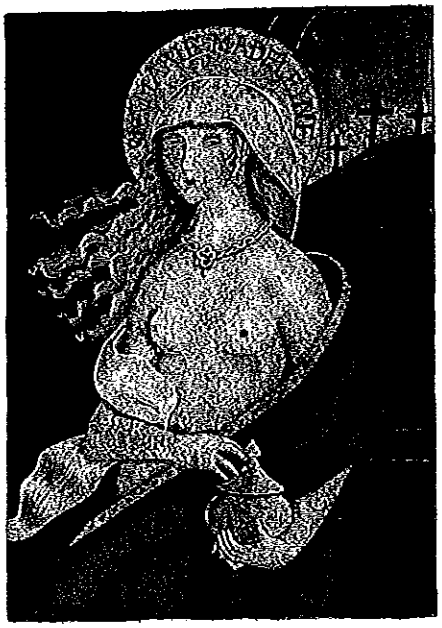
A WOMAN OF EXTREMES

BY ANNE HOLLANDER

MARY MAGDALEN can't help being a suggestive character; she's always the Other Woman in Jesus' life. The Virgin Mother's essence is eternally fixed, but the nature of Mary Magdalen's otherness is forever open to question. Christianity's long-term and variable construction of Mary Magdalen's character, history, and meaning and its diverse effects on religious and worldly life and on art and popular culture all over Christendom make a complicated tale, which has now been prodigiously expounded by Susan Haskins in "Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor" (Harcourt Brace; $27.95), a trim, powerful book. This is not a sensational essay that pretends to break free from the tradition of learned effort on which it really depends: the author has great sympathy with the immense religious, imaginative, and scholarly labor behind the multitudinous texts she has consulted, and she is eager to share in the devotion of her sources, to join their scrupulous and patient company in explaining her own idea. Her book is a work of impassioned scholarship.



Susan Haskins unravels the myth of Mary Magdalen, the original Other Woman.

Like many people, Haskins first met Mary Magdalen in a work of art. As a child, when she saw the print of a trecento Crucifixion she was captivated by the golden-haired woman in red who wept at the foot of the Cross; but that was at a convent school, where the Magdalen's role was always glossed over in favor of the Virgin Mary's superior glory. Haskins' desire to take up the Magdalen's cause seems to have sprung from that moment, and she has done her subject full justice in what appears to be a companion and an alternative to Marina Warner's important 1976 book on the Virgin Mary, "Alone of All Her Sex."

IN any collection of Old Masters, the Virgin is everywhere. Her head is veiled and her face is calm; whether she appears as a village maiden or as the crowned Queen of Heaven, there is no mistaking the gentle Mother of God, the submissive Handmaid of the Lord. Nearly as ubiquitous is Mary Magdalen, foremost among female saints as the intimate of Christ, equal in importance to all the original disciples. But it doesn't take long to notice that the Magdalen's image has its own visual language, different from that of the Virgin, and, indeed, from any other saint of either sex.

Steady exposure to the saints in art yields a pretty firm sense of the fixed garb and attributes of each, the motifs that have defined them through time: Sebastian is naked and stuck full of arrows, always beardless and beautiful; John the Baptist is gaunt and unkempt, carries a cruciform staff, and wears a camel skin; George and Michael always wear armor, and Michael has wings. Most of the virgin martyrs have loose hair and carry the instruments of their martyrdom, so we can tell them apart; and in the vast troop of robed and bearded Apostles, martyrs, and Church Fathers each displays a special identifying characteristic or two—Peter a white

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beard and keys, Paul a dark beard and a sword, Jerome a cardinal's hat. But whatever their separate trappings, most saints in art display a uniform solemnity of expression, a holy seriousness that sometimes veers toward exaltation during tortures or visions, and their bodily comportment is transcendentally decorous, just like the Virgin's.

None of this applies to the image of Mary Magdalen. Her figure has a unique instability, her face a multiform emotional cast, her gestures an unpredictable range, and her hair, costumes, circumstances, and attributes keep changing. Her life in art is one of extremes. In a Duccio painting we see her wrapped in clinging red from head to foot, approaching with others the angel at the tomb, mournfully dipping her head as she tells him whom she seeks; in Titian's famous portrait she gazes up in ecstasy, clutching a mass of golden hair around her naked breasts and shoulders. In Rogier van der Weyden's fragment she sits on the floor in a green wool dress and white wimple, quietly reading a book; in Botticelli's "Lamentation" she frowns, kneeling with closed eyes and pushing her wet face against Christ's dead cheek, embracing his head with her veil as if to bind it to her own. In William Etty's portrait from the eighteen-forties she sits stark naked except for her earrings, thrusting up her plummy nipples and showing off her furry crotch as she lets her hands dangle and glares fiercely at a nearby crucifix, while for Hugo van der Goes she is robed in stately brocade, her red hair bound up in delicate braids. In Correggio's painting she flops to the ground on her stomach like a teen-ager, pushing up her rippling yellow hair as she props up her head.

