

# Charles LeBrun's *Penitent Magdalen* Reexamined

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A century after Charles LeBrun completed his *Penitent Magdalen* (1655-57; Figure 1), two critics, F.-B. Lépicié and A.-J. Dézallier d'Argenville, published descriptions of the painting and of its original setting, the first convent of discalced Carmelites in Paris.<sup>1</sup> There the painting hung as the main altarpiece in a chapel dedicated to the convent's founder, the prominent religious thinker Pierre Bérulle. Since the convent's decorations were disassembled at the end of the *ancien régime*, these descriptions are particularly valuable.<sup>2</sup> The critical texts provide information about the *Magdalen* as part of a functioning religious context, and, as will be argued in this paper, they illuminate the artistic milieu for which LeBrun designed and executed the image. The *Penitent Magdalen* is presented here as the artist's critical gloss on two issues important both to his own art and to the evolving Academy of Painting, of which he was a founding member: the example of Italian Renaissance forebears and the place of French painters in the European art world; and the merits of coloring as a major component of ideal painting.

Both Lépicié, in a collection of biographies of the First Painters to the Kings of France, and Dézallier, in a guide book to the city of Paris, noted the *Magdalen's* striking visual quali-

ties and its prominence in the convent's interior, though it hung not in the nave but in a side chapel. Dézallier's account listed paintings in the convent sponsored by Marie de Medici, Henry IV's Queen, and painted by prominent artists of the generation preceding LeBrun's—to name a few, Philippe de Champaigne, Jacques Stella, the sculptor Jacques Sarrazin, and even Guido Reni (who was greatly revered in France).<sup>3</sup> Lépicié discussed several paintings that LeBrun contributed to this dazzling array of artistic showpieces at the behest of Anne of Austria, Queen of France, and the critic observed that LeBrun distinguished himself among the beautiful works by Stella and Champaigne.<sup>4</sup>

But it is the *Penitent Magdalen* to which Lépicié and Dézallier paid particular attention. Lépicié claimed that nothing in the church surpassed the *Magdalen*, which many regarded as one of the artist's most perfect paintings. Dézallier referred to the *Magdalen* as LeBrun's *chef d'oeuvre*, and admired "the correctness of the design, the draperies, the expression, the coloring," praising each of these four elements equally.<sup>5</sup> These remarks are in stark contrast to twentieth-century commentary on the image, which in fact has been very nearly excluded from English-language discussions of LeBrun's *oeuvre*.<sup>6</sup> Jennifer

<sup>1</sup> F.-B. Lépicié, *Vies des premiers peintres du Roi depuis M. LeBrun jusqu'à présent* (1752; Geneva: Minkoff, 1972) 18-19; A.-J. Dézallier d'Argenville, *Voyage pittoresque de Paris* (1757; Geneva: Minkoff, 1972) 316-319.

<sup>2</sup> The abbot of the convent, M. LeCamus, commissioned the decoration of this chapel, dedicated to the convent's founder. On either side of the *Magdalen* hung scenes of the saint's life, executed by LeBrun's pupils, based on his designs. And before the *Penitent Magdalen*, as perpetual spectator to the saint's conversion, was placed a kneeling effigy of Bérulle himself, carved in marble by Jacques Sarrazin, leading sculptor of the previous generation.

<sup>3</sup> These artists were all one or two generations older than LeBrun: Champaigne (1602-1674); Stella (1596-1656); Sarrazin (1588-1660), Reni (1575-1642).

<sup>4</sup> Two of LeBrun's other Carmelite paintings are still extant: the *Christ in the Desert Served by Angels*, now in Paris at the Louvre, and the *Feast in the House of Simon*, now in Venice at the Accademia Museum. For a reproduction of the *Christ in the Desert*, see Jacques Thuillier and Jennifer Montagu, *Charles LeBrun 1619-1690: Peintre et Dessinateur* (Versailles: Chateau de Versailles, 1963) 44. For the *Feast in the House of Simon*, closest in subject to the *Penitent Magdalen*, yet quite differ-

ent in style, see Michel Gareau, *Charles LeBrun: First Painter to King Louis XIV* (New York: Abrams, 1992) 155.

