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Rethinking Savoldo's *Magdalenes*: A "Muddle of the Maries"?¹

Charlotte Nichols

The luminously veiled women in Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo's four *Magdalene* paintings—one of which resides at the Getty Museum—have consistently been identified by scholars as Mary Magdalene near Christ's tomb on Easter morning. Yet these physically and emotionally self-contained figures are atypical representations of her in the early Cinquecento, when she is most often seen either as an exuberant observer of the Resurrection in scenes of the *Noli me tangere* or as a worldly penitent in half-length. A reconsideration of the pictures in connection with myriad early Christian, Byzantine, and Italian accounts of the Passion and devotional imagery suggests that Savoldo responded in an inventive way to a millennium-old discussion about the roles of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene as the first witnesses of the risen Christ. The design, color, and positioning of the veil, which dominates the painted surface of the respective *Magdalenes*, encode layers of meaning explicated by textual and visual comparison; taken together they allow an alternate Marian interpretation of the presumed Magdalene figure's biblical identity. At the expense of iconic clarity, the painter whom Giorgio Vasari described as "capriccioso e sofisticato" appears to have created a multivalent image precisely in order to communicate the conflicting accounts in sacred and hagiographic texts, as well as the intellectual appeal of deliberately ambiguous, at times aporetic subject matter to northern Italian patrons in the sixteenth century.²

The *Magdalenes*: description, provenance, and subject

The format of Savoldo's *Magdalenes* is arresting, dominated by a silken waterfall of fabric that communicates both protective enclosure and luxuriant tactility (Figs. 1-4). Versions dated between c. 1527 and c. 1540 are found in London (National Gallery), Los Angeles (The J. Paul Getty Museum), Florence (Galleria degli Uffizi, Contini Bonacossi Collection), and Berlin (Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen).³ Each is an oil on canvas measuring approximately 90 x 75 cm; each depicts a veiled woman in half-length format positioned close to the picture plane.⁴ The body is shown in profile with her head turned in a three-quarter view. She gazes directly at the viewer, creating an aposiopetic effect. Her left hand reaches across her body to gather the fabric covering her right arm and hand, which is raised to her chin. In all versions the hair and

¹ Versions of this essay were presented at the annual meetings of the Renaissance Society of America (Venice, 2010), the New College Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Studies (Sarasota, 2010), and the College Art Association (New York, 2011). I am grateful to Linda Wolk-Simon, Helen Evans, Derek Moore, and Cathrael Kazin for reading a preliminary draft and for the comments of Lisa Rafanelli. I also wish to thank the two anonymous readers of this article for their very helpful suggestions. The phrase "muddle of the Maries" is taken from Maria Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Random House, 1983), 344-345.

² Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori* (Florence: I Giunti, 1568), 3: 564. Accessed December 6, 2014, via Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/levitedepiveccel03vasa>. Nicholas Penny, *National Gallery Catalogues: The Sixteenth Century Italian Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 1:350, translates the phrase as "fanciful and ingenious." Alexander Nagel, Lorenzo Pericolo, and Maria Loh have contributed important recent publications on the subject of deliberate topical ambiguities or obfuscations, as noted below.

³ Penny, 1:350-351, notes that an engraving by Lorenzo Lorenzi of ca. 1750 after a drawing by Giuseppe Zocchi in the Museo Correr, Venice, may represent a fifth version.

⁴ Penny, 1:346-351, records the following measurements: London, 89.1 x 82.4 cm; Berlin, 94.2 x 75.3 cm; Florence, 83 x 76 cm; and Los Angeles, 99.7 X 76.2 cm.

upper body are almost completely enveloped by a satiny maphorion.⁵ It covers a richly textured crimson dress and, behind her, an arcuated brick wall in ruins effectively isolates the figure from the background of the painting.



Fig. 1: Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo, *Mary Magdalene*, ca. 1527-ca. 1540, National Gallery, London, Bridgeman Images



Fig. 2: Savoldo, *Mary Magdalene*, ca. 1527-ca.1540, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, image via Wikicommons

⁵ The term maphorion, a garment covering the head and shoulders, is used interchangeably with veil in this essay. For the emergence of 'maphorion,' see Annmarie Weyl Carr, "Threads of Authority: the Virgin Mary's Veil in the Middle Ages," in *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. Stewart Gordon (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 63-64.



Fig. 3: Savoldo, *Saint Mary Magdalene*, ca. 1527-ca, 1540, Galleria degli Uffizi, Contini Bonacossi Collection, Florence, Bridgeman Images



Fig. 4: Savoldo, *Mary Magdalene*, ca. 1527-ca.1540, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, Art Resource (photo: Joerg P. Anders)

Despite these commonalities, the works overtly differ from each other in relation to the color of the veil and visibility of its painted seam, the presence of a small white vase on a ledge in front of a partially obscured aperture, the suggested age of the sitters, and the settings. The

fabric is silver-white in the London version, dusky gold in the others. The seam suggesting that the material has been pieced is seen at the center of all versions of the painting except the Berlin version.⁶ Her features—including a double chin, prominent nose, curved lips, doughy face, and haggard expression—are so specific as to suggest a portrait of a middle-aged woman. While the London *Magdalene* has a more youthful, attractive aspect, the sitter in the Berlin version—overpainted at one time to appear younger—appears to be the eldest of the four.⁷ The latter also lacks the attribute of the vase and adjacent subterranean opening, includes a high wall that fills the width of the canvas, and eliminates the distant background seen in the upper left of the other variations, which seem to depict coastal Venice (London) and distant mountains (Los Angeles and Florence).⁸ The suggested time of day varies among the pictures, ranging from, presumably, dawn (London) to full daylight (Berlin). Differing tastes and budgets on the part of the patron surely account for such variations with regard to color, background, and degree of detail.⁹

Savoldo's oeuvre includes several such variations of a single compositional theme. Paintings of the *Flight into Egypt* date to early in his career and were in the possession of the erudite Pietro Contarini—a Venetian patrician, senator, and author—at the latter's death in 1527.¹⁰ The difference in their backgrounds matches those in the *Magdalene* paintings: in one a scene of Venice, in the others mountains or generic landscapes (Fig. 5). Also present are the tall arcuated walls *alla romana* in various states of ruin that anticipate those of the four *Magdalenes*. A different painted sequence by Savoldo features Nativity scenes, one of which was for the chapel of Bartolomeo Bargnani in S. Barnaba, Brescia of c. 1538 (Fig. 6). They include Savoldo's much-admired nocturnal effects, also seen in the London painting, along with a low crumbling brick wall (Fig. 1).¹¹ The patrons of these works are unknown, as is the proximity of the works in relation to each other as originally viewed.

⁶ See my forthcoming essay on the subject of Savoldo's painted seams.

⁷ In 1994 a heavy layer of surface dirt was removed from the London painting. The abrasion and increased transparency of the paint layer in this version now reveals the underdrawing that outlines the features; it is particularly visible under her left eye and along the lower lip. Ashok Roy generously shared the conservation report with me in January 2013. See also Penny, *Italian Paintings*, 1:346. During a restoration in 1989 of the version in Berlin, the overpainting of the face—which coquettishly communicated the “laughter of a courtesan”—was also removed; see Erich Schleier, “Savoldo's ‘Magdalena’ in der Berliner Gemäldegalerie,” *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 33 (1991): 146.

⁸ In the London picture there is a church in the middle ground on the viewer's left, into which white veiled persons enter while a view of the sea, ships typical of Venetian naval construction, and an urban skyline suggestive of Venice are seen in the background. The location suggests to this author that the viewer is looking at Venice from the island of Murano, possibly from the location of S. Bernardo, the now-destroyed convent for Augustinian nuns cloaked in gray habits: cf. Maria Pia Pedani, “Monasteri di agostiniane a Venezia,” *Archivio veneto* 125 (1985): 71.

⁹ For Titian's replication of his *Danae* (1530s), see Maria H. Loh, *Titian Remade: Repetition and Transformation in Early Modern Italian Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 13-42.

¹⁰ Creighton Gilbert, “Newly Discovered Paintings by Savoldo in Relation to Their Patronage,” *Arte lombarda* 96-97 (1991): 38-41.

¹¹ See the remarks on Savoldo by his pupil, Paolo Pino, *Dialogo della Pittura* (1548), ed. Rodolfo and Anna Pallucchini (Venice: Edizioni Daria Guarnati, 1946), 70-71, and Vasari, 3:564.



