

Hirsute Mary Magdalene

Some Late Gothic Examples from Lesser Poland and Contribution to Interpretation of Their Iconography

MAGDALENA ŁANUSZKA

Łanuszka, Magdalena: Hirsute Mary Magdalene : Some Late Gothic Examples from Lesser Poland and Contribution to Interpretation of Their Iconography

The article examines a specific aspect of the otherwise very broad late medieval iconography and cult of St Mary Magdalene, that is the Saint in ecstasy, depicted as hirsute. It was particularly popular in Central Europe, but this paper focuses on examples coming mainly from Lesser Poland, juxtaposing this Saint with popular images of Wild Women and exploring referring to Mary Magdalene as a New Eve and a Mystical Bride of Christ.

Key Words *St Mary Magdalene; Late Gothic Painting; Central-European Art; Lesser Poland; Wild Women; Hirsute Mary Magdalene*

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Contact *International Cultural Centre in Cracow; magdalena_łanuszka@o2.pl*

The cult of St Mary Magdalene in the Middle Ages and at the dawn of Early Modern times has been immensely complex, as her character refers to many aspects of humanity. She was viewed as a woman possessed by demons, a sinner, a prostitute, yet she was one of the closest people to Jesus: she oiled his feet, she followed him, and was the first to witness the mystery of resurrection. She became the Apostle for the rest of the Apostles, and her role was especially significant in the late antique Gnostic texts.¹ She acquired a position of the beloved pupil of Christ, and however the descriptions of their relation actually used language characteristic for romance,² their main goal was to stress the fact that Mary Magdalene was supposed to have been filled with esoteric wisdom. In medieval sources (sermons, legends, offices), Mary Magdalene usually occurred in the context of Christ's resurrection, as a repentant sinner, or in relation to the cult of her siblings Martha and Lazarus.³

Medieval iconography of Mary Magdalene is a very broad subject; I would like to share some thoughts on specific images of that saint depicted as hirsute. Those depictions were

¹ See SCHMID, Renate: *Maria Magdalena in gnostischen Schriften*. Munich 1990; PRICE, Robert M. *Mary Magdalene: Gnostic Apostle? Grail: An Ecumenical Journal* 6, 1990, no. 2, pp. 54–76. See also HASKINS Susane: *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*. London 1994.

² On medieval love references in regard to Mary Magdalene see chapter *The Lovesick Magdalene: The Master of the Female Half-lengths and Jan van Hemessen's Musical Magdalenes* published in: JOLLY, Penny Howell: *Picturing the 'Pregnant' Magdalene in Northern Art, 1430–1550: Addressing and Undressing the Sinner-Saint*. Ashgate 2014, pp. 153–178.

³ Comprehensive summary of written sources for the cult of Mary Magdalene was collected by JANSEN, Katherine Ludwig: *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages*. Princeton New Jersey 2000. See also: ŠTER, Katarina: *Mary Magdalene, the Apostola of the Easter Morning: Changes in the Late Medieval Carthusian Office of St Mary Magdalene. Musicological Annual (Ljubljana)* 53, 2017, no. 1, pp. 9–53.

particularly popular in late Gothic art in Central Europe, but in my research I focus mainly on Lesser Poland. I very much hope that this paper⁴ would not only contribute to the discussion on interpretation and sources of depictions of Mary Magdalene covered with hair, but most of all would bring international attention to the lesser-known representations of this subject, especially the ones preserved in Poland.

Hairy Mary Magdalene in Gothic painting in Lesser Poland

The historical region of Lesser Poland (lat. *Polonia minor*) stretches over the southern and southeastern territories of post-1945 Poland. Lesser Poland's capital, Cracow, was the seat of Polish kings and therefore the region is the area of main significance for research on late medieval Polish art. Regarding the 15th century, the term *Lesser Poland* should be understood as the whole medieval Cracow Diocese, which is a much larger territory than the present Lesser Poland Voivodeship.⁵ Naturally, the medieval cult of Mary Magdalene in this region is at least partially echoed in the records about patronage – that is patronages of churches and altarpieces. In the 13th century there were eight churches of St Mary Magdalene in the historical region of Lesser Poland,⁶ another seven erected in the 14th century,⁷ and two more in the 15th century.⁸ We know that relics of St Mary Magdalene (pieces of her finger) were kept in the church of Holy Trinity in Cracow (Dominican church) and the church of Corpus Christi in Kazimierz (today a district of Cracow); also some of her relics were included in the altar of St John the Almsgiver in St Catherine Church in Kazimierz.⁹ Additionally, there used to be a separate altarpiece of St Mary Magdalene in the Cracow Cathedral.¹⁰ The feast of Mary Magdalene, celebrated on July 22nd, used to be one of the most important ones, described as *duplex* – it was only in the 17th century when the Pope degraded that feast.¹¹

In Lesser Poland alone, there are survived Gothic examples of depictions of hirsute Mary Magdalene, including: wall paintings in Łany Wielkie (mid-15th century) and Haczów (1494), altarpiece from Moszczenica (close to Stary Sącz, ca. 1480, figure 1), and a decorated initial in *Antiphonarium of Adam of Będków* (Archives of Wawel Metropolitan Capitule, figure 2).

Both aforementioned wall paintings are poorly preserved. The one in Łany Wielkie is located at the top part of an eastern wall of the aisle. The church in Łany Wielkie (today

⁴ This article is based on a paper I have presented at the international conference *Visualizing the Other in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Art (1300–1550)* organised by the University of Ostrava and the Vivarium – Centre for Research of the Medieval Society and Culture on 14–16 November 2019 in Ostrava, Czech Republic.

