

Information on

Master of the Parrot

Flemish, active 1525–1550

Mary Magdalene, ca, 1530

Oil on panel

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frederic G. Oppenheimer

1955.10



Subject Matter

A lovely woman, dressed in a red velvet dress with voluminous sleeves, holds a decorative gold vessel in one delicate hand, the lid in the other hand. The vessel is embellished with cherubs. Her face is capped with auburn hair, braided and parted in the middle. With her head turned slightly to the left, she gazes serenely into the distance. A small curl is showing at her neck. A double gold necklace falls over her bare shoulders onto the bodice of her dress. A small book with a gold clasp rests on a platform in the foreground. This half-figure's rich color is set against a shadowed background with intriguing light behind her head and shoulders, lending the subject a kind of aura.

Mary Magdalene is an important figure in Christian literature and tradition. A woman from the town of Magda, she is considered one of Jesus' most intimate friends, along with his mother Mary, Martha and Mary of Bethany, and the Twelve, his chosen apostles. The Gospel according to Luke mentions her as the woman from whom seven demons were cast out (Luke 8: 2). In John's account she was present at the foot of the cross along with the beloved disciple and other women (John 19:25–26). The Gospel according to Matthew places Mary Magdalene at the crucifixion and the burial, next to the empty tomb, and among the women whom Jesus greeted on Easter morning (Matthew 27:55–61; 28:1–9). Both the Evangelists Mark and John report that Mary Magdalene was the first to meet the Resurrected Christ (Mark 1:47, John 20:11–18), giving her great authority in the Early Church.

The gold vessel, an attribute of Mary Magdalene, may depict the container of spices that she took to the tomb on Easter morning to anoint the body of Jesus (Mark 16: 1-2). Although scholars do not agree, another tradition identifies the vessel as the alabaster jar of expensive perfume with which a sinful woman (perhaps Mary Magdalene) anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. Jesus at the time was a guest at dinner, and his host was horrified at her actions. Jesus, on the other hand, praised her expression of great love and declared her sins forgiven (Luke 7:36–38).

In other paintings and icons Mary Magdalene holds an egg, sometimes a red egg. This tradition of the Orthodox Church comes from a legend of Mary Magdalene's post-Resurrection visit to Rome where she told the story of the stone being rolled away from the grave of Jesus on Easter morning. She used an egg to represent the stone. The Emperor found the story preposterous, saying it was as unlikely as the egg turning red. Before his eyes the egg turned red, and thus began the custom of colored and decorated eggs in celebration of Easter. This legend and her prominence in Christian art throughout the centuries attest to her importance. Even to this day she is the subject of popular literature, film, and feminist writings, whether as a penitent prostitute, the wife of Jesus, or even the first Apostle.

About the Artist

In the early twentieth century Max J. Friedlander registered a number of paintings under the name of "Master of the Parrot" in his history of Netherlandish art, which was translated into English in the 1960s. The Master of the Parrot was a member of the Antwerp School of artists. He painted the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child depicting the Christ Child playing with a colorful parrot, thus the name "Master of the Parrot." Popular lore had it that the parrot spoke the word "Ave" in adoration of the Virgin, becoming the first word that the Angel Gabriel said to the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation.

Master of the Parrot
Mary Magdalene

In the 16th century, artist guilds flourished in Europe, especially in Italy and the Low Countries with their lively textile industries, which produced luxurious as well as common material. One had to belong to a guild in order to legally paint. The guild at Antwerp was particularly noted for producing commercial paintings with religious subjects. Many of these paintings of the Late Medieval/Early Renaissance period were destroyed during the Reformation. More examples may be found in Spain today. The McNay painting is attributed to the Master of the Parrot in part because of the subject's distinctive oval face, centrally parted hair, and long, delicate fingers. Another artist, The Master of the Half-Figure, paints in a similar style.

Strategies for Student Tours

Primary Grades (ages 6–8): What colors do you see? How is this person feeling: glad, sad, mad? I wonder why. How does her dress feel? I wonder what is inside the jar. Who do you think she might be?

Upper Elementary & Middle School (ages 9–11): What attribute would you choose for a portrait of yourself? Why? What can you tell about this woman based on her clothing? Where do you think the light is coming from? Where is the artist? Compare this painting with the nearby wooden sculpture or with other icons and paintings of Mary Magdalene. What is alike? What is different?

Adolescents & Adults: What textures do you see? Imagine the soft touch of the velvet of her dress, the cold, hardness of the necklace, the heaviness of the jar. What about her gaze? What might she want us to know? How would a portrait of Mary Magdalene look if it were painted today?

Sources Worth Consulting

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