Fig. 5 (left): Savoldo, *Flight into Egypt*, 1527, private collection, Milan (formerly in the Albani Collection), Alinari / Art Resource



Fig. 6 (right): Savoldo, *Nativity*, ca. 1538, Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo, Brescia, image via Wikicommons

Our understanding of the *Magdalenes* must also remain necessarily speculative due to the lack of information about their patrons and the originally intended location of the paintings. No contract survives for any of the four known versions, which are collectively dated between c.1527 and c.1540, and only the painting in Berlin is signed.¹² Savoldo is recorded in documents as consistently present in Venice during that period following earlier sojourns in Parma and Florence.¹³ He did, however, continue to maintain ties with clients in Brescia, then under Venetian dominion, throughout his career. Tentative links survive for one source of patronage; in the early seventeenth century what is presumed to be the London version of the painting was located in the Brescian palace collection of Fausto Averoldi, the grandson of Giovan Paolo Averoldi da Brescia, whose family had a residence in Venice and may also have been the patron of Savoldo's *Saint Jerome* of c. 1525-30 (London, National Gallery).¹⁴ The eventual setting for the London *Magdalene* in a sumptuous Brescian *palazzo* may in fact echo its initial placement, alone or together with other variants or paintings by Savoldo.

By the sixteenth century images of sacred subjects of a size comparable to Savoldo's images were found in both secular and ecclesiastic settings. One would expect his paintings to

¹² For a summary of dating and provenance issues, see the catalogue entry for the London version by Penny, *Italian Paintings*, 1:350-352, and Renata Stradiotti's catalogue entries in *Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo: tra Foppa, Giorgione e Caravaggio*, exh. cat. Monastero di Santa Giulia, Brescia, and Shirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (Milan: Electa, 1990), 146-153; Mary Pardo, "Letter to the Editor," *The Art Bulletin* 71 (1989): 311.

¹³ Rossana Prestini, "Regesto," in *Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo*, 316-324, who transcribes documents recording him in Florence in 1508 and 1512. For an overview of Savoldo's career and a bibliography, see also Penny, 1:337-339, and Beyer, 318-320.

¹⁴ The first reference dates to 1611 and cites "la Maddalena" in the house of Fausto Averoldi; see the documentation cited by Renata Stradiotti, in *Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo*, 150. For the *Saint Jerome*, see Penny, 1:340-345. Giovan Paolo Averoldi's links to Venice would have been strengthened through his uncle Cardinal Altobello Averoldi, the papal legate to Venice from 1517-23 and 1526-31, the Bishop of Crete from 1517 to 1537, and a patron of Titian; see Giovanni Agosti, "Sui gusti di Altobello Averoldi," in *Il politico Averoldi di Tiziano restaurato*, ed. Elena Lucchesi Ragni and Giovanni Agosti (Brescia: Grafo, 1991), 55-60; 76-78. For an overview of Brescia as an artistic center see Beyer, 306-326.

have ornamented the *portego* of a Venetian palace or, alternatively, the *salone* of a Brescian residence, or a private chapel in either city.¹⁵ Images such as Savoldo's were also concealed by actual fabric.¹⁶ The contrast of real fabric versus its painted counterpart would have been dramatic, accentuating the artist's brilliant rendering of the fictive veil. This may have been augmented by a nearby display of exotic and luxurious hangings known to adorn sacred chapel, *salone*, or *portego* settings, which would have added immeasurably to the richly painted effects on the canvas.

The identification of Savoldo's veiled women as Mary Magdalene first appears in early Seicento commentary; in 1620 Ottavio Rossi describes what is thought to be the London painting as "una bellissima Maddalena coperta da un pan bianco," a description that was picked up by Carlo Ridolfi for his widely circulated biographies.¹⁷ Yet later nineteenth-century observers—Giovanni Battista Cavacaselle among them—were less certain, referring to her as "la Zingara," "the veiled woman" or "Magdalene," while the Berlin version was known as "La Veneziana."¹⁸ Scholars in recent decades have, however, treated all four variations of the veiled woman unconditionally as the Magdalene because of Savoldo's inclusion—in the London, Florence, and Los Angeles paintings—of the white vase, presumed to be a container of the Magdalene's iconic unguent, as well as the descriptions in scripture of her presence at Christ's tomb. Mary Pardo's view that the composition represents the aposiopetic engagement of the penitent saint with the unseen figure of Christ, by whom she is brilliantly illuminated, at his resurrection outside of the tomb has been generally accepted.¹⁹

Marian pictorial prototypes

This labelling of Savoldo's figures as Mary Magdalene is, however, confounded by the Marian aspects of the image in terms of body language, the role of the veil, and the use of color. His positioning of the woman and use of fabric to enclose both the figure and the raised covered hand is highly unusual within the larger context of sixteenth-century iconography *alla Maddalena* and, indeed, may be more readily associated with the Virgin Mary. By the early Cinquecento, artistic depictions of the Magdalene as a witness to the resurrected Christ typically took the form of the *Noli me tangere* rather than a veiled, isolated, and self-contained figure

¹⁵ For the ornamentation of Venetian homes see Patricia Fortini Brown, "Behind the Walls: The Material Culture of Venetian Elites," in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State 1297-1797*, ed. John Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 295-338. For the use of devotional images as altarpieces see Ronda Kasl, "Holy Households: Art and Devotion in Renaissance Venice," in *Giovanni Bellini and the Art of Devotion*, ed. Ronda Kasl (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 2004), 82. Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting*, 2nd ed. (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1984), 33, cites Fra Giovanni Domenici's admonition ca. 1400 to "'make the house like a temple with paintings.'" See also Margaret Morse, "From *Chiesa* to *Casa* and Back: The Exchange of Public and Private in Domestic Devotional Art," in *Reflections on Renaissance Venice: A Celebration of Patricia Fortini Brown*, ed. Blake de Maria and Mary E. Frank (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2013), 143-153.

¹⁶ For the long-standing tradition of concealing Byzantine or Byzantine-style icons with fabric, see Carr, 70.

¹⁷ Stradiotti, 150, cites Carlo Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie dell'arte* (Venice: G.B. Sgava, 1648). However, Stradiotti provides no date or page number for his citations from the oft-reprinted Ridolfi, who in turn cites earlier sources.

¹⁸ Penny, *Italian Paintings*, 1:348. Particularly interesting in this regard is his reference to Frederic Burton's initial description in 1894 of the London sitter as a "young woman in a white mantle," which he later emends to "Mary Magdalene Approaching the Sepulchre." The London *Magdalene* had been earlier attributed to Titian (ca. 1750-1850): *ibid.*, 346.

¹⁹ Mary Pardo, "The Subject of Savoldo's *Magdalene*," *The Art Bulletin* 71 (1989): 67-91. The Getty's version of the painting was in a private collection at the time of her publication.

standing near the tomb.²⁰ Titian's version of this theme may be seen as representative of an approach with which Savoldo would have been particularly familiar (Fig. 7). Here the astonished Magdalene has fallen to the ground and reaches forward to confirm what she thinks she sees; her hair, itself an emotive device, is unfettered while the sleeves of her white *camicia* billow luxuriously to assist in the communication of a level of feeling that complements her extravagant gesture.



Fig. 7: Titian, *Noli me tangere*, ca. 1514, National Gallery, London, image via Wikicommons

Titian later used a similar formulation to depict the Magdalene at a different moment in the Passion cycle. In his *Entombment* of ca.1520 she appears in dishabille, as a younger expressive foil to the grieving Virgin, who is stooped with raised hands clasped and covered by a long shimmering silvery-blue maphorion (Fig. 8).²¹ Titian's visual dichotomy of the 'unfettered/open' versus the 'fettered/closed' to facilitate narrative clarity had been widely embraced by Italian artists for centuries when depicting scenes of the Passion. It is echoed by Savoldo in his own *Lamentation* scene of ca. 1513-1520 in which Mary wads her veil to wipe her tears, while the unveiled and open-mouthed Magdalene cradles Christ's feet (Fig. 9).²²

²⁰ See Lisa M. Rafanelli, "The Ambiguity of Touch: Saint Mary Magdalene and the 'Noli me tangere' in Early Modern Italy," PhD diss., New York University, 2004, 21-82, and *ibid.*, "To Touch or Not to Touch: the 'Noli me tangere' and the 'Incredulity of Thomas' in Word and Image from Early Christianity to the Ottonian Period," in *Mary Magdalene: Iconographic Studies from the Middle Age to the Baroque*, eds. Reimund Bieringer, Karlijn Demasure and Barbara Baert (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 139-177.

²¹ Pardo, 83, notes the similarity of Titian's Virgin in the *Entombment* to Savoldo's *Magdalenes* in the four paintings under discussion here (Figs. 1-4).

²² This painting appears to have been cut down, obliterating part of the Magdalen figure; see Francesco Frangi, *Savoldo* (Florence: Cantini, 1992), 24-27, who dates it to ca. 1521. A discussion of the Byzantine origins of the Virgin's figural type follows below.