<sup>5</sup> Lépicié, 18-19: "Mais rien ne surpasse celui [exécution savante] de la Magdelaine convertie, que plusieurs regardent comme un des plus parfaits de l'Auteur. La correction du dessein, l'expression noble et pathétique de la belle Pénitente, la beauté des draperies jettées avec art et d'un grand goût, la douce harmonie, tout concourt à relever cet excellent morceau. . . ." Dézallier d'Argenville, 319: "La quatrième Chapelle possède le chef d'oeuvre de le Brun. On y voit la Madeleine absorbée dans la douleur. Tout est admirable dans cette pièce, la correction du dessein, les draperies, l'expression, le coloris."

<sup>6</sup> Examples of twentieth-century assessments of the *Penitent Magdalen* and/or of LeBrun can be found in the following works: Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (1940; New York: Norton, 1967); Anthony Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France: 1500-1700* 4th ed. (London: Penguin, 1991); Thuillier and Montagu, *Charles LeBrun*; Gareau, *Charles LeBrun*; Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age*, trans. Emily McVarish (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1993); Jennifer Montagu, *The Expression of the Passions: The Origin and Influence of Charles LeBrun's "Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière"* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994).

Montagu suggested that the painting is perhaps “too theatrical” for modern tastes.<sup>7</sup> There are other explanations; modern literature’s emphasis on the roles LeBrun played as administrator, theorist and leading figure of the French Academy has overshadowed his role as a highly accomplished and ambitious painter. Consequently, his art is commonly known in current discourse as arid and formulaic, and above all as an art that exemplifies the principles of *dessein*.<sup>8</sup> Yet this opulent *Magdalen* is both unquestionably by LeBrun, and, as early critics recognized, a vivid display of *coloris*, an aspect often hidden due to the modern tendency to study the picture from black-and-white photographs (see cover illustration).

LeBrun received this major commission in 1655, when he was thirty-six years old and already a prominent Parisian painter. He was well connected, employed by high-ranking aristocratic patrons such as Chancellor Séguier (a cousin of Bérulle), and by Anne of Austria. He was also well-travelled, having spent four years in Rome in the company of Poussin. In 1660, three years after completing the *Magdalen*, he was named officially as Louis XIV’s First Painter. LeBrun was a charter member of the Academy, founded in 1648, seven years before he undertook the commission for the Carmelite altarpiece. In 1655 LeBrun and his colleagues definitively established the Academy’s dominance over the older painter’s guild, the *Maîtrise*. Although it was still in its infancy, the artists’ Academy had clearly stated its projects, which included positioning France as artistic heir to the Italian Renaissance. LeBrun, as both artist and Academician, was keenly aware of his own position in a developing history of art—a self-conscious knowledge of art history and theory that informs his paintings and permits them to be interpreted as art-critical statements.

When LeBrun completed the *Penitent Magdalen*, the famous Academic debate about *dessein* vs. *coloris* was not to occur for over a decade, but the theoretical matrix from which it developed was firmly entrenched in the critical tradition. French painters and connoisseurs knew well the tradition of Italian discussions of *disegno* and *colorito*, such as those penned by Dolce, Vasari and Lomazzo. These authors clearly and consistently articulated the hallmarks of coloring, namely: excellence in imitating the softness of flesh, especially that of women and children; various reflective surfaces of textiles; and the atmospheric effects of landscape.<sup>9</sup> In other words, coloring

embraced those elements which are most challenging to counterfeit, because they were most difficult to measure quantitatively, unlike anatomy, proportion, and perspective—attributes of design. The critical literature also associated with coloring a certain range of techniques, such as impasto and visible brushwork, which artists developed to imitate the textures listed above. The seventeenth-century classicist critic Fréart de Chambray, writing shortly after the *Penitent Magdalen* was completed, groups all these qualities together. His text is polemical and vehemently anti-colorist, but it is cited here to demonstrate that in the mid-seventeenth century the sixteenth-century critical notion of coloring persisted. It included the:

. . . Freshness and Loveliness of the Coloring, the Freedom of the brush, the bold Touches, the Colors thickly impasted and well nourished . . . the Masterful Strokes . . . the beautiful Tints, and the Softness of the Flestones. . . .<sup>10</sup>

In the art literature of the Renaissance and Baroque eras, Titian was recognized by both supporters and detractors as the chief representative of these colorist pictorial qualities, so that his name and art became virtually synonymous with coloring. The Italian texts directed French audiences to certain works by Titian, works that exemplified Titian’s stylistic virtues. Two of these renowned paintings, both accessible to LeBrun, were Titian’s Naples *Danae* (whose coloring, Vasari reported, bore the authoritative stamp of approval from Michelangelo) and his Pitti *Magdalen*.<sup>11</sup> It is not argued here that either one of these Italian paintings was a model or source for LeBrun. Instead they are presented as they were in the critical literature: as encapsulations of Titian’s renowned stylistic virtues.

