

MARY MAGDALENE: ICONOGRAPHIC IMAGE AND LITERARY SUBJECT IN COUNTER-REFORMATION SPAIN

In Spain, as in the rest of Europe, Mary Magdalene's presence is certainly noted in the arts and in the literature of the time as she is depicted as an exemplar of conversion. Magdalene's story was used to spiritually move other sinners to lead a life free of sin, more in consonance with the Catholic Church's doctrine. Despite the Church's efforts to combat heretic visual representations of biblical scenes, the artistic freedom granted to the subject of Mary Magdalene in the arts during the controlled atmosphere of Tridentine and Post-Tridentine Europe, allowed artists and writers alike to represent her as both an ardent lover and a penitent sinner. Nevertheless, whether it was in the arts or in literature, portraying the famous sinner became a challenge in itself, given the repressive measures that were implemented by the Council of Trent (1545-1568). How then was this subject able to escape some of the strict rules of decorum and decency that most of the other saints were subjected to? In addition, how did she become an effective image used to disseminate the Church's doctrine? In order to answer these pressing questions, it is worth noting first what the Council's new measures were in relation to the representation of religious art.

One of the critical topics that were discussed during one of the Council of Trent's meetings was the accuracy with which religious images and scenes were to be represented in order to avoid any misrepresentations that would otherwise be considered heretic. Biblical images, especially those pertaining to the exemplary lives of saints, were meant to instruct the laity on important Catholic doctrines. For this reason, such visual depictions were carefully overseen by the Church. In December 1563, under the Sovereign Pontiff, Pius IV, the Council of Trent made the following assessment under the heading "On the Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of Saints, and on Sacred Images":¹

The Bishops also shall diligently teach and suggest, that by the histories of the mysteries of our redemption, expressed in pictures, and other similitudes, the people are instructed and confirmed, in remembering and daily calling to mind the Articles of Faith: as likewise the extraordinary fruit and profit is received from all holy images; not only because the people are admonished of the benefits and gifts which are conferred upon them by Christ, but also because the miracles and wholesome examples of the saints are set before their eyes, that they may thank God for them, and imitate them in their lives and conversations; and may be stirred up to adore and love God, and exercise and delight in godliness. But if any one shall teach or believe contrary to these decrees, let him be accursed. (*The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* 147)

In hindsight, the ideas set forth by the Council of Trent marked a new trend of religious art of concentrated emotivity and lacking in unnecessary superfluous content that would otherwise be distracting to the faithful. It was emphasized that religious subjects were to be accurately represented, and in view of that, artists were limited "to keep very closely to the biblical or traditional story which he was treating and not let his imagination add ornaments to it for the sake of making it more attractive" (Blunt 110-11). This censorship was echoed throughout the arts and, in particular, in the treatises that instructed artists to adhere and follow the new codes of religious decorum, as instituted during the Council's twenty-fifth session.

Many of the influential Spanish authors who wrote treatises on the aesthetics of art during the seventeenth century include Fray José de Sigüenza, Butrón, Vicente Carducho, and Francisco Pacheco².

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¹ This regulation included censorship in the churches: "Lastly, so great is the diligence and care the bishop ought to take about these things, that nothing may appear disorderly or preposterous, or done in a hurly-burly, nothing profane or dishonest, seeing holiness and devoutness becometh the house of God: To the end therefore these things may be the more faithfully and duly observed, the Holy Synod ordains, that it shall be lawful for none, to put, or cause to be put up in any place or Church, thought exempt, any unusual image, except it shall be approved of by the Bishop; nor shall any new Miracles be admitted, or new Relics received without the knowledge and approbation of the Bishop; who, as soon as any such thing shall be known abroad, and come to his ears, shall with the counsel and advice of some Divines, and other Godly Men, do whatsoever he shall judge consentaneous and agreeable to truth and godliness. But in case any doubtful or difficult abuse be to be removed, and extirpated or any weighty question arise about these things" (*The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 147).

