

# Young Woman at a Mirror

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*Young Woman at a Mirror*, Meiffren Conte,  
Seventeenth Century, Oil Painting, France

### *Young Woman at a Mirror*

Meiffren Conte's *Young Woman at a Mirror*, from the last half of the seventeenth century, depicts a young woman gazing skyward. The room she resides in is furnished opulently. There is a richly colored carpet draped on the table, and on it rests a golden mirror and silver pitcher. One of the woman's hands pulls out her decadent pearl earring, the other hand reaches out and holds the other earring. The problem that arises in an analysis of the painting is what exactly that young woman and her mirror are supposed to represent. Various interpretations include the proposition that the painting is to be deciphered from a secular lens, and the woman is supposed to represent vanity. An alternative interpretation suggests that the painting shows Mary Magdalene repenting and casting aside her jewels. The symbols in the painting reinforce the Mary Magdalene argument instead of solely being proof for the secular argument. *Young Woman at Mirror* depicts Mary Magdalene. That conclusion is proven by a study of the background of the Magdalene story, an examination of other Magdalene paintings at the time, a discussion of the symbols commonly associated with Magdalene, and a study of the symbolic objects in the painting.

There is a great deal of dispute over the exact details of Mary Magdalene's story. However, in any account it is clear that she had some sort of large role both biblically and in Christianity itself. The most often recounted story suggests that Mary Magdalene was a rich and noble lady who lived on the Sea of Galilee. Her brother and sister were said to be Martha and Lazarus, who were also biblical characters, and who both lived virtuous lives. Mary, on the other hand, reputedly lived a life of vanity and greed until she was converted by Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Other stories in the Bible suggest that she was one of the people watching at Jesus's Crucifixion, one of

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Edwards Goldsmith, *Sacred Symbols in Art* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1911), 169.

the disciples that discovered his empty tomb, and even that she was a prostitute who was redeemed because of Christ. Most sources seem to agree that Magdalene was one of Jesus's favorite and most important disciples.<sup>2</sup> The idea of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute seems to be a relatively modern construction, and many scholars do not agree with that identification. However, there is still relatively little known about Magdalene. She is mentioned thirteen times in the New Testament of the Bible, and in the Gospels of Mark and John she is said to be the only person that first sees Jesus after his resurrection.<sup>3</sup> The one element that the Magdalene stories have in common is the fact that she was repentant. Her role as a repentant figure made her particularly popular in the Middle Ages when pestilence and other calamities struck. The motif of Mary Magdalene as a repentant woman continued into Baroque art and culture.<sup>4</sup>

The richly disputed story of Mary Magdalene inspired a variety of artistic traditions. One common motif in painting comes from the Gospel of John in the Bible. John writes that after his resurrection, Jesus says, "Noli me tangere" to Mary. That phrase means, "Do not touch me" or, "Do not cling to me." That moment proved to be rich inspiration for painters such as Fra Angelico and his assistants in 1440, Titian in 1511-1512, Agnolo Bronzino in 1561, and Lavinia Fontana in 1581 (Fra Angelico, *Noli Me Tangere*, 1440, Museo di San Marco, Florence)(Titian, *Noli Me Tangere*, 1511-1512, National Gallery, London)(Agnolo Bronzino, *Noli Me Tangere*, 1561, Musee de Louvre, Paris)(Lavinia Fontana, *Noli Me Tangere*, 1581, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence). All four of those artists completed renditions of the "Noli me tangere" scene in the period directly before Conte's *Young Woman at a Mirror* was painted. The paintings all show

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<sup>2</sup> "Mary Magdalene," *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition (2013), Accessed February 20, 2014, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost>.

<sup>3</sup> Pamela Thimmes, "Memory And Re-Vision: Mary Magdalene Research Since 1975," *Currents In Research: Biblical Studies* 6 (1998): 196-197, Accessed February 20, 2014, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost>.

<sup>4</sup> Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, "Saint And Sinner: Mary Magdalene In Art History," *U.S. Catholic* 65, no. 4 (2000), Accessed February 20, 2014, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost>.

Mary richly garbed in either red or blue fabric, with long and flowing hair.<sup>5</sup> It is clear that Mary Magdalene was a popular, and widely painted subject. The four paintings are evidence that there was a Magdalene tradition that Conte could have followed. While the subject matter of “Noli me tangere” is slightly different it still shows the tradition of luxuriously dressed Magdalenes often clad in red with long hair. There were also several paintings done of Mary Magdalene in the period Conte was working in, that are reminiscent of the figure in *Young Woman at a Mirror*. A painting done by Annibale Carracci in 1600 shows Mary Magdalene draped in red cloth, with long fair hair, and a skyward gaze (Annibale Carracci, Mary Magdalene, 1600, Musee de Louvre, Paris). The expression of Conte’s young woman and Carracci’s Magdalene is nearly identical. Additionally, a painting done by Guido Reni in 1634-1635 shows Mary Magdalene again with red clothing, long fair hair, and that same gaze up to heaven (Guido Reni, Saint Mary Magdalene, 1634-1635, National Gallery, London). The tradition of “Noli me tangere” Magdalenes was continued in the Baroque period, but the motif of a Magdalene that is the central focus of the painting was also exceedingly popular. Many of the Magdalenes of the period are a mirror of the look and gaze of Conte’s young woman. *Young Woman at a Mirror* depicts a woman that could have been following in the spirit of the Magdalene artistic tradition.