Masaccio's "Crucifixion" shows her from the back, sunk under a heavy red cape, while both arms rise up stiff with grief; but some painters show her at a jewel-strewn dressing table, wearing lush décolleté satin and a worried face. And in one twelfth-century illumination she stands in a flowered cloak and pleated veil, announcing Christ's Resurrection to eleven stunned disciples.

The sculptors give her limbs and clothes a vivid turn: Bernini drapes her in twisting fabric, her nude body so twisted with sorrow that her knees give way and she falls against the side of her niche, her twisting hands clasped to her tearful cheek. An earlier sculptor turns her into a maenad, arms flung out, veil flying wide, face a mask of rage. Donatello alone among Renaissance sculptors shows her old, her face hollow with long suffering, her dress an animal skin—a poignant reminder that this saint had no martyr's early death.

Indeed, in almost all her images Mary Magdalen is young, beautiful, and full of sentient vitality, whether she's wretched and naked or soberly draped, nervous in silk or cheerfully arrayed to tell the good news. Her most usual attribute is her covered jar of ointment, which she brings along to works of art where she needs to be picked out immediately. A second signal attribute is her emphatic hair, often uncovered among veiled heads. But her hair may be hidden and her jar absent. Bitter tears, too, she often sheds, but she evidently knows love and fury, spiritual transport, thoughtful concentration, great dignity, and deep anxiety. In fact, the conflicting data, the suggestive drama, and, often, the sheer beauty of the Magdalen's apparitions in art may well send the viewer straight back to the Bible for the real story. What is behind all this?

THE story is amazingly sparse. Spread out among the four Gospels are references to a Mary Magdalen whom Jesus cured of seven devils, who followed him as a disciple and witnessed his Crucifixion. She also observed where Jesus' body was stowed, but when she and other women went back to prepare it for burial they found the tomb empty and an angel waiting. When the angel told them Jesus was risen, she and the others told the disciples, who didn't believe them and came to look for themselves. In the Gospel of John, however, Mary Magdalen goes by herself to weep at the empty tomb and then, still alone, meets the risen Christ in the garden. They speak, and he bids her tell the disciples of his Resurrection; she does, and in this version they believe her.

That is the sum of the Mary Magdalen story. But, of course, there is the other Mary who lived in Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who sat at Jesus' feet and let her sister do the housework, and of whom Jesus approved. Near the time of his betrayal, when Jesus was having supper at Simon

"Do you think we could be happy in three thousand square feet?"

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the Leper's house, a woman opened a jar of expensive ointment and emptied it over Jesus' head, causing the shocked disciples to object. Jesus told them to let her be—she was doing it for his burial, and would be remembered for it. But this woman with the jar has no name, except (again) in the Gospel of John, where it is firmly stated that she was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. John, moreover, plainly says that she poured the ointment on Jesus' *feet*, not his head, and wiped them with her hair.

And then there is the dramatic story, told only in the Gospel of Luke, of how Jesus scandalized his friends by agreeing to dine in the house of Simon the Pharisee. At this urban dinner party, an unannounced woman arrived, whom the others immediately recognized as "a sinner." She stood weeping behind Jesus, washing his naked feet with her tears (the dinner guests would have been reclining) and drying them with her hair, after which she kissed them repeatedly and rubbed them with ointment from an alabaster box. Looking on in disgust, Simon the Pharisee decided that Jesus couldn't possibly be a true prophet, or he would have known she was bad and rejected her attentions. But Jesus instead told a story about forgiveness, and went on to forgive the woman her sins because of the love she had just shown him—pointing out that Simon, the proud host, had offered him no mark of respect whatsoever. Then Jesus told the woman that her faith had saved her and bade her go in peace, and that's the last we hear of her. We're never told the nature of her sins.

