ON GILDED UGLINESS:

Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen*

and

Issues of Beauty, Sanctity, and Sexuality in Fifteenth Century Florence

by

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Abstract

The sins of the flesh and the mortification of the flesh characterize the biography of the saint known as Mary Magdalen. The polychrome wooden sculpture by Donatello from c.1455 was described by Vasari as: “wasted away by her fastings and abstinence” the extreme emaciation of the figure contrasts with the image of the beautiful and mournful Magdalen frequently seen at the foot of the cross in medieval crucifixion scenes. With virtually no documentation concerning its commission, much of the scholarship on this particular piece focuses on dating and the intended installation site. This thesis aims to examine the relationship between the emaciated style and the manner of polychromy in Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen* as an example of the redeeming power of penance. On a figure known for a life of sin and prostitution but also redemption, the gilding juxtaposed with a haggard and ugly body creates a dynamic relationship between sanctity and beauty (or the lack thereof) and demonstrates the effect of penance on the sinner. The extreme emaciation and rough finish of the piece, in tandem with the gilding of the hair, created an effect of light that was significant to the Renaissance understanding of the saint’s character but also to a larger discourse on female sexuality and spirituality. The multifaceted character of Mary Magdalen and Donatello’s depiction of her was understood by Quattrocento Florentines on a variety of levels. Higher social classes would readily grasp the sculpture’s affinity with Petrarchan tropes and philosophical ideas, particularly in terms of light imagery and descriptions of love. But the average viewer would also make more prosaic associations between the figure of the Magdalen and popular preaching and prostitution. Through an examination of the cultural climate of
fifteenth century Florence, this investigation will situate Donatello’s uniquely emaciated and gilded sculpture in the visual tradition of Magdalen imagery, motifs of female spirituality in Donatello’s career, the literary tradition of describing female beauty, and societal concerns about prostitution and female sexuality.

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for Adam.
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Fig. 1. Donatello, *Penitent Magdalen*, c.1455, Museo dell’ Opera del Duomo, Florence. Wood with polychrome and gilding.
The Museo dell’ Opera del Duomo’s famed sculpture of the *Penitent Magdalen* by Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi (Donatello, 1386-1466) marks a pivotal point in the representation of Saint Mary Magdalen. Traditionally depicted as a beautiful, full-bodied onlooker at the base of Crucifixion scenes, the celebrated Florentine artist depicts an extremely emaciated and solitary figure bringing her sinewy arms together in the position of prayer (fig. 1). This withered and gaunt portrayal of the saint, enhanced by naturalistic polychromy on the face and body, and gilding on the hair, was unique for its time. Representations of the Magdalen that precede Donatello do not convey the same sense of emaciation and haggardness evident in the Florentine sculptor’s interpretation. Despite the departure from convention, this image resonated with Quattrocento Florentines since the “Donatellesque Magdalen” proliferates in the Tuscan republic until the end of the century.¹

John Pope Hennessey remarked that the 1966 restoration process that unearthed the polychromy and gilding of the *Penitent Magdalen* transformed the modern understanding of the sculpture’s “aesthetic character.”² The hitherto unstudied aspect of Donatello’s Magdalen, her colouring, offers a new insight into how the sculpture was viewed by the artist’s contemporaries. Not that gilded sculptures were a novelty, but that the extreme emaciation and rough finish of the piece, in tandem with the gilding of the hair, created an effect of light that was significant to the Renaissance understanding of the saint’s character. The primary focus of this study is on Donatello’s unique approach to depicting the saint as an emaciated ascetic yet also a gilded, long-haired, and naked woman. His interpretation involved the complication and varied use of all aspects of the
Magdalen’s biography and in particular the tension between the sexual and spiritual elements of the Magdalen character. On a figure known for a life of sin and prostitution but also redemption, the gilding juxtaposed with a haggard and ugly body creates a dynamic relationship between sanctity and beauty (or the lack thereof) and demonstrates the effect of penance on the sinner. The emaciated body highlights the former life of bodily sin and concerns for worldly matters, while the gilding renders the emaciated flesh into a literally shining example of the sanctifying powers of grace on the penitential sinner.

Communicating the character or personality of a notable and religious figure posed ethical concerns for the artist. Aristotle wrote that the form and colour of visual images “are not imitations, but signs, of moral habits, indications which the body gives of states of feeling.” The ancient Greek philosopher was concerned not so much with aesthetics but the content of character described in art and the effect of these depictions on the audience. This moralizing effect was likewise significant for Medieval and Renaissance patrons and artisans. The Florentine architect and sculptor Antonio di Pietro Averlino (c. 1400 - c. 1469) or Filarete noted in his *Trattato dell’Architectura* (1465) that in art, saints should “match their types, so that when you have a Saint Anthony to do, he is not to be made timid, but alert.” The theorist’s treatise demonstrates not only concern for depicting a believable and suitable likeness in painting and sculpture but elsewhere emphasizes the moral importance of depicting a saint accurately as well. The saint’s ‘type’ was a primary concern because a saint’s personality and biography coincides with a
particular niche in Christian worship and the visual representation of the saint must relate to a higher matter of faith.