Both Titian’s *Danae* and his *Magdalen* featured skillfully counterfeited female flesh, hair, atmospheric effects, and other reflective, luminous and translucent substances. *Danae*’s body was an occasion for the artist to display his uncanny talent for simulating living female flesh, just as the *amorino* exhibited colorable juvenile flesh. The metamorphosis of Jupiter into gold coins demonstrated Titian’s mastery of the shimmer of metal and the ethereal atmosphere. The *Magdalen*, which presented many of the same qualities, is a closer thematic comparison for LeBrun’s picture. Titian’s half-length view of the *Magdalen*, penitent in the wilderness, naked, also gave the painter occa-

<sup>7</sup> Montagu, *Expression of the Passions* 38-39.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Lee 27, 28, 34, 60, 67.

<sup>9</sup> The sixteenth-century Italian literature on *disegno* and *colorito* is extensive. Listed here are but a few of the canonical discussions of *colorito*. Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi (Florence, Sansoni, 1966-1987) vol. 4, 5-6, vol. 6, 164; see also Giorgio Vasari, *Vasari on Technique*, trans. Louise S. Maclehorse (New York, Dover, 1960) 205-220; the bilingual edition of Ludovico Dolce’s *Dialogo della pittura* in Mark W. Roskill, *Dolce’s “Aretino” and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento* (New York, New York UP, 1968) 116-119, 152-155, 184-195; and Giovan Paolo Lomazzo, *Idea*

*del Tempio della Pittura*, trans. and ed. Robert Klein (Florence, Istituto Palazzo Strozzi, 1974) vol. 1, 120 - 129.

<sup>10</sup> For the translation I must credit Donald Posner, “Concerning the ‘Mechanical’ Parts of Painting and the Artistic Culture of Seventeenth-Century France,” *Art Bulletin* 75 (1993): 583. The passage comes from Roland Fréart de Chambray, *Idée de la Perfection de la Peinture* (Paris, 1662) 61-63.

<sup>11</sup> I refer readers to reproductions in Francesco Valcanover, *L’Opera completa di Tiziano* (1969; Milan: Rizzoli, 1978). The *Danae* (Naples, Capodimonte Museum) is on pages 36-37, and the *Penitent Magdalen* (Florence, Pitti Palace) is on page 26.

sion to depict a beautiful nude woman. Most abundantly the image featured the Magdalen's shining hair and supple flesh, which filled the frame and confronted the spectator at the very foreground of the picture. Titian also displayed tears in the saint's moist, glistening eyes, the sheen of her fingernails, and in the background, an atmosphere heavy with condensation.

In both images, the picture's surface contributes significantly to the illusion of textures in the scene depicted. To enliven the illusionistic surfaces, Titian allowed his paint to bleed into the canvas, and pigments to build up on the surface, casting shadows, and recording brush marks. In passages of Danae's recumbent body, in the divine shower of gold coins, and in the flesh of the Magdalen, the weave of the canvas is visible through thin layers of glaze.

With full comprehension of the meanings of *dessein* and of *coloris*, with the example of Titian's renowned paintings in mind, and with first-hand experience of the virtual art museum inside the Parisian Carmelite convent, LeBrun composed his own image of the penitent saint. One of LeBrun's contemporaries remarked that the painting depicted "a Magdalen, who in the beginning of her conversion, peels off her adornments."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in this ornate picture, LeBrun emphasized both the saint's rich adornments and the action of unveiling she performs.

