



# In Search of Mary Magdalene

**W**as Mary Magdalene the lover of Christ and did she have a son by him? This idea—made popular by *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown’s wildly successful novel and its film adaptation—has stimulated debates, disputes, and even some serious attempts at historical research in recent years. Today, some claim they have found evidence for the fatherhood of Christ in an ancient fresco preserved in a Templar church at Tempio di Ormelle, near Treviso in northern Italy. Is it true?

### Portrait of a Woman

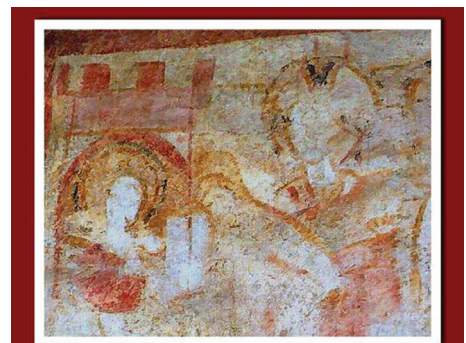
The figure of Magdalene—a sinner converted by Jesus and turned into one of his most devoted followers—has always stimulated the curiosity and imagination of artists and mystery mongers alike. The hypothesis of her being Jesus Christ’s companion was first suggested long before Brown. “It’s an idea born in the Parisian ‘counterculture’ at the end of the nineteenth century, developed by artists that were protesters and often involved in the occult, who wanted to shake up the conventions,” Mario Arturo Iannaccone, historian of Christianity, told the author in a personal interview. “For example, in 1888, an opera titled *The Lover of Christ* was performed in Paris. It was written by Darzens and the lover was, obviously, Mary Magdalene. In 1896, a book titled *The Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)* was published; it was an important apocryphal work that

helped strengthen feminism. In various novels, Mary Magdalene became a *femme fatale*. Lawrence, author of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, wrote a story about Mary Magdalene and Jesus titled *The Risen*, filled with double meanings.”

But even the 1800s’ artists were fascinated by this woman and portrayed her in several paintings. “During the decadent era they turned her into a disturbing character, such as Salomé,” continues Iannaccone. “There are many examples in which she is represented as a beautiful woman bejeweled, or naked, symbolizing her newfound innocence. An example is the ‘penitent’ Magdalenes by Francesco Hayez, painted in 1825 and 1833. But at that time, hundreds of women of high society asked to be portrayed in the nude or seminude *à la Madeleine*, as it was called. They liked to represent this way their youthful beauty and purity.”

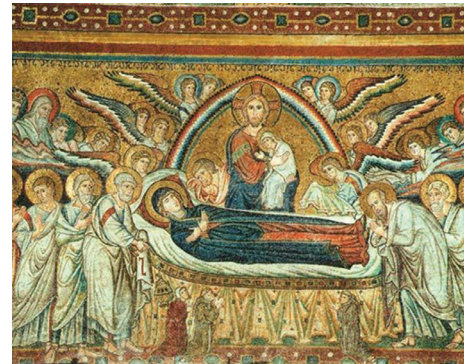
### A Holy Family

Some believe that it was not only decadent and romantic painters who depicted Magdalene, but before them came the painters of the Renaissance and, further back, medieval artists. In these ancient works of art, Magdalene was not merely a disturbing woman; she would be depicted lying on a bed, after giving birth to a child, while Jesus holds a baby in his arms: his son.



Stunning XII century mural possibly showing the Magdalene bringing to Jesus a male child!

The fresco in Tempio Ormelle: Jesus holds a baby, but it is not his son. It actually is a “Dormitio Virginis,” or the death of the Virgin Mary, where Jesus, her son, receives her soul in the form of a baby.



Another example of “Dormitio Virginis” by Jacopo Torriti, in Santa Maria Maggiore (Rome), dating back to the end of thirteenth century, like the Tempio Ormelle’s fresco.



Another “Dormitio” in which the soul of Mary as a child in diapers can be clearly seen.