But Haskins describes how the Fathers of the Church, in developing and codifying the elements of Christian faith, could not resist the temptation to blend this unnamed woman with the two Marys and make them all into one person. They could then lay on her shoulders the role of sinner and the burden of repentance, theretofore missing from any Mary but increasingly necessary to Catholic belief and practice. Thus Mary of Bethany, the eager listener who understood Jesus' destiny before anyone else, and Mary of Magdala, the loving mourner who first saw the risen Christ and told all the others, eventually became merged and identified with a third woman, now adroitly christened Mary Magdalen, who became the figure of the penitent sinner saved by faith. And so the unhappy woman at the foot of the Cross does not merely mourn her dead leader but weeps for the world's sins, which have brought the Son of God to this pass.

But there was more. As a woman, Mary Magdalen could weep not just for all human sins but for the permanent stain of mankind, the inherent sinfulness of the body. She is, of course, a very physical saint. Her own body—through her eyes and hands, her tears and ges-

tures—is the vessel of her devotion. And her tactile spiritual offerings are delivered without any question of sin. But if she is to represent sin itself, she must correspond to frail Eve, who touched the apple and thereafter introduced both sin and sex to the entire human race. So Mary Magdalen, with her active hands, eager kisses, and flowing hair, comes to stand for sex and sin together, for the whole fleshly process whereby Eve's presumption and disobedience were passed on to later generations through her body. Only a Virgin Mother could produce the redemptive Christ; every other human female was the image of Eve, the mother of sin and death.

To counter the sinless virginal maternity of the Virgin, Mary Magdalen's own sins had to be entirely sexual: her cast-out devils had to be the demons of lewdness, and the faults known to the Pharisee's guests had to be lechery and fornication. The Church gave her the task of fomenting constant war between the flesh (always female and tempting) and the spirit (always male and pure). It was steady work for quite a while.

The occupation of the Magdalen's later life came to be portrayed as the endless self-abasement of an endlessly seductive but endlessly repentant prostitute. This moral condition would naturally include a steady hatred for the vain trappings of the profession—those repulsive silk dresses, jewelled bracelets, and gauzy chemises. Only total nakedness could rightly become her—the dress of innocence (including Eve's artless and endless hair) recovered through penitence—as she kept out of men's sight in a cave and brooded on salvation. Of course, an artist might find her there and glimpse a pearly flank. Deep in prayer, she wouldn't notice him sketching.

Thus the nameless sinner in the Gospel of Luke eclipsed the two staunch Marys, troubled the waters of Christian theology, and immensely enriched the Magdalen's artistic and legendary history. Her allure simultaneously produced centuries of great strain in the Church's policy on women's role in religion and great stress in women's actual lives throughout Christian society. Her appeal remains potent right now, and Haskins tackles it head on by taking a definite stand on her subject. In the midst of fair-minded, good-humored, thorough inquiry into every facet of the Magdalen's long story, Haskins is herself a partisan.

She wants to reclaim and celebrate the original Gospel character named Mary Magdalen, to detach her from the devout girl in Bethany and certainly from the weeping sinner at the Pharisee's house. That, she tells us, is something the Eastern Church has always done. And when we do it—when we get away from sin, repentance, loose hair, and expensive oil—we see a very different and very specific saint. She becomes the Apostle to the Apostles, the one who first witnessed and then announced Christ's triumph over death, which was the Church's founding moment. This makes Mary Magdalen the first prophet of the new religion, the first of Christ's disciples to see and hear, to believe and speak: the first Christian. Haskins is careful to point out that Mary Magdalen and the other women who travelled with Jesus were not different from his male disciples—that men and women had equal functions in the spreading of his Gospel. Translators eventually changed what was the same word in Greek into "followers" for women and "disciples" for men, as if to suggest that the women had tagged along to make the coffee.

Haskins also reminds us that Jesus himself treated women as equals and paid no attention to their famous uncleanness or conventional inferiority. During his ministry, he made no distinction between male and female works, words, or faith. As a result of this, the Early Church in its first few generations had both male and female teachers and leaders, including priests, deacons, and bishops. This practice, so foreign to both Jews and Greeks, often brought the early Christians into disrepute. It was only later, during the establishment of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, that women were definitively banished from service at the altar and began to acquire their dependent posture in Christianity, along with the crippling blame for all human sexuality and moral weakness. The Gospel's Mary Magdalen was notably independent, a woman defined only by her village and not by any man or any occupation. Her life was clearly her own, and she made the risky choice to be the disciple of Jesus.