⁵ See KRAWCZUK, Wojciech: *Geschichte Kleinpolens*. In: BAŁUS, Wojciech – POPP, Dietmar (eds.): *DEHIO-Handbuch Kunstdenkmäler in Polen, Kleinpolen, 1: Einführung in Geschichte und Kunst*. Berlin – München 2020, pp. 1–14.

⁶ In Wawrzeńczyce since 1223, in Dziekanowice since 1226, and in Cracow since before 1300; in Dąbrowa (near Kielce) in the 13th century, in Dzierżnia since before 1229, in Gołaczewy since 1225, in Szczepanów since the 11th century / before 1230, and in Szczucin in the 13th century.

⁷ In Chomentów in 1331, in Dobrowoda in 1345, in Działoszyn in the 14th century, in Głogoczków in 1325, in Kosocice (now Krakow) in 1325, in Koszyce in 1374, and in Zalas in 1353.

⁸ In Łęgonice in 1420 and in Zborowice in 1470.

⁹ RAJMAN, Jerzy: *Średniowieczne patrocintia krakowskie*. Kraków 2002, p. 223.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

¹¹ KRAWIECKA Ewa: *Staropolskie portrety św. Marii Magdaleny*. Poznań 2006, p. 37.



Fig. 1: Triptych of St Mary Magdalene from Moszczenica Niżna, ca. 1480, the National Museum in Cracow, MNK-I-85/a-e, <http://muzea.malopolska.pl/obiekty/-/a/26885/1114878>.



Fig. 2: Initial D in *Antiphonarium of Adam of Będków*, 1451–1457, Archives of Wawel Metropolitan Capitule (AKMW), vol. II, manuscript KP 49, fol. 38. Photo after: Katarzyna Dybel: *Samotność w literaturze średniowiecznej Francji. Literatura narracyjna XII-XIII wieku*. Kraków 2009 (cover photo, fot. Dariusz Kołakowski).

Silesian Voivodeship) dates back to the 13th–14th centuries; some of its wall-paintings date back to the first half of the 15th century, while the others, funded possibly by a parish priest of Żarnowiec, Maciej of Kobylin, date back to the turn of the third and fourth quarters of the 15th century.¹² This latter group includes the image of St Mary Magdalene, lifted by the angels.

The church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Michael the Archangel in Haczów (near Krosno, today Podkarpackie Voivodeship) is a wooden temple built in the third quarter of the 15th century, and in 2003 added to the UNESCO World Heritage List.¹³ For many years the church was considered as dating back to the 17th century, and it actually faced possible demolition, until in 1955 late Gothic wall paintings were

¹² MAŁKIEWICZÓWNA, Helena: Łany Wielkie – malowidła w prezbiterium i w nawie. In: LABUDA, Adam S. – SECOMSKA, Krystyna (eds.): *Malarstwo Gotyckie w Polsce*, II. Warszawa 2004, p. 69.

¹³ See ŁANUSZKA, Magdalena: *Haczów – Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Michael the Archangel*. In: <https://digitalunesco.pl/portfolio-item/haczow-en/> cited 30 March 2021.

discovered there by Jerzy Gadowski and Stanisław Gadowski.¹⁴ The 18th century parish chronicle noted under 1789 whitewashing wall paintings dating back to 1494. Currently, the uncovered late Gothic decoration in Haczów (of the total area summing up to approximately 600 m²) is the largest known set of wall paintings from the 15th century in Poland. The murals' style is rooted in the traditions of Gothic painting from Cracow, but it may have been as well made by the artists from a workshop from nearby Krosno.¹⁵

The painting of St Mary Magdalene in Haczów is unfortunately rather damaged¹⁶ – it is located on the southern part of an eastern wall of the church's aisle. Today the only clearly visible parts are Mary Magdalene's legs, supported by two angels; all together it seems that the number of angels in this composition used to be at least six. The Saint's legs are covered with thick fur, leaving bare feet and knees – perhaps the composition was close to a slightly earlier example from the triptych of St Mary Magdalene from the parish church in Moszczenica.

The altarpiece from Moszczenica (Figure 1) was purchased by the National Museum in Cracow 1892, and is now exhibited in the *Gallery of Art of Old Poland (the 12th–18th century)* at The Bishop Erazm Ciołek Palace (MNK-I-85/a-e). It is unknown whether the retable originally came from Moszczenica Niżna (near Stary Sącz). The church in that village has been an independent parish church since the 14th century (noted in 1326) until ca. 1570, when it became a filial church of the Stary Sącz parish. By the 15th century the church belonged to the monastery of Poor Claires in Stary Sącz.¹⁷ The current church in Moszczenica Niżna dates back to the second half of the 16th century or to the early 17th century, and it is dedicated to St Nicholas.¹⁸ Nevertheless, written sources of the late 16th century mention patronage of St Mary Magdalene – it is possible that in the 15th century this church had two patrons.¹⁹ The retable's central part is dedicated to St Mary Magdalene, but in one of the wings we may also see St Nicholas. The other wing of this triptych (recto side) contains a depiction of St Florian, while the finial features Archangel Michael weighing souls. The predella is decorated with two angels presenting the Veil of St Veronica, and the verso sides of the wings present Our Lady of Sorrows and Christ Man of Sorrows. The retable is 255 cm high, and 190 cm wide (when open); it is dated to ca. 1480. It has not been attributed to any particular Cracow workshop of the second half of the 15th century, but rather described as an artistically average, yet interesting example of a retable produced for a small village church.²⁰ The artist very distinctively painted Mary Magdalene wearing something like "fur suit": neatly covering the entire body (with semi-circular neckline) and apparently completely independent from the long hair on the saint's head. Apart from bare feet and palms, the only area uncovered are the saint's knees. Her breasts are completely covered, and additionally her groin is hidden behind a semi-transparent white cloth held by two angels. This element occurs

¹⁴ GADOMSKI, Jerzy – GADOMSKI, Stanisław: Odkrycie gotyckiej polichromii w kościele parafialnym w Haczowie. *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* XIX, 1957, no. 2, pp. 186–188.