Fig. 8. Titian, *Entombment*, ca. 1520, Louvre, Paris, image via Wikicommons



Fig. 9: Savoldo, *Entombment*, ca. 1513-1520, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, image via Wikicommons

Of significance in relation to Titian's figure of the Magdalene in his *Entombment* is Savoldo's own *Crucifixion* of approximately the same date (ca. 1520), which features an emotive bareheaded Magdalene clad, like Titian's standing figure, in a voluminous gold cloth while kneeling at the base of the cross (Fig. 10). The saint throws her head back, and her hair streams down behind her. A full-length prototype of the artist's *Magdalenes* under discussion appears as a mourning figure in the background at lower left; she wears a gray-blue maphorion similar to that of Titian's Virgin, which partially obscures her face and conceals a raised hand. Savoldo's painting mirrors a woodcut by Dürer.²³ Of interest in this regard is the Flemish origin of his wife.²⁴

²³ Beverly Louise Brown and Bernard Aikema, "Venice: Where North Meets South," in *Renaissance Venice and the North: Crosscurrents in the Time of Bellini, Durer, and Titian*, eds. Brown and Aikema (New York: Rizzoli, 2000), 21-22, compares Savoldo's composition to a woodcut by Dürer in which the heavily-veiled mourners also appear. For other connections of Northern prototypes to Savoldo's work, such as landscapes by Patinir, see *Ibid.*, 428-429, 444-445, 474-475, and the discussion below. See also the veiled woman in copies of Savoldo's *Continence of Scipio* (before 1532) as noted by Creighton Gilbert, *The Works of Girolamo Savoldo: With a Review of Research, 1955-1985* (New York: Garland, 1986), 363-8, 449-53, 544-546, also discussed by Pardo, p. 71. Veronese prominently includes such a figure in his Louvre *Crucifixion* (ca. 1584).

²⁴ Bert Meijer, "Fiamminghi nella Serenissima nel primo Cinquecento," in *Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo*, 78, cited by Brown, 444. Savoldo married a widow from Tiel, to which he may have travelled.



Fig.10: Savoldo, *Crucifixion* (detail), ca. 1520, formerly Piero Corsini Gallery, New York, image via Wikicommons

The silvery-white or dark gold colors of Savoldo's veils also had Marian associations for the north Italian viewer in the early Cinquecento. His use of an oil-based lead white for the London *Magdalene* reflects the desire of painters to capture the luminous effects of silk and velvet, materials suggestive of great luxury and status.²⁵ The Brescian artist continues the trend begun by Giovanni Bellini in works such as his *Circumcision* of ca. 1500 (Fig. 11) to lighten the veil from its traditional darker blue in order to achieve such shimmering effects—analogueous to Venetian mosaics—that the new medium made possible. A few years later Titian's *Gypsy Madonna* of ca. 1510 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) featured a mantle of silvery blue lined in gold (in combination with a white veil), contrasting with her red dress (Fig. 12).²⁶ One notes the way in which Savoldo also repeatedly clothes the Virgin Mary in silvery satin veils of varying lengths over red dresses, as seen in his versions of the *Adoration* and of the *Flight into Egypt* (Figs. 5 and 6). Girolamo Romanino, his slightly younger Brescian compatriot (c.1484-c.1560), cloaks his *Virgin* of ca. 1545 in a sumptuous mantle of white silk over red, perhaps in competition with Savoldo's virtuoso displays of painted fabric (Fig. 13).²⁷

²⁵ Penny, 1:346, cites the use of lead-white pigment in the London version of the painting. Luca Molà, *The Silk Industry of Renaissance Venice* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 133, describes *argentino*, a bright silvery shade of silk fabric familiar to Venetians in the sixteenth century.

²⁶ See also Paul Hills, "Titian's Veils," *Art History* 29, no. 5 (2006): 778-785, and his *Venetian Colour* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 190-198. It should be noted that the Magdalene in Raphael's *Saint Cecilia* of 1516-1517 (Bologna, Pinacoteca) wears a white dress; she stands in profile but turns to gaze towards the viewer. Titian lightens to almost white the Virgin's veil over a red dress in *The Madonna of the Pesaro Family* of 1519-26 (S. Maria dei Frari, Venice) and situates her in three-quarter view against the blue sky. Savoldo's shortened veil permits him to create a contrast with the luxuriant red velvet under-dress; Molà notes (100-120) that by the sixteenth century Venice was actively protecting its role as the primary center for the production and distribution of red dyes and pigments.

²⁷ See Maria Cristina Passoni's catalogue entry for the painting in Lia Camerlengo, Enzo Chini, Francesco Frangi, and Francesca de Gramatica, eds., *Romanino: un pittore in rivolta nel Rinascimento italiano* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2006), 190-191. For another example of Romanino's use of silvery white to dress the Virgin, see also his *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine with Saints Lorenzo, Ursula, and Angela Merici* (1540-1545) in the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, Memphis, illustrated in *Ibid.*, 39. Both white and gold were colors of the highest status in Venetian dogal dress as well by ca. 1500, as noted by Paul Hills, *Venetian Colour*, 190.



Fig. 11 (left): Giovanni Bellini (workshop), *Circumcision*, ca. 1500, London, National Gallery, image via Wikicommons

Fig. 12 (right): Titian, *Gypsy Madonna*, ca. 1510, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, image via Wikicommons



Fig. 13 (left): Girolamo Romanino, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1545, Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo, Brescia, Italy, © Leemage / Bridgeman Images

Fig. 14 (right): Girolamo Romanino, *Madonna and Child with Saints Bonaventura and Saint Sebastiano*, 1517-1518, Cathedral, Salò, Alinari /Art Resource

The dark gold-colored veils in Savoldo's Berlin, Florence, and Getty *Magdalenes* also would have communicated to a sixteenth-century audience the radiance associated with Mary (Figs. 2-4). The luminosity of oil-based pigments, together with the elimination of gold-leaf backdrops, meant that artists could use gold paint to evocatively summon both written descriptions of the radiant Virgin "standing next to the King in a vesture of gold" and the gold-

threaded fabrics that had been deployed in festivals celebrating her.²⁸ Particularly famous were the actual golden dresses, a sign of virginity, used in the Venetian Festival of the Twelve Maries.²⁹ As noted above, Titian lines his mantle for the *Gypsy Madonna* in gold (Fig. 12), and soon after Romanino uses gold for the mantle and lap cloth of his *Madonna and Child between Saints Bonaventura and Saint Sebastiano* in the Cathedral of Salò (Fig. 14, ca. 1517-18). It should be noted that gold is also used for the clothes of the bareheaded Magdalene in this period as well, although they typically mirror contemporary Cinquecento garments of wealthy secular patrons for whom she served as a primary example of penitence.³⁰ Although the saint's cult had existed in Venice since the 1100s and blossomed there in the Counter-Reformation, as discussed below, that of the Virgin Mary was by far the most prevalent of the two.³¹

Cult of the Virgin Mary

The Virgin Mary was the protector of Venice, which was believed to have been founded on the feast day of the Annunciation on March 25, 421 CE; both Venice and the sea are present in the background of Savoldo's *Magdalene* in London (Fig. 1). When the Brescian painter arrived there in 1527 he would have encountered a dizzying array of Marian shrines, relics, and visual imagery in the Byzantine and Veneto-Byzantine traditions.³² Mary's cult was particularly powerful in Venice because of its ties to Constantinople, where she had reigned as patron saint since the early seventh century. The Basilica of San Marco—a surrogate pilgrimage church after the fall of Constantinople in 1453—housed prize spoils from the eastern capital, the most celebrated of which was the *Nicopeia*, a late eleventh-century Byzantine icon of the Mother and Child.³³ Fragments thought to be Mary's veil were another of the spoils kept at San Marco and one of particular interest to this study.³⁴ Having left no bodily remains, Mary's secondary relics,

²⁸ Donald Attwater, *A Dictionary of Mary* (London: Longmans, 1957), 111-112, cites this phrase from a Marian hymn.

²⁹ Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 135-156, discusses the Festival of the Twelve Maries associated with the church of Santa Maria Formosa; it was celebrated from the mid-1100s to 1379 and retold in 15th- and 16th-century chronicles.

