

**The Hair of the Desert Magdalen: Its Use and Meaning in Donatello's *Mary Magdalen* and Tuscan Art of the Late Fifteenth Century.**

Bess Bradfield

In Western iconography, the Mary Magdalen is popularly depicted with long, loose hair.<sup>1</sup> The origins of this emblem can be found in the Magdalen's rather complex biography. According to medieval Church teaching, as formulated by Pope Gregory the Great, she was at one and the same time those women who the New Testament variously described as Mary of Magdala, Mary of Bethany, and the unnamed 'sinner' of Luke 7.<sup>2</sup> The woman who washed Jesus' feet with tears and ointment, 'and wiped them with the hairs of her head' became one of the most popular images of the Magdalen in early medieval art, appearing in representations as diverse as the Ruthwell Cross (seventh or early eighth century) and the *Codex Egberti* (c.990).<sup>3</sup> To medieval Church writers, whose attitude toward women was strongly coloured by their views on the desirability of chastity, and a misogynist opinion of women's inherent lustfulness, the Magdalen's sin was to be identified as licentiousness, or even adultery and prostitution.<sup>4</sup> The *Catholic Encyclopaedia* offers a possible etymology of the Magdalen's name in 'a Talmudic expression for 'curling woman's hair', which the Talmud explains as that of an adulteress.'<sup>5</sup> While this etymology is unlikely, it nevertheless points out the existence

---

<sup>1</sup> E.S. Whittlesey, *Symbols and Legends in Western Art: A Museum Guide* (New York, 1972), p. 229.

<sup>2</sup> S. Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (London, 1994) pp. 95-6.

<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible, Authorised King James' Version*, Luke 7:44. The Ruthwell Cross and the *Codex Egberti*, images of the Magdalen reproduced in Haskins, *Magdalen*, p. 25, 110

<sup>4</sup> For the Church Fathers' views on women, lust and chastity, see for example St. Jerome on the 'insatiability' of 'woman's love', and other extracts in A. Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford, 1992), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> C.G. Herbermann et al, ed., *The Catholic Encyclopaedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church* (London, 1910), vol. IX, p. 761.

of a long-standing association between long, unbound hair and female sexuality, and the linking of both to the career of the Magdalen.

In medieval legend, the Magdalen continued her penance for earlier ‘sensual pleasure’ after the death of Christ by spending thirty years in a cave near Aix in complete isolation and destitution, with no clothing, and only spiritual nourishment from the angels who daily lifted her for miraculous communion in heaven.<sup>6</sup> This later Magdalen inspired a new iconography of the saint which, in late medieval Tuscan art, in the statues of Donatello and Desiderio de Settignano, the paintings of Botticelli and Jacopo del Sellaio, and many others, also gave the saint’s hair an important symbolic role. Frequently depicted as unkempt and wild, grown miraculously long to cover the saint’s nakedness, it made a deliberately harsh contrast to the beautiful, scented hair of the sinner who dipped her hair in oil, and in a single image reminded the viewer of the beginning and end of the Magdalen’s life in the service of Christ.

The legend of the desert Mary Magdalen may have appeared in England as early as the eighth century, although Saxer gave it a late ninth century origin in South Italy.<sup>7</sup> The popularity of hairy desert saints in early medieval literature and art, including John the Baptist, John Chrysostom, Paul the Hermit and St. Jerome, undoubtedly had an important influence on the development of the Magdalen’s own eremetical tradition. During the Middle Ages, the iconography of the Mary Magdalen was in particular influenced by that another female desert saint, St. Mary of Egypt, who had also been a former prostitute, and was one of the earliest female saints to be shown naked: apart, of course, from her own long hair.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is easy to confuse representations of the two

---

<sup>6</sup> One version of this legend is in Jacopus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. W.G. Ryan (Chichester, 1993) p. 375.

<sup>7</sup> Haskins, *Magdalen*, p.119. Referring to V. Saxer, *Le Culte de Marie Madeleine en Occident des origines à la fin du moyen âge* (Auxerre-Paris, 1959), p.126.