¹⁵ See ŁOPATKIEWICZ, Piotr: *Drewniany kościół w Haczowie*. Kraków 2015.

¹⁶ Best visible here: <https://digitalunesco.pl/wp-content/uploads/04-haczow/pano/lev0/PANOS/009.html> cited 30 March 2021.

¹⁷ GADOMSKI, Jerzy: *Gotyckie malarstwo tablicowe Małopolski 1460–1500*. Warszawa 1988, p. 40.

¹⁸ BAŁUS W. – POPP, D. (eds.): *DEHIO, 2: Westlicher Teil mit Krakau*, p. 500.

¹⁹ GADOMSKI, J.: *Gotyckie malarstwo tablicowe*, p. 40.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 171.



Fig. 3: The right wing of Winterfeld Diptych, created in Gdańsk ca. 1430–1435 (the National Museum in Warsaw), Śr. 206/1–2 MNW, Wikimedia Commons.

also in an altar (ca. 1500) from the Church of St James the Elder in Jakub village near Banská Bystrica (nowaday's Slovakia), today in the church of the Assumption of Virgin Mary in Banská Bystrica – although in that case it is only four angels, not seven, that lift the Saint up.²¹

Mary Magdalene of the Moszczenica Altarpiece is in a praying position (knees bent, palms together), and two angels hold a golden crown above her head, which is not a usual detail in the case of Mary Magdalene. She was no martyr, hence the celestial crown is not a reward for martyrdom in her case (as it used to be in many legends of virgin Saints²²). However, an iconography of crowned Mary Magdalene existed in Central Europe: another (and earlier!) example being a right wing of the Winterfeld Diptych, created in Gdańsk ca. 1430–1435 (the National Museum in Warsaw, figure 3).²³ As in case of altar from Moszczenica, the painting now in Warsaw depicts the Saint in a similar thick “fur suit” (although without cloth around the groin, and not exposing her knees), lifted by seven angels. In the Winterfeld Diptych, though, it is God the Father who crowns Mary Magdalene himself. This creates an interesting juxtaposition with the images of Virgin Mary being crowned in Heaven, and in my opinion it may reflect the fact that Mary Magdalene could have been interpreted as a Mystical Bride of Christ – on this subject I will elaborate further in the last part of this paper.

Last but not least, hirsute Mary Magdalene lifted up by the angels occurred also in book illumination in Lesser Poland, and the aforementioned example is actually earlier than the Moszczenica Triptych. *Antiphonarium de Sanctis* of Cracow Cathedral, funded by the Cracow canon Adam of Będków according to his will, was completed by a scribe named Mikołaj Sietesz in 1451–1457. The production was supervised by Tomasz Strzępiński (bishop of Cracow), and some of the decoration was created by a painter known as the Master of Pontificale of Tomasz Strzępiński.²⁴ In this manuscript (in the second volume) there is an initial D[iligebat] at folio 38, filled with an image of Saint Mary Magdalene in ecstasy (Figure 2). Inside the letter five angels carry Mary Magdalene against a red background decorated with stars. The Saint, again, seems to be wearing a “fur suit”, the only uncovered body parts being her face and neck, palms and bare feet. In this case as well there is a golden crown above Mary Magdalene's head. Interestingly, this time not only her body hair is independent from the hair on her head, but additionally the latter is covered with a white veil. This probably derives from the images of St Mary Magdalene as a well-dressed lady with a jar of oil, as seen in many Gothic altarpieces. Magdalene was often depicted with her head covered, to distinguish her from saint virgins; nevertheless, such a veil on Magdalene's head did not usually occur in depictions of her ecstasy. The veil and crown distinguish this depiction among its type; limited space of decorated initial usually resulted in simplifying the composition, usually by reducing some elements, e.g.

²¹ GERÁT, Ivan: *Legendary Scenes : An Essay on Medieval Pictorial Hagiography*. Bratislava 2013, pp. 131–132, fig III/29.

²² Apart from the general iconographical medieval custom of depicting virgin martyrs as wearing crowns, stories about Christ promising a crown to the saint before her martyrdom occurred in lives of various holy virgins, e.g. Saint Barbara; see ŁANUSZKA, Magdalena: An attribution for two late Gothic central-European panels, in English public collections, depicting episodes from the life of St. Barbara. *Quart* 48, 2018, no. 2, pp. 16–17.

²³ LABUDA, Adam S.: Gdańsk – Dyptyk z fundacji rodziny Winterfeldów (I). In: LABUDA, A. S. – SECOMSKA, K. (eds.): *Malarstwo Gotyckie w Polsce*, II, p. 165.

²⁴ MIODOŃSKA, Barbara: *Antiphonarium de sanctis zwane Antyfonarzem Adama z Będkowa*. In: LABUDA, A. S. – SECOMSKA, K. (eds.): *Malarstwo Gotyckie w Polsce*, II, p. 357.



