

## ***Georges De La Tour's Magdalene and the Smoking Flame***

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- by Kelly Bagdanov

Georges de La Tour's, *Magdalene with the Smoking Flame*, is a French Baroque work that envisions Mary Magdalene in a state of deep contemplation. With clarity of form, and a limited color palette, De La Tour creates a forceful work that captures this quiet moment. In this post we will explore the composite character that was Mary Magdalene during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.



## **Who was De La Tour?**

Georges De La Tour was a French Baroque painter who worked during the first half of the 1600's. He was noted for his use of light and moving religious works. Heavily influenced by Caravaggio, De la Tour combined Caravaggio's use of light with simplified forms that eliminated extraneous details, and concentrated the focus of the viewer on the indispensable details of his story.

While De La Tour would eventually become the painter to the King, the bulk of his work was bought by the wealthy bourgeoisie. Painting, with this audience in mind, likely explains why there are multiple versions of the painting we are going to look at today.



Georges De La Tour's Penitent Magdalene

**Why did De La Tour paint so many Mary Magdalenes?**

In France, during the 1600's Mary Magdalene was one of the most popular saints, and the fascination with her life appeared to be insatiable. Mary Magdalene's early story of sexual promiscuity and worldly pursuits was fertile ground for the artistic imagination.

Then, her conversion and renunciation of that early life, layered on a spiritual lesson that justified the innumerable paintings she has been featured in. Always beautiful, hair falling down, shoulders bared, Mary is pictured penitent and remorseful. She was the saint artists loved to portray.

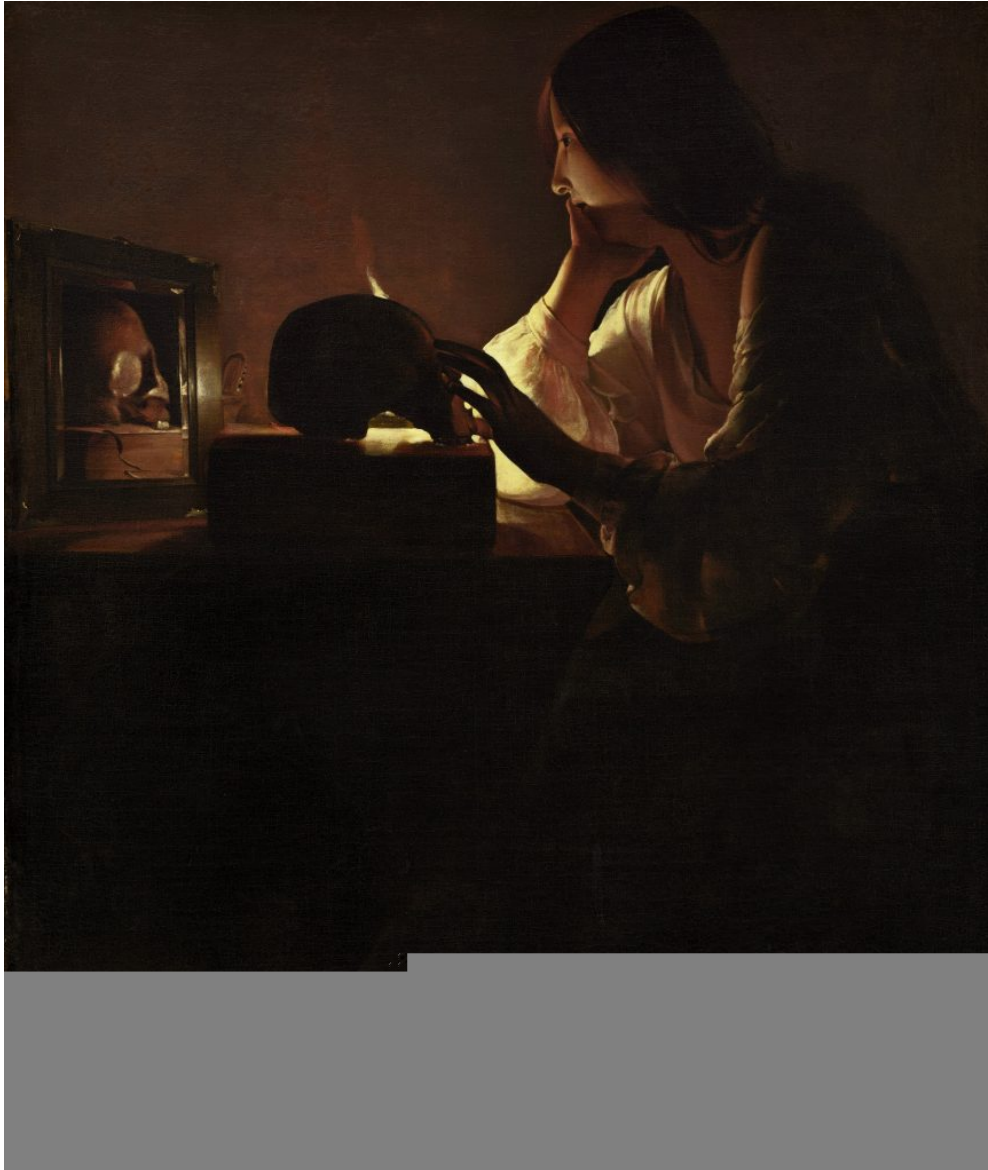
Mary was also popular because she was relatable. Many of the stories of saints are filled with such self-sacrifice and courage that we cannot imagine being them. But Mary Magdalene, well, she is relatable, and her story provides comfort and hope.