The Magdalen's very body is an emblem of the painting's theological content. Her serpentine pose, an ornate configuration of the body and a renowned symbol of design in the Renaissance critical literature, makes material the notion of spiritual turning, or conversion.<sup>13</sup> Perched on one leg, she turns away from her mirror, gazing tearfully toward the luminous fog that enters her room from the open window at the upper left, interrupting her toilette and heralding the commencement of her salvation. Her right arm counterposes the direction of her torso's turn, emphatically reaching across her body to remove a brilliant ultramarine silk mantle from her shoulder. LeBrun underscored the chiasmic pose by placing the saint's waist—that is, the nexus of the turning—at the physical center of the painting, and by binding it twice, with a pink sash and a belt of gold inlaid with blue enamel. The saint's face displays a composite of some of the famous illustrations for the *Conférence on Expression* LeBrun delivered to the Academy in 1668: worry, sadness, astonishment, contemplation. Dézallier doubtless recognized them when he praised the painting's expression. Those emotional templates are framed by long, gleaming blonde hair woven with strands of pearls, pink ribbons, and braids. They

are enlivened with vivid flushes of pink, soft flesh, glistening teeth, and pearly tears.

In the surrounding pictorial space, as well as in the figural contrapposto and facial expression, LeBrun represents the conversion as a process by drawing attention to the layers of clothing and to the action of peeling them away. Imagine a sequence of events: the crumpled iridescent pink garment is the first to be removed, deposited on the cushion in the foreground; next is the red one, shimmering with orange highlights and little golden tassels, caught beneath the saint's knee, along with a glimpse of a transparent veil. The intricately-embroidered golden shawl follows, then the ultramarine silk, with which it is entwined. Once removed, they fully expose the dress, pale, clinging, and translucent; below her waist, the fabric adheres to her abdomen, revealing the shadowy suggestion of her navel. The gown is the color of pallid flesh, echoed in passages of the saint's skin—in her throat, forearm and foot. This sequence might prompt viewers to speculate that if her worldly goods are so exquisite, in their silken, embroidered, shimmering iridescence, translucence and transparency, then the unadorned body beneath must be still more splendid. Dézallier's approval of the draperies was surely merited.

With the inverted jewelry box, emptying its luxurious contents, LeBrun draws an analogy to the saint's spiritual state. While casting off her vestments, she dropped the velvet-lined box, from which emerge more pearls, rings, and gold chains. Beside the case, on its side, lies her ointment jar of polished black stone, a standard attribute of the Magdalen.

The rich furnishings of the interior not only allude to her sinful past, but they also knit the composition together with a harmony of colors. The three primary colors enveloping the figure in the form of clothing—blue, red, and gold—resonate in the surrounding space. The blue of the upholstered chair in the lower left, whose leg of polished ebony overlaps the Magdalen's left foot, matches the tasseled skirt of her dressing table and the curtain at the back of the room. The red of the bow crowning the mirror at the painting's right edge is repeated in the cushion in the foreground. And the entire composition is punctuated with gold—the lion's head finial, the embroidery and tassels of the chair, the gold knobs of the dressing table, and more embroidery and tassels on the red cushion in the foreground.

Adorning the upper left quadrant of the picture is the landscape, over which the incandescent fog passed prior to its arrival in the saint's chamber through the open window. Its col-

<sup>12</sup> Guillet de Saint-George, "Charles LeBrun," *Mémoires inédites sur la vie et les ouvrages des membres de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture*, ed. L. Dussieux, E. Soulié, Ph. de Chennevières, Paul Mantz, and A. de Montaiglon (Paris, F. de Nobele, 1968) 11. Guillet describes "une Madeleine qui dans le commencement de sa conversion se dépouille de ses ornements."

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the serpentine pose in Renaissance critical literature, see David Summers, "Maniera and Movement: The *Figura Serpentinata*," *Art Quarterly* 35 (1972): 269-301.

ors, less saturated than those of the interior, imply spatial distance. The misty vista presents a variety of intangible substances as well as tangible ones. A sunlit body of water and mountainous coast dissolve into the horizon; a weathered circular tower and dense garden mark the middle distance, enclosed by a stone wall. The entire image is laden with the signature traits of coloring.

Ornate, brimming with ostensibly anecdotal embellishments, this *Magdalen* functioned on at least two levels. It was effective, first, as a religious picture of the courtesan who stripped herself of her earthly riches in order to lead a religious life. The embellishments adorning the picture enhanced its meaning: the saint forsakes her worldly goods, but the worshipper must first be seduced by the splendor of the ornaments before comprehending the significance of her act. In this respect it also suited the audience of the painting's original context, the women who had retired from Parisian society to spend the rest of their lives in the Carmelite cloister.

