

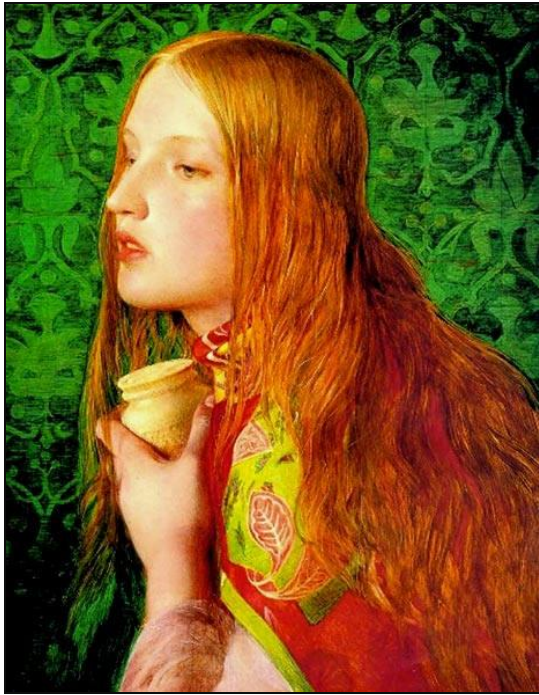
### Mary Magdalene in Art

Mary Magdalene is the only woman named in all four gospel accounts of the resurrection. In John 20:1-18 she is the *first witness* to the risen Christ. Her moving encounter with Jesus conveys the pure joy she must have felt as she recognized her master.

Here are two very different representations of Mary Magdalene. Our first is a *Pre-Raphaelite painting* by Anthony Frederick Sandys who was a friend of Rossetti and excelled as a portrait painter and draughtsman. Mary Magdalene was the only Biblical character that Sandys ever painted. Mary is depicted in front of a patterned forest-green damask. Damask is a reversible fabric of silk, wool, linen, or cotton with the pattern formed by weaving. The reversible aspect of this fabric has been chosen to represent Mary Magdalene's own reversal – she turned her life round to serve Christ with utter devotion. She holds an alabaster ointment cup, a traditional attribute which associates her with the anonymous sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet when he visited a Pharisee's house in Luke 7: 36-50. Alabaster is white in colour and here becomes symbolic of purity, which is what Mary Magdalene comes to represent by the purity in which she loves and anoints Jesus' feet. Yet this young depiction of Mary Magdalene is both knowing and innocent. Her features are sharp not delicate, there is a sense of tragic power as she gazes out of the canvas contemplating how the man Jesus has changed her life. There is a sombre intensity but like other Pre-Raphaelite painters, Sandys also gave Mary Magdalene a sensual look. Notice her rosy cheeks, full red but partially open lips, heavy eyelids and burning red untamed tresses. So where's the innocence? Well, here we are witnessing a moment of grace, an interior change. This painting also offers us, the viewer, a reminder that it is never too late to begin anew.

In Titian's painting Christ and Mary Magdalene meet in the middle of a landscape which seems to be at one with them; the natural setting's lines complement Jesus and Mary rhythmically. We are not in the garden of the tomb as described by John but in open countryside bathed in morning light. On Mary's side, the curve of a hillside is echoed by the inverse curve of her body thrown forward to the ground. Christ's side of the painting opens out onto the blue distances of infinity to remind us that he is forever, in all space and in all time. But these two worlds, human and divine, suggested by the division of space are subtly linked to each other: the bend of Christ's body is a direct continuation of the curve of the inhabited hillside; the line of Mary's upper torso continues that of a tree which, while balancing the right side of the landscape, directs the mind of the observer to the idea of new life. Everything in this very sophisticated composition is designed to enhance the importance of the gestures and dialogue taking place in the foreground and to highlight the drama of the resurrection message.

Mary Magdalene has just recognized Christ's voice. Titian shows the surge of emotion which casts her to the ground, an impulse just as quickly suppressed by Christ who draws back, speaking the words, "Noli Me Tangere" from the Latin, best translated as "Do not cling to me." Titian has omitted most of the traditional references: there is no tomb, angel, halo or Standard marked with the cross in the hand of the resurrected Lord. Titian places a hoe in Jesus' left hand which is a reference to Mary's first mistaken impression of him as a gardener, and by placing in her left hand the now unneeded jar of ointment, Titian evokes a new harmony and relationship between them. Notice also, that the resurrection through Christ's naked body is represented by his being covered only in his burial shroud, and whose white drapery complements the white and red flow of Mary's garments. Titian accentuates the tension by not allowing Christ and Mary to touch each other as Christ pulls back in a subtle movement of refusal, nuanced by the affectionate inclination of his torso bending over Mary Magdalene. For Christ is just passing by. His dance like steps are directed towards the front of the painting, not towards Mary but towards us, the viewers. We thus find ourselves facing the Lord's approach, also invited to recognize him and to announce the joy of his miraculous resurrection.



Frederick Sandys (1829-1904),  
*Mary Magdalene*, c.1858-60,  
Delaware Art Museum, Delaware.



Titian (1495-1576),  
*Noli Me Tangere*, 1511-12,  
National Gallery, London.

*Reflection*

Look at Mary Magdalene, her clothes, her colours and her cup.

What in your life would you like to put in this cup?

What in your life would you like to pour out of it?

What does this painting show you about your relationship with Jesus?

Thank God for new beginnings and new insights.

*Reflection*

Look at Christ and Mary Magdalene, the landscape and the central tree.

What do their garments symbolise to you?

What would you like to be clothed in when you meet Christ?

What does this painting show you about your relationship with Jesus?

Thank God for sending his Son to rise for you.