

FOLLOWER OF
JEAN GOSSART
THE MAGDALEN

LORNE
CAMPBELL

From *National Gallery Catalogues. The
Sixteenth Century Netherlandish Paintings
with French Paintings before 1600*

© National Gallery Company Limited
ISBN 9 781 85709 370 4
Published online 2011; publication in print forthcoming

THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY

www.nationalgallery.org.uk

PROVENANCE

Follower of Jan Gossaert (Jean Gossart)

NG2163

The Magdalen

Oil on oak, arch-topped, the frame being integral with the support, 29.3 x 22.1 cm, painted surface approximately 22.2 x 14.6 cm

The picture belonged to Thomas Henry Mack (1862–1943), a railway clerk, residing at 12 Irene Road, Parsons Green, London.¹ He offered it to the Gallery on 2 December 1907 and it was purchased from him later that month for £30, out of the Lewis Fund.²

TECHNICAL NOTES

The painting was cleaned and varnished in 1908, soon after its acquisition. ‘The halo only came to light when the picture was cleaned.’³ Painting and frame were cleaned and restored in 2008–10. Parts of the hair, flesh and fur had been damaged by abrasion during previous cleanings. The flesh is very worn; the lock of hair falling in front of the Magdalen’s left ear was almost entirely lost and has been reconstructed from the remnants of original highlights and shadows.

The frame, which is 22 mm thick, and the panel are made from one board of oak, vertical in grain and radially cut. No dendrochronological investigation was or is possible, because the end-grain is covered by paint. A large number of narrow wooden dowels, set at intervals into the outer sides of the frame, may have been used to attach it to a second frame or another support. Three holes are bored into

¹ 1891 census.

² NG Archive, ‘Register of Pictures Offered’. Mr Mack offered another (British) painting on 3 June 1908 but it was declined on the same day.

³ Brockwell 1909, p. 35 n. 1.

the top edge of the frame, two of which emerge at the back of the panel; a string or thong could have been passed through the holes and used to hang the painting. The frame had been gilded five times; beneath the gilding and overpaint was discovered a layer of grey-brown paint, varying in colour and including lead white, some coarse black, some vermilion and occasionally a little pale green.⁴ It lies on a lead-white layer covering a ground that is almost certainly chalk. This preparation continues across the whole panel including the painted surface.⁵ The grey-brown layer is likely to be original and may be intended to represent stone or marble. During the recent restoration, the frame was not regilded but a painted finish was applied to suggest a dark greyish stone surface – possibly in keeping with the original decoration of the frame. Infrared photographs and reflectograms reveal a few lines of underdrawing and several changes made during the course of painting, particularly in the hands. The stem on the lid of the pot ends in a knob that appears to be painted on top of the patterned fabric of the sleeve; the contour of the sleeve has been extended across the background; the larger of the two pendants and its ribbon are painted on top of the Magdalen's clothes, though there seems to be underdrawing for something similar in a slightly different place. The blue background is painted with azurite.⁶ Although several samples were taken during cleaning from the frame and one from the blue background, no sample was taken for medium analysis.

DESCRIPTION

The background is blue; on the left, a shadow, apparently cast by the frame, is a mixture of blue and black. The halo, executed in yellow paint, appears to be

⁴ The layer structure of the ground, priming, paint and gilding campaigns on the frame were deduced from a series of paint cross-sections taken during the recent conservation of the panel (report in Scientific Department file by M. Spring dated 22 July 2009).

⁵ One paint sample was taken from this painting, from the blue background, and showed a lead-white layer similar to that seen under the paint on the frame (report in Scientific Department file by M. Spring dated 22 July 2009).

⁶ Confirmed from examination of a paint sample (report in Scientific Department file by M. Spring dated 22 July 2009).

original. The saint has blue eyes and brown hair and around her head is a black headband. The jewels on the headband are a diamond and eight pearls in a gold setting. The ribbon around her neck is black; the pendant is a semi-transparent pink stone held by four golden claws and hanging from a golden ring. The dress is cloth of gold, patterned in black and trimmed with brown fur, and is laced at the neck with green ribbons over a red *pièce*. The larger pendant hangs from a black ribbon and incorporates, in a gold setting, diamonds and rubies and a large pearl. The ring on her left hand is silver, with a ruby set in gold; the ring on her right hand is gold, set with an emerald.

The Magdalen is identified by her emblem, the covered pot of ointment, and by her halo. The decoration of the golden pot is intriguing. On the cover, a clothed woman is being carried on the shoulders of a nude woman, whose thighs are disappearing into water. A monster lurks in the choppy waters behind them. One of the women is perhaps Latona who, pregnant with Jupiter's twins Apollo and Diana, was pursued by the serpent Python. She fled to Ortygia, where she gave birth to Diana. As soon as she was born, Diana grew to womanhood and helped her mother across the narrow strait to Delos, where Latona gave birth to Apollo. A few days later, Apollo, who also matured with miraculous speed, wounded Python with his arrows; and shortly afterwards killed him.⁷ On the main part of the pot is Mercury, nude but wearing his winged hat or *petasus* and holding his *caduceus*. Below him are two cows; they may refer to Admetus' cattle, which were herded by Apollo and stolen by Mercury.⁸ Why these myths should be associated with the Magdalen is totally obscure.

