Michael O'Rourke, January, 2023

A French Renaissance Sculpture of a Strikingly Beautiful Magdalene

— and some psychology thereof

Metropolitan Museum, NYC.

The Metropolitan Museum of New York City has such a large and varied collection of masterful artworks from all cultures that one can wander about it with no plan and be sure to encounter something astonishing. This happened to me recently when I walked into the museum without a plan or intention, wandered into the Medieval section, and stumbled upon a breathtakingly beautiful French Renaissance sculpture of a breathtakingly beautiful woman. I had been ambling a bit here and a bit there throughout the Medieval section, looking at this and that, when out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of the profile of a nearby statue. The profile was exquisite. It was the kind of beauty in a woman that would make anyone, male or female, on seeing her enter across a crowded room, stop and look. Before approaching the statue to study it more carefully, I stayed where I was and looked. Many of the nearby statues of Madonnas and female saints were extremely good sculptures, but none came across with this same sort of extreme physical beauty. What was happening in this

(Unless indicated otherwise, photos are by the author.)

piece? I looked, still without approaching. The nose was perfectly straight. The cheekbones were high. The upper lip protruded a bit beyond the lower. The chin was small but firm. The eyebrows appeared to be long, resting above what seemed from this angle to be large eyes.

The pose of the figure was very static and columnar. There was very little body language other than the understated language of standing still and straight. I sketched what I was seeing, trying to capture both the staid pose and a hint of the beautiful face. She was carrying something in her hands. Her head and much of her face was covered by a heavy turban-like headdress and

a scarf. Without yet knowing what or who the statue represented I walked around for a closer look.

Seen from up closer and at a different angle, the purse of the lips was more evident, almost the sort of bee-stung look fashionable in the 1920s. Evident also was the unusually long breadth of the eyebrow ridge. The eyes, it turned out, were not so large, but the upper lids, I saw, are heavy, making the eyes quite prominent. And the upper lids are also very, very slightly lowered, giving the face the appearance of being fully relaxed, of her being at peace with herself. The cheekbones were indeed high, on a rather broad face. The overall effect is that of a woman of great natural beauty. But unlike what we see in our current culture in photos of beautiful models or actresses, this woman comes across as completely calm and appears to be fully content within herself and her thoughts.

Stepping back and looking at the statue from straight on, I sketched the face, attempting to understand its structure and what was causing its beauty. Comparing my sketch with the real thing, I saw that, while I'd captured certain features, I'd exaggerated others. It was partly the subtlety of the modeling of