³⁰ Correggio dresses his bare-headed Magdalene in gold (with a red shawl) in the *Noli me tangere* of ca. 1525 (Prado, Madrid): see Margaret A. Morse, "Mary Magdalene between Public Cult and Personal Devotion in Correggio's *Noli me tangere*," in Michelle Erhardt and Amy Norris, eds., *Mary Magdalene Iconographic Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 295-314, who notes that Correggio borrowed for his Bolognese patron the gold cloth of S. Cecilia in her wedding dress from Raphael's 1514 *Altarpiece of S. Cecilia*, also in Bologna. For cloths of gold in this period, see Lisa Monnas, *Merchants, Princes and Painters: Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 299-300. Romanino drapes his Magdalene similarly in the *Feast in the House of the Pharisee* in S. Giovanni Evangelista, Brescia, of 1545. Pardo (71 n. 10) cites Victor Saxer, "Les Saintes Marie dans la tradition orientale," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 32 (1958), 320-322, who notes that yellow and white were colors associated with the Magdalene's feast day. See Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1993), 281-282, for Venetian laws requiring prostitutes to wear yellow headbands beginning in 1417. I do not consider any of the garments under discussion here to be yellow.

³¹ See Haskins, 271-286, for a history of the Magdalene's cult in Venice.

³² By 1500 there were at least 20 churches and 300 altars dedicated to the Madonna and many more on view in private domestic settings: Rona Goffen, *Piety and Patronage in Renaissance Venice: Bellini, Titian, and the Franciscans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 138-154.

³³ See Patricia Fortini Brown, *The Venetian Sense of the Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1996.

³⁴ Alberto Rizzi, "Le icone bizantine e postbizantine delle chiese veneziane," *Thesaurismata* 9 (1972), 250.

such as clothing, were critically important to her cult.³⁵ The Virgin, herself a weaver of veils, eventually became the patron saint, along with Saint Mark, of the silk workers guild (Arte dei Setaiuoli) in Venice.³⁶

Savoldo's images overtly recall Byzantine icons of the *Lamenting Virgin* or *Mater Dolorosa* in the form of veiled full or half-length images, with the fabric completely covering the hair and part of the forehead and a veiled hand raised to the inclined head to wipe away tears. The prevalence of such devotional images in La Serenissima was testimony to the influx of, and obsession with, icons from the Greek East following the Venetian crusade of 1204, and they were on display in both churches and private homes.³⁷ Italian artists in central and northern Italy were inspired to mimic the full and half-length versions of the Byzantine *Lamenting Virgin* type.³⁸ One prominently displayed example was part of Paolo Veneziano's painted cover (1345) for the *Pala d'Oro* above the high altar of the basilica of San Marco (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15: Paolo Veneziano, Cover for the *Pala d'Oro*, 1345, Museo Marciano, San Marco, Venice (detail of *Lamenting Virgin* and *Man of Sorrows*), Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource

³⁵ Annemarie Weyl Carr, 61. By the ninth century the conceptual notion that Mary had woven a robe of flesh draped around divinity had emerged (ibid., 63-64); it would ultimately become a metaphor for the Virgin's civic protection as well.

³⁶ Peter Humfrey, *Cima da Conegliano* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 107.

³⁷ Caroline Campbell and Alan Chong, *Bellini and the East* (London: National Gallery of Art, dist. Yale UP, 2005), 44-59. For some patrons unable to obtain imperial spoils, the Veneto-Byzantine style of Renaissance-era icons sufficed; Crete, a Venetian colony from 1517 to 1537, was the primary source for post-Byzantine icon production. A document of 1499 cites the import of 700 icons from Crete; see David Chambers and David Pullan, eds, *Venice: A Documentary History 1450-1630* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 333-337.

³⁸ Another relevant example is a triptych of c. 1300 (private collection, Dordrecht), possibly by a Venetian artist for a Dominican patron, that also includes Christ as Man of Sorrows and John; see Ann Derbes and Amy Neff, "Italy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Byzantine Sphere," in *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)*, ed. Helen Evans (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 458-459, who posit that the training of the artist who painted the Virgin is uncertain (Byzantine or Italian-Venetian). Other examples of the type are discussed by Maria Vassilaki and Niki Tsironis, "Representations of the Virgin and their Association with the Passion of Christ," in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. M. Vassilaki (Milan: Skira, 2000), 335 and 458. Analogous full-length figures of the Lamenting Virgin appear frequently in Byzantine icons of the Crucifixion flanked by Mary and John; see, for example, the catalogue entry by Weyl Carr for a "Two-sided icon with the Virgin Kataphyge and the Vision of Ezekiel" from Thessalonike (1371-1393) in Evans, 198. Of appeal particularly to Mendicant patrons, this type of iconic representation of the grieving Virgin may also be seen repeatedly in the lateral terminals of Crucifixions by Italian painters. The Magdalene also appropriates this pose: Marilena Mosco, *La Maddalena tra sacro e profano* (Florence: Usher-Mondadori, 1986), 68, illustrates an Italian example of a veiled Magdalene with one covered hand by Duccio, polyptych no. 47, in the Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena (see below). For the relationship of icons to Italian panel painting, see Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 21-25, 337-76.

Northern painting also responds to Byzantine or Byzantine-inspired prototypes. Of particular interest with regard to Savoldo's Magdalene figures is Rogier van der Weyden's *Crucifixion* for the Charterhouse at Scheut, near Brussels (1454-1464; Fig. 16).³⁹ Although badly damaged, the surviving materiality of Mary's pale maphorion in grisaille, which conceals her hand raised to wipe tears, together with her sense of isolation, offer an important reinterpretation of the Byzantine visual tradition. Here Rogier reduces the scene of Christ's death to an iconic minimalism. Although in full length, similar to Savoldo's imaging is the degree to which the veil covers her forehead, the suggestion of *contrapposto*, and the sheer volume of her drapery. As noted above, Savoldo's wife was evidently Flemish, and he frequently referred to painters of the region in his own work; Rogier's work was also well known to Italian artists and patrons.⁴⁰

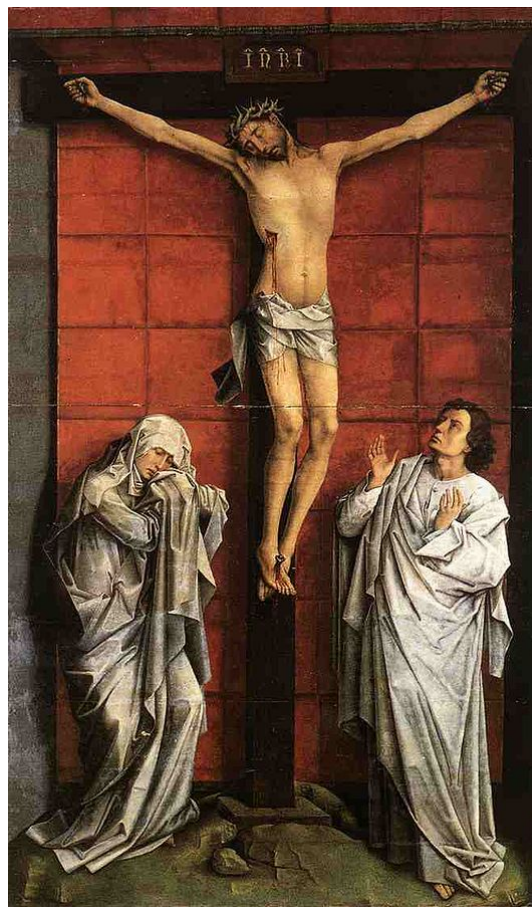


Fig. 16: Rogier Van der Weyden, *Crucifixion*, 1454-1464, Nuevos Museos, Monastery of the Escorial, image via Wikicommons

³⁹ Dirk de Vos, *Rogier van der Weyden: The Complete Works* (New York: Abrams, 1999), 291-294. In addition to Byzantine or neo-Byzantine prototypes of mourners accessible to Rogier, see the *Pleurants* of 1404-1410 by Claus Sluter for the tomb of Philip the Bold at the Chartreuse de Champmol, near Dijon.

⁴⁰ See notes 23 and 24 above. For Rogier in Italy, see Michael Baxandall, "Bartolomeus Facius on Painting: a Fifteenth-Century Manuscript of *De Viris Illustribus*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 27 (1964): 105-106.

The half-length figural types seen in the panel by Paolo Veneziano (Fig. 15) continued to be inventively transformed by artists such as Antonello da Messina, Bellini, Giorgione, and Titian into what Sixten Ringbom calls the “dramatic close-up,” where the format of an icon is both enlarged and fused with the verism—both in physical and psychological terms—of a living person, typically Christ.⁴¹ Pardo situates Savoldo’s Magdalene paintings firmly within this tradition.⁴² Especially appealing to Mendicant patrons, this artistic development prolongs the late medieval preoccupation with the corporeal appearance of Christ and the Virgin.⁴³ In the late fifteenth century artists and their patrons further encouraged empathetic mourning by introducing a narrative dimension to complement the half-length figures, who were depicted as turning to confront the viewer.⁴⁴ Savoldo adopted this formula by reinventing the Byzantine *Lamenting Virgin* for his female Magdalenes to achieve a compelling iconic pathos. Paul Joannides has suggested that Savoldo’s *Magdalene* (perhaps the version in London: Fig. 17) may have been hung by the patron or owner in a manner reminiscent of the images that functioned as models for such a hypothetical diptych; the Averoldi family commissioned Christ the Cross-bearer of 1542 (Brera, Milan) from Romanino of Brescia, whose material luxury competes with that of Savoldo’s veiled women (Fig. 18).⁴⁵



Fig. 17 (left): Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo, *Mary Magdalene*, ca. 1527-ca. 1540, National Gallery, London, Bridgeman Images

Fig. 18 (right): Girolamo Romanino, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, 1542, private collection, © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images

⁴¹ The term comes from Ringbom, 48. See also *ibid.*, 47-155.