<sup>8</sup> I.E. Friesen, ‘Saints as Helpers in Dying: The Hairy Holy Women Mary Magdalen, Mary of Egypt, and Wilgefortis in the Iconography of the Late Middle Ages’, in E.E. DuBruck and B.I. Gusick, eds., *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages* (Canterbury,

saints: Pollaiuolo's painting of *The Miraculous Communion of St. Mary Magdalen* (c.1450), for example, was previously thought to be of Mary of Egypt (Plate 1).<sup>9</sup>

Donatello's mid fifteenth century statue of the Magdalen is drawing upon a well-established iconography. In Florence, one of the earliest Italian examples of the saint as hairy penitent is to be found on the so-called 'Magdalen Master' altarpiece of c.1280. (Plate 2). Scenes from her life surround a central image of the Magdalen as hermit, clad from head to ankle in her own hair. The brown hair falls so smoothly and regularly it takes a moment to realise it is not a cloak, and only a slight uneven-ness around the head and base gives any real suggestion of wildness. The Magdalen wears her hair like a chaste robe: only in her penitence can any reference be seen to her former licentiousness. In the scenes which depict the Magdalen's life before her retreat, the saint is shown with her head covered, including the scene in which she washes Christ's feet with her hair (top left). Medieval sumptuary laws forbade prostitutes from wearing a coif or veil, as a token of their immodesty.<sup>10</sup> This Magdalen however, cannot be accused of immodesty: both her clothes and her hair cover her perfectly, with little attention paid to suggesting the Magdalen's beauty or describing her form beneath the hair. Her hair appears to have grown instantly to ankle length upon her embrace of the solitary life, like the hair of another medieval saint, Agnes (whose chastity was threatened when she was stripped and taken nude to a brothel), which miraculously grew 'so long that it covered her better than any clothing'.<sup>11</sup> As the legend of St. Agnes is somewhat older than that of St. Mary Magdalen, it is probable that the iconography of

---

1999), pp. 239-256, p. 241.

<sup>9</sup> J. Pope-Hennessy, *An Introduction to Italian Sculpture, Vol. II: Italian Renaissance Sculpture* (London, 1996), p. 358.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 171.

<sup>11</sup> Voragine, *Golden Legend*, vol. I, p. 103.

the later legend was drawing, either consciously or unconsciously, upon this earlier saint's life.<sup>12</sup>

Although there were also other images of the cave-dwelling Magdalen in thirteenth and fourteenth century Italian iconography which depicted her as clothed and attractive (see for example Plate 3), the 'hairy' image of the saint, with all its evocative symbolism, nevertheless proved to be a persistent one. Fourteenth century manuscript illustrations of her legend and church icons similarly portray the saint in a thick cloak of hair.<sup>13</sup> In Tuscan art of the second half of the fifteenth century the 'hairy' image of the saint became especially popular. Sant'Antonino, Archbishop of Florence (1445-1459), who possibly inspired the commission of Donatello's statue of the Magdalen for the Florence Baptistry (Plate 4), promoted the cult of the Magdalen in late medieval Florence as an example of urgently needed penance.<sup>14</sup> Influenced by this concern, Donatello and others revived the iconography of the hairy Magdalen with an especially harsh emphasis on the penitent's ravaged appearance and suffering.

Like the wooden statue of John the Baptist, made in 1436 for the chapel of S. Maria del Frari in Venice (Plate 5), Donatello's Mary Magdalen is represented as an emaciated, weather-worn ascetic. Where the Magdalen Master's saint is a static, imperturbable representation, Donatello's statue is charged with movement and emotion. The saint, her hands about to touch in prayer, is shown advancing on the left foot, the movement drawing attention to the painful thinness of her legs. Her lips are parted as if in prayer or the moment of ecstatic communion, a deeply private gesture which is not meant to communicate with the viewer. Her hollow, sunken eyes seem to

---

<sup>12</sup> Haskins points out the legend's fifth-century origins, *Magdalen*, p. 120.

<sup>13</sup> Illustrations and Italian commentary in A. Mondadori, ed., *La Maddalena Tra Sacro e Profano: Da Giotto a De Chirico* (Florence, 1986), pp. 44-6.