Fig. 4: Initial D in Antiphonarium from St Mary Magdalene Church in Wrocław, 1387, BUWr OR, M 1244, fol. 83 v, photo: J. Gromadzki, after Gromadzki, Jan: Iluminowane księgi liturgiczne z kościoła farnego św. Marii Magdaleny we Wrocławiu: (ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem najstarszych, z około połowy XIV w.). *Roczniki Sztuki Śląskiej* 20, 2011, pp. 7–34, il. 24, p. 22.

the amount of angels. An interesting example of that would be an initial D from another Antiphonarium, this time Silesian, dating back to 1387, funded by Nicolaus Lemberg from Wrocław to the St Mary Magdalene church in that city (Wrocław University, figure 4).

The Legend of St Mary Magdalene

In most of the Easter texts and poems, Mary Magdalene acted as a witness of the triumph of Resurrection – that was also her main role in surviving medieval texts from Poland. The Gniezno Sermons (early 15th century) refer to Magdalene as an example of repentance, bringing hope for all the sinners. Meanwhile, the Przemyśl Meditations (mid-15th century) present Mary Magdalene as a messenger sent by Virgin Mary to her Son to prevent him from entering Jerusalem. Christ talks to Magdalene kindly and eventually asks her to look after his mother.²⁵ Not elaborating here on what is a subject for a separate research, it may be said that in general Polish medieval preachers were familiar with Western sermons. That especially was the case of Cracow which, as a capital, a seat of

²⁵ KRAWIECKA E.: *Staropolskie portrety*, pp. 64, 110. There must have been sermons on St Mary Magdalene in Poland already in the 12th-13th centuries, but unfortunately they did not survive.

the bishop as well as the University, and a city of numerous monasteries, had multiple libraries and scriptoria. The records of the Cracow Cathedral Library dating back to the turn of the 15th and 16th century listed quite many sermons, catalogued in the theological section of the inventories; those were the collections of sermons for entire year, for certain feasts and Sundays, as well as for the time of Lent, both by the local theologians, as well as by the foreign ones (e.g. from Paris, Milan, or Prague).²⁶ Similar collections of sermons were present in the university libraries and private libraries of Cracow scholars; even though most of those books did not survive, we know about them from inventories. There are records referring to *Sermones de Sanctis*,²⁷ which most likely contained also sermons dedicated to Mary Magdalene.

It is often noted that there is a parallel between the iconography of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt. The merge of the legend of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt probably occurred in the 10th century, and the depictions of hirsute Magdalene in the wilderness are often explained as a result of confusion of the legends of those two saints. That is certainly not the entirely correct explanation. First of all, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt could not have been confused, as they were both venerated as distinguished and well-known characters. For example, in medieval Cracow there were two separate churches dedicated to those saints – unfortunately neither of them survived. The church of St Mary Magdalene was situated in the centre of the oldest part of Cracow, by the main route now being Grodzka street. Meanwhile, Mary of Egypt had her own separate church situated directly on the Wawel hill. Also, we may spot a depiction of Mary of Egypt in one of the late Gothic altarpieces from Cracow. It is an altarpiece of Saint John the Almsgiver, completed by 1504 for the Lanckoroński Chapel by the St Catherine's Church in Kazimierz near Cracow – today that retable is in the National Museum in Cracow. Some of the wing panels of that altarpiece are dedicated to the Eastern Saints, and one of them contains depictions of St Marina and St Mary of Egypt (Figure 5). She may not be confused with Mary Magdalene here, as she is holding three round loaves of bread. According to the legend, Mary of Egypt spent over 40 years in the wilderness eating only the three loaves of bread she took with her. In fact it would be rather important to stress that the legends of Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalene are rather far from similar. Indeed, they both spent the last decades of their lives in the wilderness, but that would be the only similarity. According to Jacopo da Voragine, Mary of Egypt became a penitent hermit: she spent her time repenting, and her sins were of carnal character. Meanwhile, in the *Golden Legend* Magdalene is no longer a repentant sinner: her sins have long been forgiven and now she rather enjoys her loneliness, being lifted up in ecstasy seven times every day. As Jacopo da Voragine wrote: *Every day the angels bore her aloft at the seven canonical hours, and with her bodily ears she heard the glorious chants of the heavenly hosts. Then, being filled with this delightful repast, she came down to her grotto, and needed no bodily food.*²⁸

Interpreting Mary Magdalene as a sinner repenting in the wilderness in reference to the late medieval visual culture is in my opinion erroneous, most likely inflicted by the

²⁶ SKRZYNIARZ, Ryszard: Zbiory kazań w polskich księgozbiorach okresu średniowiecza. *Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne* 70, 1998, pp. 247–260.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 259.

²⁸ *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, trans. and adapted Granger RYAN and Helmut RIPPERGER. New York 1969, pp. 360–361.



Fig. 5: St Marina and St Mary of Egypt from the altarpiece of Saint John the Almsgiver, before 1504, the National Museum in Cracow, Photo: Pracownia Fotograficzna MNK.



Fig. 6: Ecstasy of St Mary Magdalene in one of the altars of Church of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist in Toruń, ca. 1400, fot. Juliusz Raczkowski, <https://heritage.torun.umk.pl/pl/galleries/72?fbclid=IwAR1E463PTyv5b4muUN9bb72g1UYwpBaXA28VEQgOtK-6VHc38oqfh3RxGvw#lg=1&slide=2>.

Early-Modern pictorial tradition, in which she indeed turned into a penitent anchoress.²⁹ Meanwhile, the quoted legend suggests that in the wilderness, Mary Magdalene had already enjoyed Heaven and salvation, even though she was not yet physically dead. However, it does not mention Magdalene growing hair all over her body. It is thus important to ask why the artists depicted her in that peculiar way.