⁴² Pardo, 76-77.

⁴³ Ringbom, 48-52; Belting, 349.

⁴⁴ Belting, 261, 362-364.

⁴⁵ Paul Joannides, “Savoldo: Minimalist Refinement,” exhibition review of “Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo tra Foppa, Giorgione e Caravaggio,” Monastery of Santa Giulia, Brescia, and Schirn-Kunstfall, Frankfurt, *Apollo* 132 (1990): 56. Gilbert, 38, proposes that Savoldo’s *Shepherd* (Los Angeles, Getty) may have been a pendant to one of the *Magdalenes* (Getty or Berlin). The directions in which the figures illustrated here face are, however, incompatible and suggest that such an arrangement was not intentional on the part of the artist.

The Marian characteristics of Savoldo's Magdalene figures thus suggest a reconsideration of the identity of the sitter. This line of inquiry may profitably begin with a review of sacred texts and hagiographies relevant to the Virgin's presence at the Resurrection. Unremarked in relation to the *Magdalene* paintings is an acknowledgement of longstanding and inherently contradictory theological assessments of the role of the Virgin Mary at Christ's tomb on Easter morning. Yet such references exist in Western writings from the fourth century through the Counter-Reformation and thus merit review in relation to Savoldo's paintings. A survey of religious texts concerning the role of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene at the sepulchre follows, which will then be applied to an analysis of the formal aspects of Savoldo's imagery previewed above.

The Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene at the tomb: textual sources

Textual ambiguities regarding the respective roles of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene as witnesses to Christ's resurrection were ultimately the result of the imprecise and conflicting accounts in the canonical gospels. None of the evangelists actually described the resurrection itself. Matthew (28:1-4) stated that Christ, heralded by an angel, appeared to both Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary."⁴⁶ In Mark 16:1-10, three myrrh-bearers (myrophores) identified as Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James, and Salome visit the tomb, but only the Magdalene sees Christ. Luke (24:10) identified the women at the sepulchre who see the angel as "Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary of James and the other women that were with them." In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene visits the sepulchre "early, when it was yet dark" (20:1) and, subsequently, Christ appears exclusively to a woman simply called Mary: "Jesus saith to her, 'Mary.' She turning saith to him, 'Rabbouni' (which is to say, 'Master')" (20: 16-17).

Eastern apocrypha and exegetical writings reflect concern about the absence of the Virgin Mary in the accounts of the resurrection by the Evangelists. Beginning in the first century, the Syrian exegetes in particular celebrated Mary's presence at the tomb on Easter morning in keeping with both the growing interest in Christological issues generally and their related distress with the scriptural silence regarding Mary's role as a witness to the risen Christ.⁴⁷ Thus, Matthew's ambiguous reference to "the other Mary" was often converted in early Eastern commentary to an explicit identification of Mary as the mother of Jesus in order to satisfy the need for Mary to be present at the Resurrection of her son.⁴⁸ As Mariolatry intensified, the impulse to celebrate Mary as a primary witness of the events near the tomb continued in the writings of Origen (3rd century), Ephrem the Syriac (d. 373), and the more well-known John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople (397-407), who was later the subject of considerable devotion in Venice.⁴⁹ In the West, Saint Ambrose had incorporated this aspect of Eastern

⁴⁶ Scriptural passages are from Angela M. Kinney, ed., *The Vulgate Bible: Douay-Rheims Translation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), vol. 6. For an exhaustive analysis of the canonical gospels in relation to Mary Magdalene as witness to the resurrection, see Richard Atwood, *Mary Magdalene in the New Testament Gospels and Early Tradition* (Bern: Lang, 1993), 97-146.

⁴⁷ James Breckenridge, "'Et Prima Vidit': the Iconography of the Appearance of Christ to His Mother," *The Art Bulletin* 39 (1957), 11-12; Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 330.

⁴⁸ See the multiple early Eastern sources cited by Breckenridge, 11-12, and Saxer, 32.

⁴⁹ For Saint John Chrysostom's erratic descriptions regarding the role and identity of women, including Mary Magdalene, at the tomb and as witnesses to the resurrection, see Atwood, 170-174. Of the Syrian exegetes, the writings of Chrysostom were the most well-known in the West. His cult flourished in Venice, and Girolamo Donato

writings in his *De virginitate* (4th century): “Then Mary saw the resurrection of the Lord, and she was the first to see and believe.”⁵⁰ He also compares Christ’s vacant tomb to the Virgin’s womb.⁵¹

Illustrations accompanying these exegetical texts complement the literary desire to demonstrate the Virgin Mary’s unequivocal presence at the tomb. This may be seen in the Resurrection scene in *The Syriac Gospel of Rabbula* (586 AD), housed in the Medici collection, Florence, by 1497 (Fig. 19).⁵² Here Mary, dressed identically to her representation in the Crucifixion at the top of the page, falls to the ground in the presence of the resurrected Christ along with another woman; of the two she alone has a halo and is veiled in dark blue cloth. It should also be noted that on the left side of the page, she carries an ampulla to the tomb, and that in the Crucifixion scene her covered, raised hand anticipates the Byzantine icons of the Lamenting Virgin discussed above.



Fig. 19: Rabbula Gospels, *Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ*, 586 CE, Laurentian Library, Florence, fol. 13r, image via Wikicommons

translated the saint’s texts into Latin ca. 1500; see Patricia Brown, *Venice & Antiquity: The Venetian Sense of the Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 242-243.

⁵⁰ Ambrose, *De virginitate*, I, iii, 14, cited by Breckenridge, 15: “Vidit ergo Maria resurrectionem Domini: et prima vidit, et credidit.”

⁵¹ It is tempting with regard to Marian tomb-womb imagery to juxtapose the shared sense of enclosure seen in Antonello da Messina’s *Virgin Annunciate* of ca. 1475-1476 (Galleria Regionale della Sicilia, Palermo) with Savoldo’s veiled women when interpreted as Mary. See note 69 below.

⁵² Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, Cod. Plut. I, 56: published in commented facsimile by Carlo Cecchelli, Giuseppe Furlani, Mario Salmi, eds., *The Rabbula Gospels* (Olten: UrsGraf, 1959), 25. See also Breckenridge, 14-15. Savoldo is documented in Florence in 1508 and 1512 (Prestini, “Regesto,” in *Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo*, 316).

The Virgin Mary continued to be celebrated by Byzantine writers as a witness to her son's resurrection as the Eastern cult of Mary generally intensified. George, Metropolitan of Nikomedeia, reinvented early exegetical commentary advocating Mary's presence at the tomb in the form of elaborate narrative hymns for Holy Week of ca. 870, which unequivocally declaim her participation. In a Marian lament for Holy Week, Christ is directed to say: "When you have come, and the joy of Resurrection is accomplished, first of all appear to announce this to your Mother."⁵³ In a hymn for Holy Saturday, George maintains that Mary saw the resurrected Christ even before the angels and that it would be only logical for the Virgin Mary to keep vigil outside the tomb.⁵⁴ His view was consecrated in a series of hymns called the *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* of ca. 1000 AD.⁵⁵ During the singing of hymns, icons similar to those of the Lamenting Virgin discussed above were commonly displayed; Shoemaker notes that George's hymns exerted considerable influence over both Marian art and literature and Orthodox liturgy for Good Friday.⁵⁶

When the cult of Mary intensified in Italy with the influx of Eastern writings via the Crusaders, so too did the interest in the role of the Virgin Mary at the tomb of Christ revive.⁵⁷ By the twelfth century it had emerged as a topic of heated debate in the sermons and essays of theologians within the Latin church as well, as Katherine Jansen demonstrates.⁵⁸ The controversy is echoed in two of the most influential writings of the later Middle Ages: the *Golden Legend* and the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*.