<sup>14</sup> J. Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello, Sculptor* (London, 1993), p. 277. On the Church's promotion of the Magdalen as example of penance, see K.L. Jansen, 'Mary Magdalen and the Mendicants: The Preaching of Penance in the Late Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval History* 21 (1995), pp. 1-25.

gaze unfocused out of a face so gaunt the shape of the skull is clearly discernible, suggesting those female images of death which became popular towards the end of the Middle Ages, where the grinning skeleton is shown pathetically surmounted by wisps of hair as a warning against worldly *vanitas*.<sup>15</sup>

The hair that hangs from the Magdalen's head and body does not fall smoothly but in matted ropes, which stick to the side of her face and cling to her wasted form. The bare flesh of the saint is exposed as much as it is hidden by this hair, knees and elbows jutting out of its irregular covering, the absence of feminine hips or stomach revealed more completely by the belt which girds her waist. And yet, in her fine bones and the still reddish tint of her hair, the viewer can still see the remnant of a once beautiful woman, whose hair was perhaps once left uncovered to attract admiration. In 1 Corinthians, St. Paul observed that 'if a woman has long hair, it is her pride. For her hair is given her as a covering'.<sup>16</sup> Loose gold or red hair was considered to be one of the most attractive attributes of a woman in the Middle Ages, although a highly ambivalent one. In images of the virgin martyrs, it is meant to express youthful beauty and unsullied virtue; however, it was also the snare of the adulteress, the prostitute, or the witch.<sup>17</sup> The Magdalen's hair, previously her beauty and her shame, finally ends as this: the unkempt and bedraggled tangle of repentance, where earthly beauty is no longer a desirable, or even meaningful attribute. In medieval images of the sinner in hell, the damned are frequently represented as suffering through the organ in which they trespassed (see the representation of Luxuria in Plate 6).<sup>18</sup> It is especially fitting that the Magdalen, who has elected to begin her purgatory on earth, should have her suffering

---

<sup>15</sup> C. Grössinger, 'The Death of Woman', in *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Manchester, 1997), pp. 141-6, p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> *Bible*, 1 Corinthians, 11: 14-15.

<sup>17</sup> K.M. Phillips, 'Maidenhood as the Perfect Age of Woman's Life', in K.J. Lewis et al, ed., *Young Medieval Women* (Stroud, 1999), pp. 1-24, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> M. Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London, 1985), pp. 295-6.

represented by the ugly, matted disarray of her hair. Settignano's wooden statue, which shows a strong influence from Donatello, makes the connection between present wildness and former beauty even more explicit by having the shaggy-haired penitent hold aloft an ointment jar, reminding us of that first time when her hair was used in the service of Jesus, rather than sin (Plate 7).

Pope-Hennessey describes the Magdalen as wearing a 'hair robe' or hair-shirt.<sup>19</sup> According to the Catholic Encyclopaedia, a hair-shirt was 'a garment of rough cloth made from goats' hair and worn... by way of mortification and penance.'<sup>20</sup> Donatello's 1436 John the Baptist clearly wears some kind of animal skin, the hair of which curls as it falls, unlike his roughly arranged hairstyle. Moreover, the Baptist is shown wearing a cloth draped over one shoulder, visually separating the skin from the hair and beard of the Baptists' head and confirming its status as garment. The hair of Donatello's Magdalen does not fall evenly from head to feet as it does in the Magdalen Master's representation, but the relation between the saint's own hair and her hairy 'robe' is ambiguous. Her skin or robe is not differentiated as being especially curly, and the hair of her head shows no evidence of having been styled. She does not wear any clothing at all, and even her 'belt', if that is what it is, is made of hair. This Magdalen almost seems to have *become* her hair-shirt, internalising the outward sign of 'mortification and penance' in her extreme passion. The Magdalen Master's saint expressed her piety by her hands, left free from the folds of her hair, which are depicted in a variety of religious activities and gestures in the scenes from her life. However, there is no real sense in which Donatello's Magdalen can be separated from her hair: every part of her body shares in communicating intense, passionate, repentance.

---

<sup>19</sup> Pope-Hennessey, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> G. C. Alston, 'Hairshirt', in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. VII, pp. 113-4, p.113.

