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HISTORIANS OF NETHERLANDISH ART REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEWS

Picturing the “Pregnant” Magdalene in Northern Art, 1430–1550: Addressing and Undressing the Sinner-Saint (Women and Gender in the Early Modern World)

By Penny Howell Jolly


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Scholarship has often explained Mary Magdalene’s great popularity in the Renaissance in terms of her flexible iconography and her ability to address diverse audiences. One of the many strengths of this publication is that Jolly focuses on roles for the Magdalene yet to be explored. Her novel approach offers a deeper understanding of Magdalene images, including a detailed examination of dress. The organization of the book also contributes to its overall effectiveness. In each chapter, Jolly considers a single painting or a group of related paintings in depth. The author also rightly points out that northern Magdalene images have not received nearly the attention that they deserve and sets out to correct that situation. Additionally, through the examination of Magdalene imagery, Jolly taps into engaging current topics including the production of works for the open market, the body and sexuality, the meaning of dress, and performative viewing (audience reception).
The first two chapters focus on Rogier van der Weyden’s innovative representation of the Magdalene in his Prado *Descent from the Cross* and in the *Braque Triptych*. In Chapter 1, Jolly identifies the Magdalene as spiritually pregnant (the equivalent of divine inspiration): a new visual type invented by the artist. Rogier portrayed the Magdalene wearing spreading maternity laces as was customary for pregnant women. Furthermore, the low-slung belt, known as the *demi-cent de magnanimité*, emphasized her abdomen and indicates through the inscription on it (IHESVSMARIA) that her bridegroom is Christ. The transformation that Mary Magdalene underwent from sinner to saint was paramount to her popularity and accessibility. While this transformation was commonly shown in scenes where she wept at Christ’s feet, artists found other ways to represent it. In the *Descent from the Cross*, the Magdalene’s spiritual pregnancy reveals her religious conversion. Viewers are encouraged to model their lives after the Magdalene by opening up a place within themselves where Christ might dwell. The Magdalene’s body served as the locus of sin and as a vehicle of transformation. This duality is a recurrent theme in the book.

In Chapter 2, the author investigates the figure of Mary Magdalene from the *Braque Triptych*. Among the innovative elements introduced by Rogier is the figure’s exotic headdress. Similar to the figure of the Magdalene from the Escorial *Deposition*, the Braque Magdalene wears loosened maternity laces. Jolly demonstrates that these features establish a visual connection between Rogier’s Magdalene and depictions of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. Particularly interesting is Rogier’s presentation of the Magdalene as both a Wise and a Foolish Virgin, an iconographic detail that has precedent in Lucas Moser’s *Tiefenbronn Altarpiece* (1432). Functioning simultaneously as both within the same image enacts Mary Magdalene’s transformation from sinner to saint. The maternity laces and headdress also align the Braque Magdalene with contemporary images of sibyls. Like sibyls, Mary Magdalene is believed to possess divinely inspired knowledge. Her maternity laces and the Magdalene’s metaphorical pregnancy reinforce this characterization. The identification of Mary Magdalene as the Wise and Foolish Virgin is particularly significant in the interpretation of the *Braque Triptych*. After all, the painting was commissioned by Braque’s widow, Catherine de Brabant, in hopes of promoting her dead husband’s heavenly ascent.
The imagery includes many interactive devices that would have aided Catherine in her efforts. The Magdalene could also serve Catherine by providing her with a saintly intercessory.

Rather than focus on a specific painting, the third chapter addresses half-length Magdalene images made for the open market by artists including Cornelisz. van Oostanen, Quentin Massys, the Master of the Magdalene Legend and the Mansi Master. Jolly demonstrates that these images borrowed features from crypto-portraits and that their portrait-like qualities may have contributed to their accessibility. She also concludes that the Magdalene’s elaborate dress and type of container are not mere attributes of her pre-conversion life or role as myrrhophore. These images are neither exclusive presentations of her sinful past nor her saintly redemption, but rather both. They present the reformed saint while simultaneously recalling her colorful past. Also significant is the ability of her garments and container to stand as a trademark for a region, or as a way to grab the audience’s attention. There are performative elements in these paintings. Portrayed in the act of opening the jar, similar to the depiction of spreading maternity laces, the entire process of repentance and salvation occurs.

Continuing the exploration of half-length images, Chapter 4 focuses on images by the Master of the Female Half-Lengths and Jan van Hemessen in which the Magdalene plays a lute or harpsichord. This represents an iconographic innovation since no earlier tradition of the Magdalene as musician exists. Although the lute commonly indicated sexual availability, Jolly associates it with a love sickness or in the case of the Magdalene, her spiritual longing for Christ. As a metaphor for Christ the lute functions similar to the Magdalene’s inscribed belt in the *Descent from the Cross*. This analysis rests on changing notions of music and the lute. Throughout this book Jolly considers the different audiences for these images. She suggests that these musical Magdalenes would have appealed to Catholics and Protestants as Antwerp had a significant population of both. Additionally, the images cultivated an identity for Antwerp as a refined and cultured city.
Chapter 5 is dedicated to images of Mary Magdalene in a landscape setting by Adrian Isenbrant, the Master of the Female Half-Lengths, and others. Details of the Magdalene’s attire, her activities, and the surrounding landscape all contribute to the meaning of the images. Jolly identifies an unrecognized thread of meaning present in these images – melancholia. Several details, including her head-to-hand gesture identify her as a melancholic. It is in this era that melancholy began to acquire more positive associations with creative genius. Mary Magdalene is one of the first saints and the first woman to be depicted as a religious melancholic. Similar to Saint Jerome she had the gift of prophecy and of divine inspiration. Several episodes in the Magdalene’s legend alluded to her melancholic nature. These representations allow audiences to experience the melancholic state and to partake of its cures.

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