Some scholars derive depictions of hirsute Mary Magdalene from medieval Italian art, referring to the *St. Mary Magdalene and Scenes of Her Life* now housed in Florence's Galleria dell' Accademia (13th c.) as the early example. There is a hypothesis that the depiction of Mary Magdalene as a holy hermit may have been first created in Umbria under Franciscan influence.³⁰ It should be stressed though that in the case of the Italian examples Mary Magdalene seems to be covered with hair growing from her head. Of course, long hair is a standard attribute for Magdalene, both symbolising worldly vanity and sinful beauty, as well as being an instrument of her penitence and her attribute as a hermit saint. Loose hair may refer to Magdalene's sexual past, but also may have been understood as symbolising her "recovered virginity" – that idea actually occurred in medieval literature about this saint.³¹ Meanwhile, the case of Central-European images of hirsute Magdalene it is different: she is not seductively hiding behind gorgeous long hair, but her body is actually hairy all-over, as if covered with fur. Those depictions of Mary Magdalene provide an inconsistent image of the saint: she is young, and all together good-looking (considering her features, shape of her figure, golden curls), but of course her beauty is somehow damaged by additional hair all over her body.³²

At this point it may also be noted that Western scholars tend to assume that hirsute Mary Magdalene was a subject specific for German art, ignoring numerous examples from other Central European artistic centres. Additionally, those famous German examples are usually late ones (the mostly cited one being a relief by Tilman Riemenschneider from Münnertstadt Altarpiece, 1490/1492, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich). Meanwhile, the earliest surviving sculpted image of hirsute Mary Magdalene is a relief of the Extasy of St Mary Magdalene in one of the altars of Church of St. John the Baptist

²⁹ One of the factors for the popularity of Early Modern imagining of St Mary Magdalene as a penitent saint was undoubtedly the Roman Catholic focus on promoting the sacrament of Penance during the Counter-reformation; as a result St Mary Magdalene gained a new attribute – a skull – which was a very rare situation in the case of biblical Saints of firmly established medieval iconography. Confusion of medieval and Early-Modern iconography of St Mary Magdalene results in misinterpretation of some late Gothic depictions. Very interesting examples are depictions of unknown female saints holding skulls in the wings of two altarpieces dated ca. 1470: from Zator (Poland, in the National Museum in Cracow) and from Hervartó (today Hervartov, Slovakia; in the Hungarian National Gallery in Budapest). Even though simple dresses and long hair of the said saints suggest that they were Early-Christian virgins, and possibly martyrs (as crowned), in both cases museum catalogues used to misinterpret those Saints as Mary Magdalene, probably because of the skull attribute.

³⁰ FOSKOLOU, Vassiliki A.: Mary Magdalene between East and West : Cult and Image, Relics and Politics in the Late Thirteenth-Century Eastern Mediterranean. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 65/66, January 2011, pp. 272–273, note 7). See also JANSEN, Katherine Ludwig: Mary Magdalen and the Mendicants: The Preaching of Penance in the Late Middle Ages. *Journal of Medieval History* 21, 1995, pp. 1–25.

³¹ ERHARDT, Michelle A.: The Magdalene as Mirror : Trecento Franciscan Imaginary in the Guidalotti-Rinuccini Chapel, Florence. In: ERHARDT, Michelle – MORRIS, Amy (eds.): *Mary Magdalene, Iconographic Studies from the Middle Ages to the Baroque*. Leiden – Boston 2012, p. 28 note. 13.

³² Medieval beauty canons followed an assumption that a lady should have no hair apart from her head; some medieval medical tractates actually offered advice on full body depilation. See: JOLLY, Penny Howell: Pubics and Privates : Body Hair in Late Medieval Art. In: LINDQUIST, Sherry (ed.): *Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art*. Aldershot 2012, pp. 183–206.

and St. John the Evangelist in Toruń (Figure 6). It dates back to the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries and, as recent research proved, it has been made of a specific golden-grey limestone (German *Goldener Pläner*, Czech *zlatá opuka*) from Prague, so it seems it is an artwork imported from there.³³

Wildness of Mary Magdalene

It has been noted that the image of Mary Magdalene in the Wild may be juxtaposed with the iconography of St John the Baptist.³⁴ Perhaps it should be stressed that John the Baptist was considered one of the most important Saints in terms of his closeness to Christ, and subsequently in reference to the effectiveness of his intercession in prayers. John the Baptist was the first one to recognise the Messiah, while Mary Magdalene was the first one to spread the news about Resurrection. It may actually be concluded that John's mission of teaching the World about Messiah was continued by Magdalene. Jesus chose those two by revealing himself to them: John was the first one to know about the Incarnation (still in his mother's womb), while Mary Magdalene was the first one to know about Resurrection.

Joana Antunes proposed an interesting insight, pointing out to the fact that in the 15th and 16th century there was a broader development of veneration of the "wild saints", depicted as hairy. That includes not only St Mary Magdalene, but also St Mary of Egypt or St Onuphrius. She connected this trend with the development of urban environments at the dawn of modernity, suggesting that intensification of the cult of those hairy hermits was caused by the worries of growing urban culture: the society seeking comfort in the idea of departure from civilisation and focusing on nature and wilderness.³⁵ As she pointed out, Magdalene in the late 15th and early 16th centuries' depictions was often indeed identical to the Wild Women. A nice example of that are the woodcuts of the Nuremberg Chronicle of 1493,³⁶ containing both images of an actual Wild Woman and Mary Magdalene lifted by the angels – both being hirsute in a very specific and similar way (leaving palms, feet and breasts hairless – Figure 7).