Inn the *Golden Legend* another female saint, Agatha, tells her persecutor ‘These pains are my delight!...The wheat cannot be stored in the barn unless it has been thoroughly threshed and separated from the chaff: so my soul cannot enter paradise unless you...give my body harsh treatment.’<sup>21</sup> Donatello’s Magdalen is one whose body is being ‘thoroughly threshed’ by suffering in order to enter paradise undefiled. Donatello reveals to us her body in the process of being stripped of all former meaning. Although she is naked, this is not an erotic image: the thigh which reveals itself through the hair reminds us of the vulnerability of the body and the transitory nature of human beauty rather than excites us to admiration. Her hair seems to lap her body like flames: she is as one purging herself in spiritual fire in order to slough off all sinfulness and corporality. According to Sant’Antonino, the Magdalen regained through penitence the saintly crown she lost when she gave way to lust.<sup>22</sup> In restoration, gilding was revealed on the head and body of the *Magdalen*, a fiery, heavenly touch of beauty contrasting poignantly with the naturalistic pigment of her exposed and suffering flesh.<sup>23</sup>

Donatello’s Mary Magdalen is a more extreme image of suffering asceticism than his John the Baptist. In a painting by Jacopo del Sellaio, also from the late fifteenth century (Plate 8),<sup>24</sup> three desert-saints are painted together: Saints Jerome, John the Baptist, and Mary Magdalen. Again, the Magdalen presents the wildest image, and her retreat from the world the most austere. Appearing in the far right of the scene, in the ecstatic posture of Donatello’s statue, she is the most removed figure, furthest from the path which leads back to the inhabited world and closest to the rocky walls of the cave, and she is also, spatially at least, the highest of the three saints. Unlike Jerome and the

---

<sup>21</sup> Voragine, *Golden Legend*, vol. I, p. 155.

<sup>22</sup> Pope-Hennessy, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, pp. 358-9.

<sup>23</sup> Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello*, p. 277.

<sup>24</sup> For dates and Italian commentary, see Mondadori, ed., *La Maddalena*, pp. 53-5.

Baptist, she alone is unclothed except for a long hair shirt, which, more like human hair than animal skin, flows in tendrils on the ground as she kneels in prayer.

Another, more famous example of the Magdalen pictured with John the Baptist is Botticelli's *Trinity with St. Mary Magdalen and St. John the Baptist, the Archangel Raphael and Tobias*, c.1491-94 (Plate 9), an altarpiece painted for the Augustinian Convent of Sant'Elisabetta delle Convertite in Florence, founded in 1329 to house penitent prostitutes.<sup>25</sup> In this painting John the Baptist, who is rather a handsome young man with well-groomed hair, wears a red cloth draped over his hairy robe. It is the Mary Magdalen who is the true hermit, gaunt and naked, her hair seeming to fall straight from her head to the ground. Shown on the right of the scene, John the Baptist gazes out at the viewer, with one hand pointing out the body of the Crucified Christ, and it is also to his side of the picture that God the Father inclines his far-seeing gaze. However, it is Mary Magdalen who has the most exalted position, being placed on the right side of Christ, closest to his drooping head and pierced side. In another popular representation from the life of the saint, the Magdalen was shown weeping at the foot of Cross, demonstrating her special relationship with Christ in her privileged place of mourning. Botticelli herself painted her in this way in *The Mystical Crucifixion* (c. 1500) (see Plate 10). Although Botticelli depicts her with head covered, in other renderings the Magdalen's hair is yet again an important feature: loose in the disarray of grief before those feet which it had earlier washed in oil.<sup>26</sup>

In the *Trinity*, the Magdalen's obvious suffering also links her especially intimately to the dead Christ. Her covering of lank hair, all feminine beauty vanished, relates her to his pallid, wounded body. Mary Magdalen, standing against the cave in

---

<sup>25</sup> Dates and commentary from W. Bradford and D. Ekserdjian, in E. Foy and C. Butterfield, eds., *The Courtauld Gallery at Somerset House* (London, 1998, repr. 2000), p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> See the representations in Mondadori, ed., *La Maddalena*, pp. 102-107.