² Fray José de Sigüenza (*Historia de la Orden de San Jerónimo*, 1605), Butrón (*Discursos apologéticos [...] del arte y*

All of these authors showed an explicit appeal to the rules of the Tridentine decree in terms of the moral and didactic role of religious paintings. For example, Carducho's treatise, *Dialogues of painting, its defense, origin, essence, definition, modes and difference* (*Diálogos de la pintura; su defensa, origen, esencia, definición, modos y diferencia*) (1633), clearly embodies the Council's new measures, which undoubtedly compromised the artistic freedom of the artist:

And pertaining to the genre of Paintings, I understand that the 25 session of the Council of Trent has prevented anyone from painting or placing any new image in the temples without the approval of the Bishop. (350: *my translation*)³.

On the other hand, Francisco Pacheco, known to be an extremely devout Christian who also held a post within the Inquisition to oversee the decorum of religious paintings, is perhaps the most influential of all the authors. His treatise, *Art of Painting* (*Arte de la Pintura*), was meant to be strictly instructive as it guided artists on the proper manner for representing religious motifs in their paintings. This included instruction on the concept of decorum, honesty and decency, which was to be applied to religious art as established by Trent. This new direction in iconic representation of sacred images pressed the importance of the Church's need to refocus its attention on instructing the faithful with the teachings of Catholicism and preserving them from error.

During this time, the penitent Magdalene became one of the most important iconic representations. Viewed as a model of penitence and repentance due to her exemplar conversion, she became a popular theme among writers and artists alike during the Counter-Reformation movement. The literature of this period evidences Magdalene's gained popularity⁴. An important treatise, belonging to the Spanish mystical tradition, is Malón de Echaide's *The Conversion of Magdalene* (*La conversión de la Magdalena*) (1588). This Spanish Augustinian monk's work, regarded as an exhortation to a religious life, focuses on the states of the soul and presents Mary in all the phases of her life: as a sinner, a penitent and a saint. Malón de Echaide presents her as a "rare and admirable example of penitence" ("raro y admirable ejemplo de penitencia") (1: 78), whose conversion gives hope to other sinners:

Look upon the example of this repentant sinner, forgiven and sanctified, and since there was a remedy for her, there will also be one for you (women); and thus, she finds herself encumbered in God's grace and friendship, and there will also be loins to receive you (women). (3:55: *my translation*)⁵.

Malón de Echaide, along with other theologians, proposed Mary Magdalene as a model of repentance, and therefore, she became an iconic figure during this period by exemplifying the penitential image ascribed to her. Due to her past, which had to be taken into account, this saint could be represented in multiple ways, referencing her past and present life.

Notwithstanding the precautions that were taken by Trent to ensure that religious images adhered to the new guidelines of decorum, the iconic representation of the penitent Magdalene became particularly challenging for artists due to the combination of sacred and secular elements that encompassed this saint's life, which in some instances became distracting in its rich sensual appeal. During this highly surveilled period, painters and artists shaped a relatively homogeneous representation of Mary Magdalene, the repentant harlot. Magdalenian iconography counted upon precise objects and attributes to identify both her sensual nature and spirituality: her long loose hair, her pearls, her tears, the precious ointment jar which recalls the washing of Christ's feet, a torn dress, a skull, a crucifix, a wild scenery, a precipice in the background, bare feet, and the bible or religious book, which is representative of the Scriptures.

These are the building blocks of the ravaged prostitute-turned-penitent, which at times, in composition, failed to meet the new strict codes of decorum. For example, the foremost attraction of an earlier painting of the Italian Mannerist, Tiziano Vecellio (Titian)⁶, is its great sensuality which stands as a

de la pintura, 1626), Vicente Carducho (*Diálogos de la pintura; su defensa, origen, esencia, definición, modos y diferencia*, 1633), and Francisco Pacheco (*Arte de la pintura*, written in 1638 and published in 1649). Two European authors that were influential Spanish authors were Gabriel Palcott (*Discurso en torno a las imágenes sagradas y profanas*, 1582), Juan de Molano (*De picturis et imaginibus sacris*, 1570). Gilio's treatise, *On the Errors of the Painters*, 1564, along with Paleotti's discourse on the images, "are the basis for the widespread representation of the Counter-Reformation aesthetic, according to which the Church surrounded the inventiveness of Renaissance arte with precise rules" (Gilbert 393).

³ "Y deste género de Pinturas entiendo ha prevenido el Santo Concilio de Tridentino Sesión 25 que no se pinten, y que ninguno sea osado poner en los templos alguna nueva imagen, sin que lo mire, y apruebe el Obispo. (350)"

⁴ For example, Erasmo di Valvasone's *Lagrima di Santa Maria Maddalena* (1560) was a very popular work during this period. Another important work is Malón de Echaide's *The Conversion of Magdalene* (*La conversión de la Magdalena*) (1588)).