The Magdalen is a composite saint, an amalgamation of several Biblical personalities, and thus has a character with a certain degree of malleability in representation. By the Quattrocento, the saint known as Mary Magdalen had absorbed and evolved through a great deal of biblical extrapolation and construction. Pope Gregory the Great officially defined the figure of the Magdalen and this definition provided a unified biography and personality for this religious figure. In his 33rd homily delivered on 21 September 591, Gregory combined three Biblical women into the figure of Mary Magdalen and made official what had been generally accepted in Western Christendom since the 3rd century. He identified as Mary Magdalen the unnamed sinner from the Gospel of Luke and Mary of Bethany. Luke’s anonymous sinner entered the House of Simon the Pharisee, washed the feet of the Lord with her tears, dried them with her hair, and anointed them with oil. The Pharisee refers to the woman as a sinner (or peccatrix) and Christ replies: “Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.” In the subsequent chapter of Luke, Mary Magdalen is mentioned by name as woman from whom Christ cast out seven devils who became a devoted disciple. This scriptural proximity may be a reason for the conflation of Mary Magdalen with sin and anointing. The other three Gospels mention the anointing of Christ at Bethany. Both Matthew and Mark mention a woman in the house of Simon the leper who poured ointment on Christ’s head to prepare Him, as He says, for burial. The Gospel of John also mentions a woman who anoints Christ in Bethany but it is in the
home of Lazarus, whom Christ rose from the dead, and his sisters Martha and Mary. This Mary anoints the feet of Christ with perfume in preparation for His burial.\textsuperscript{11} Christ is also mentioned in the home of Martha in the Gospel of Luke. While Martha busied herself with domestic tasks, Mary sat at Christ’s feet and listened to him. Martha was irritated by Mary’s lack of assistance and asked Christ to instruct Mary to help her. Instead, he chastises Martha and says that, “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”\textsuperscript{12} Mary of Bethany became a symbol for the contemplative life and the theme of anointing as well as the name ‘Mary’ allowed Gregory to connect the Magdalen to Mary of Bethany with relative ease. Mary Magdalen also witnessed the Resurrection and brought the news to the apostles, thus becoming \textit{apostola apostolorum} (the apostle to the apostles, so named by St. Augustine in his \textit{Homilies on the Epistle of John}).\textsuperscript{13}

Worship of the Magdalen emerged from Easter celebrations of the resurrection of Christ, in which she played an integral part as witness to the event and the bearer of the news to the disciples.\textsuperscript{14} Her cult was encouraged by extra-biblical legends about her life after the Resurrection. Various sources recounted how she sailed with Martha, Lazarus, and Maximin to Southern France to preach and convert the people to Christianity. Because there were no geographic ties to Italy in her legend, the worship of Mary Magdalen was initially less popular in Italy than in France. Very few churches were dedicated to the Magdalen in Italy and only one in Florence, a Cistercian church named Santa Maria Maddalena di Cestello.\textsuperscript{15} The cult of the Magdalen developed most strongly in the area in which she allegedly preached but later spread throughout Western Europe.
A legend promulgated by Byzantine anchorites in Southern Italy in the ninth or early tenth century claimed that after her period of proselytizing, the Magdalen withdrew to the wilderness to spend thirty years as an anchorite.\textsuperscript{16} The Medieval period and the eleventh and twelfth centuries in particular were the height of the Magdalen’s popularity. In the eleventh century there was a sort of ‘Magdalen boom’ that resulted in the migration of the saint’s cult from the south of France to Rome and gave increasing prominence to the saint’s feast day (22 July) in liturgical calendars.\textsuperscript{17}

In addition to numerous medieval \textit{vitae} outlining the Magdalen’s hermitic repose, the Western conflation of the Biblical Marys\textsuperscript{18} produced a figure associated with (often sexual) sin, contemplation, and penitence. By the fifteenth century, the Magdalen was regarded as the patron saint of prostitution. It bears noting, however, that in the original Biblical references and Jacobus de Voragine’s famous biography of her in his \textit{Legenda Aurea} of 1260, there is no explicit reference to Mary Magdalen as a prostitute. The similarities between St. Mary Magdalen and St. Mary Aegyptica’s \textit{vitae} in Jacobus’ text could account for some of the association. (Mary of Egypt was a prostitute by legend and spent forty-seven years in the desert to atone for her mortal sins.) Most frequently, however, the pre-conversion Mary Magdalen was invoked as a symbol of vanity and its most dangerous consequence, \textit{luxuria} or lust; one of the seven deadly sins. Gregory the Great identified the seven demons possessing Mary Magdalen with the seven deadly sins. Katherine Jansen notes that as a consequence, “…her physical symptoms became outward signs of the sinful sickness afflicting her soul.”\textsuperscript{19} The Gospel writers refer to her as a sinner or \textit{peccatrix} and as the Magdalen became increasingly associated with lust and
vanity, she was referred to as a prostitute or *meretrix.* Although the Magdalen has a strong scriptural association with penitence and redemption, it was difficult if not impossible to divorce her from her traditional association with sin and sexuality. The traditional conclusion that her sin was sexual reflects historical tendencies to associate female sin with the body and sexual intercourse.