which she has voluntarily chosen to incarcerate herself, is like a woman in a living tomb, with her hair for winding sheet. Where John addresses the world and the viewer with his gaze, the Magdalen, dead-in-life, looks to higher things, gazing up towards Jesus and God. The guidance that is being offered in this picture begins with John, who, in his Biblical role, points the way to Christ, and ends with the Magdalen, who, by her suffering and prayer, reveals the hope for spiritual grace and remission of sins which Christ offered by his death. Her matted hair and clasped hands offer an example and encouragement to others who must also endeavour to ‘wean themselves from the world’ in order to gain salvation; moreover, in acting as a visual intermediary between the viewer and the Father and the Son, she also reminds the viewer of her intercessory power.<sup>27</sup>

Towards her feet walk the miniature figures of Tobias and the angel. Bradford and Ekserdjian, in their commentary on this picture, say that the presence of these two smaller figures ‘cannot be satisfactorily explained; they may, however, refer to the guidance and apprenticing of the illegitimate children of the Convertite’.<sup>28</sup> In fact, they also appear in an earlier picture of the Magdalen by Francesco d’Antonio di Bartolomeo, also painted in Florence (Plate 3), where the Angel is shown presenting the figures of Tobias and a nun to Mary Magdalen at the entrance to her cave. Their appearance, and their role in this scene, would seem to reinforce the idea of ‘guidance’ in interpreting the Botticelli picture, and also link their presence especially to the Magdalen. I am less convinced that the ‘guidance’ was intended for the ‘illegitimate children’ however, than for the penitent prostitutes themselves, who had the Magdalen for their patron saint.<sup>29</sup> The Magdalen and the Baptist both indicate the contemplative,

---

<sup>27</sup> On the power and popularity of penitent sainthood, see R. Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (London, 1984), pp. 133-40.

<sup>28</sup> Foy and Butterfield, eds., *Courtauld Gallery*, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> K. Rarzman, ‘Gender, Religious Representation and Cultural Production in Early Modern Italy’, in J.C. Brown and R.C. Davis, eds., *Gender and Society in Renaissance*

reclusive life; however, the Magdalen's harsher, asexual appearance and shaggier hair would however distinguish her from John as one who had to suffer more, in repentance for her previous sexual history. Prostitution was becoming of increasing concern to the authorities of Florence, and Trexler notes that by the early sixteenth century, it was perceived to be an especially dangerous evil.<sup>30</sup> The Magdalen's popularity as an image in the city was no doubt influenced by this concern for reform.

However, she was not meant to be exclusively meaningful to prostitutes. It has been suggested that in the eschatological imagery of Botticelli's *Mystical Crucifixion* (Plate 10) the Magdalene represented the entire 'city of Florence repentant after chastisement'.<sup>31</sup> For Sant'Antonino, the Magdalen was a mirror for *all* penitents, lay and religious.<sup>32</sup> In the very intensity of her suffering, moreover, she surpassed all the over desert saints in her worthiness as a model. According to a sermon given by another Dominican, Giordano da Rivalto, at the church of Mary Magdalen in Florence on 22 July 1305, the Magdalen was the most perfect example of saintly penitence: 'For it was read of St. Mary of Egypt and Paul the hermit...that they ate grass and such things, but she [Mary Magdalen] neither ate nor drank for thirty-two years, except for heavenly victuals.'<sup>33</sup> The Mary Magdalen is represented in art as being even more withered, hairy and wild than her male equivalent John the Baptist, who at least fed at least on locusts and honey.<sup>34</sup> Pollaiuolo emphasised the contrast between bodily neglect and the

---

*Italy* (London, 1998), pp. 213-233, p. 224-226.

<sup>30</sup> R.C. Trexler, 'Florentine Prostitution in the Fifteenth Century: Patrons and Clients', in *The Women of Renaissance Florence: Power and Dependence in Renaissance Florence, Vol. II* (Binghamton, New York, 1993), pp. 31-65.

<sup>31</sup> J. Rossiaud, *Medieval Prostitution*, trans. L.G. Cochrane (Oxford, 1998), p. 156.

<sup>32</sup> Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello*, p. 277.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Haskins, *Magdalen*, p. 147 from D. Moreni, ed., *Prediche del Beato Fra Giordano da Rivalta...recitate in Firenze dal MCCCIII al MCCCVI* (Florence, 1813), vol. I, pp. 181-2.