⁵ "Mirad al ejemplo de esta pecadora y arrepentida, perdonada y santificada, que pues para ella hubo remedio, también lo habrá para vosotras; y así ella se ve envuelta en gracia y amistad de Dios, también habrá entrañas para recibirnos a vosotras. (3: 55)"

⁶ *St. Mary Magdalene*. c.1530-1535, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, Florence, Italy. Some of the Italian Mannerists include

reminder of Magdalene's past disorderly life. The bare-breasted Magdalene appears in the foreground, attempting to cover her naked body with her long hair and hands to no avail. While her beauty is emphasized by the contrasting light colors, and thus becoming the prominent feature of the painting, it is her gaze directed toward heaven that stands as a sign of devotion along with her teary eyes that transmit the emotive intention of the painting. Both Mary's teary eyes and upward pious gaze become the fundamental elements of these paintings that represent the penitent Magdalene. Another Italian Mannerist painter, Paolo Veronese⁷ also portrays the saint with long flowing hair looking upwards, while maintaining some sensuality by revealing her half naked shoulder barely covering her bosom with her garb. The other objects that identify this subject's contemplative life in the desert (alluding to a hermitage life) are the crucifix, the skull, and the book. There is also some emotion present, as a sign of repentance, which is evident and palpable through the subject's upward gaze, elevating her eyesight toward God, and the divine light that is illuminating her face symbolizes absolution.

Similarly to Veronese, El Greco presents the penitent Magdalene in parallel poses in three different paintings. In the first two, *Magdalena Penitente* (1580-86)⁸ and *Magdalena Penitente* (1577-80)⁹, there is a cave-like setting, and a dark sky that contrasts with the subject's lighter tones. Magdalene's upward gaze toward heaven and clasped hands reference a life of penance while her long blond hair emphasizes her sensual beauty. Two of the characteristic objects of this subject's life, the skull and the alabaster jar, also comprise the representation of the subject's penance. In the third painting¹⁰, El Greco represents the penitent Magdalene standing next to a crucifix gazing downward with an opened hand pointing to the skull – a symbol of mortality – that is lying next to her. These objects stand as a reminder of Magdalene's repentance, but they also symbolize our mortality and need to repent for our sins. Moreover, Spanish Mannerism is not absent from such sexually explicit depictions of the saint. An example of this is Luis de Carvajal's *La Magdalena penitente*¹¹, in which one of the most salient characteristics of the piece is Magdalene's nude right breast and bare shoulders.

However, out of the Mannerist paintings aforementioned, Titian's depiction of the prostitute turned saint is by far the most scandalous and indecent; however, keeping in mind that it was painted before the Council of Trent, it perhaps fails to have the same impact as those produced during the Baroque era. Despite the strict rules conferred to the Baroque movement that were actively enforced by the Catholic Church, the most important patron of the arts during this time, some Baroque painters dared represent a more sensuous penitent Magdalene. Worth mentioning among the Flemish Baroque painters are Gérard Seghers (1591-1651)¹², Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641), and Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). While Gérard Seghers' penitent Magdalene is shown with disheveled hair sensually lying down on the ground surrounded by objects that symbolize her spirituality, Van Dyck and Paul Rubens' subject is characterized by her nudity. In the image, *Mary Magdalene*, Van Dyck portrays an ashamed Magdalene who is aimlessly trying to cover her breasts with her dress, whereas in two of Rubens' paintings, *Ecstasy of Mary Magdalene* (c.1619-20) and *Mary Magdalene, detail from The Deposition* (1602), it is only the subject's right breast which is being revealed.

However, these seminude portrayals of the saint are not what one finds in Cigoli's *Penitent Magdalene* (1598). As an Italian painter of the late Mannerist and early Baroque style, he presents a completely nude Magdalene who, through her upward gaze, is still able to elicit a slight level of emotion. Other Italian Baroque painters who represent a less overtly sensual Magdalene in composition, and still maintain some level of piousness, include Domenico Feti (1589-1624)¹³, Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652)¹⁴, Reni Guido (1575-1642)¹⁵, and the Spanish-born Italian painter, José de Ribera (ca.1591-1652)¹⁶, among others. The only nudity present in their compositions is the bare shoulders and feet of the saint. For example, José de Ribera preserves some of the subject's sensuality in both paintings by exposing her shoulders, her long hair, and naked feet, but there is still a rendering of the saint's piousness and repentance. Ribera

Correggio (ca.1489-1534), Tiziano Vecellio (ca.1485-1576), and the Greek-born Spanish painter, El Greco (1541-1614).