Not only did Jesus forgive Mary of her past, she became an integral part of the group that traveled with him. She is frequently mentioned in the company of the Virgin Mary, and was given the title, "apostle to the apostles." Surely, if her life could be redeemed, there is hope for the rest of us.

And so, De La Tour began making his paintings of the penitent Magdalene. We do not know if he had specific commissions for these canvases, if they just sold well so he continued to paint them, or if Mary Magdalene was a favorite of his.

Whatever the reason, the series of paintings on this topic are striking. I've chosen to focus on *The Magdalene with the Smoking Flame*, but as you will see, these other two Magdalene's vary in only a few details.

### **Historical context of the De La Tour's Magdalenes**



### Georges De La Tour's Repentant Magdalene

De La Tour's Magdalene's were painted during the counter-reformation. The Reformation (1517-1648) was a period of religious upheaval and reform which saw the Catholic church splintering. A variety of groups formed, that rejected various elements of Catholic practice and doctrine. As religion and governments were closely tied, wars and political struggles ensued. The Catholic Church recognized that reforms were needed and a period of Catholic Revival followed.

During this period, the Catholic Church enacted a collection of reforms and began a publicity campaign to reassert the doctrines that were under attack by the Reformers.

## **Art and the Reformation**

One area that was contested, by each group, was the role that art played in religious life. Protestants largely renounced religious art, feeling it promoted idolatry. This belief resulted in periods of iconoclasm, or the destruction of religious imagery. In particular, Protestants objected to the portrayals of the saints and the Virgin Mary.

In response to these Protestant “cleansings,” Catholic leaders doubled down, and invested heavily in art. They skillfully used art as a powerful tool to reinforce their doctrinal distinctives.

Artists thrived in the Catholic regions of Europe. In the largely Protestant areas of the North, artists instead explored new areas of expression, including genre paintings, portraits, and landscapes.

Reformation churches, particularly Lutherans, did not eliminate all art, but what was acceptable was limited.

### **Mary Magdalene was popular with both groups**

Interestingly, Mary Magdalene was popular in both camps. Catholics loved Mary Magdalene for a variety of reasons. First, Catholics embraced the legends of the Saints and used their stories as didactic tools to help inform their followers about holy living. Secondly, Mary was held up as a defender of Roman Catholic sacraments, which were under attack by the Reformers.

On the other side, Protestants, looking to downplay the importance of the Virgin Mary, had, perhaps unintentionally, played up the story of Mary Magdalene. Because Mary was called the “apostle to the apostles,” Reformers felt she embodied their doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Her title, “apostle to the apostles,” was given to her because she was the first to see Christ after the Resurrection, and then carried the good news to the other disciples.

In Catholic theology the priests play the critical role of administering the sacraments, essentially they serve as intermediary between God and man. Protestants rejected the need for this go-between and declared that all believers act as priests and can approach God directly. Mary Magdalene was a clear example of this belief.

## **Understanding De La Tour's Mary Magdalene**

De La Tour was painting during the 1600's when the popularity of Mary Magdalene was quite high. Living in France, a Catholic area, De La Tour embraced the Catholic vision of Mary Magdalene and the need to strengthen the churches core teachings.