Even Italian Nobel laureate Dario Fo, the author of a text devoted to Christ and to Magdalene, thinks that there might be some truth in the case of a not-so-platonic love between Jesus and Mary—a hypothesis that Fo sees confirmed in several famous works: “From the cycle of painting by Giotto in the upper church of Assisi, all devoted to Mary Magdalene, where she ascends to heaven assisted by the angels, well before the Madonna, to a fresco at the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua,” said Fo in an interview found on Diego Cuoghi’s website. “While portraying Jesus chas-

ally Mary Magdalene can be deduced from the fact that she wears a red robe, traditionally attributed to her, and by the presence of a tower behind her, her other feature.

Is it really possible, however, that a painting with such outrageous and heretical content could have been painted and its significance remain unnoticed for centuries? If this interpretation were true, it would be really one of the most shocking discoveries in the history of art and, especially, in the history of the Church.

More important are the studies of so-called feminist theology, which aim to re-evaluate the role played by women in early Christianity and therefore also that of Magdalene: this is an ideological, historical, and theological area that is both respectable and culturally relevant. Where, however, the modern myth of Magdalene has no place.”

Also, in *The Da Vinci Code*, one of the key clues of an intimate relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene was sought in the *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci, where an effeminate figure, with long hair, sits at the right hand of Christ.

“This is the apostle John, as any art student knows,” noted Diego Cuoghi, expert of art history and author of a study on the issue of Ormelle, in a personal interview with the author. Leonardo himself wrote clearly in his preparatory notes who that figure represented. Cuoghi continues: “Perhaps it will seem trivial, but Christian sacred art is based on the texts of Christian religion. For this reason, in almost all Medieval and Renaissance *Last Suppers* Giovanni is always represented as young, boyish-looking, and with a hairless face, unlike the other apostles who look like adults, often bearded; and he often has the head reclined on the shoulder or chest of Jesus.”

If, then, the one painted by Leonardo is not Magdalene, could she be depicted in the fresco at Tempio Ormelle?

Cuoghi says: “First of all, it should be clarified that the color red is not a characteristic exclusive to Mary Magdalene, but belongs also to the Madonna, for example. And the tower is a characteristic iconography of Santa Barbara (who was locked in a tower) and, again, of the Virgin Mary (also called *Turris Davidic* in litanies).”

The iconographic elements that distinguish Magdalene in art, in fact, are different: the jar of ointments in Medieval times, as Mary Magdalene washed the feet of Christ, and the skull, the book, and the crucifix from the sixteenth century onward.

“As for the Templars,” continues

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ing the money changers from the temple, Giotto also paints a little boy who, scared, runs to take refuge near a woman: Mary Magdalene, on whose head stands a halo. That baby, suggests the painter, clings to his mother as if to ask protection from the outburst of a man who had always been seen smiling. His father, Jesus.”

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The fresco in question is located in Tempio Ormelle, on the wall of a medieval church built by the Templar Knights. According to some, the church was dedicated to Mary Magdalene, of whom the Templars were devout, and the fact that in a fresco worn by time, a lady portrayed is actu-

### The Templars and Magdalene

The version of Mary Magdalene—who was alternatively seen as the first feminist, sorceress, witch, priestess of a vaguely defined religion of a Mother Goddess—as the true founder of Christianity (or of a Christian alternative) is actually a very modern myth. “It is a reinterpretation of the figure of this woman that was proposed in the late nineteenth century,” says Iannaccone. “Since then, Magdalene has been charged with new meanings, becoming a prism that reflects the entire spectrum of modern protesters against traditional Christianity.”

*The Da Vinci Code* had popularized the idea of a Jesus bloodline. “These are modern fantasies often connected to sacred or *graalian* bloodlines,” continues Iannaccone. “No serious historian, caring for his own reputation, ever took them seriously, simply because they lack the necessary foundations.

Cuoghi, “they never dedicated any church to Mary Magdalene but only to the Virgin Mary, whose cult was passionately widespread by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who wrote the rule of the Templars and ‘invented’ the term ‘Notre Dame.’”