<sup>34</sup> C.W. Bynum suggests that female saints were more closely associated with penitential fasting than their male counterparts. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (London, 1987), pp. 113-149.

spiritual nourishment which was both the Magdalen's sustenance and reward by depicting the saint's miraculous communion (Plate 1). The Magdalen's sun-browned skin and coarse hair, her voluntary embrace of a life like an animal in the wild, are yet those self-same attributes which elevate her out of the true bestiality, which is sin, into the company of heavenly angels.

In a near-contemporary 1492 German version of the communion by Tillman Riemenschneider, the Magdalen's hair grows over her entire body, (Plate 11), just as it grows on animals, or that other kind of hairy woman popular in the late fifteenth century, the wild woman (Plate 12).<sup>35</sup> The hair of Italian Magdalens tends to be less fur-like than their German counterparts, nevertheless their extreme hairiness exceeds the bounds of normal human appearance. Grössinger suggests that part of the reason for the popularity of the wild people in late medieval art lay in a belief that they were representative of a 'simple and free life...a Golden Age'.<sup>36</sup> While the wild woman's fertility and sexuality initially seems far removed from the austere chastity of the desert saint, it is possible that the artistic fashion for both derived from some shared interest in exploring 'otherness', and perhaps nostalgia for a mythical, more perfect past. The Magdalen was frequently discussed by scholastic writers as a kind of New Eve.<sup>37</sup> In her hairy nakedness, she seems to suggest something of a return to pre-lapsarian purity, adopting that wild nakedness which the scholastics termed *nuditas naturalis*, in order to redeem herself from that earlier nudity (or *nuditas criminalis*) which was meant to be a sign of vice in the sinner.<sup>38</sup>

In these late fifteenth century representations, the Magdalen's wild hair was a highly useful and versatile image which could be used to convey a wide range of

---

<sup>35</sup> Grössinger, *Picturing Women*, p. 81.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 87.

<sup>37</sup> See for example St. Ambrose's *Commentary on Luke*, as partially translated in Blamires, ed. *Woman Defamed*.

<sup>38</sup> Marina Warner, 'Nudas Veritas', in *Monuments and Maidens*, pp. 294-328.

meanings - including sexuality, repentance, austerity, nakedness and modesty, wildness and sanctity, *vanitas* and death, and hope for life ever-lasting - which I have unfortunately only been able to briefly describe here in relation to a very small selection of representations.<sup>39</sup> However, in the sixteenth century a new image of the Magdalen in her grotto appeared which effectively replaced Donatello's model, inspired by new conceptions of the nature of sacred and profane love and beauty, and the reawakened interest in the classical nude which also inspired Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (c. 1482-6).<sup>40</sup>

In this later interpretation, the hair of the Magdalen is more ornament than hair-shirt. Where Donatello's *Magdalen* subtly hints at former beauty, in order to contrast it with later renunciation, Titian's *Penitent Magdalen* of 1531-5 is still evidently a highly sexually attractive, nubile young woman (Plate 12). The naked legs and arms of Donatello's statue were shocking precisely because of their lack of beauty, their harsh renunciation of femininity. Titian's saint, however, is startlingly nude, for all that she is apparently making a remarkably ineffective attempt to draw the glossy waves of her hair across her breasts. Although she still casts her gaze up to heaven, her gaze is less anguished than reflective. Titian is drawing upon another aspect of the Magdalen legend here: as Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha, she was also the symbol for the contemplative life preferred over the active.<sup>41</sup> However, he is also drawing upon classical images, and his model for the saint is copied from a representation of Venus.<sup>42</sup> While the painting was ostensibly meant to depict the physical beauty of the Magdalen

---

<sup>39</sup> For a wide-ranging survey of the Magdalen in Florentine iconography, see Mondadori's catalogue, *La Maddalena*. On the various meanings of hair in Western art, see A.C. Faxon, 'Hair/Haircutting', in M.R. Roberts, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Comparative Iconography: Themes Depicted in Works of Art* (London, 1998), Vol. I, pp. 373-379.

<sup>40</sup> Haskins, *Magdalen*, pp. 236-239.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 210.

<sup>42</sup> P. Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity* (Manchester, 1997), p. 177.

as a reflection of her beautiful spirituality, it is difficult to avoid the erotic implications of the picture's associations with the Goddess of Love.