³³ The sculpture is of a very high artistic quality; I thank prof. Juliusz Raczkowski for the information on the outcome of the recent research on this subject, which is a result of a project *International Gothic (Schöne Stil) in Bohemian Rendition in Prussia – Stone Sculptures from Years 1380–1400*, led by the Malbork Castle Museum, in cooperation with Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, the National Museum in Gdańsk, and the Bayern National Museum in Munich and the National Marine Museum in Gdańsk. Project director is Monika Jakubek-Raczkowska, Ph.D. Hab., Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń: https://marlstone.zamek.malbork.pl/?page_id=656 cited 30 March 2021. Petrographic analysis of this sculpture was completed by dr. Wojciech Bartz (Institute of Geological Sciences, Faculty of Earth Sciences and Environmental Management at the University of Wrocław); additional examinations of this sculpture were recently completed by prof. Juliusz Raczkowski in a project *The Inventory of Toruń Art*, realised within the framework of the National Program for the Development of Humanities of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Poland, No. 0122/NPRH6/H11/85/2018 (see <https://heritage.torun.umk.pl/en>, cited 23 May 2021).

³⁴ BRADFIELD, Bess: The Hair of the Desert Magdalen : Its Use and Meaning in Donatello's Mary Magdalen and Tuscan Art of the Late Fifteenth Century. *York Medieval Yearbook* 1, 2002, pp. 9–10.

³⁵ ANTUNES, Joana: The late medieval Mary Magdalene: Sacredness, Otherness and Wildness. In: LOEWEN, Peter – WAUGH, Robin (eds.): *Mary Magdalene in Medieval Culture : Conflicted Roles*. New York 2014, pp. 116–139.

³⁶ *The Liber Chronicarum* by Hartmann Schedel printed in Nuremberg by Anton Koberger in 1493; the German edition was printed alongside the Latin one between January and December 1493. The project was completed on 23 December 1493. Both editions are lavishly illustrated with 1804 xylographical images created from 641–643 woodblocks by the Nuremberg artists Michael Wolgemut (ca. 1434/37–1519) and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff (ca. 1450–1494).



Fig. 7: Wild Woman and St Mary Magdalene, woodcuts from the Nuremberg Chronicle (Hartmann Schedel, *Liber Chronicarum*, published in Latin and German in Nuremberg by Antoa Koberger in 1493, woodcuts by Michael Wolgemut and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff). Wikimedia Commons.

In any case, most scholars acknowledge the actual similarity between depictions of Magdalene and Wild Women usually in passing, not focusing their research on that particular aspect. Meanwhile, this connotation must have been rather obvious for medieval and Early-Modern viewers.³⁷ The popularity of images of Wild Men and Women in late medieval visual culture may have been rooted in longing for a simple and free life of the Golden Age.³⁸ As Bess Bradfield noted: *While the wild woman's fertility and sexuality initially seems far removed from the austere chastity of the desert saint, it is possible that the artistic fashion for both derived from some shared interest in exploring 'otherness', and perhaps nostalgia for a mythical, more perfect past. The Magdalen was frequently discussed by scholastic writers as a kind of New Eve. In her hairy nakedness, she seems to suggest something of a return to pre-lapsarian purity, adopting that wild nakedness which the scholastics termed nuditas naturalis, in order to redeem herself from that earlier nudity (or nuditas criminalis) which was meant to be a sign of vice in the sinner.*³⁹

Michelle Moseley-Christian investigated the transformation of Wild Women documented in Northern prints (by which she meant mostly German) of the 15th century: from fearful beasts and sexual aggressors into nurturing figures, fitting into the evolving concepts of European domesticity.⁴⁰ She noted that the “new” Wild Woman, reinvented as young and somehow beautiful, could even have been understood as a model of virtue in reference to clarified gender identity for a growing middle-class audience – which, interestingly, coincided with the growing popularity of domestic satirical images of dominating women fighting with their husbands for the position of household supremacy.⁴¹ Moseley-Christian provided an analysis proving that this reformed image of a Wild Woman was very much corresponding with the figure of Eve, especially in reference to the theme of the Labor of Adam and Eve (following the Expulsion from Paradise). Finally, she actually concluded: *Like Eve, Mary Magdalene lived a life concomitant with that of the new wild woman: formerly promiscuous, with a legendary reputation for engendering fertility, and significantly, as an anchorite in the wilderness. [...] Selective exegetical focus on Mary Magdalene's attributed identity as a prostitute gave rise to her popularity in the twelfth and thirteenth century as a devotional figure, in part as a typological 'second Eve' or 'new Eve', and as a woman admired for her redemption from a life of sexual profligacy. [...] The penitent Mary Magdalene was admired for her reformed sexuality but also as a figure of faithfulness, domesticity, and fertility alongside Eve and in relationship to the wild woman.*⁴²

On the other hand, as Roberta Milliken noted, Wild Women's hairiness was connected to notions of sexual disorder and depravity, and so in the case of Mary Magdalene it may have been a way of reminding the audience of her hermetical life, and the fact that

³⁷ The popular motif of Wild Men was of course also present in Polish art; see JANKIEWICZ-BRZOSTOWSKA, Monika: Topos dzikiego człowieka i jego recepcja w późnogotyckim malarstwie w Polsce. *Studia Historica Gedanensia* 9, 2018, pp. 55–84.

³⁸ GRÖSSINGER, Christa: *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*. Manchester – New York 1997, pp. 80–93.

