical concepts, to the appropriation of aspects of pop culture. The boundaries between these diverse perspectives are themselves perpetually shifting – just as Mary Magdalene herself has, over the centuries, assumed a multiplicity of roles.

From the Bible to the legend. Stories about Mary Magdalene

As recorded in the Gospel According to St. Luke, Jesus had freed a woman called Mary Magdalene of the torment visited upon her by seven devils. Thereafter, in the company of other women, she had faithfully followed him. This is the first reference to Mary Magdalene by her name to occur within the traditional sequence of the Four Gospels. In these texts Mary Magdalene is granted a central role in the story of Christ's Crucifixion and the events surrounding it. It is she who encounters the Risen Christ and bears news of his Resurrection – the event so central to Christianity – to his disciples. Later biblical exegesis merged her identity with that of other women mentioned in the New Testament and associated her with other events recounted in the Gospels. As a result, she gradually lost her perceived importance as a female apostle. Favoured now was her identification with the unnamed penitent sinner pardoned by Christ of whom we read in the Gospel According to St. Luke. Mediaeval Lives and Legends of the saints characterised Mary Magdalene as a wealthy noblewoman who, before her encounter with Christ, had led a sensually indulgent and morally dissolute life. After the Ascension, Magdalene, along with her siblings and other Christians, is set adrift in the Mediterranean by "unbelievers" in a rudderless boat. Divine Providence brings them to Marseille. For a time, Mary Magdalene was a missionary in Provence, thereafter pursuing a life of solitary penitence.

Mary Magdalene and the Passion of Christ. Faithful unto death

It is chiefly towards the end of the narrative of the Gospels that Mary Magdalene is mentioned, that is to say in connection with Christ's death. While his disciples play there a rather inglorious role, several of his female followers are fearless in attesting to their fidelity, being present both at the Crucifixion and at the Entombment. Mary Magdalene herself, as represented in art from the Middle Ages onwards, is also in attendance at the preceding and following episodes: Christ Carrying the Cross, Christ Nailed to the Cross, the Elevation of the Cross, and the subsequent Deposition, Lamentation and Entombment. After the Franciscan Order had, in the 14th century, formally instituted the Veneration of the Holy Cross, there arose a tradition of showing

Mary Magdalene as a figure positioned at its base, her consequent proximity to Christ's feet an allusion to the several accounts of their being washed and anointed. In this role Mary Magdalene became a prototype for penitent humanity. For, according to Christian belief, Christ's Passion had become necessary because of man's inherent propensity to sin. Through Christ's own death – and hence the profound significance of the Cross – he became the Redeemer of humanity, which had in turn to acknowledge its own role in the Death of its Saviour. As a sorrowing venerator of the Cross, Mary Magdalene thus became a model for all believers.

“Touch me not!” First witness to the Resurrection

Mary Magdalene, having accompanied Christ on his Way of the Cross, was thereafter among the women who visited his tomb – which they discovered to be empty. An angel explained to them that their Lord had risen and bade them convey this news to the disciples. As chief among this group of women, Mary Magdalene became the first witness to Christ's Resurrection: a key role in the History of Salvation that was in effect to grant her a rank higher than that of the disciples, as the “apostle among apostles” (*apostola apostolorum*). In the realm of art, the scene of “The Threes Marys at the Tomb” has accordingly assumed a particular importance. The account in the Gospel According to St. John enhances this episode in a way that has greatly enriched its rendering in painted form (the so-called “Noli me tangere”). Here Christ himself appears to Mary Magdalene, but she at first mistakes him for the gardener. Upon recognising that this is indeed the Risen Christ, she spontaneously moves to reach out towards him. But Christ restrains her with the words: “Touch me not [Lat. *Noli me tangere*]. For I have not yet ascended to my Father”. This remarkable episode, giving rise to a distinct thematic category, has inspired countless artists to innovative pictorial solutions turning on the notions of corporeality and touch, confusion and astonishment, proximity and distance, belief and doubt.

A merging of identities. The making of a saint

The combined reading of various stories to be found in the Gospels and the later biblical exegesis undertaken by theologians issued in the merging of her identity with that of other women. Among these was the unnamed female sinner, mentioned in the Gospel According to St. Luke, who wets Christ's feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and then anoints them, before Christ pardons her. Another was Mary of Bethany, mentioned in the Gospel According to St. John. She, too, anoints Christ's feet. By being equated with her, Magdalena gains two siblings: Martha and Lazarus. In around 600 Pope Gregory the Great codified the idea that the “seven demons” expelled from Mary Magdalene by Christ represent the Seven Deadly Sins. For the saint's image this was to prove a fateful development, the focus soon shifting to the

notion of a woman consumed by a craving for pleasure, primarily understood as lechery (*Luxuria*). This is how Mary Magdalene acquired her reputation as a former adulteress and prostitute, thus coming to be identified also with another such figure: Mary of Egypt, who also devoted the later part of her life to isolated penitence. As depicted by artists, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt are often hard to tell apart.

