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**Donatello depicts the penitent Mary Magdalen with physical and emotional tenacity in the face of adversity—her suffering having increased her spiritual strength.**

# The Penitence of Mary Magdalen

BY HEIDI J. HORNİK

The Mary Magdalen known by Donatello and other artists of the Italian Renaissance was the composite Mary that scholars trace back to Pope Gregory the Great's homily delivered in 592. Gregory combined Mary of Magdala, Luke's unnamed "woman in the city, who was a sinner" (Luke 7:37), and Mary of Bethany (sister of Martha) along with the extra-biblical Penitent Mary from the *Golden Legend* who goes off into the wilderness for thirty years, to form one conglomerate story about Mary Magdalen, the reformed prostitute.<sup>1</sup>

The original location and patron of the sculpture are unknown. During its cleaning after a devastating flood in 1966 covered it with mud and oil, it was revealed that the flesh was originally painted to suggest a leathery tan produced by years of exposure to the sun in the wilderness, and the hair had gilded streaks to enhance the figure's red hair.<sup>2</sup> Wooden figures were often carried through the streets in processions that occurred at Lent, feast days of saints, and religious events such as Epiphany (January 6) and the Annunciation (March 25). These "highlights" in her hair would have been quite remarkable when hit by the sun if this Magdalen was in such a procession.

This is not an emaciated figure whose body has been ravaged by penitence. Although her broken teeth are obvious, her refined bone structure remains intact. She is slender, yet her limbs are strong with muscle definition. We are reminded that the Magdalen was known for her great beauty. She stands in the characteristic *contrapposto* or counter-poised position as one leg supports the majority of her weight while the other balances the body in a relaxed and natural manner.

Donatello depicts the penitent Mary Magdalen with physical and emotional tenacity in the face of adversity – her suffering having increased her spiritual strength.<sup>3</sup> Her faith is evident as her hands are clasped in prayer.

## NOTES

1 For the origins of the penitent Magdalen in the wilderness, see Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, translated by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (London, UK: Longmans, Green, 1941), 360-361. For more on the visual tradition of Mary Magdalen from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries see, Heidi J. Hornik, "The Invention and Development of the 'Secular' Magdalene in Late Renaissance Florentine Painting," in *Mary Magdalene in Medieval Culture: Conflicted Roles*, edited by Peter Loewen and Robin Waugh (New York: Routledge, 2013).

2 Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, seventh edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 298-299.

3 Mary Levine Dunkelman, "Donatello's Mary Magdalen: A Model of Courage and Survival," *Womans Art Journal*, 26:2 (2005), 10-13.