

In Search of Mary Magdalene: Images and Traditions, a spring show at the American Bible Society Gallery (<http://www.americanbible.org/gallery/gallery.cfm>) in New York City, explored the history, legends and iconography of this perennially fascinating woman. In the accompanying catalogue, curator Diane Apostolos-Cappadona considers the various roles played by Mary Magdalene as sinner, penitent, first-hand witness to the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, contemplative and muse to two millennia of artists and writers. Underlying this multifaceted approach is the basic question of who the Magdalene was and how she came to have such a remarkable impact on sacred and secular culture. The psychological appeal of her story is obvious; ordinary Christians could identify with her mix of moral frailty and strong faith, seeing played out in her life the personal drama of sin and redemption. The popular conception of the Magdalene centers on a converted femme fatale, a beautiful courtesan who washes Jesus' feet and dries them with her long hair, who weeps at the foot of the cross. One of the delightful aspects of this exhibition was the inclusion of popular culture, from paperback novels to *Jesus Christ Superstar* to Cecil B. DeMille's silent film *King of Kings*, in which the Magdalene, catching a glimpse of Jesus, abandons her guests at an orgiastic party, exclaiming "Harness my zebras. I must follow him!" Apostolos-Cappadona also recognizes the importance of the Magdalene to nineteenth-century discussions of the fallen woman as sentimental heroine and social problem. *Mary Magdalene at the House of the Pharisee* (1891) by Jean Béraud depicts Christ appearing at a contemporary stag dinner with a fashionably dressed young woman at his feet; the prosperous diners make a fine rogues' gallery of hypocrisy.

Who was the historical Mary Magdalene? The answer to this question is by no means simple. The scriptural accounts mention a number of women named Mary, aside from the mother of Jesus. Over the centuries, Christians would conflate different strands of the narrative to emphasize some aspect or another: one of the earliest and most loyal followers of Jesus, a confidante of Christ; the anointer, whose impromptu ritual in the house of the Pharisee prefigures the post-crucifixion ritual; the archetypal penitent and contemplative. What emerged from the interplay of multiple images and texts was the most complex woman in Christian hagiography, a point not lost on theologians, scholars studying the New Testament and Patristics, and researchers in the more recent academic fields of popular religion and gender studies.

Among the scriptural incidents often depicted, none is more striking than the *Noli me tangere*, which dramatizes Christ's first post-resurrection appearance, depicting the moment when Mary Magdalene recognizes him. The Magdalene instinctively reaches toward Christ but is gently kept at a distance. This choreography poignantly individualizes the longing of the faithful for their savior. Sometimes Christ is dressed as a gardener. Martin Schongauer retains the garden setting in his *Noli Me Tangere* (c. 1470–80) but shows Christ bearing the victory flag with its cross and clad in a red robe that reveals his wounds. The Magdalene, identified by her ointment jar, halo and curling golden hair, kneels, her hands outstretched. Beyond the scriptural narrative, legend follows the Magdalene to the south of France, where she spent years as a hermit. Her long hair grew to envelop her, covering her nakedness, although sometimes she is depicted in rough skins or pelts, like John the Baptist. The most harrowing image of the penitent Magdalene is surely Donatello's woodcarving of a scrawny old woman, her face ravaged by tears. Apostolos-Cappadona sees an echo of this archetype in Picasso's *Weeping Woman* series.

Usually, however, the Magdalene retains her beauty, and the Provençal phase of her life looks rather idyllic. There are some extraordinarily lyrical scenes of the Magdalene being lifted by angels to mark the canonical hours or be fed on manna, as in the famous woodcut



Wendy Brusick Steiner, *I've Seen Love Conquer the Great Divide*, 19
Brauer Museum of Arts, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana

(c. 1504–05) by Albrecht Dürer, where the saint seems a goddess in her apotheosis. Sometimes these figure-in-a-landscape compositions anticipate the Romantic nature reverie, as in Flemish artist Adrien Isenbrandt's (c. 1500–51) *The Penitent Magdalene*, with the half-naked saint reclining in a blue-green Eden, reading her book, while a vision of Jesus hovers like the evening star in the sky behind her.

Portraits of saints move them out of the narrative stream and into the more atemporal devotional realm. The mendicant orders of the Middle Ages promoted the cult of the Magdalene by preaching a discipline of individual remorse. The word *maudlin*, meaning teary-eyed and sentimental, is a corrupted form of Magdalene. Mary Magdalene's tears became an emblem of rhetorical piety, both in paintings such as Carlo Dolci's *The Penitent Magdalene* (c. 1670), a detail of which is used as the cover illustration for the exhibition catalogue, and in Metaphysical poet Richard Crashaw's notorious Baroque poem "The Weeper." Not all compositions with this theme were so melodramatic. In the famous painting by Georges de la Tour, a young woman sits quietly in a simple interior, lit by a single candle. Her attributes are a skull, the memento mori of iconographic tradition, and a mirror, which shifts meaning from the *in malo* denotation of vanity to the *in bono* of self-examination.

The story of the Magdalene has proved not only durable but adaptable. She develops new characteristics as the needs of successive generations demand it. In this saga of transformation and identity, she holds our interest as historical figure and archetypal woman. While the subject could support a much larger exhibition, this modest, thought-provoking show and catalogue manage to suggest the polyvalent richness of the Magdalene persona and should inspire further explorations.