



## *“Mary, called the Magdalene . . .”*

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

**T**he woman thus described in the Gospel of Luke (8:1–3) would become posterity’s ultimate symbol for sin and redemption, but even the scant information about her in the canonical gospels is remarkably unlike the perception that doggedly lingers around the figure we know as “Mary Magdalene.” Further contributing to the controversy is her very name. “Mary” (anglicized from the Hebrew and Greek versions) was an exceptionally common name in first-century Judaea, and that led to frequent conflation of the woman called the “Magdalene” with others sharing her name.

Another misconception about her name is that it is a double one, like “Mary Ann.” On the contrary, “Magdalene” refers to a location, specifically the town of Magdala. Magdala (modern Migdal) was a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee in antiquity, but it remains unknown whether this was Mary’s birthplace or simply her home when she entered Jesus’ ministry. Although archaeological excavations have uncovered an early synagogue, they have revealed nothing to connect our subject to it. Moreover, scholars speculate that there may have been more than one town called Magdala, a Hebrew word meaning “tower.” Such a name may well have applied to more than one place, a confusing geographical phenomenon not uncommon in antiquity (there were more than twenty Alexandrias, for example).

Luke’s passage (above) also reveals some additional facts about Mary from Magdala. The chapter describes Jesus moving through “every city and village,” delivering his message. With him are “the twelve,” and a group of women: “Joanna” (wife of an employee of Herod), “Susanna” (nothing further provided), “Mary, called the Magdalene,” and “many others who provided for them out of their means.” The apparent



Gérard Edelinck (Flemish-French, 1640–1707)  
After a painting by Charles Le Brun (French, 1619–1690)  
*The Repentant Magdalene*, ca. 1665  
Engraving on paper  
Museum purchase (65.184)

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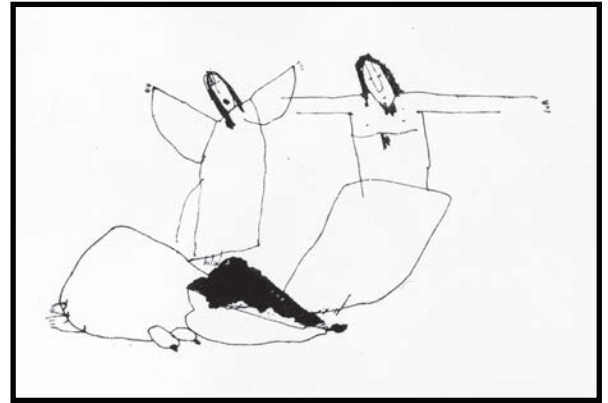


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implication, that a large group of women financially supported Jesus and his apostles, is rarely mentioned. Needless to say, many questions remain unanswered regarding the women's wealth. Was it from family? From husbands? Were some widows? Joanna aside, had the others ever been married? Luke informs us further that at least some of the women had been healed of illness or demons. "Seven demons" had been cast out of Mary of Magdala, but no details are provided. This reference has been the subject of much speculation, but we have no definitive information about Mary's ills or what caused them. What is certain, however, is that the passage does *not* refer to Mary as a sinner, and certainly not a sexual sinner. But the previous chapter (Luke 7:37–50) refers to an unidentified woman, a sinner who washed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair, when he dined at the house of Simon the Pharisee. This woman, though unnamed, has often been conflated with the Magdalene, since she is introduced immediately afterward. But it seems improbable that these two are the same woman, since the Magdalene has a formal introduction in Luke 8:1–3. Moreover, though unclear where the Pharisee dinner takes place, the cities mentioned just prior are Capernaum and Nain, not Magdala. Yet another Mary, from Bethany, also anoints Jesus's feet and dries them with her hair (John 12:3). Since the sinner performed this same action, Mary of Bethany has been confused with the sinner, but the sinner also became conflated with the Magdalene. As a result, the identities of all three of these women have been muddled over time.

The Roman Catholic Church under Pope Paul VI finally "ruled" on this subject in 1969, distinguishing the Magdalene from Mary of Bethany and the anonymous sinner. But the damage was done, and the view of Mary Magdalene as the reformed prostitute has persisted. Her ambivalent reputation

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Geta Brătescu (Romanian, 1926–2018)  
*Mary Magdalene Washing the Feet of Christ*, 1974  
Lithograph on paper  
Gift of Saul and Gladys Weinberg (86.11.9)



Antoine Coypel (French, 1661–1722)  
*Mary Magdalene at the Foot of the Cross*  
Late 17<sup>th</sup> century–early 18<sup>th</sup> century  
Red, black, and white chalk on tan paper  
Museum purchase (76.73)





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has also been compounded in recent years by renewed attention to three New Testament apocrypha (books that were not included in the 27-book canon accepted by most churches). In all three of these “gospels” (of Philip, Thomas, and Mary), Mary Magdalene arouses suspicion and antipathy from one or more apostles because of her closeness to Jesus. Perhaps the book ascribed to Philip is the most controversial for it portrays Mary Magdalene as a rather intimate companion of Jesus whom he kissed often, though the text describing *where* he kissed her is missing. We should note that kissing in antiquity was often a platonic greeting, a tradition that continues in many Mediterranean countries today.

The confusion over Mary Magdalene’s identity is reflected in her artistic legacy. Geta Bratescu’s image shows the bare-breasted subject washing Jesus’s feet, the event identified with the sinner and Mary of Bethany. The Edelinck engraving illustrates a typical formula for representations of the Magdalene: the repentant voluptuary, forsworn wealth discarded about her, heeds a heavenly calling. There is nothing ambiguous in the canonical gospels about the presence of Mary Magdalene at the Crucifixion, while the Gospel of John places her at the Resurrection, but evidence of her alleged sinful past seems to linger in the art historical record of these events. The Coypel drawing depicts the subject with long, unbound hair, a trait often synonymous with historical prostitution while the Flemish painting has her opulently garbed with décolletage revealed. Given the evidence, however, these tropes reference a past that had never existed. ■



Circle of Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish)  
*Noli me tangere* (*Touch me not*), ca. 1630  
Oil on canvas  
Museum purchase (69.114)

*In the Gospel of John (20:14–17), Mary Magdalene is the first to see the resurrected Jesus, whom she mistakes for the gardener. When she realizes it is Jesus, she attempts to touch him, but he replies: “Touch me not for I am not yet ascended to my Father.”*