Titian's representation of the saint became immediately popular. In Florence, for example, Giovanni Pedrini detto Giampietrino's *Saint Mary Magdalen* (early sixteenth century) was given rosy cheeks, a soft, demure and reflective glance, but also very exposed breasts, which the tendrils of her hair only serve to frame more effectively, and rather titillatingly (see Plate 14). Ultimately, Titian's sensuous, weeping Magdalen has had a more lasting effect on the iconography of the saint than Donatello's hairy recluse, and generally receives more critical attention.<sup>43</sup> However, in rejecting the image of the hairy Magdalen, perhaps something has been lost in the subtle range and variety of symbolism which Donatello's solitary penitent was able to suggest so effectively, and in the emotive force of its almost unearthly passion. Marina Warner argues that from the fifteenth century onwards the Virgin Mary became an increasingly remote figure of unattainable perfection, where the Magdalen became correspondingly approachable.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps, however, Titian's *Magdalen* in a sense became *too* attainable: a sensual object of art and beauty to be praised, admired and even lusted after, rather than the deeply, inwardly, repentant subject of Donatello's statue, to be wondered at and meditated upon.

---

<sup>43</sup> Haskins for example, devotes well over ten pages to a discussion of the painting and its context, where Donatello receives only a paragraph: *Magdalen*, pp. 234-251.

<sup>44</sup> M. Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London, 2000), pp. 224-235, p. 235.

---

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

*The Holy Bible, Authorised King James Version.* Cambridge, 1979.

Blamires, A., ed. *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts.* Oxford, 1992.

Voragine, J. de. *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints.* Trans. and ed. W.G. Ryan. Chichester, 1993.

### Secondary Sources

Barzman, K. 'Gender, Religious Representation and Cultural Production in Early Modern Italy'. *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy.* Ed. J.C. Brown and R.C. Davis. London, 1998. Pp. 213-233.

Bynum, C.W. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women.* London, 1987.

Foy, E. and Butterfield, E., eds. *The Courtauld Gallery at Somerset House.* London, 1998, repr. 2000.

Friesen, I.E. 'Saints as Helpers in Dying: The Hairy Holy Women Mary Magdalene, Mary of Egypt, and Wilgefortis in the Iconography of the Late Middle Ages'. *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages.* Ed. E.E. DuBruck and B.I. Gusick. Canterbury, 1999. Pp. 239-256.

Grössinger, C. *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art.* Manchester, 1997.

Haskins, S. *The Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor.* London, 1994.

Herbermann, C.G. et al, ed., *The Catholic Encyclopaedia: An International Work of*

- Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*. London, 1910.
- Jansen, K.L. 'Mary Magdalen and the Mendicants: The Preaching of Penance in the Late Middle Ages'. *Journal of Medieval History* 21 (1995). Pp. 1-25.
- Kieckhefer, R. *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu*. London, 1984.
- Mondadori, A., ed. *La Maddalena Tra Sacro e Profano: Da Giotto a De Chirico*. Florence, 1986.
- Olsen, R.J. *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*. London, 1992.
- Phillips, K.M. 'Maidenhood as the Perfect Age of Woman's Life'. *Young Medieval Women*. Ed. K.J. Lewis. Stroud, 1999. Pp. 1-24
- Pope-Hennessey, J. *Donatello, Sculptor*. London, 1993.
- Pope-Hennessey, J. *An Introduction to Italian Sculpture. Vol. II. Italian Renaissance Sculpture*. London, 1996.
- Roberts, H.R., ed. *The Encyclopaedia of Comparative Iconography: Themes Depicted in Works of Art*. Vol. I. London, 1998.
- Rossiaud, J. *Medieval Prostitution*. Trans. L.G. Cochrane. Oxford, 1998.
- Tinagli, P. *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity*. Manchester, 1997.
- Trexler, R.C. *The Women of Renaissance Florence. Power and Dependence in Renaissance Florence*. Vol. II. Binghampton, New York, 1993.
- Whittlesey, *Symbols and Legends in Western Art: A Museum Guide*. New York, 1972.
- Warner, M. *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*. London, 1976, repr. 2000.
- Warner, M. *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*. London, 1985.