The *Legenda aurea* or *Golden Legend* of ca. 1260, written by Jacobus da Voragine, a Dominican friar from Varazze, was second only to the Bible in popularity for Western readers, and the text was repeatedly published and translated in the early modern period.⁵⁹ It consists of a series of hagiographies and descriptions of key events in the lives of Mary and Christ. Jacobus uses John's canonical account for his description of Christ's appearance to the Magdalene in his hagiography of the saint. He writes:

Indeed, according to Ambrose, Martha was the woman with the issue of blood, and the woman who called out was Martha's servant. 'She [Mary] it was, I say [. . .] who stood beside the cross at his passion, who prepared the sweet spices with which to anoint his

⁵³ Breckenridge, 13.

⁵⁴ For the role of George of Nikomedeia in developing the Marian lament and a paraphrase of his homilies for Holy Week, see Maria Vassilaki and Niki Tsironis, "Representations of the Virgin and their Association with the Passion of Christ," in M. Vassilaki, ed., *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art* (Milan: Skira, 2000), 459-460.

⁵⁵ However, the *Synaxarium* weds the canonical and Orthodox traditions regarding the roles of the Virgin and the Magdalene. Here Mary is accompanied by the Magdalene: "She [Mary Magdalene] was the first, along with the other Mary, Mother of God, to see the Resurrection." See Hippolyte Delehaye, *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae e codice Sirmondiano nunc Berolinensi* (Brussels: Apud Socios Bollandianos, 1902), 833-835, cited by Saxer, 7.

⁵⁶ Stephen Shoemaker, "A Mother's Passion: Mary at the Crucifixion and Resurrection in the Earliest *Life of the Virgin* and its Influence on George of Nikomedeia's Passion Homilies," in *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Mary B. Cunningham (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 54. See also Breckenridge, 13-14.

⁵⁷ Breckenridge, 15-16.

⁵⁸ Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 59-62.

⁵⁹ The *Legenda aurea* was published in Venice by Andreas Paltasichis for Octavianus Scotus in 1482.

body, who, when the disciples left the tomb, did not go away, to whom the risen Christ first appeared, making her an apostle to the apostles.⁶⁰

This passage, together with the Gospel of John, has been cited by scholars in relation to the identity of Savoldo's veiled women as Mary Magdalene.⁶¹

Significantly, however, Jacobus da Voragine also focuses on the Virgin Mary's vision of the risen Jesus in a passage elsewhere in the *Golden Legend* that has not been included in scholarly assessments of Savoldo's imagery. In a section titled "The Resurrection of the Lord," Jacobus cites the appearance of the Christ to multiple witnesses but privileges Mary:

The third apparition was to the Virgin Mary and is believed to have taken place before all the others, although the evangelists say nothing about it. The Church at Rome seems to approve this belief, since it celebrates a station at the church of Saint Mary on Easter Sunday. Indeed, if this is not to be believed, on the ground that no evangelist testifies to it, we would have to conclude that Jesus never appeared to Mary after his resurrection because no gospel tells us where or when this happened. But perish the thought that such a son would fail to honor such a mother by being so negligent! Still it may be that in this case the evangelists kept silence because their charge was only to present witnesses to the resurrection, and it would not be proper to have a mother testifying for her son. If indeed the words of the other women had been taken for ravings, how much more surely would a mother be thought to be making up stories for love of her son! So the evangelists judged it better not to write about this apparition, and left it to be taken for granted. Christ must first of all have made his mother happy over his resurrection, since she certainly grieved over his death more than the others. He would not have neglected his mother while he hastened to console others. Ambrose also testified to this in the third book of his *De Virginibus*, saying: 'His mother saw the risen Lord, and saw him first and believed first.' Mary Magdalene saw him although up to that moment she had hesitated to believe. And Sedulius, treating of Christ's apparition, says: 'She remains ever virgin, to whose sight the Lord first offered himself at dawn, so that she, good mother, who in the past was the path for his coming, might, by making known the grand miracles, become also the signpost for his returning.'⁶²

Thus, in his hagiography of the Virgin Mary Jacobus de Voragine succinctly summarizes the millennium-old discussion about the role of the Virgin at the resurrection of her son. He conscientiously cites Ambrose, the highly influential fourth-century bishop of Milan, and Sedulius, a relatively obscure fifth-century Christian Latin poet from northern Italy, both of whom portrayed the Virgin Mary as indisputably entitled to the role of key witness to the events of Easter morning.⁶³ Yet in his hagiography of Mary Magdalene, he celebrates the Magdalene as the primary witness to Christ's return in keeping with the Dominican affinity for penitential role

⁶⁰ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1:376.

⁶¹ Pardo, 75.

⁶² Granger, 1:221-222.

⁶³ Ambrose writes: "For consider that virgins merited to see the resurrection of the Lord before the apostles . . . Then Mary saw the resurrection of the Lord, and she was the first to see and believe. Mary also saw, although she doubted. . . This explains why, subsequently, Mary Magdalene was forbidden to touch the Lord: her faith in the resurrection had wavered": *On Virginity*, trans. Daniel Callam (Toronto: Peregrina, 1980), 13-14.

models. These contradictory narratives reappear in religious writings of the following centuries, including those of Pietro Aretino, Savoldo's contemporary.

Jacobus de Voragine's speculation about the Virgin's presence at the Resurrection is meanwhile echoed in a number of other late medieval texts, including the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. Attributed to John of Caulibus, a Franciscan monk from San Gimignano, the *Meditations* (ca.1346-64) were second only to the *Legenda aurea* in popularity.⁶⁴ In a section titled "The Revelation of the Lord and First, His Appearance to His Mother" the author situates Mary within the context of her home, writing:

At dawn on Sunday, the Lord appeared at the tomb with a majestic multitude of angels [. . .] At that same hour, that is, at dawn, Mary Magdalene with Mary, the mother of James, and Salome, after first asking permission of our Lady, set out for the tomb with their ointments. Our Lady remained at home and began to pray: "Most gentle Father, most loving Father, my son, as you know, has died [. . .] Where is he? Why does he delay for so long his return to me? . . ."

Then while she [our Lady] was praying this way and gently weeping, look there, the Lord Jesus suddenly did come: dressed in whitest white garments, serene of countenance, beautiful, glorious, and rejoicing. At her side, he addressed her: 'Greetings holy parent.' She, turning at once, asked, "Is it you, Jesus, my son?"⁶⁵

Here John of Caulibus ascribes to the Virgin the "turn" towards Christ that the Magdalene possesses as the witness to the Resurrection in the Gospel of John: "She turning saith to him, 'Rabbouni' (which is to say, 'Master')." ⁶⁶

Visual counterparts to these written descriptions of Mary in the *Golden Legend* and *Meditations* as first witness to the Resurrection appear in manuscripts and paintings during the following centuries.⁶⁷ Rogier van der Weyden gave particular prominence to the theme in the right panel of his celebrated *Miraflores Altarpiece* of 1440-1444, which also includes *Mary Worshipping the Infant Christ* to the left and, in the center, a *Pietà* (Fig. 20).⁶⁸ Such scenes tend to mimic the conventional poses associated with Annunciation scenes in which a standing Christ approaches a seated, surprised Mary.⁶⁹ Rogier places her in a painted Gothic narthex, rather than

⁶⁴ John of Caulibus, *Meditations on the Life of Christ* (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 2000), xxviii-xxix. John of Caulibus is the identity of the author previously known as Pseudo-Bonaventura (ibid., xiii-xiv, and Breckenridge, 16, n. 45).

⁶⁵ *Meditations*, 278-281. Moreover, the Virgin's role as first witness to the Resurrection is reinforced in the following section of the *Meditations* titled "Mary Magdalene and the Other Mary's visit the Tomb": "When she [Mary Magdalene] reached such a pitiful state that her love disregarded anything from the angels, her Master was unable to restrain himself any longer. The Lord Jesus then related the situation to his mother and told her he wanted to go console Mary Magdalene. This was quite acceptable to her and she said, 'My blessed son, go in peace and console her, because she loves you very much, and is in deep grief over your death. But remember to return to me.' And embracing him, she sent him on his way" (*Meditations*, 283). Peter Abelard also refers to the Virgin Mary as the first witness to the Resurrection in his 13th sermon for Easter; see Deirdre Good, *Mariam, the Magdalen, and the Mother* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 20, n. 46.

⁶⁶ Pardo, 80-81, discusses the implications of *contrapposto* for Savoldo's figures, which she identifies as the Magdalene.

⁶⁷ See the survey of such images in Breckenridge (figs. 1-20).