The dynamic and tense relationship between sexuality and sanctity inherent in the Magdalen’s biography invariably plays itself out in the Quattrocento Florentine’s viewing of the sculpture. The wooden Magdalen by Donatello embodies a plethora of contradictions and complexities. She is a rough-hewn but gilded piece of wood, a naked woman covered by hair, a withered ascetic with pronounced musculature, and a woman who in sinning was physically beautiful, but in her sanctity is rendered ugly. This study aims to explore these complexities and to understand the cultural identity of Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen* in fifteenth century Florence. Owing to her complicated and composite biography, the image of Mary Magdalen is multifaceted but also multivalent and accessible to a wide variety of audience levels. By the year 1500, Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen* was in the Baptistry, which signifies her importance to Florence and also her widespread appeal, since this civic building was the site of baptism for all Florentine citizens.

The tensions between sexuality and sanctity that permeate the saint’s biography and the use of gilding on this sculpture relate to similar themes in the Tuscan artistic, poetic, and philosophical discourse that were well-known in the upper echelons of Florentine society. Florence considered itself ‘the intellectual heir of Athens’ and the

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Medici family was at the centre. Donatello’s continued association with the court of Cosimo de’Medici (1389-1464) permitted the artist considerable exposure to the educated class of Florence. This social class would readily understand the sculpture’s affinity with Petrarchan tropes and philosophical ideas, particularly in terms of light imagery and descriptions of love. Elizabeth Cropper’s essay on the beauty of women in poetry and art provides a framework for understanding the relationship between poetry and visual art in the Renaissance. Cropper cogently argues for the affinity between the features of painted women in the early sixteenth century and the language of Petrarchan love poetry, already extremely popular by the fifteenth century, Donatello’s time period. Specifically, she describes how both Firenzuola and Parmigianino “drew upon the same vernacular tradition and created ideal types, beautiful monsters composed of every individual perfection.” She establishes that a common standard of beauty within a culture allows for shared metaphors of beauty in literature and art.

The widespread appeal of Petrarchan poetry would be relevant for most of the Quattrocento Florentine audience, given Petrarch’s fame, but the average viewer would also make more prosaic associations between the figure of the Magdalen and popular preaching and prostitution. The cultural attitude toward and treatment of prostitutes in this time period has implications on the way Donatello’s Magdalen- the patron saint of prostitutes- was understood by his contemporaries. This investigation will situate Donatello’s uniquely emaciated and gilded sculpture within the cultural climate of Quattrocento Florence through an examination of the visual tradition of Magdalen imagery, themes of beauty and spirituality in Donatello’s oeuvre, the literary tradition of
describing female beauty and the Magdalen, and societal concerns about prostitution. Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen* represented a specific iconographic type that embodied these complexities and layers of meaning in a way that was significant for fifteenth-century Florence, as is evident from the proliferation of its type until the end of the century.
Notable examples: Romualdo di Candeli and Neri di Bicci’s *Mary Magdalen* (1455) from the Museo della Collegiata in Empoli; Desiderio da Settignano’s San Trinità *Penitent Magdalen* (1460); Antonio Pollaiuolo’s *Elevation of the Magdalen* altarpiece (c. 1460) from Santa Maria Assunta, now in the Museo Pollaiuolo, Staggia; Sandro Botticelli’s *Holy Trinity* altarpiece (c. 1491-1493) for Sant’ Elisabetta delle Convertite; Lorenzo di Credi’s *An Angel Brings the Holy Communion to the Magdalen* (1510) Christian Museum, Esztergom; and Francesco da Sangallo’s *Penitent Magdalen* (1519) from the S. Stefano al Ponte, Florence.


5 Joseph Manca, “Moral Stance in Italian Renaissance Art: Image, Text, and Meaning,” *Artibus et Historiae*, vol. 22, no. 44 (2001) 53-54. Manca contends that artists in the Italian Renaissance used stance to convey a sense of goodness but also moral laxity or weakness. This involved stylistic references (the Venus Pudica, for example) as well as implying a sense of stability/instability in the pose of the figure.

6 Susan Haskins, Mary R. Thompson, and Katherine Jansen demonstrate the composition of the saint from a far earlier point in Christianity but for the purposes of appreciating the fifteenth century understanding of the religious figure, I am drawing from her persona as defined and upheld by the doctrine of the Western Church.