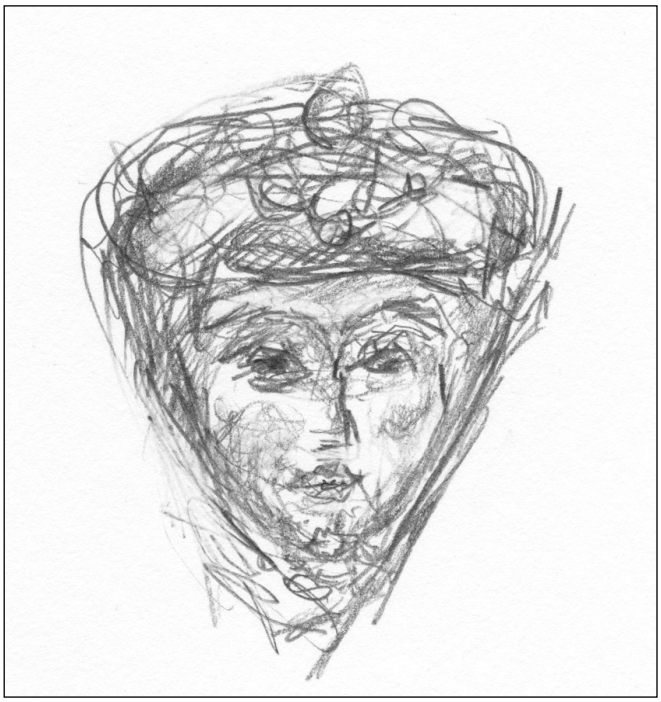


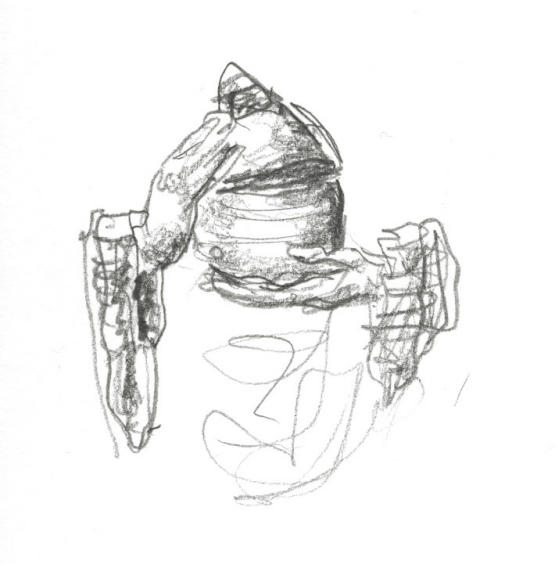
Photo: Metropolitan Museum

her features that contributed to her beauty.

I also saw that the calmness of her pose echoes and enhances that of her face. She is standing perfectly straight up and very still. There is no suggestion of movement, either in process or imminent. Her head is very relaxed. She looks straight ahead. Her head, however, is not pulled back and erect but rather hangs forward just a little bit, which we see most clearly from a side view. This is the relaxed position and angle of one's head, I mused, when one meditates. Who is this person? Who is represented here, so very calm and so very beautiful?

Photos: Metropolitan Museum

And what about that jar or canister that she is holding? What is that and what is its significance? It is the only element of the sculpture that suggests movement – and not a movement that is



happening or is about to happen, but one that has happened. She is very calmly and stilly holding a jar that she has partially opened.

As is my custom, I had not yet looked at the identifying label. I do this to allow myself to react to what I see in a sort of raw state, without being guided by labeling information to think what has already been thought – in short, to counter what Jacques Derrida called the "framing" of the label information. The label read: "Saint Mary Magdalene or Holy Woman". The "holy woman" I could see, given the tranquillity the statue conveyed. But why Mary Magdalene? I knew the story of Mary Magdalene from my childhood, but did some further research.

There were many variants on the story of Mary Magdalene and much has been written about how they came about. During the Middle Ages she was an extremely popular saint figure and the dominant story was that she had been a prostitute. (This is also the version I was familiar with). Upon her conversion, she came to Jesus and in a sign of repentance and humility, washed his feet with oil and dried his feet with her hair. With this as the story, the artistic traditions of the Christian Middle Ages and Renaissance very commonly represented her with a jar or bottle of oil, as here in this

sculpture. She was also, because of the sexual nature of her sins, traditionally represented as very attractive. The sculpture I was examining certainly fit that bill. Frequently the Magdalene's sexuality was emphasized and alluded to by a bare arm or a partially open blouse revealing a hint of breast. Here, however, she is completely covered up. She is clearly post-conversion. Her beauty is here, unmistakable and breathtaking, but she is not in any way overtly sexual in this representation. On the contrary she is quite literally "upright". She stands tall and straight and all that is visible within those heavy garments are her hands and part of her face. Even her face is partially hidden. The turban covers the top of her head and hair, and the scarf around it wraps under her chin quite snugly. She is, from head to toe, "under wraps". She is very, very asexual — except for the extraordinary attractiveness of her face. She is a reformed Magdalene. She is a saint.

But still, why *so* beautiful, so extraordinarily beautiful? Other representations of the Magdalene show an attractive woman, sometimes a sensual woman. But here she is strikingly beautiful. What is going on there? Why so stunningly beautiful?

Here I think we get into some fascinating psychology, well beyond just an effort by the sculptor to represent a holy Saint Mary Magdalene.

A curious aspect of this sculpture is the clothing. Yes, the clothing covers her completely and fully, hiding her beauty. Given the beauty of her face, we and the French viewers of the time might naturally assume that her body is equally beautiful. Hence, to capture and emphasize her modesty and her suppression of her sexuality, let us cover her body, quite fully.