⁷ Graves 1960, vol. I, pp. 55–6, 76.

⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 63–5, 223–4; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 656–735.

ATTRIBUTION AND DATE

NG2163 was offered and acquired as a work of the 'Flemish School' and published by Holroyd as a work of the 'Antwerp School'. He mentioned that connections with Gossart's work had been noticed;⁹ while Kronig ascribed it to Jan van Scorel.¹⁰ It was attributed to Gossart by Brockwell in 1909, who thought that it was a portrait of a young woman as the Magdalen.¹¹ According to Weisz, Friedländer claimed that it was a certain work by Gossart;¹² between 1912 and 1929 it was catalogued as by Gossart; and Friedländer published it as painted by Gossart in about 1515.¹³ Davies, however, thought that it was 'perhaps ... the youthful work of a pupil of Gossart'.¹⁴ Ainsworth maintained that it was by Gossart himself and painted in about 1506–8;¹⁵ she suggested that it might represent 'a young woman in the guise of Mary Magdalen'.

As the flesh and hair are in poor condition, the picture should be judged on the drapery, jewellery and ointment pot, all of which are very well preserved. Ainsworth, calling NG2163 'this little gem of a painting', compared it with the portrait of Jean Carondelet now in Toledo, Ohio. This portrait is usually attributed to Gossart himself and dated 1514 because a copy (Besançon) bears an inscription identifying the sitter as Carondelet (1469–1545) and giving his age as 45 and the date as 1514. Ainsworth, however, dated the Toledo portrait around 1503–8 because she thought that Carondelet looked more than three years younger than he appeared in Gossart's diptych of 1517 where he is shown with the *Virgin and Child* (Louvre).¹⁶ The over-cleaned state of the Toledo portrait makes the apparent age of the sitter exceptionally difficult to judge, but there seems no compelling reason to doubt the authority of the copyist's date of 1514. Carondelet

⁹ Holroyd 1908, pp. 33–4. The 9th Earl of Carlisle, who owned Gossart's *Adoration of the Kings*, now NG 2790, was persuaded that NG 2163 was by the same hand.

¹⁰ Kronig 1908, p. 227.

¹¹ Brockwell 1909, pp. 35–6.

¹² Weisz 1913, p. 123.

¹³ Friedländer, vol. VIII, no. 25.

¹⁴ Davies 1968, p. 66.

¹⁵ Ainsworth in Ainsworth et al. 2010, pp. 236–7.

¹⁶ Ainsworth in Ainsworth et al. 2010, pp. 243–5.

could well be 45 in the Toledo portrait; he is 48 in the Louvre diptych. If the Toledo portrait was painted in 1514, it would be approximately contemporary with Gossart's *Adoration of the Kings*, NG2790.

It is difficult to believe that NG2163 is by the painter of the *Adoration*, that it is a portrait or that the artist had a model in front of him when he painted the image. The nose and the far eye are seen in false perspective from completely different angles: the nose is almost in profile but the eyes and the rest of the face are in pure three-quarters view. In the Toledo portrait, in contrast, the features are observed from much the same angle, in a straightforward three-quarters pose. Carondelet's cranium is much diminished, whereas the Magdalen's is rather exaggerated. Her large ear is set very high, while Carondelet's ear is very low in the Toledo portrait, though it is accurately placed in the Louvre diptych.

The cloth of gold of the Magdalen's robe is carefully painted but, if it is compared with the robes of Balthasar and Melchior in the *Adoration of the Kings*, it is singularly lacking in verve and skill. Similarly the Magdalen's jewels and pearls and her elaborately decorated pot are accurately observed but are very much less interesting than the jewels, pearls and metalwork of the *Adoration*, where the pearls on Melchior's clothes are painted with wonderful skill and economy of effort. The Magdalen's hands, slightly unequal in size, are rather poorly articulated and the tangent contours, for example in the large jewel with the pendant pearl, are not normally found in Gossart's work. The strange mythological subjects on the Magdalen's pot have no parallel in metalwork designed by Gossart, where apparently irrelevant subject matter would be extremely unusual.

Though the abrasion makes it difficult to distinguish the true style of the head, the heart-shaped face, wide-open eyes, large irises and bowed upper lip are close to some of Gossart's ideal types. The lock of hair brought forward in front of the ear is found in various Virgins by Gossart,¹⁷ as well as in his mythological figures

¹⁷ Friedländer, vol. VIII, nos 28 (Washington), 35 (Prado), 36 (Berlin).

such as Deianira and Danaë.¹⁸ The strong contrasts of light and shade in the hands, which are less damaged than the face, are again reminiscent of Gossart but the hands are so badly drawn that they cannot be by Gossart himself. NG2163 may be attributed to a follower. It was perhaps painted during his lifetime or shortly after his death: arch-topped panels and integral frames do not seem to have been fashionable after the middle of the sixteenth century. The arcane mythological subjects on the pot, however, would be rather exceptional in the first decades of the century.

¹⁸ Friedländer, vol. VIII, nos 50, 48.