A life transformed. Sinner and penitent

The merging of the identity of Mary Magdalene with that of the unnamed female sinner mentioned in the Gospel According to St. Luke had far-reaching consequences for the veneration of this saint and for how she was henceforth depicted by artists. The penitent now increasingly occluded the witness to Christ's Resurrection. The notion of the former prostitute who, having seen the error of her ways, had through penitence attained sanctity, encouraged the emergence of a popular "role model"; and this in turn became a subject favoured by artists, especially in the Catholic Europe of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. During the Counter-Reformation, the "sacrament of penance" (confession) assumed a much greater importance, and Mary Magdalene accordingly became the epitome of true contrition. The legends associated with her placed her life as a penitent during the last 30 years of her time in Provence, which she spent in a deserted region, devoting herself to solitary contemplation. In the paintings, the "sinfulness" falsely attributed to her and her penance often intertwine in a remarkable way. And it is perhaps not surprising that the element of religious ecstasy that also features in the iconography of Mary Magdalene sometimes borders on the erotic, nor that the Mary Magdalene depicted in the work of painters and sculptors of the Baroque period should be a figure so deeply charged with emotion.

Elevatio. Heavenly sustenance

According to the legend, Mary Magdalene spent her 30 years of contemplative isolation largely in a grotto in the Sainte-Baume massif around 50 km to the east of Marseille. As nothing edible was to be found in the vicinity, she was, seven times a day – each such occasion coinciding with one of the hours of prayer observed by the monks and nuns – assisted by angels to ascend to Heaven to be supplied with "a heavenly nourishment". This last was acoustic in its quality, comprising "the singing of the heavenly host". Thereafter, angels would escort Mary Magdalene back to her grotto. Over time the artistic rendering of this aspect of the saint's life in Provence acquired the Latin title *elevatio* (elevation).

Death and relics. What remains of Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene is said to have died in the South of France. Bishop Maximin of Aix-en-Provence, who had accompanied her from the Holy Land, enabled her to take Communion for the last time in that city's Cathedral, where she was later laid to rest. From the mid-11th century it was the prevailing ecclesiastical view that Mary Magdalene had in fact been buried at the Benedictine monastery in Vézelay, and this soon became the first site of worship in Western Europe to be associated with her. In 1279, however, heretofore unknown bones were discovered in the crypt of the church in Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume, not far from Aix. The conviction that these were what remained of the true body of Mary Magdalene brought about a rapid decline in the status of Vézelay. The church of Saint-Maximin is still revered as the site of her burial. Another favoured site of pilgrimage in the Sainte-Baume massif since the Middle Ages is the grotto in which the saint is said to have spent her final years. Numerous relics and reliquaries related to Mary Magdalene attest to the enormous reverence for her, now as in the past.

In the role of the saint. Mary Magdalene and portraiture

We know of portraits dating from virtually every period since the Late Middle Ages in which women of noble birth or high social standing are posed and attired in imitation of Mary Magdalene. These works reflect the enduring interest in the multi-layered figure of their saintly model. The reasons for wishing to be portrayed in this way are manifold, incorporating the prevailing conceptions of the saint and her specific veneration of that era. In some cases, such a portrait might have been intended as a testament to the sitter's own pious identification with the saint; in others it might have served as a religiously motivated gesture of self-criticism or of moral admonition; in yet another it might have been political and propagandistic in intent; on occasion (above all in Renaissance and Baroque portraiture) it may have been a deliberate act of theatrical self-fashioning; and, in our own time, it might well be a visual metaphor for both the sexual and the social aspects of female self-determination.

A saint for the Salon. Mary Magdalene in the Modern Era

With the increasing secularisation of European society during the 19th century, the character of the image of Mary Magdalene itself altered. Artists were now only rarely commissioned to produce altarpieces or devotional images, yet the centuries-old pictorial tradition endured – both as a source of inspiration and as a form of provocation. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the multi-faceted figure of Mary Magdalene and the diverse aspects of her story prompted a resort to novel interpretations and forms of appropriation. Depicting her had of course ceased to feature in the routine activity of painters and sculptors as it had in the Middle Ages

and in the Early Modern Period. But, by the same token, the decision to treat such a subject assumed a greater significance, not least on account of the range of approaches that might now be adopted. In painting of the sort associated with the Paris Salon or with the fantastical imagery of Symbolist art, Mary Magdalene became a prototype of the *femme fatale*, in itself a profane re-working of the woman viewed, in the Christian context, as a sinner. It was at this point that the image of Mary Magdalene – albeit with new connotations – found new favour among artists. With its distinctive iconography, this could easily function as a set piece, which they might then re-fashion as they desired. The outcomes ranged, accordingly, from instances of a blunt eroticisation of the figure of the saint to a profound engagement with the universal human themes at the heart of the biblical narrative.