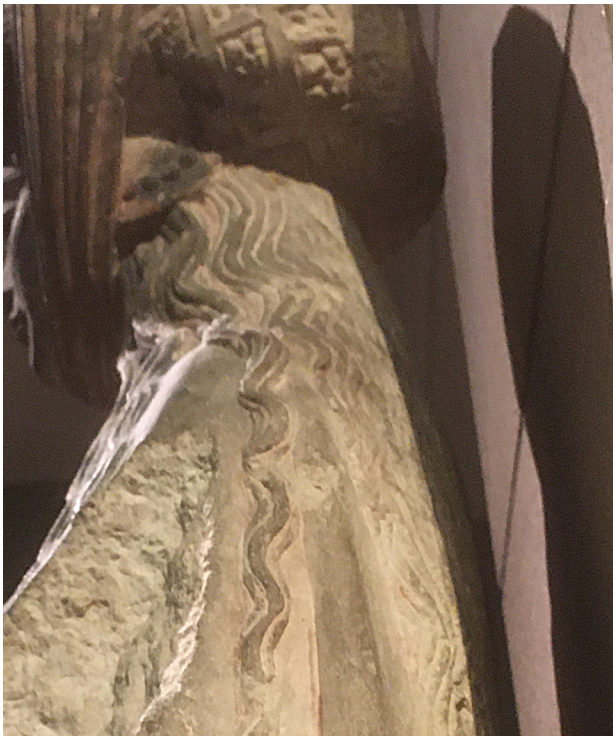
But the clothing is more than just functionally covering her. It is also sumptuous. The headdress is brocaded and has a diamond shaped ornament at the front. The sleeves are beaded and tasseled. She looks like a queen! This is very rich, affluent dress, certainly not simply that of a former prostitute who has converted. Again, why? What is going on?

One variant of the story says that Mary was affluent and

Her luxurious clothing.
(Photo: Metropolitan Museum)

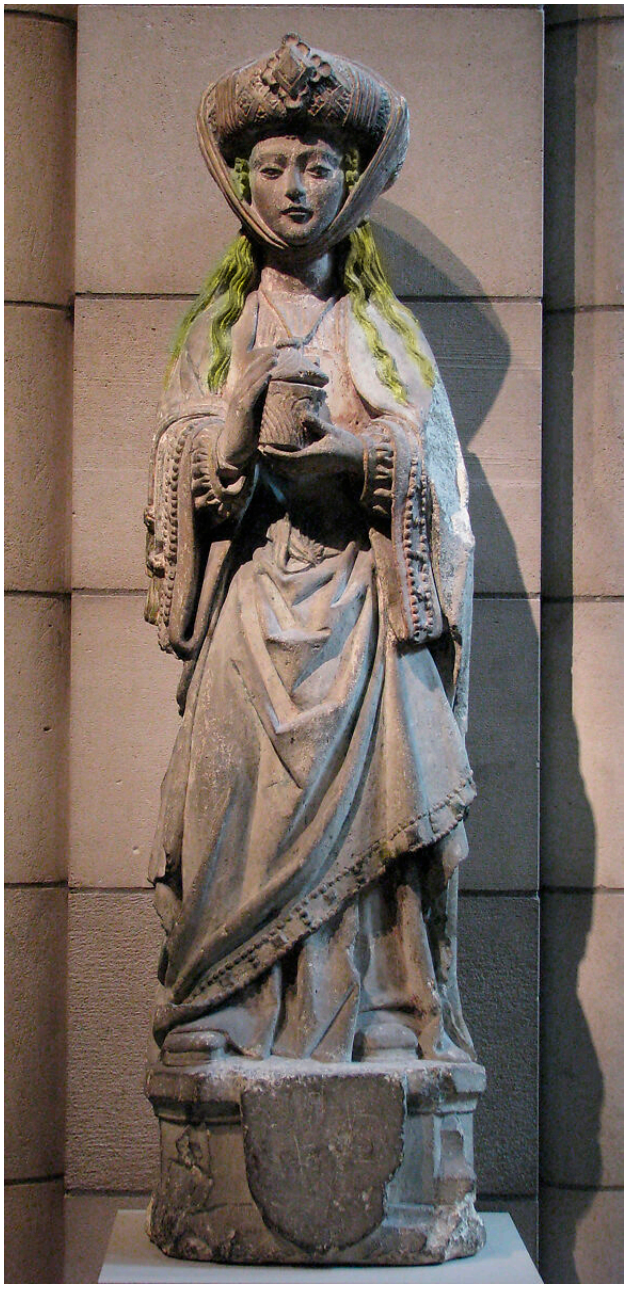
gave money to Jesus and his ministry. But that version of the story does not gibe with the prostitute version. Why this luxurious, rich attire?