⁷ Veronese, Paolo (ca.1528-1588): *Magdalena penitente*, 1583, Musco del Prado, Madrid.

⁸ Nelson-Atkins, Museum of Art Kansas-City.

⁹ Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts.

¹⁰ *La Magdalena penitente con el crucifijo*, 1587, Musco Cau Ferrat, Sitges, Spain.

¹¹ Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo.

¹² *The Repentant Magdalene*, c. 1627-30, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

¹³ *Saint Mary Magdalene Penitent*, 1615.

¹⁴ *Magdalena penitente*, 1617-20, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, Florence, Italy.

¹⁵ *Repentant Magdalene*, 1626.

¹⁶ *Éxtasis de la Magdalena*, 1636, Museo de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid; *Magdalena, o Santa Tais*, 1641, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

achieves this through Magdalene's devout pose and meditative gaze toward heaven.

Spanish Baroque art is also not absent from producing such sensual representations of the saint. In the composition entitled *The Penitent Magdalene* (c. 1650-65), Bartolomé Esteban Murillo paints a Magdalene who appears to be undressed and is covering her body with a garb that is placed in front of her body. This painting juxtaposes Juan Carreño de Miranda's¹⁷ subject, whose naked breasts are barely being covered by the locks of her hair, and whose relaxed pose in which her feet are shown, exhibits a rather blatantly sexual pose. It may be surprising that this and any of the abovementioned paintings had escaped censorship due to their indecent content, but during this period Magdalene was perhaps the only subject who was exempt from the Church's firm and strict rules of decorum.

As in the arts, the image of the penitent Magdalene was also depicted in the literature of the time. For example, the famous seventeenth century Spanish poet and playwright, Lope de Vega, illustrates a rather erotic conversion of the saint in the expiatory poem entitled "Las Lágrimas de la Magdalena"¹⁸, while he also presents a poetics of meditation, intended to convince sinners to follow the saint's exemplary conversion.

Lope's poem, "Las Lágrimas de la Magdalena"¹⁹, begins as the narrator of this epic poem calls upon the young Filida to follow in the saint's steps, by propounding a meditation on the life of this woman sinner:

Hear the exemplar saint, see the image,
prodigious miracle of beauty,
of that who teaches you and inspires you
in such a night of err, such pure light. (17-20; *my translation*)²⁰.

The poetic narrator is keen to set Mary Magdalene as the object of meditation due to her exemplar conversion, and through her story lies the hope that she will move other sinners like herself to abstain from a life of abject sin regardless of the difficulty inherent in such an endeavor. Therefore, the narrator insists by advising Filida to not give up when temptation becomes a deterrent in the search for the Lord's forgiveness, and to meditate on the life of this "exemplary saint" ("santo ejemplar")²¹:

If the fragile memory conspires
against your attempt and in the weapons lasts,
Filida, here you will find them divine
drawing the curtains to this painting. (21-24; *my translation*)²².

These verses stand as a prelude to Magdalene's conversion at Christ's feet. The poet illustrates this scene, considered to be one of the most visual cycles of her life, with explicit sensuality whereby the washing of the feet turns into an erotic and sensual meeting between a woman sinner and Christ²³. The setting of this scene is further dramatized due to the vividness of the imagery that is presented through the "composition" of place²⁴. This feature of meditation is performed as one imagines oneself to be present in the same place where the event took place, and recreates the events as they unfold before one's eyes (Martz 30). Such practice of "composition" grants Lope the license to create an emotionally drenching piece fused with drama and lyricism, and as we contemplate the encounter between Magdalene and Christ, we experience it with all our senses, becoming witnesses to this sinner's quest for salvation. Therefore, by narrating their meeting in the present tense, there is immediacy created in the scene as we become visual participants, stricken with emotion, and thus, triggering a contemplative state of inner personal reflection where we can come to "understand the meaning of the mystery thus re-created by memory (and imagination)" in the hope that this will lead to a penitent state (Powers 279)²⁵. This is the narrator's

¹⁷ *Magdalena Penitente*, Museo de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid.