⁶⁸ De Vos, 226-233. See also Breckenridge, 25. Other examples of this subject from 1300 ff. are discussed in ibid., 18-28. Rogier's panel was copied by Juan de Flandes ca. 1496; one copy is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

⁶⁹ De Vos, 230. See note 51.

in her house, which also frames the adjacent scenes of the Nativity and Crucifixion. Later versions of the theme are less site-specific, in keeping with the *Golden Legend*; one example is Titian's *Christ Appearing to His Mother* of 1554 (Santa Maria Assunta, Medole).⁷⁰



Fig. 20: Rogier van der Weyden, *Miraflorales Altarpiece*, 1440-1444, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, image via Wikicommons

Pietro Aretino, the flamboyantly provocative author and critic, whose Venetian residency overlapped with Savoldo's, was one of several Cinquecento writers to describe Mary at the Resurrection in his religious work titled "L'Umanità di Cristo" (1539).⁷¹ Dedicated to Isabella of Portugal, the wife of Aretino's patron Charles V, it was written during the period in which Savoldo appears to have been engaged with his *Magdalene* series. Although Aretino's writings on sacred subjects—well known and often reprinted in the Cinquecento—have been studied in relation to paintings by Titian and Paolo Veronese, they have not been cited for Savoldo's veiled women.⁷² Aretino follows the *Golden Legend* and *Meditations* in stating: "They say that Jesus appeared first to his mother before any other person," and he goes on to evoke the Annunciation:

⁷⁰ Breckenridge describes Titian's painting (workshop) that he gave to the Collegiata di S. Maria at Medole (Mantua) in 1554 as following the tradition of paintings of Christ's appearance to Mary. Erwin Panofsky, "Some Biblical and Hagiological Problems," in *Problems in Titian: Mostly Iconographic* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 39-41, identifies the title of this altarpiece instead as "The Perpetual Intercession of the Virgin Mary." See below, note 85. See Breckenridge (figs. 14-20) for other sixteenth- and seventeenth- century paintings of Christ's appearance to Mary.

⁷¹ Pietro Aretino, "L'Umanità di Cristo," in *Pietro Aretino*, intro. Giulio Ferroni (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 2002), 491-492. The essay was published first in 1535 and then in an expanded version in 1539 (*ibid.*, 381-382). For Aretino's religious affinities, see Raymond P. Waddington, "Aretino, Titian and 'La Humanità di Cristo,'" in *Forms of Faith in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, ed. Abigail Brundin and Matthew Treherne (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 171-175.

⁷² David Rosand, "Veronese's Magdalene and Pietro Aretino," *Burlington* 153 (2011), 392-394; Waddington; and Jaynie Anderson, "Pietro Aretino and Sacred Imagery," in *Interpretazioni veneziane: studi di storia dell'arte in onore di Michelangelo Muraro*, ed. David Rosand (Venice: Arsenale, 1984), 275-90.

“In seeing her son she was filled with astonishment just as she was when Gabriel placed him in her through the power of the word of God.”⁷³ Moreover, the intense devotion to the Virgin Mary by proponents of the Counter-Reformation meant that other authors and painters celebrated her prominent role as a witness to Christ’s resurrection into the late sixteenth century.⁷⁴

On the basis of the *Golden Legend* and other texts describing Christ’s appearance to Mary, one could interpret each of Savoldo’s veiled women as the mother of Christ, turning to confront Christ as she waits by the tomb, with her expression confirming what she already knows. This is perhaps most convincing as an interpretation for the Berlin version, which lacks the vase of unguent most often associated with the Magdalene and in which the sitter appears to be the oldest of the four women (Fig. 4). However, what of the presence of the vase in Savoldo’s other three versions of the scene, and its role in Renaissance painting as the Magdalene’s most widely recognized attribute (Figs. 1-3)?

An interpretation of Savoldo’s sitter as representing the Virgin Mary and/or Magdalene may also include the long-standing literary and visual traditions of imbuing Mary Magdalene with the characteristics associated with the Virgin Mary. Such a fusion—encouraged by their shared name of Mary—dates to the fourth-century texts of Ephrem, who merges the personas of the Virgin and the Magdalene as a metaphor for the Church.⁷⁵ This patristic conflation was countered in the West by Pope Gregory I’s transformation in the late sixth century of the Magdalene into a penitent sinner, despite the lack of biblical evidence for such a mandate. Late medieval texts and images depicted the saint as a “shadow Mary,” as Katherine Jansen has demonstrated.⁷⁶ She quotes Giovanni da San Gimignano writing in the later Trecento: “And

⁷³ Aretino, 491: “Dicesi che Giesù apparve prima a la Madre che ad altra persona; e che nel dimostrarsi a lei, poco mancò che la gioia non la condusse dove non la potè spinger la doglia. Ella, nel vedere il figliuolo, si empi di maraviglia non altrimenti ch’ella si facesse quando Gabriello glielo pose in seno per virtù della parola d’Iddio. Splendeva la faccia sua, e tutto il corpo insieme con luce non più veduta.” The subsequent description of Christ’s appearance is echoed in the work by Titian cited above at S. Maria Assunta in Medole. Aretino’s account of Mary at the Resurrection is much less clear in his “Vita di Maria Vergine,” in *Edizione nazionale delle opere di Pietro Aretino: opere religiose*, ed. Paolo Marini, vol. 7, tome 2 (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2011), 278-83. The *Vita di Maria Vergine* was commissioned by the Marchese del Vasto, Alfonso d’Avalos, and Aretino dedicated it to his wife, Maria of Aragona. Avalos was the governor of Milan and Charles V’s emissary to Venice in 1539. Aretino’s religious works may constitute in part the need for public redemption as he faced charges of sexual deviancy in a Milanese court; see Paolo Marini’s introduction to *ibid.*, 10-24. As per note 51 above, it is tempting to compare Antonello da Messina’s *Virgin Annunciate* with Savoldo’s paintings under discussion here.

⁷⁴ See for example the writings of Chiara Matraini (1590) cited by Susan Haskins, ed. and trans., *Who is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 110-111: “And if the Evangelists did not write of the appearance that Christ made to His Mother when He rose from the dead, this was because their purpose was to bear witness only to the Lord’s Resurrection. And if it happened that the other women who saw Him risen from the dead were disbelieved, much less would the Mother have been believed, so that it did not seem appropriate to the Evangelists to bring in the Mother to bear witness to her Son, although it was most certain that Jesus Christ appeared first to His Mother before all the others, as she had loved Him more than the others had.” Haskins (2008, 35) notes that in 1546, the Council of Trent recognized as valid non-scriptural and oral traditions.

⁷⁵ Murray, 146, 334. See Good, 3-26, for the name ‘Mary.’ Jacobus de Voragine begins his hagiography of the Magdalene with “the name Mary or Maria is interpreted as *amarum mare*, bitter sea, or as illuminator or illuminated” (Ryan, 1:374). His hagiography of the Virgin Mary exclaims: “O blessed Virgin, you need no purification! You are wholly shining, wholly resplendent” (*ibid.*, 1:148). Chiara Matraini writes in 1590: “O Virgin, only Star of the Sea, much more, sun of my deep nights, unveil, I pray to you, your light, beautiful above all others, in these fearful waves” (Haskins, 76). Images of Mary and the moon are discussed in Timothy Verdon, *Mary in Western Art* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2005), 16.

⁷⁶ Jansen, 286-306.

these two Marys are just like two eyes in the head of the Church. For one is the right eye directing the way of innocence, the other is like the left, directing the way of penance.”⁷⁷

The visual counterparts to such fusion continue in Italian and Northern painting of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁷⁸ Rogier van der Weyden’s image of the Magdalene in the left panel of his altarpiece of the *Crucifixion* in Vienna of ca. 1440 demonstrates that the phenomenon of her as a “shadow Mary” survived in painted imagery for certain clients (Fig. 21).⁷⁹ She is dressed in garb associated with widows or the religious and carries a jar of unguent to the scene of Christ’s death.⁸⁰ With inclined head, the Magdalene raises a covered hand to her cheek to wipe tears, as does the Virgin in Rogier’s *Crucifixion* at the Escorial of the following decade (Fig. 16). His figure of Mary, who kneels at the base of the Cross that she embraces, innovatively assumes a pose—the *Mariae planctus*—much more readily associated with the Magdalene by that time.⁸¹ This inversion of dress and body language manipulates the viewer’s perception of the two women in a way that generally anticipates Savoldo’s own machinations.