Perhaps an answer can be found in thinking about the statue's audience and their reactions. For the common people, this richly attired Magdalene would appear far, far beyond anything they could aspire to physically. But for the wealthy of that society? A very wealthy woman, an aristocrat, a noblewoman, would look at this statue and think, "Yes, that is just like me in so many ways. I too wear clothes like that. ('Elle est très bien habillée, n'est-ce pas, Henri?') I am just like her. I too am richly attired. I too am beautiful. And, like her, I too can control my sexual desires, can keep them in check. I too can be holy, saintly – if I work at it, if I try, if I model myself on Mary Magdalene – who is so like me in so many ways."


Low-relief carving of the hair.

And for the men of early 16th century France, how might they have reacted? One reaction would probably have been to see this Mary's sexual restraint and control as an ideal for their own wives. But at the same time, I cannot believe those men would not have enjoyed a great deal just looking, gazing, staring at this Magdalene's extraordinary beauty.

And of that beauty, there is also — the hair. It is not immediately obvious when first looking at this sculpture just how long and luxurious her hair is, for now, centuries later, we see only a monochrome stone sculpture with slightly raised carvings indicating the tresses of her hair. But those tresses are quite long, cascading over her shoulders and, when we look behind, midway down her back. This is *very* long hair. And one of the symbols traditionally used to represent Mary Magdalene during these centuries was long hair. Long hair = sexually attractive = sexuality = sexual desire. And when we further realize that this sculpture was at one time polychromed (there remain faint traces of paint on it now) and that Mary Magdalene's hair was most commonly represented in the Middle Ages as blond (blond = sexually attractive = sex: "Blonds have more fun?") we wonder: What would the long beautiful hair of this statue have looked like if it had been tinted the traditional blond of a Medieval



Digital colorization of the hair to help convey original polychromy. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum)

Magdalene? To answer, I did some digital enhancement on one of the photos, coloring it blond. Her hair then becomes *very* prominent. It tumbles down over her shoulders, framing the entire upper portion of her body and her face. And hidden inside the scarf that is working so hard to limit what we can see of her beauty, we see bunches of blond nestled between scarf, cheeks, and turban. It would have been very hard to look at this sculpture in its day and not think, whether you were male or female, “Wow! What a beauty! What a gorgeous, what a beautiful....!” only then to remember that she is saintly, she has controlled her sexual urges and is saintly and that I too can do so, can try to emulate her control and saintliness in that regard. I believe, in short, that this sculpture served

two purposes in its day: It was religious instruction, and it was simultaneously titillation. It is a very complex and a *very* sophisticated artwork.

When I first encountered this sculpture in the Medieval section of the Metropolitan, I was also puzzled by the sophistication and realism of its modeling. I normally don't think of Medieval sculpture as being this mimetically realistic. There is something about the face, especially the face, that almost makes you feel you are looking at a real person – an extraordinarily beautiful person, but a real person. The Metropolitan's suggested dating for this sculpture is 1500-1525. In Italy, this was high Renaissance, but the style of this Magdalene definitely has much of the Medieval about it. On researching a bit about the date, however, I came to understand that, although France lagged well behind Italy in its embrace and understanding of Renaissance techniques and trends, by the end of the 15th century France was indeed moving into its own Renaissance. Then in 1494, France invaded Italy and continued to do so off and on for some fifty years, further speeding up the transfer of Italian Renaissance ideas and techniques to France. In 1513, Leonardo da Vinci moved to France at the invitation of the French king, Francis I, and lived out the last three years of his life there. The astonishing realism of this sculpture makes perfect Renaissance sense within this timing. The astonishing complexity of its psychology resides outside of eras. It is timeless.