³⁹ BRADFIELD, B.: *The Hair of the Desert Magdalen*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ MOSELEY-CHRISTIAN, Michelle: From page to print: the transformation of the ‘wild woman’ in early modern Northern engravings. *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 27, 2011, no. 4, pp. 429–442.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 432.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 438.

ultimately she turned her back on the things of this world. She also suggested that it may have served as a reminder that even though Mary Magdalene was a saint, she was still a woman, and that traditionally meant she was not entirely capable of controlling herself.⁴³ Indeed, even Early-Modern physiognomists believed that hirsuteness indicated primitive lust, unbridled, perverse, and pathological sexuality.⁴⁴ I would not completely agree with that interpretation in the case of Mary Magdalene, but I do believe that the main connotation of the Wild Women was related to the issues of sexuality. On one hand it seems possible that this simply refers to Magdalene's sinful past, depicting her as a sinner-saint and a model for successful repentance for all the people. On the other hand, perhaps we should not read sexual meaning only in this negative sinful context, especially when it comes to Mary Magdalene.

Sexuality of Mary Magdalene

At this point I would like to say that there is an entirely different group of depictions of Magdalene in the 15th-century Northern art, analysed by Penny Jolly.⁴⁵ It seems to be especially specific for the Early Netherlandish painting: those are depictions of “pregnant” Mary Magdalene. As one of the earliest examples of such depictions Penny Jolly listed Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (before 1443, Prado, Madrid): Mary Magdalene is wearing a very characteristic maternal dress there (with unlaced front, which was a specific feature of late medieval pregnancy gowns), and her rounded belly is encircled with a belt with the inscription *Ihesus Maria*. According to Jolly, this is only one of many depictions, but they all were supposed to be read as a metaphor, not as an actual image of physical pregnancy. The metaphor would refer to the ideas of spiritual transformation of Magdalene herself; Jolly noted that medieval sources describing Magdalene used language characteristic for vernacular romances, and specifically referred to conception and birth (re-birth) in reference to Magdalene's conversion. All together, “pregnant” Magdalene would impersonate the dualistic idea of a sinner-saint, carnal in her sins, but blessed in her metaphorical pregnancy, which additionally puts her in the role of Christ's spiritual bride.

Generally, scholars assume that it was Virgin Mary who symbolised Ecclesia-the Church, understood as the Bride of Christ, in reference to Bride and Groom from *The Song of Songs*. Meanwhile, it is often overlooked that the position of Christ's Bride – in a symbolic sense – may have also been taken by Mary Magdalene. That would be rooted in Early-Christian and early medieval ideas: for example, the early 3rd century Commentary on *The Song of Songs* by Hippolytus of Rome suggested that Shulammitte (Bride) prefigured typologically both Mary and Martha.⁴⁶ Also, Mary Magdalene impersonating

⁴³ MILLIKEN, Roberta: *Ambiguous Locks : An Iconology of Hair in Medieval Art and Literature*. Jefferson. North Carolina – London 2012, p. 197.

⁴⁴ TOERIEN Merran – WILKINSON, Sue: Gender and Body Hair : Constructing the Feminine Woman. *Women's Studies International Forum* 26, 2003, no. 4, p. 337; see also CININAS, Jazmina: Wolf Girls and Hirsute Heroines. Fur, hair and the feminine. *PAN : Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 8, 2011, p. 35.

⁴⁵ JOLLY, Penny Howell: Rogier van der Weyden's „Pregnant” Magdalene: On the Rhetoric of Dress in the *Descent from the Cross*. *Studies in Iconography* 28, 2007, pp. 1–72; Ead: *Picturing*.

⁴⁶ JANSEN, K. L.: *The Making*, p. 28.



Fig. 8: Noli me tangere (in the middle) juxtaposed with Bride and Groom (right), Netherlandish manuscript of Biblia Pauperum (The Hague? ca. 1395–1400), the British Library in London, Kings MS 5, f. 23.



Fig. 9: Wild Woman, marginal decoration of French Book of Hours, ca. 1420–1425, The Morgan Library and Museum in New York, MS M.1004, fol. 90 r.



Fig. 10: Master E.S., Wild Woman with Unicorn, print L.229, from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Wikimedia Commons.

the Church-Mystical Bride occurred in one of the sermons of Pope Gregory the Great.⁴⁷ Just as the Bride of the biblical *The Song of Songs*, Magdalene found her beloved in the garden. Noteworthy, late medieval manuscripts and prints of *Biblia Pauperum* actually juxtaposed the scene *Noli me tangere* with the depiction of the meeting of Bride and Groom (Figure 8).

Additionally, as mentioned above, it seems that Magdalene may have been understood as an antitype for Eve, however – again – we tend to assume that the New Eve was rather Virgin Mary. In fact, it seems that the metaphorical understandings of the character of the Virgin Mary shifted to Mary Magdalene throughout the Middle Ages; already Latin Fathers saw Mary Magdalene as a counterweight to Eve.⁴⁸ At the same time, theologians juxtaposed Mary Magdalene and Virgin Mary, seeing them as complementary characters – those traces may be spotted throughout the centuries in writings of such authors as Odo of Cluny, Geoffrey of Vendôme, Bernard of Clairvaux, or Humbert de Romans.⁴⁹ In any case, it should be noted that the cult of Mary Magdalene was quite strong, and in the first millennium she was regarded as only the second after the Mother of God – that is how she was described by Rabanus Maurus in the 9th century.⁵⁰ The 11th-century *Life of Magdalene* contains words Christ told her when she was dying: he was supposed to have called her *my beloved* and have said that *the powerful king is in love with you*. Later in the 14th century, Ludolph of Saxony explicitly called Magdalene a saint Bride of Christ.⁵¹ I do believe that the traces of those interpretations are also implied in the depictions of hirsute Magdalene, lifted by the angels, and crowned. Perhaps it is worth noticing here that in general hair was not only among the first type of relic to be collected from holy bodies,⁵² but also a lock of hair was often used as a love token.⁵³ That custom is a recurring motif in medieval vernacular literature; also, decorated combs served as popular gifts for beloved women, or actually as wedding presents.⁵⁴