10 Matt. 26.6-12; Mark 14.2-9.


The precise origin or first use of this title is unknown, although St. Augustine referred to Mary Magdalen as “apostolum apostola” and this is arguably the most famous use of the title. This designation would later become significant to unorthodox sects who saw Mary Magdalen as the antithesis to St. Peter. Claudia Setzer, “Excellent Women: Female Witness to the Resurrection,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 116, no. 2 (Summer, 1997), 260.

John 20. 1-18 mentions Mary Magdalen specifically as the sole witness, Luke 24.1-12 notes Mary Magdalen in the group of women who receive the news of the Resurrection from two angels, Mark 16.1-9 lists Mary Magdalen as part of a group at the tomb and as the first to see Christ risen, and Matthew 28.1-10 mentions Mary Magdalen and the ‘other Mary’ as the first to see Christ and bring news of him to the disciples. Setzer, 259-264.

Santa Maria Maddalena di Cestello was founded in 1325.


The Eastern Byzantine tradition has always maintained a strict separation of these figures and distinguishes all of these women from Mary Magdalen.


Elizabeth Cropper, “On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style,” *The Art Bulletin* vol. 58, no.3 (Sept., 1976) 376. The influence of Petrarch on portraiture in Venice at the turn of the sixteenth century is also examined in Brian D. Steele, “In the Flower of their Youth: ‘Portraits’ of Venetian Beauties ca. 1500,” *Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Summer, 1997) 481-502. Steele notes that attitudes toward viewing art and reading love poetry were the same: beginning from an erotic context and then examining moral ambiguities and complications. 490.

Cropper, 393.

I am indebted to the work of several authors for some of the translations in this thesis. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are my own.
The discovery of gilding and naturalistic polychromy on Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen* is relatively recent. The restoration process that followed the severe flooding of Florence in 1966 confirmed an older suggestion that the monochrome pigmentation of Donatello’s wooden Magdalen actually masked naturalistic polychromy of the face and body and gilding in the hair.\(^1\) While more recent discussions of the sculpture mention this revolution\(^2\), most of the literature does not offer suggestions about the significance of this feature in relation to fifteenth century Florence’s understanding and worship of the Magdalen.\(^3\) Most of the literature discusses Donatello’s undated *Penitent Magdalen* in relation to other notable emaciated and roughly finished sculptures in his oeuvre: the wooden *St. John the Baptist* in Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice and the bronze *St. John the Baptist* in the Duomo of Siena. Similar to Donatello’s *Magdalen* in its rough style and ascetic subject matter the bronze Baptist has the date 1457 inscribed on its base. The wooden Baptist was understood as an earlier version of the Duomo Baptist and was previously dated to the early 1450’s. The Magdalen, a more developed example of this rough style was thus attributed to the last years of Donatello’s life.\(^4\)

Around this tenuous date grew an elaborate critical theory suggesting that Donatello, homesick and aged, expressed his anxiety about the end of his life in sculpture symbolic of spiritual angst.\(^5\) However, a 1973 cleaning of the wooden *Baptist* sculpture revealed a date of 1438 on the base,\(^6\) which has lead some scholars to posit an earlier date for the Magdalen in the late 1430’s or early 1440’s before Donatello’s trip to Padua.\(^7\)
Richard A. Turner suggests that subject matter requires a stylistic type and based upon this idea the *Magdalen* could easily belong to the 1430’s or the 1450’s and the three sculptures may not be so close in construction. A presumed derivative figure of Donatello’s Magdalen at the Museo della Collegiata in Empoli by Romualdo di Candelì and Neri di Bicci (fig. 2) has recently been dated to 1455, which provides a fairly conclusive *terminus ante quem* for Donatello’s sculpture and has lead to a general consensus that Donatello created his *Penitent Magdalen* immediately after his return from Siena, around 1453-1454. According to the inscription, in 1455 Monna Nana di ser Michele Tocci da Vinci commissioned a wooden Magdalen for the Church of Santa Croce in Vinci. The somewhat awkward *contraposto* pose, painted wrinkles, and slightly offset eyes suggest the influence of Donatello’s emaciated *Penitent Magdalen* (fig. 3).

Fig. 2. Romualdo di Candelì (and Neri di Bicci), *Penitent Magdalen*, 1455, Museo della Collegiata di Sant’Andrea, Empoli. Wood with polychrome and gilding.
The continued interest in the dating and style of the wooden Magdalen results from the lack of any extant documents referring to the commission of the Magdalen by Donatello. The scarcity of evidence regarding dating, patronage, and intended placement has frustrated scholarly attempts at understanding the reception of the sculpture in fifteenth-century Florence. Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) noted in his *Lives of the Artists* that the wooden Magdalen by Donatello was in the Baptistry across from the Cossa monument, on the southwest wall. But two earlier documents place the Magdalen in the building as well. A notice in the Spogli Strozzani from 30 October 1500 notes that the Magdalen was removed from the Baptistry temporarily and then put back. A record of the Arte de’ Mercantini of the same year indicates that the guild paid for a diadem of gold by Jacopo Sogliani for the sculpture. The older and more widely recognized theory of the sculpture’s intended setting argues that since the wooden Magdalen had been documented in the Baptistry as early as 1500, that it was likely intended for that site.