Through the wide tradition of Mary Magdalene painting several symbols have been identified that can be commonly attributed to Magdalene pieces. In *Sacred Symbols in Art* Mary Magdalene is said to be depicted in paintings as having long yellow hair, clasped hands, and eyes that are tearing up.<sup>6</sup> She is often shown with a posture and expression of penitence. It is suggested that she is depicted in red to imply the passion of her love and devotion to Christ. She

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Kiely, “Picturing the Magdalene,” *Commonweal* 137, no. 15 (2010): 14-19, Accessed February 20, 2014, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost>.

<sup>6</sup> Goldsmith, *Sacred Symbols in Art*, 173-174.

is additionally shown in luxurious attire before she was converted by Christ.<sup>7</sup> Goldsmith also suggests that there is an alabaster box of ointment in nearly every depiction of Mary Magdalene. She suggests that the box of ointment could also be represented as a covered cup, vase, or box. Goldsmith goes on to say that Magdalene is depicted in red in ancient pictures, while in more modern pictures she is shown in either blue or violet in order to show her penitence and constancy.<sup>8</sup> The *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* expands on the color analysis and says that red can represent pain and sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> Red is an appropriate color for Magdalene because it fits with her story. As vague and mysterious as the figure of Magdalene is, most renditions of the story seem to equate her with what the color red represents. The main symbols that can be linked to Magdalene are color and attire. Additionally, the look of the figure of Mary Magdalene is symbolic in its own way. There is a consistent depiction of her as a luxuriously dressed, beautiful young female with long flowing hair. The image of the woman is so archetypal that it can be seen as an additional symbol that is as clear as the use of the color red.

The symbols in *Young Woman at a Mirror* include a tapestry covered table, a mirror, a silver pitcher, and a strange box like shape behind the woman. Furthermore, the figure of the woman herself is laden with symbols. The color of her dress and her jewels are significant. The silver of the pitcher can be understood as a Christian symbol for purity. Additionally, that pitcher would have most likely held water, which was a symbol for purification. The woman in the painting is wearing earrings with pearls, which represent salvation and the word of God.<sup>10</sup> The presence of the mirror is the driving force of the argument for a solely secular interpretation of

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<sup>7</sup> Goldsmith, *Sacred Symbols in Art*, 173-174.

<sup>8</sup> Goldsmith, *Sacred Symbols in Art*, 173.

<sup>9</sup> James Hall and Kenneth Clark, *Dictionary of subjects and symbols in art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 43-44.

the painting. The mirror is consequently thought of as a symbol of vanity. However, the rest of the objects in the painting are laden with symbolism too. The overall look of the room suggests vanity by its richness. The idea that the whole painting itself is a solely secular depiction of the renunciation of vanity seems too isolated. The symbolic attributes of the other objects in the painting suggest that the woman is being purified by the word of God. It is quite possible that the woman in the painting is renouncing her previous vanity, and that woman is Mary Magdalene. The absence of the apparently tell-tale box of ointment shown in Magdalene scenes is odd. However, Goldsmith did say that artists often took artistic license with that box, and Conte could have even excluded it because of changing styles in the Baroque period. The red dress that the young woman is wearing fits her in the tradition of Mary Magdalene portraits, as does her long hair. She is dressed luxuriously, as she is often seen to do in scenes prior to her conversion. The seemingly non-secular painting showing the ills of vanity can actually be seen to be Mary Magdalene renouncing her vanity, through a careful analysis of both the symbols of the painting and the symbols commonly attributed to Magdalene depictions.

*Young Woman at a Mirror*, by Meiffren Conte, is not solely a secular painting of vanity. *Young Woman at a Mirror* depicts Mary Magdalene because of the story of Mary Magdalene herself, the similarities between it and other Magdalene portrayals at the time, a close examination of the symbols that are attributed to Magdalene, and a look at how those symbols relate to the symbols in the painting. The image of the woman in the painting is unmistakably echoed in other examples of Baroque art that identify their subjects as Magdalene. The secular reading of the painting holds merit, but the symbolism and resemblance of the young woman to other painted Magdalenes expands upon that reading. The symbols of the painting do indeed point to the presence of vanity, but that vanity is Mary Magdalene's.

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