Now let's get back to the depictions of Wild Women – their primary characteristic was their sexuality. However, while Wild Men impersonated untamed lust and aggressiveness, many depictions of Wild Women surrounded by children rather pointed out to the aspect of fertility. Bare breasts of Wild Women may have both indicated erotic meaning,

⁴⁷ MIGNE, Jacques Paul (ed.): *Patrologia Latina*. Sancti Gregorii Papae I: Opera Omnia: 'Homilia XXV, Lectio S. Evang. Sec. Joan, XX, 11–18'. Paris 1857, vol. 76, col. 1190.

⁴⁸ On the relation between interpretations of Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene see chapter ten: *In the Shadow of the Virgin* published in: JANSEN, K. L.: *The Making*, pp. 286–306.

⁴⁹ LEZOTTE, Annette: *Mary Magdalene and the Iconography of Domesticity*. In: ERHARDT, M. – MORRIS, A. (eds.): *Mary Magdalene*, p. 387.

⁵⁰ *Magdalena inter filias hominum post coeli reginam superioribus aequalis nulli inferior*: MIGNE, Jacques Paul (ed.): *Patrologia Latina*. Beati Rabani Mauri, 'De Vita Beatae Mariae Magdalena et Stroris eius Sanctae Marthae'. Paris 1852, vol 112, col. 1485.

⁵¹ HOGG, James – GIRARD, Alain, et al. (eds.): *Ludolphus the Carthusian, Vita Christi*. (Analecta Cartusiana 241), vol. 2. Salzburg 2006 [1865], p. 127.

⁵² Interestingly, recent research in a project *The Inventory of Toruń Art* resulted the re-discovery of a relic of hair of St Mary Magdalene, until recently considered lost, in the church of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist in Toruń. I thank prof. Juliusz Raczkowski for this information.

⁵³ KNIGHT, Kimberley: *Hair in the Middle Ages*. *Internet Archaeology* 42, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.11141/ia.42.6.10> cited 30 March 2021. For recent research see also: MILLIKEN, Roberta (ed.): *A Cultural History of Hair in the Middle Ages*. New York 2021 (*A Cultural History of Hair series*, vol. 2).

⁵⁴ WOLFFHAL, Diane: *The Sexuality of the Medieval Comb*. In: GERTSMAN, Elina – STEVENSON, Jill: *Thresholds of Medieval Visual Culture: Liminal Spaces*. Woodbridge 2012, p. 184.

as well as referred to nursing numerous children (Figure 9). Last but not least we should remember the mysterious subject of the Wild Woman with a Unicorn, traceable in late medieval prints or tapestries (Figure 10). Apparently, the idea of wildness may have been juxtaposed with the symbol of chastity, which perhaps is another clue for the interpretation of images of hirsute Mary Magdalene. This saint turns out to be a fascinating paradox: lascivious sinner and beloved of Christ. Perhaps she impersonated the Church, consisting of sinful humanity, but in the end blessed by the love of God and providing good fruits, concealed in the metaphor of spiritual fertility.

Conclusion

To sum up, it may be concluded that specific images of hirsute Mary Magdalene, popular in the late Gothic Central-European art, may have borne many layers of meaning. Despite the most common interpretation, I do not think her hirsutism in those depictions referred mainly to the concept of her penance in the wildness, as in images of penitent Mary Magdalene popular later in the Early-Modern art. Not excluding the completely possible connection between body hair and the carnal nature of Mary Magdalene's previous sins, I suspect that the medieval juxtaposition of this Saint in ecstasy with popular images of Wild Women was rather inclining sexual connotations in a more positive sense: referring to her as a New Eve and a Mystical Bride of Christ. However researched examples from Lesser Poland dropped the most erotic details of the analysed iconographical type (e.g. bare breasts of Mary Magdalene), a very special position of this particular saint was still stressed in those images: for example by depicting her as being crowned while lifted to Heaven. Hopefully, this short study may also contribute to popularising Central European depictions of hairy Mary Magdalene other than just well-known German works of art.

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Summary

Hirsute Mary Magdalene : Some Late Gothic Examples from Lesser Poland and Contribution to Interpretation of Their Iconography

The cult of St Mary Magdalene in the Middle Ages and at the dawn of Early Modern times was immensely complex, and as a result the iconography of Mary Magdalene is a very broad subject; among surviving late Gothic images there are specific ones depicting that saint as hirsute. Those were particularly popular in Central Europe, but this paper focuses on examples come mainly from Lesser Poland, which are: wall paintings in Łany Wielkie (mid-15th century) and Haczów (1494), an altarpiece from Moszczenica (ca. 1480), and an initial in Antiphonarium of Adam of Będków (1451–1457). The author argues that the depictions of hirsute Magdalene in the wildness should not be explained as a result of confusion of the legends of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt, who were both venerated as distinguished and well-known characters. However the researched Polish examples dropped the most erotic details of analysed iconographical type (e.g. bare breasts of Mary Magdalene), a very special position of this particular saint was still stressed in those images: for example by depicting her as being crowned while lifted to Heaven. Not excluding the completely possible connection between body hair and the carnal nature of Mary Magdalene's previous sins, the article focuses on the juxtaposition of this Saint with popular images of Wild Women as inclining sexual connotations in a more positive sense: referring to her as a New Eve and a Mystical Bride of Christ.