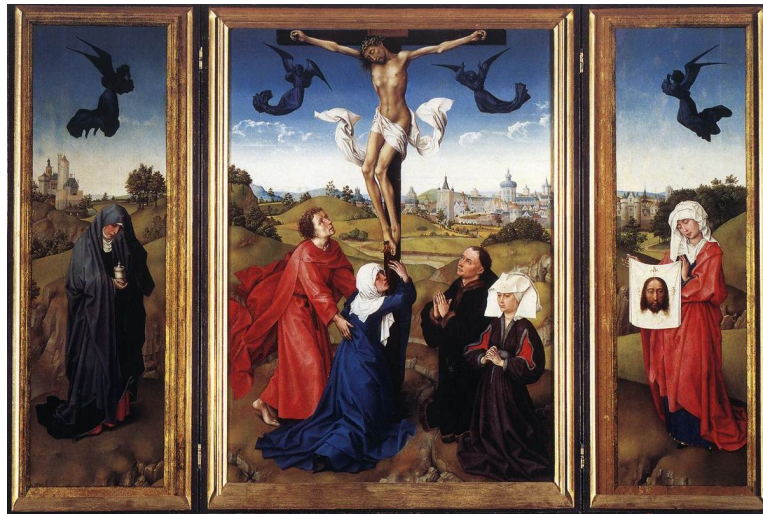


Fig. 21: Roger van der Weyden, *Crucifixion Altarpiece*, 1440, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, image via Wikicommons

The debate about the penitent status of the Magdalene had, moreover, greatly intensified by the beginning of Savoldo’s artistic career. In 1517 Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, a French Dominican, overtly challenged Pope Gregory I’s personification of the Magdalene as a reformed sinner some 900 years earlier.⁸² He posited that there was in fact no biblical evidence to support her characterization as a penitent and that eastern Orthodoxy had never viewed her as such. Although the papacy was quick to dismiss this claim, Lefèvre’s commentary focused attention on

⁷⁷ Ibid., 239.

⁷⁸ See, for example, *The Magdalen of Mercy* (ca. 1350) in S. Maria Maddalena, Bergamo, illustrated by *ibid.*, 301.

⁷⁹ De Vos, 134-137.

⁸⁰ See Penny Howell Jolly, *Picturing the “Pregnant” Magdalene in Northern Art, 1430-1550* (Aldershot, U.K.; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 27, in reference to the Maries behind John the Evangelist in Rogier’s *Descent from the Cross* (Prado, ca. 1435), who contrast markedly with his Magdalene in the same painting.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Anselm Hufstader, “Lefèvre d’Étaples and the Magdalen,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 16 (1969): 31-60, and Sheila M Porrer, *Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples and the Three Maries Debates* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2009).

the Magdalene's innate character. Such arguments, particularly in Venice with its large and increasingly vocal Greek Orthodox population, might also have motivated Savoldo's interpretation of the Magdalene as a holy figure rather than a worldly, sexualized one.⁸³

Within the context of the Counter-Reformation, the cult of the Magdalene in her most familiar guise as a penitent intensified. Ecclesiastics in Venice, a city rife with prostitutes and courtesans, aggressively deployed the saint as a model for reform, initially to combat syphilis; they promoted such establishments as S. Maria Maddalena alle Convertite in Giudecca, where reformed women participated in the silk industry.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, artists—famously Titian—began to experiment with new modes of representing the Magdalene as a penitent Venus figure in the 1530s.⁸⁵ Using the half-length format, his voluptuous nudes, with eyes averted heavenward, were partially covered by their cascading hair in marked contrast to Savoldo's luxuriantly veiled and engagingly enigmatic women. The idiosyncratic features of his sitters are consistent among the four versions and suggest the artist's depiction of a specific individual. Courtesans were known for commissioning portraits, and it has been suggested that Savoldo in fact presents a courtesan's portrait.⁸⁶

Savoldo: “capriccioso e sofisticato”

Scholars have frequently characterized North Italian artistic centers in the early modern period as venues encouraging of iconographic freedom.⁸⁷ The subject of a female witness to Christ's resurrection in fact appears to have provided Savoldo with ample opportunity to explore blended imagery for patrons who delighted in the nuances of intellectual speculation. Maria Loh's description of the collective ambiguity generated by Titian's repetition of a single composition, such as the *Danaë*, may also be applied to Savoldo's variations.⁸⁸ In Loh's view, a popular image

⁸³ In 1514 Leo X, a grecophile, allowed the Orthodox Greeks in Venice to construct a church immune from the rulings of the local patriarch; for Leo X, Clement VII, and the Greeks in Venice, see Giorgio Fedalto, *Ricerche storiche sulla posizione giuridica ed ecclesiastica dei Greci a Venezia nei secoli XVI e XVII* (Florence: Olschki, 1967), 44-63. After 1528, construction of the church of San Giovanni Crisostomo was begun: see Patricia Labalme and Laura Sanguineti White, eds., and Linda L. Carroll, trans. *Venice, Città Excelentissima: Selections from the Renaissance Diaries of Marin Sanudo* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 2008), 333-336. See also Maria Francesca Tiepolo and Eurigio Tonetti, eds., *I greci a Venezia* (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 2002). Bartolomeo Averoldi, a member of the family with whom Savoldo may have been connected, was Bishop of Calalamona (Rhythmno, Crete) from 1517-1537 and directly involved in the escalating conflict between the Venetian patriarchy and Rome on the practice of Orthodoxy in Venice (Fedalto, 1967, 57, 61, 67-69).

⁸⁴ Luca Molà, “Le donne nell'industria serica veneziana del rinascimento,” in *La seta in Italia dal Medioevo al Seicento: dal baco al drappo*, ed. Luca Molà, Reinhold Mueller, and Claudio Zanier (Venice: Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 2000), 423-426. The Venetian Convertite began to campaign to fund their convent in 1530; see Rachel Gerschwind, “The Printed Penitent: Magdalene Imagery and Prostitution Reform in Early Modern Italian Chapbooks and Broadsheets,” in Erhardt and Norris, 109, n. 3.

⁸⁵ For prostitutes and Venus, see Gerschwind, 120-122, and Haskins, 232-237. For a survey of Cinquecento paintings of the Magdalene, see Haskins, 224-290, and the essays in Erhardt and Morris, eds.

⁸⁶ Monika Ingenhoff-Danhäuser, *Heilige und Sünderin in der italienische Renaissance: Studien zur Ikonographie der Heiligen von Leonardo bis Tizian* (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1984), 59, 70, cited by Pardo, 70-71, and Penny, 1: 348.

⁸⁷ Peter Humfrey, “Introduction,” in *Artistic Centers of the Italian Renaissance: Venice and the Veneto*, ed. Humfrey (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5. Alexander Nagel and Lorenzo Pericolo, “Unresolved Images: an Introduction to Aporia as an Analytical Category in the Interpretation of Early Modern Art,” in *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art*, ed. Nagel and Pericolo (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 7, cite Venetian works of the early Cinquecento in relation to their exploration of the deliberately aporetic.

⁸⁸ Loh, 37-44.

creates a desire for its reproduction, one result of which is to challenge viewers to differentiate among variations by memory as a form of intellectual amusement.⁸⁹

The seemingly intentional lack of narrative clarity regarding the identity of the women in Savoldo's four paintings may be yet another example of what Vasari termed Savoldo's "capriccioso e sofisticato" artistic personality: a deliberate attempt to challenge the viewer's understanding of the image/s. By alluding to a multivalent interpretation of them as the Virgin and/or the Magdalene, a Cinquecento audience could identify the veiled woman individually or comparatively—perhaps from a knowledge of the other versions—as 1) the Virgin Mary only in keeping with the *Golden Legend*, *Meditations*, or Aretino's *Umanità di Cristo*; 2) a sanitized Magdalene in keeping with either Western efforts to virginalize her as a "shadow Mary" or the Orthodox concept of Magdalene as a non-penitent; and/or 3) a portrait, perhaps of a former prostitute. Alternatively, seeing the women as a fusion of the two Maries would allow the viewer to have dual exemplars, with a shared name, of purity and penance.⁹⁰

Scholars can delight in the imagined conversations that Savoldo's paintings of veiled women may have provoked a half-millennium ago. The pictures provided elements for wide-ranging commentary by a variety of viewers: haunting psychological engagement; ambiguity of place; spiritual escape; the intimacy of Savoldo's secular portraits (or perhaps even the recognition of a familiar face); accessible and dazzling visual effects at once suggestive of a precious textile commodity and a *dimostrazione* of artistic skill; local sartorial custom (Fig. 22);⁹¹ savvy comparison to the work of other painters; allusions to contemporary debate about Mary Magdalene; and, as suggested here, intimations of an alternate Marian identity.



Fig. 22: Cesare Vecellio, "Widows of Venice," in *Costumes anciens et modernes/Habiti antichi et moderni*, 1590 (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1860, pl. 109)

⁸⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁹⁰ See note 92 above.

⁹¹ Cesare Vecellio's description for plate 134 titled "Vedove" (widows) of Venice in *Degli Habiti antichi et moderni* (Venice: Zenaro, 1590) closes with: "This image of dress represents a very modest noblewoman of the Contarini family." Decades earlier, Pietro Contarini had commissioned the four paintings of *Rest on the Flight to Egypt* from Savoldo as discussed above. For comparison, see Giotto's dark veiled figure in his *Encounter at the Golden Gate* of 1304-1306 in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua.

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