The position of Donatello’s wooden Magdalen in the Baptistry is also a matter of some debate. The artistic program of the Baptistry changed dramatically through the centuries and the Magdalen was likely moved around considerably. The panel from the Opera del Duomo Museum states that Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen* was probably
originally placed on the southwest wall of the Baptistry. Eloise M. Angiola supports this suggestion in her study on the symbolic structures of the Baptistry’s decoration and construction. She argues convincingly that the doors to the east portal of the Baptistry, the “Gates of Paradise,” were so named because of Christ’s entrance into Jerusalem through the portal of the east wall. The worldly city of Jerusalem was the model for the Heavenly City in the book of Revelations. The east portal functioned symbolically as the entranceway to Heaven for the baptized faithful. The western portal, according to a sermon by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153) was the entrance of the penitents. The Magdalen’s position on the south western wall is appropriate, in light of Angiola’s research.

Deborah Strom has been skeptical of the argument that situates the Magdalen in the Baptistry although she offers no other plausible location. Martha Levine Dunkelman challenged the Baptistry tradition by suggesting that Donatello’s Magdalen may have been intended for the convent of Santa Maria Maddalena di Cestello, a refuge for repentant prostitutes and fallen women administered by Cistercian nuns. Dunkelman notes that the Cavalcanti family— for whom Donatello previously worked on the Santa Croce Annunciation—were among the patrons of the Cestello convent and offers them as potential sponsors for Donatello’s wooden work. The two potential sites posit a public or a private setting for the sculpture but both are environments in which a variety of social classes could have come into contact with the work. A definitive verdict in favor of either theory is beyond the scope of this study. However, the relatively short time span between the Magdalen’s construction and her placement in the Baptistry, a building of
great civic and religious importance for the population of Florence, attests to her larger significance in Florentine culture.

Donatello’s Magdalen has appeared in several studies about the cult of Mary Magdalen in the fifteenth century and the evolution of the visual representation of the saint. These studies have often linked Donatello’s sculpture with the beliefs and practices of the Mendicant Orders and the writings of Archbishop Antoninus of Florence. The Magdalen’s cult was bolstered by the religious practices and preaching of the Franciscans and the Dominicans and this contributed to the interpretation of Donatello’s Magdalen as a sign of redemption and the message of penance. More recent discussions of Donatello’s Magdalen reinforce this interpretation, examining the stance and expression of the sculpture.

In terms of discussions about sexual and spiritual ambiguities in the sculpture, outside Mendicant influence, Phillip F. Fehl has suggested a complex interpretation of the wooden Magdalen. He argues that Donatello depicted tensions between body and soul through her pose, emaciation, and gesture, and these tensions suggest a narrative that chronicles the figure’s process of transformation from sinner to saint. This sense of narrative in the Magdalen’s expression is relevant to this study as it implies that Donatello demonstrated the sexual and spiritual elements of the Magdalen’s biography simultaneously. Dunkelman’s article on the sculpture offers a similar interpretation that situates the Magdalen in a more specific context. She believes that the figure served as a model of strength and spiritual perseverance to a group of reformed prostitutes of a Florentine *convertite* house. Dunkelman suggests that the Magdalen may be interpreted
in the context of prostitution in fifteenth-century Florence and that the figure was intended to be a model of the spiritual strength of women for repentant prostitutes in Santa Maria di Cestello. Dunkelman’s argument that Donatello’s Magdalen belonged in a *convertite* house is plausible and her reading of the wooden Magdalen as a model for converted prostitutes highlights a layer of meaning in the sculpture that would have been understood in Quattrocento Florence. However, the present study contends that this meaning would have been apparent to fifteenth century viewers regardless of the sculpture’s placement, and this meaning would still be significant when it was placed in the Baptistry. Both Fehl and Dunkelman do not deal with the issue of gilding and its effect on the interpretation of the sculpture, given the implied narrative through gesture and the association with prostitution.

The depth of research on the relationship between the *Penitent Magdalen* and the development of the Mendicant orders is vast and certainly relevant when attempting to understand the relationship between this sculpture and Florentine society. However, the literature on the subject of Donatello’s Magdalen does not comprehensively deal with other relevant aspects of Florentine culture, such as poetry, preaching, and prostitution, and their affect on the understanding of this sculpture. The presence of gilding on a sculpture of a naked woman and a former prostitute is certainly significant and would have been understood by fifteenth century Florentines on a variety of levels that included, but was not limited to, the rise of the Mendicant orders. The relatively recent discovery of the gold and the lack of documentation for the sculpture have caused this particular aspect of the Magdalen to remain largely unexamined in a symbolic sense.25 John Pope
Hennessey noted that the understanding of the “aesthetic character” of Donatello’s wooden Magdalen was transformed with the discovery of the gilding. Its discovery offers the modern viewer a glimpse of what the original audience would have seen and appreciated. The presence of gold enhances both the sensual and spiritual beauty of the sculpture and relates Donatello’s Magdalen to the language of hagiography and love poetry and the conventions of female beauty and sexuality in the society of Renaissance Florence.