Iannaccone agrees: “The Templars were mostly French and the tradition of the repentant prostitute landed in Provence became fixed in the tenth century, giving rise to a lively worship that later extended to all of France. Therefore a number of French Templars was certainly devoted to Saint Mary Magdalene, but in the same way they were of other saints.”

#### A Little Mysterious Fresco

What then does the Tempio Ormelle fresco depict, if the figure lying in bed is not Magdalene? And why does a man (who is certainly Jesus, since he is characterized by a crossed cloud) hold in his arms a newborn baby?

Often, those who venture into this kind of reckless interpretation ignore the entire history of art and interpret the images according to their own personal biases. A famous example of this kind of behavior is that of those who today see flying saucers, aircraft, and ships in Medieval and Renaissance paintings (see this column, SI, March/April 2014 and July/August 2014).

“Do you really think it possible that, in the thirteenth century, a painting with such a subject (Mary Magdalene giving birth to Jesus’s son) could be painted on the walls of a church? Do you think that the ecclesiastics who commissioned the work to the artist would not have had anything to say? I do not think so,” observes Cuoghi. “Just think of the many paintings that Caravaggio was forced to do all over because they did not meet the standards required or what happened with the *Last Supper* by Veronese, destined to the refectory of the Dominican convent of Saints John and Paul in Venice, where the artist had placed all kind of people, dwarves, acrobats, and animals, as if it were a spectacle at the palace.

The painting was refused and the artist tried by the Inquisition.”

A closer examination of the painting on the walls of the church of Tempio, then, reveals something quite different.

“This is what is called a *Dormitio Virginis*, or the transit of the Virgin, the final episode of Mary’s life as told by some apocryphal accounts but depicted in many works of art until the late fifteenth century, especially in the

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churches dedicated to her,” according to Cuoghi. “This scene depicts the Virgin dying while standing next to her son Jesus, who receives her soul in the form of a baby in diapers. In other versions, Jesus is already in heaven, and brings with him the soul of the Virgin Mary. Beautiful examples of the *Dormitio* can be seen in Rome in the apse mosaics by Pietro Cavallini, in Santa Maria in Trastevere, and in those by Jacopo Torriti in Santa Maria Maggiore, both dating from the late thirteenth century, the same period of the paintings at Tempio Ormelle.”

Not surprisingly, on the walls of the same church, dedicated to Our Lady as many of those built by the Templars, the life of Mary is depicted in fresco after fresco. And the cycle ends with the *Dormitio*, or the death and ascension into heaven of the Virgin.

#### Modernity of Magdalene

And what about the Giotto’s frescoes that so surprised Dario Fo? Iannaccone has an answer:

Leafing through the extensive bib-

liography of texts written by scholars who have studied the work of this painter, from Toesca and Salvini until Frugoni, Pisani, Wolf, Fornari, one can easily verify that none of them went even close to these “modern” interpretations—precisely because they are modern readings, unhistorical, with no method, which totally ignore the sources. Dario Fo collected the jokes of his son Jacopo, a comedian, who clung, I do not know with how much conviction, to

the inventions of Dan Brown. Before the release of *The Da Vinci Code* he never spoke about this.

But why today is there so much discussion about Magdalene? What’s so special about this woman to attract the attention of fans of mysteries?

“Magdalene has been presented as a free woman, aware of her charm, who follows Jesus by her own choice,” concludes Iannaccone.

She is a complete female figure, closer to modern sensibilities than, for example, Mary the mother of Jesus or any other women who followed him. She was called “apostle to the apostles” because she was very close to Jesus and because she received, according to the Gospels, the announcement of his Resurrection. Saint Gregory the Great wrote in a sermon that he had converted to holiness after a lifetime of sin. This (historically uncertain) proposal was successful. Two or three figures of women mentioned in the Gospels were merged into a coherent character, the perfect penitent who, however, had experienced everything in life, including free sexuality. ■