The second level at which the *Magdalen* functioned in LeBrun's time is more metaphorical and theoretical, of particular resonance during the Academy's early decades. At this second level, the picture had meaning for a different audience, the connoisseurs and artists who considered the work one of LeBrun's "masterpieces." To them, the *Magdalen* represented both spiritual conversion and the pictorial qualities associated with *coloris*. Pictorial and rhetorical color were often presented in the critical tradition as a courtesan veiled with superficial beauties; with her fetching ornaments, she was designated "made up," "prostituted," "immodest," a "courtesan."<sup>14</sup> In Fréart de Chambray's 1662 invective against the popularity of colorist painters he stated:

they have made themselves a new mistress, coquettish and waggish, who asks only for some makeup and colors in order to please at the first encounter, without worrying if she will please for very long. Here is the idol of our age, to whom our less discerning painters sacrifice all their efforts.<sup>15</sup>

Mary Magdalen, the reformed sinner, was, in short, an apt and powerful vehicle for transmitting LeBrun's critical opinions about *coloris* and its relative importance to *dessein*.

LeBrun's version showcased the sensuous textures associated with the essence of coloring and with Titian's art. The Carmelite *Magdalen* highlighted the iconographically important body, hair, and tears of the saint. But there were important differences. LeBrun's *Magdalen* was fully clothed, and therefore exposed a minimal quantity of bare flesh. In fact, this saint's elegant vestments received considerably more attention than did the surface of her skin. Where Titian displayed the saint's body to us, LeBrun alluded to its existence beneath her exquisite garments. But he suggested the *Magdalen*'s flesh with the

hue of her dress, repeated in passages of her exposed skin, with the suggestion of her navel at the picture's center point, and with her action of disrobing. As in Titian's works, the treatment of the surface of the canvas affected the illusion of the textures, but LeBrun's execution was different. His brushwork was consistently fine, tight, and mostly invisible, making the picture's surface refined and polished to accord with his presentation of the saint as an aristocratic Parisian woman. The effect was unlike that of Venetian canvases and more closely resembled Central Italian practice. The painting might be viewed as a fusion of Venetian colorist illusionism with the technical rendering of Central Italian design, a synthesis of the triumphs of both traditions. This might account for Dézallier's equal praise for the design and the coloring.

Consider again the original setting in the Carmelite convent. Presenting in the *Penitent Magdalen* the seductive charms of coloring not only yielded an effective devotional image of the reformed sinner; it also enabled LeBrun to demonstrate the full range of his technical and stylistic competencies displayed in a single building amidst other works of his own, and works by his students and esteemed elder colleagues, all commissioned by the highest ranks of the Parisian *noblesse*. That arena allowed LeBrun to present himself not as one of the "less discerning painters" Fréart marginalized in the passage cited above but instead as a universal painter, one equally adept in all parts of painting. Such a universally excellent painter would have been a perfect candidate for First Painter to a wealthy, powerful, and politically ambitious King. He would also have been an ideal leader of an Academy charged with claiming dominance on the European art scene, a worthy successor to Italian Renaissance artistic giants. This cleverly forged image of LeBrun endured, reaching viewers like Lépicié and Dézallier. They understood the picture—and by extension, LeBrun's art—as a balance of all the parts of painting, admirable coloring as well as excellent design.

In light of the evidence presented above, the painting resists our reading it as LeBrun divesting himself and his art of the sensuous pleasure of *coloris* in order to pursue a higher, more virtuous existence of pure *dessein*. LeBrun's *Magdalen*, unlike Fréart's reprehensible coquette, did worry about pleasing her beloved, whom we might interpret to be Christ, Bérulle, LeBrun, or even perhaps Louis XIV, whose patronage her creator courted. She demanded more than makeup and colors, but she didn't discard them altogether. LeBrun was too discerning a painter and too skilled a rhetorician for that. He enticed the viewer's attention by displaying all of the saint's dazzlingly-wrought finery, and challenged the viewer to abandon this man-made splendor.

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<sup>14</sup> Lichtenstein 189-190.

<sup>15</sup> The translation is by Emily McVarish and Edith Gladstone, in Lichtenstein 191; the passage is from Fréart's preface.



Figure 1. Charles LeBrun, *Penitent Magdalen*, oil on canvas, 2.52 x 1.71 m., 1655-57. Louvre, Paris. Courtesy of Réunion des Musées Nationaux.