4 Charles Avery, *Florentine Renaissance Sculpture,* (Fakenham, Norfolk: Fakenham Press, 1970) 91; Francesca Petrucci, *La Scultura di Donatello: Techniche e linguaggio,* ed. Gabriella Greco (Firenze: Casa Editrice le Lettere, 2003) 112. However, another tradition took as evidence the *libro* of Antonio Billi, which suggested that the figure was carved in competition with the much earlier and now lost wooden Magdalen by Brunelleschi from Santo Spirito. John Pope-Hennessey, *Introduction,* 266.


6 Strom, 239-248


9 Pope Hennessey *Donatello* 276; Rosenauer, 286; and Olson, 89.


11 Desiderio da Settignano (c.1430-1464) designed another *Penitent Magdalen* (1460) for the Church of San Trinità in Florence. It is also derivative of Donatello’s type and significantly shows the saint wearing a hair belt, a feature missing from the Empoli Magdalen. A. Victor Coonin, “New Documents Concerning Desiderio da Settignano and Annalena Malatesta,” *The Burlington Magazine,* vol. 137, no. 1113 (Dec., 1995) 795.

13 Strom, 107.

14 Rosenauer 286.


19 Angiola, 245.

20 Strom, 107.

21 Dunkelman 12. The convent is referred to as Santa Maria Maddalena de’Pazzi since 1481 when it underwent a renovation and rededication as a home for monastic men from a nearby Cistercian abbey looking for a base in Florence.

22 Dunkelman, 12.


25 Petrucci, 112. Francesca Petrucci significantly interprets the gilding of the Magdalen as a “burning flame” of gold that signifies penitential transformation, but does not elaborate. Bennett and Wilkins also include the Magdalen in their discussion of gilding in Donatello’s oeuvre but they do not discuss it symbolically. 129-132; and 216-217.

26 Pope Hennessey, *Introduction* 266.
The people of Renaissance Florence understood images, particularly of saints, in the context of a visual tradition. In Italian art before Donatello, the Magdalen appears in three different forms: as a supporting cast member in a biblical episode such as the *Lamentation* or the *Crucifixion*, in narrative cycles of her life, or -less frequently before the fifteenth century- as a solitary figure. Mary Magdalen was traditionally recognized as the woman washing Christ’s feet or bearing witness to the risen Christ. The attributes of a saint also served as a clue or signifier for identity in visual language. Mary Magdalen’s common attributes are: her jar of ointment with which she anointed Christ in penance, and her long- usually golden- hair, which alludes to her former life of sin. Her emblems and the biblical scenes in which she appeared were symbolic of certain aspects of the saint’s character, which often included sensual overtones. Depictions of the Magdalen typically refer to themes of sin, contemplation, and penitence but also illustrate the close relationship that Mary Magdalen had with Christ.

**The Magdalen in Lamentation Scenes**

Before the fifteenth century, the Magdalen’s appearances in Italian art were often relegated to the biblical events in which she participated. The Magdalen’s weeping at the death of the Lord was evident in the Gospels (Mark 15:40 and John 19:25) and especially apparent in John 20.1-17, when she stands weeping over the empty tomb. In a tradition dating to first-century Easter celebrations, Mary Magdalen commonly appeared as one of
the three Marys at the tomb or in the *Noli me tangere*. By the thirteenth century, perhaps owing to the increased popularity of her cult, she began to feature more prominently in depictions of the Crucifixion and other scenes of the Passion.¹ In scenes relating to the death of Christ, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalen, and St. John serve as examples for the pious in the expression of grief for the sacrifice of the Lord. While St. John is typically more stoic in his response to the death of Christ, the Magdalen is often the most expressive of the bereaved characters beneath the cross.