The nature of Mary Magdalen's con-

nection with Jesus inspired the invention of many legends and theological explanations. In Gnostic writings she was identified as the earthly vessel of the heavenly wisdom, the closest companion to Christ: she was seen as his complete spiritual mate and as his necessary mediator, the one who understood and interpreted him to the others; she was the Seeker of the Beloved in the Song of Songs, with the sexual metaphor in full operation. But the Gnostic aim was finally to merge sexual difference, to undo the fatal division between Adam and Eve, so that human beings could be all asexual spirit, and death could be undone.

Such versions of Christian thought had become heretical by the fourth century. Haskins describes how both Christ's female companion and his mother were taken over by views of religious truth that abolished all feminine elements from the core of divine power, and gave all female roles only a derivative force. Christ may crown his mother in Heaven, but she doesn't share the throne with Him, the Father, and the Holy Ghost. Goddesses, even the faintest trace of them, had long since been expunged from Judaism, and Christianity eventually followed suit.

WHILE Haskins was doing research in Europe, she was struck by the strong presence of Mary Magdalen in France, where every other church and town, and even field, seems to bear her name. Haskins soon discovered the legend of the Magdalen's own apostolic arrival in France, at the port of Marseilles, to which she had sailed with her brother Lazarus to spread the Gospel in Gaul. When her missionary work in the region was accomplished, the legend has it, Mary Magdalen withdrew to a local grotto to spend the remaining thirty years of her life as an anchoress, in total contemplative seclusion. The hermit Magdalen, it was said, ate no food: she lived on the Eucharist, being lifted bodily by angels so she could receive it directly from Heaven at the canonical hours. She wore no clothing, either, but her hair grew extra thick to cover her up in the chilly cavern. Eventually, she received extreme unction from the local bishop and died, leaving her remains to be fought over by later generations of relic-mongering princes of both church and state. Over time, bits of her bones and hair were distributed among many sites, but a reliquary believed to contain the Magdalen's head is still carried in procession on her feast day in the Provençal town of Saint-Maximin, near the site of the cave where she lived for so many years. Haskins includes a recent photograph of this ritual.

Mary Magdalen apparently became the star of the Middle Ages, as the abbey churches of France struggled for possession of her relics and control of her miracles, each hoping to swell its own treasury and increase its influence as a favored international site of pilgrimage. Royal, aristocratic, and papal recognition was constantly at stake as well, and St. Mary Magdalen took on her own considerable value, which was no longer dependent on her role at the Crucifixion or her closeness to Jesus. She became a potent holy personage in her own right: from the eleventh century, her name was being given to baby girls. The Dominican order took over the Magdalen's grotto, built a monastery there, and eventually spread her cult throughout Europe. The attractiveness of her legend was increased by morality plays and Easter dramas: Mary Magdalen might figure, for example, as John the Evangelist's rich and beautiful bride, whom he jilted at the altar in order to follow Jesus, so that she vengefully plunged into a life of luxurious debauchery until she saw the light and followed him, too.

The stronger the medieval cult of the Virgin Mary, the more the monastic tradition elevated virginity and degraded all sexual life, the stronger also grew the palpable sexuality of Magdalen's image and its insistence on her bodily qualities—her personal attractions and material possessions, her licentious past, and the very physical mode of her repentance. Her great apostolic role was almost forgotten by the fifteenth century. When Titian painted her as a radiant, golden-haired courtesan in sixteenth-century Venice, Christian humanism had all but transformed her into Venus. By then, her fleshly beauty could seem the rightful mirror of God's love and the sum of all His earthly gifts—a benign virtue, and nothing to be ashamed of.

It was during the Counter-Reformation that Mary Magdalen was put to hard labor as a full-time penitent, since her whore's repentance could also stand for the depraved Church's quest for forgiveness after its return to God. In this period, she often froze with horror in the act of considering her finery, and sat uncomfortably for many naked portraits with the skull and the scourge or the crucifix and the book while her expressive hair kept failing to hide the best part of her quivering flesh. She was also made to participate artistically in the rampant female mysticism of the seventeenth century—to undergo seizures of quasi-sexual rapture in the style of St. Teresa.

The Magdalen's repentant posture only intensified during the Victorian era when she lent her name to the ubiquitous Fallen Woman who was swelling the tide of prostitution then contaminating the world's moral health. Reclaiming her soul was virtuous and, of course, eminently Christian work, often undertaken by women. Hospitals and convents for the rehabilitation of prostitutes had been established centuries earlier in several countries, usually in the Magdalen's name and without much fuss; but in nineteenth-century England the enterprise heated up, and much was made of the grim economic conditions that forced young Magdalens into a hideous life of shame.