### **E Book coming soon**

As I researched Mary Magdalene, I discovered that the composite figure that was understood by artists like De La Tour was actually quite complicated. I collected the various stories, and an amazing collection of Mary Magdalene art, and decided to write an e-book about what I've discovered. If you are subscribed to my blog or [YouTube channel](#) you will be notified when the e-book is available.

But today I will just include what is pertinent to this painting.

### **Mary Magdalene became a composite character**

The Mary Magdalene of the Middle Ages and Renaissance was a composite character. This means that Mary's narrative is a blending together of several women to create one story.

De La Tour's Magdalene references several of these different sources, so let's explore the many characters that contributed to the Renaissance version of Mary Magdalene.

### **The Anointing Mary**



Ruben's portrayal of Mary anointing Christ feet.

Mary Magdalene is mentioned, by name, 12 times in the New Testament. From these stories we know that she was healed by Jesus of 7 demons, and that she financially supported Christ's ministry. We know that she traveled with Jesus and the disciples in the company of the Virgin Mary, and several other women.

Mary Magdalene was also believed to be the harlot who washed Christ's feet while he was at a dinner party. We will note that the harlot of the story is never named, and yet, this becomes the defining story of Mary Magdalene.

This woman, repenting of her poor choices, washed Jesus' feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, and anointed his feet with oil.

As a prostitute, Mary was frequently painted as a penitent. De La Tour's Magdalene embraces this interpretation, and the artist uses her demeanor and other visual clues, to remind the viewer of Mary's genuine repentance and God's grace.

This anointing story gave rise to the most significant iconography of Mary Magdalene, a jar of ointment. When there is a group of women in a Biblical scene, we can identify Mary by her jar.

### **The Contemplative Mary**



De La Tour's Mary Magdalene contemplating the cross



This is just one story of Christ being anointed with oil, there are three others. Mary Magdalene quickly became identified with all of them.

In one story, theologians determined that Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, was also Mary Magdalene. In this story the woman anoints Jesus head as if for burial. This combining of Mary Magdalene with Mary the sister of Martha, gave rise to the idea that Mary lived a contemplative life, in contrast to her sister who lived an active life.

During this time period there was a belief that people fell into one camp or the other. In the story of Martha and Mary we have Martha bustling about getting ready to serve dinner, and Mary seated at the feet of Jesus listening to his teaching. When Martha complains that she isn't helping, Jesus defends Mary saying that she has chosen the better path. It is this idea of the contemplative Mary, or the one sitting at Christ's feet to learn from him, that De La Tour's portrays for us.

### **The Faithful Mary**



Titian's portrayal of Mary meeting the risen Christ

Mary was also present at the crucifixion. When the other disciples fled, she stayed. Her faithfulness in this moment is one of the attributes of her character



that is most praised. She is steadfast and loyal no matter the circumstance. De La Tour gives this part of Mary's story a nod by including a cross on the table.

### **The Witness Mary**

We also know from the gospels that Mary Magdalene was the first person Christ revealed himself to after his resurrection. At that appearance, Christ instructed Mary to carry word of his resurrection to the other disciples. This made Mary Magdalene the first to declare the gospel, that Christ had risen from the dead. Her role in bringing the good news to the other disciples is why she is called the "apostle to the apostles."

### **The Evangelist Mary**

Legend has it, that Mary Magdalene, with other believers, during the persecution of the early Christians, was put into a rudderless boat and pushed out into the Mediterranean sea to die of exposure and starvation. Miraculously, the boats were guided to the shore of Provence in France, and this is where Mary lived out the rest of her life. Having been saved by Christ, both spiritually from her early sinful life and now physically, Mary set out to spread the gospel in France. This is how France was converted to Christianity, and why Mary Magdalene is the patron saint of Provence.

### **Reading De La Tour's Magdalene**

#### **Light and Form**



As I've noted above, what De La Tour was particularly known for was his use of light. A dark room and a single source of light is used to focus the attention. As we examine this painting we can see an excellent example of this. When we examine the work closely, the most striking example of the artist use of light is the luminosity of the Magdalene's sleeves. With light pinks, and brighter whites, De La tour creates an amazing effect of the light shining through the gauzy fabric. It's a lovely detail that shows his absolute mastery and understanding of how light works.