The Virgin and the Magdalen serve as interesting counterpoints in the expression of sorrow: in images of the Passion, Mary the Mother of Christ either gazes in restrained sorrow or swoons while Mary Magdalen often kneels under the cross touching the blood of Christ in an act of more flagrant despair. The swoon of the Virgin, according to Amy Neff, developed out of an “affective devotion that, from the twelfth century on, urged an empathetic response to…[the Virgin Mary’s anguish].”² Although never completely surpassing in popularity the sight of the upright and quietly grieving Virgin in Passion scenes, the second half of the thirteenth century witnessed a flourishing of the Virgin’s swoon beneath the cross, which became increasingly popular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³ The Virgin’s stance is an important issue for theologians since an upright, steadfast Virgin suggested her unfaltering faith in and knowledge of Christ’s ultimate destiny. In the later medieval period, the humanity and suffering of Christ and Mary became central to Christian devotion. Neff argues convincingly that the Virgin’s swoon beneath the cross is representative of her compassion, maternity, and sacrifice. As the mother of Christ and the source of his humanity, she suffers along with her son as He
is crucified at Calvary. Her role as an intercessor on behalf of the faithful is particularly relevant. Mary acts as a bridge between the devoted and her divine Son in matters of salvation. Relating to her suffering is a way for the faithful to connect to the agony of the crucified Christ. Neff argues that the imagery of the Virgin swooning and held by her companions is also reminiscent of birthing scenes where midwives and birthing attendants support a woman in labour (despite the fact that Mary’s labour took place without midwives and she probably was not standing during her delivery). While the swoon may suggest Mary’s maternity, more importantly, it suggests her inner pain and turmoil at witnessing the death of her Son. Her body usually slumps in a way that mirrors Christ’s body position and highlights the Virgin’s closeness with and compassion for Christ. In this sense, her swoon relates to her motherhood.

The affective devotion of the Middle Ages brought greater focus to Mary Magdalen’s experience beneath the cross as well. In his writings, St. Bonaventure expressed a desire to become the Virgin or the Magdalen in order “experience the compassion they felt at Christ’s crucifixion.” The increased presence of the Magdalen in Passion scenes by the third quarter of the thirteenth-century emphasized that “…her new task [was] to enhance the drama of the Passion, and to act as a transmitter of emotions.” The *compassio* of the Magdalen is a more outward, blatant, and also bodily expression of grief at the base of the cross. As the Virgin’s deportment related to her motherhood and intercessory role in the Christian faith, the Magdalen’s more emphatic displays of grief in scenes of the Passion signify her status as a repentant sinner and a female sinner. The fact that the Virgin’s swoon became widespread as Mary Magdalen’s more emotional and
outward display of grief became popular suggests that the two held contrasting roles in religious interpretation. Although her role as a mother makes her identifiable with the average woman, the swoon of the Virgin implies a more interior grief. The pure mother grieves inwardly for her son, while the sinner grieves outwardly and extravagantly because her sin is complicit in Christ’s death. Perhaps the viewer is meant to identify more with the sinner than with the perfect mother.

While the Virgin is a pure woman and a mother, the Magdalen is a saintly figure that can break the bounds of decorum in her grief because although repentant, she was once a sinner and a prostitute. Her designation as a *meretrix* made her sins bodily and associated her with sexuality, which allowed artists greater license in representing her body and its display of grief. The Magdalen’s status as a sinner and a sexual sinner made it possible to put her in positions and poses that showcase physical beauty— even sensuality— and emotional states that would not otherwise be seen in virtuous women.

Specifically, her displays of grief can imply the transformation of the object of her affection: from body to soul. The Cappella Scrovegni (Arena Chapel) frescoes (1305-1308) showcase this more emotional characterization of the Magdalen and illustrate signs of the Magdalen’s breach of the bonds of decorum. She appears in the frescoed scenes depicting the *Resurrection of Fig. 4. Giotto di Bondone, Crucifixion, 1304-1306, Scrovegni Chapel (Arena Chapel), Padua. Fresco.
Lazarus, the Crucifixion, the Lamentation, and Noli me tangere. In the Crucifixion scene, Giotto places the Magdalen at the base of the cross, with her face very close to the feet of Christ and her hand touching His blood (fig. 4). Her cloak has fallen off, revealing her loose, golden hair and the garment beneath it. The ignored cloak suggests that Mary Magdalen is too overcome with grief to notice her lost garment, but also an element of undressing and revealing of the body and hair. The disrobed Magdalen also corresponds with the soldiers’ squabble over the mantle of Christ, which is visible on the other side of the scene. This dual disrobing heightens the sense that the Magdalen’s close relationship with Jesus allows her to experience His suffering with Him. In the same scene, the Virgin slumped backward, her face lowered in the same direction as Christ, eyes closed, and supported by two attendants. She also experiences Christ’s suffering but she appears to experience it privately.

The Lamentation scene from the Arena Chapel likewise shows the Magdalen at the feet of Christ in a scene of intense anguish and sorrow (fig. 5). The Virgin here holds the head of Christ and gazes at His now closed eyes. The mother and Son have a moment of extreme intimacy in which the Magdalen does not participate.

The two men at the far right of the group of mourners stand upright with more physical restraint than the other female mourners, who are closer to the body. Their physical

Fig. 5. Giotto di Bondone, Lamentation, 1304-1306, Scrovegni Chapel (Arena Chapel), Padua. Fresco.
expressions, as in the *Crucifixion* scene (fig. 4), are mirrored and magnified by the angelic spirits in the air. These scenes suggest that Mary’s reaction to the death of her Son is interior but perhaps indicative of a stronger connection to Christ, while the Magdalen’s expression is perhaps meant to strike a chord with the viewer, who would identify with the repentant sinner and her involvement with Christ’s death.