The shame-free sexual behavior of Mary Magdalen the disciple of Jesus, on the other hand, has received much imaginative attention in the modern world. The ebb of faith and the rise of scientific inquiry have led not only to the quest for the historical Jesus but to the quest for the human unconscious, and there was a corresponding liberation of themes and styles in art. Fantasies about the erotic couplings of the woman Mary of Magdala and the man Jesus have taken many forms, some of them pictorial and poetic, others cinematic, theatrical, and novelistic, and, indeed, pornographic. Haskins gives an array of examples—but she finds most of them less than satisfactory, especially the recent fiction that insists on a vigorous sexual appetite as the Magdalen's chief quality, along with blasphemous and mystical leanings. Haskins finds everyone still blindly entranced by the sinner in Luke's Gospel, still ignoring the witness at the empty tomb and the strength of her vision and mission, still forgetting the remarkable spiritual journey Mary Magdalen undertook

apart from whatever sexual life she may have led.

HASKINS is truly impatient with the mythical Magdalen and would like to get rid of her. The myth has certainly been responsible for increasing the fear and hatred of women which have plagued the world since ancient times—not to mention women's own self-hatred—and Haskins resents the way Mary Magdalen was used for centuries as an "instrument of propaganda against her own sex." It's true that the Magdalen's part in the history of moral life has consisted largely of reinforcing the dreadful invention of Woman, the genus with only two species, Good and Bad: a woman is either frivolous, sexy, and probably dishonest, or serious, modest, and loyal—either Tonya or Nancy. Perception of female life has been compromised again and again by the compelling dichotomy between the impossibly virginal Virgin and the sinfully sexual Magdalen, whose tempting female body is alone responsible for all human lust. It's under the influence of the mythical Magdalen that prostitutes are punished and their clients are not, that mothers with lovers can be deprived of their children.

But the sinful Magdalen has also been responsible for obscuring her own role as an active disciple, witness, and Apostle, and this is Haskins' real objection to her. In 1969, the Catholic Church removed both the Penitent Sinner and Mary of Bethany from the character of Mary Magdalen, and reinstated the faithful follower—but not the minister or the Apostle. Thus the cumulative result of the myth, together with that of the Virgin, still permits the Church to oppose the ordination of women. Now that the Church of England has begun to ordain women, as the American Anglicans were already doing, Haskins, like so many others, thinks the Catholic Church should do the same. If the Church were to cease forcing the passive and submissive Virgin Mother to be the only model for women, she says, the gifted and enterprising Mary Magdalen might at last exert her proper sway in the modern Christian world.

I believe, however, that the sinful, colorful, mythical Mary still has good work to do. The image of female saint-hood that she represents in art offers a powerful combination of qualities to modern viewers, and gives a larger sense of her exemplary importance than Haskins allows. I wouldn't want to do without the ambivalence she represents: the loud tears and the silent gravity, the modish dresses and the plain drapery, the dignity and the hysteria, the self-abandon and the intelligence, the bare body and the cloak of hair. Although the legendary Mary Magdalen begins her life in riches and lechery, leaves them behind for devotion and grief, and comes to nakedness and contemplation at the end, her life in art mixes all these things up, heedless of sequence and narrative sense. Haskins' book describes how the imagery created for the Magdalen over time reflected the perspective of each age; but in the modern age we have them all at once, and what we get from her composite image is a more realistic picture of human female experience than was ever intended.

The Magdalen in art allows us to see that a deeply religious and virtuous woman may love sex and fine clothes, that a simply dressed woman may be profoundly vain. She suggests that calm, dignified women can have violent feelings, and that a fainthearted woman may be a courageous genius. She shows that a woman's erotic expressiveness and unworldly inwardness are not mutually exclusive, any more than her love of jewelry and love of humanity are—that, in fact, conflicting qualities are unevenly distributed throughout a woman, and present her with a certain challenge.

The Mary Magdalen that appears before us is reassuringly complex, struggling to find her balance in a very demanding world, to reckon with her soul and keep her moral credit as intact as her costume and complexion. I am reminded of an account of the funeral of Gabrielle Chanel, which took place at the center of Paris in l'Église de la Madeleine. The congregation gathered before the coffin, right below the statue of Mary Magdalen ascending into Heaven, whereupon Chanel's mannequins entered the church, exquisitely dressed in her latest collection. They paced slowly down the aisle and into the front rows, ready to do solemn honor to the dead and to her talented, mercurial saint. It was not for nothing that the Magdalen had come to France. ♦