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Penance of Mary Magdalene: Genesis of Franciscan Iconography

Visual arts can express deep emotional feelings that go beyond mere iconographic representation. Mary Magdalene is the original figure of repentance, even more than St Jerome or St Francis. The figure is also closely connected to the relationship of Christ with female figures. This paper will illustrate the emergence of this iconography, based on the former model of Mary Aegyptiaca as well as the evolution of this figure from the late Middle Ages onwards. In particular we will try to clarify when, how, and why started the portrayal of penance of Mary Magdalene in art. The roots of the representation of Mary Magdalene probably go back to the thirteenth century and are connected to the Franciscans, who were the first to introduce an iconography of penance. This development is closely connected with the new definition of penance, hermits, but also the new role, even spiritual, of women in that period, characterized by strong growth of female yearning in religiosity, both in its most spontaneous forms and in monastic codification of the Clarisse. The depiction of Mary Magdalene by various artists, finally, captures this ambivalence between individuality and vision of society.

One could interpret this iconography as a decrease in the power and role of women in the Church, which transforms her role of a missionary, social and active, into a sinner. The fact that in the first representations of the penitent, unlike the following ones, the naked body of the sinner is not presented, and instead we perceive angels who communicate with her and feed with the bread, puts strong emphasis on chastity and the deep psychological conversion of female figure covered with a hairy coat, based on a personal and intimate relationship with God. This is also reflected in St Francis, who recognizes in a woman, as already did Jesus, a parity and equality with man. In this Franciscan atmosphere the convent of St Clare was founded, under the guidance of Francis, but it had been announced before the renewed female religious turmoil. The depiction of Mary Magdalene, therefore, not only expresses a social situation of women, but a deeper understanding of women in the Franciscan environment.