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DAVID LACHAPELLE

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Was Mary Magdalene a Sinner or a Saint? Artists Weigh In

A new exhibition at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt traces her shifting image over the centuries.

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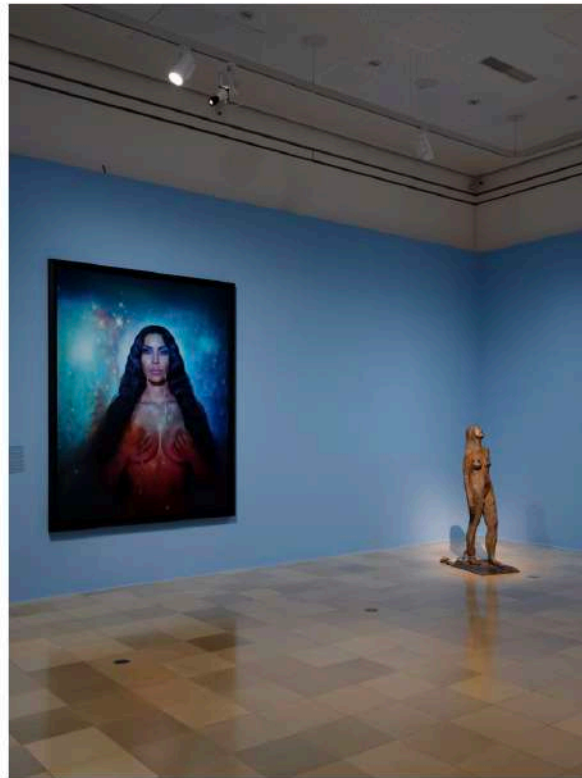
“Mary Magdalene: Sin. Pray. Love,” includes over 100 paintings, sculptures and works on paper from around 60 institutions across Europe and North America, including “Penitent Magdalen in Meditation,” by Georges de La Tour (1635–40). National Gallery of Art, Washington



By **Sarah Bahr**

Sarah Bahr visited the Städel Museum in August and got a preview of the show.

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The painting "Mary Magdalene: Abiding Lamentation" (2018) by David LaChapelle and the statue "Wild Woman (Maria Magdalena)" by Kiki Smith (1994). Ksenia Kuleshova for The New York Times

The fallen woman archetype is the depiction most people are now most familiar with, though, thanks to the 1971 rock opera "[Jesus Christ Superstar](#)" by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, in which the character of Mary Magdalene sings a yearning ballad called "[I Don't Know How to Love Him](#)."

The author Dan Brown went a step further in his 2003 best-selling thriller novel "[The Da Vinci Code](#)" and contended that Magdalene was Jesus' wife — and the mother of his child, whom she was purportedly pregnant with at the time of the crucifixion.

(There is no historical evidence to support that claim, Dr. Eclercy said, which stems from a noncanonical Gnostic text, known as the Gospel of Mary, that was likely written in the second century. Most modern scholars agree with his assessment.)

"Nowhere does the Bible say she had romantic feelings for Jesus," he said. "Somewhere in the apocryphal texts, it says Jesus kissed her on the mouth, but of course, in ancient culture, kissing somebody on the mouth is a very different thing.

"Fragments of text were interpreted in a very modern but sensationalist manner to make them fit into movie stories," he added.

Among the most well-known representations of Magdalene are three that are on view in the show in Frankfurt. In “The Repentant Magdalen” (c. 1635-40), the painter Georges de La Tour shows her with a mirror — a symbol of vanity — and a skull — an emblem of mortality. In the woodcut “The Elevation of Saint Mary Magdalen” (c. 1504-5), the artist Albrecht Dürer depicts her being carried to heaven by angels. Perhaps most dramatically, in “Noli Me Tangere” (c. 1581), the painter Lavinia Fontana depicts the encounter when Mary mistakes the resurrected Christ for a gardener. (The work’s title, translated from the Latin phrase meaning “Do Not Touch Me,” references the words said by the risen Christ in the Gospel of John.)

The La Tour painting, Dr. Eclercy said, melds the sinful and the penitent aspects of Magdalene’s persona into an imagined scene of devotion.

“It’s what I call a synthetic image,” he said. “It’s not going back to a real story, either in the Gospels or the legends. Various lines of tradition are coming together in this painting.”

Magdalene is often depicted with standard attributes that help identify her, including a skull — a memento mori, a reminder of the inevitability of death — and a cross, a reference to the fact that she was one of the few followers who remained near the cross during the crucifixion.

Some artists, though, have taken an approach that is more realistic than reverential. This is particularly true of contemporary artists, who are no longer bound by having to work on commission and cater to the desires of the (often traditional) patrons funding their work.

About 90 percent of the work in the contemporary section of the exhibition, made from 1994 to 2025, was created by female artists, Dr. Eclercy said. He noted that these artists — particularly in the last 30 or 40 years — have identified with Magdalene’s strength and self-determination themselves, and have translated that into varied representations of her.

For instance, in the 1995 paintings “Magdalena (Newman’s Zip)” and “Magdalena (Manet’s Queen / Queen of Spades),” the South African painter Marlene Dumas renders Magdalene, on one canvas, as a traditionally coded nude white woman with long, red hair, and then, on the other, as a Black woman with short hair. And in 2018, the American photographer David LaChapelle imagined Kim Kardashian as Magdalene, her hands covering her nipples as she cries glittering streams of tears, in the portrait “Mary Magdalene Abiding Lamentation.”

Through the centuries, Dr. Eclercy said, Magdalene has served as a blank canvas for artists to explore themes of salvation, beauty and grief.

“There’s not one Mary Magdalene in this show, but 10,” he said.

Sarah Bahr writes about culture and style for The Times.