¹⁸ For an analysis on the erotic conversion that takes place in the poem, see my article entitled: "Lope de Vega and 'Las lágrimas de la Magdalena': An Erotic Conversion" *El Siglo de Oro antes y después de El Arte Nuevo: nuevos enfoques desde una perspectiva pluridisciplinaria*. Ed. Oana Andreia Sâmbrian-Toma. Craiova, Romania: Editura Sitech, 2009, pp. 49-58. Print.

¹⁹ This poem may be found in Antonio Carreño and Antonio Sánchez Jiménez's edition of the *Rimas Sacras*, 2006.

²⁰ "Oye el santo ejemplar, la imagen mira,/ portentoso milagro de hermosura,/ de aquella que te enseña y que te inspira/ en tal noche de error lumbre tan pura. (pp.17-20).

²¹ Filida, as well as the reader is the implied audience: "Baroque devotional poetry almost always supplies the reader with the sense of a specific setting and an implied audience within the poem" (Warnke 137).

²² "Si la frágil memoria se conspira/ contra tu intento y en las armas dura,/ Filida, aquí las hallarás divinas/ corriendo a este retrato las cortinas." (pp. 21-24).

²³ See my article entitled "Lope de Vega and 'Las lágrimas de la Magdalena': An Erotic Conversion".

²⁴ "Other features contribute to the dramatic effect of Baroque poetic devotion: the fact that it is typically offered in the present tense, not as something that has happened, but as something that is happening, and the fact that it is projected in a vitally engaged idiom- abrupt, exclamatory, and colloquial" (Warnke, p. 137).

²⁵ In his article, "Lope de Vega and the 'Lágrimas de la Magdalena'", Perry J. Powers relates Lope's epic poem with the

intention, throughout this poetics of meditation, to emotionally move his audience by re-creating the events of Mary's conversion, including Christ's Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection. In this case, the implied audience of the poem is Filida, who like Lope, has also engaged in disorderly love and sexual promiscuity. However, Powers argues that "Lope is not trying to stir our emotions," and instead "his purpose is not to make us 'see' with 'our corporal eyes', but to make us perceive with our inner eye; our presence is psychological, not 'physical,' the process is not that of observation, but of penetration" (280). Although this is evident from the opening stanzas, Lope's initial intention is to move us emotionally, so that through Mary's long cry and distraught state, we can identify with her pain and reflect on our own sins. In hindsight, the one hundred octave poem ends precisely with the poetic narrator's determination to repentant for his sins: "with her saintly example we shall cry / for not having cried, and we must cry" ("con su ejemplo santísimo lloremos/ no haber llorado, y que llorar debemos" (799-800). These lines reveal the effect Mary's cry should have on her audience, and by extension, Lope and the reader. Her painful tears and desperate cry urge her audience to transcend from being mere passive observers to penitent participants by becoming more aware of their sins. Mary's conversion is therefore meant as an example for one to follow. With her powerful dramatic performance in the poem, it can motivate anyone, including our famous sinner and wayward priest, Lope, to repent for his sins.

Lope's intention to emotionally move his audience as they become witnesses to Magdalene's story, is comparable to the effect that the paintings of the penitent saint were meant to have on her audience. In allowing for her nude and mortified sinful flesh to be illustrated, there was a sense of shame and repentance that was transmitted to the viewer, thereby accomplishing the Church's aim to promulgate its doctrines. As an important reminder and for didactic purposes, this saint's physical attributes become the instrument of her salvation, and both her hair and tears stand for the mortified flesh, which in turn symbolizes increasing spiritual gain. This explains why these elements were to be included in that artistic representations of the penitent subject, while they also resulted in illustrations that were sometimes lascivious in nature. However, the affective appeal to these paintings was critical to its devotional purpose, and to this effect, it was permissible to portray the "exemplar of conversion", Mary Magdalene, by combining both spiritual and sensual characteristics. It is this open and justifiable permissibility by the Church that the artists of the period, in particular the Spanish poet Lope de Vega, found in this subject amid the surveilled environment of seventeenth century. This allowed them to illustrate an overtly sensual Magdalene in their paintings, as well as in their literary works.

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