Along with the hauntingly beautiful use of light, De La Tour simplifies his forms and limits his palette creating a quiet calm. This calm, controlled picture doesn't jump out of the canvas toward us, as so many Baroque works do, instead the space invites us in. Mary is closed into herself, unaware we are observing her, and this creates in us the desire to be still and not disturb her.

### **The Flame**



Unusually, De La Tour's *Magdalene and the Smoking Flame* uses an oil lamp, as opposed to a candle as the source of light. The lamp illuminates a still life on the table that gives us more information about the woman we are observing. There is smoke rising from the flame in two curling columns. Generally, flames represent the presence of God, and as we see the Magdalene in an attitude of

contemplation we can assume that part of her thoughts are on God's presence with her.

### **The Still Life**

Also on the table are a stack of books, which indicates this is an intellectual woman who possesses a depth of understanding and curiosity. The books add to the serious note of Mary's reflections. In front of the books is a cross. Lying flat on the table, the cross could easily be missed, but again, the cross reminds of Mary's role during the crucifixion and resurrection. Lying on top of the cross is a whip, a gathering of leather cords that were used to beat oneself in penance for sin.

### **Mary's Appearance**



While not being obvious, the iconography used to identify Mary Magdalene is evident here. De La tour has painted the Magdalene in red, a reminder to the viewer of her past occupation. The term scarlet woman originates in the book of Revelation, with the whore of Babylon, also called the Mother of Whores. It is unlikely that the historical Mary Magdalene is the same woman who anointed Christ feet, or that she was a prostitute, however she will be remembered

throughout history as one, and the iconography, like a red dress, will keep that understanding of her story alive.

Along with the red clothing we have her top falling off of her shoulders, a further indication of her 'loose' past. Her hair falls down her back, an indication to men that she was available, as women only let their hair down in front of their husbands. To be fair, this is not just an indication of her moral state, but also done because, according to legend, after she used her hair to wipe her tears from Christ feet she never cut it again.

### **The Skull**

While we may see a skull as a bit morbid, and perhaps as an unhealthy preoccupation with death, that is not how it was interpreted in religious art. A skull is a vivid reminder of our mortality, and when we realize our time is limited, we become more focused on what is truly important. Our purpose in life is clarified when viewed through the lens of death, and we are encouraged to not waste a single hour on the vanities of life, but to pursue those things that "rust and moth cannot destroy."

In Mary Magdalene's case, she has renounced riches and earthly pleasure and instead is focused on the mission of spreading the gospel. She is "living in the light of eternity." Rather than a morbid reminder of death, the skull is a testament that Mary has chosen to live her life "in the light of eternity," and that demonstrates her wisdom.

### **Mary Pregnant?**

The last part of Mary Magdalene's story that I believe De La Tour is referencing in this painting is a bit more controversial, and you will have to decide if you agree with me or not. I personally find the concept of a metaphorical pregnancy rich with meaning and themes to be explored.

Some suggest Mary Magdalene has been painted pregnant, not just in this work, but in many. This is not some Dan Brown conspiracy that Mary bore Jesus a love child, but is meant to be interpreted metaphorically. The use of marriage and childbirth imagery to explain God's relationship with his people is not new, it is where we get the term "born again." The idea is that Mary carried the good news of Christ's saving message and when she arrived in France she delivered, giving new life to the people there.

## Concluding thoughts

I have serious problem's with the way the historical Mary's story was co-opted and transformed into this sensational, sexualized, fantasy Mary. Likely Mary Magdalene was actually a respected member of her community with financial means to support Christ's ministry. She is a constant companion of the Virgin Mary and is included with the disciples at the critical moments of Christ's ministry. The low view of women held during the middle ages obviously played a large part in how the composite character of Mary developed, and her story reveals the clergy's prejudices.

That said, there is a richness and complexity to Mary Magdalene, as she was understood during the Renaissance, that the other women of the Bible lack. She is multi-layered and has a depth of development that few women of the Bible receive.

Historical accuracies aside, this painting leaves us with a lot to contemplate.

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As a child—everyone is ever a child—you love Mary, the Mother of God, as a mother. As a masculine male, you love Mary Magdalene as a feminine woman. As a son of God, you love her as a daughter of God. As a child of God, you love her as a child of God.

TJB