Artists following Giotto in Florence and nearby continued to place the Magdalen at the foot of Christ in an expression of undisguised sorrow in which her body demonstrates her emotional state. Nardo di Cione’s *Crucifixion Scene with Mourners* from the mid-fourteenth century again depicts a Magdalen at the foot of the cross, embracing the wood as her hands are washed in Christ’s blood (fig. 6). Here the Virgin’s arms cross in front of her and her right arm extends slightly towards Christ. Both women
look at Christ. Agnolo Gaddi’s late Gothic- style *Crucifixion* from the Uffizi also shows the Magdalen at the foot of the cross, gazing up at Christ and embracing the wood while the Virgin swoons, her face in what would be Christ’s line of sight (fig. 7). Even when not placed at the foot of the cross, the Magdalen tends to display more of her emotion on her face than the Virgin, as seen in the Sacristy *Crucifixion* from the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence by Taddeo Gaddi (fig. 8). The image from the first half of the fourteenth century shows the Virgin and the Magdalen standing, but the Magdalen’s arms are raised as she beholds the sight of Christ, an expression associated with sorrow seen in one of the far left mourners in Giotto’s Arena Chapel *Lamentation* (fig. 5). The Virgin stands, holding hands with John, with eyes downcast.

The use of the whole body as an expression of grief is especially noticeable in Masaccio’s 1426 *Pisa Altarpiece*. Although dismantled and partially lost Masaccio’s *Crucifixion* scene remains in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples. The panel, which once surmounted the *Pisa Altarpiece*, depicts a crucified Christ flanked by the standing
figures of the Virgin and St. John (fig. 9). Mary Magdalen is again positioned at the foot of the cross but Masaccio has painted her from behind, concealing her facial expression and thus, “her despair is expressed all the more vigorously as her arms stretch out towards the cross in a silent lament.”

The more bodily expression of grief seen in the Magdalen is due to her status as a former sinner in the sense that having once transgressed the bounds of moral decency, she is not held up to the same level of decorum as other, more virtuous saints at the Crucifixion.

The tendency to depict the Magdalen embracing the cross may refer to her status not only as a penitent but also a converted prostitute. The Gospel of Luke noted that the Magdalen was forgiven her many sins “hence she loved much.” As a former prostitute, the Magdalen’s conversion to Christianity marked a transformation of her love. Instead of performing the act of love in fornication, she turned her love of the body to the love of Christ. Her embrace of the cross, therefore, refers to her past embraces in her former line of work but redeems them in the context of the Crucifixion. The redemption inherent in the Magdalen’s embrace of the cross seems to be important to Florence’s understanding and worship of the saint. A painted Florentine Crucifix shows a small, solitary figure of the Magdalen kissing His feet and suggests not only the special relationship between the
Magdalen and Christ but also her redemption. The painted *Crucifix with the Magdalen Embracing the Feet of Christ* from 1285-1290 indicates the Magdalen’s penitence as it refers to her traditional position in *Crucifixion* scenes but also the sinner’s redemption as she kisses and embraces the blood of Christ (fig. 10). The blood spills onto the bodily remains of Adam at Golgotha seen directly beneath the cross, redeeming Original Sin, and making Christ the New Adam. The Magdalen, the consummate sinner, participates in this redemption offered by the spilling of Christ’s blood as she kisses His bloody feet.

The theme of transforming love has parallels in dramatic literature and popular preaching of the Renaissance. Passion plays that described the pre-conversion life of the Magdalen often referred to all levels of the Magdalen’s love. In a 1501 *Passion* play by Jean Michel, the Magdalen is exhorted by her sister Martha to hear a preacher (Christ). Mary pays no heed but the formation of a crowd around the Saviour piques her interest and she inquires about His appearance with a note of professional interest.¹⁰ Bernardino of Siena, a popular Franciscan preacher in the fifteenth century, once proclaimed:

“following the example of the most holy Magdalen, let fruitless and empty profane love

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Fig. 10. Anonymous Florentine Painter, *Crucifix with the Magdalen adoring at the feet of Christ*, detail, 1285-1290, Accademia, Florence. Tempera on panel.
be transformed into the fullness of sacred love.”¹¹ This particular passage suggests that
the Magdalen’s once physical interest in the beauty of the Lord evolved into an
appreciation and love of the beautiful spirit of Christ. The visual record reflects this
understanding of the Magdalen as the beautiful and more overtly emotional figure
beneath the cross, and this emotionalism is penitential and bodily.

The Magdalen in Narrative Life Cycles

Nurith Kenaan-Kedar noted that since the thirteenth century, Mary Magdalen
tended to become more individualized in visual art and her role became more important.¹²
The Magdalen continued to be a significant figure in Crucifixion and Lamentation
scenes, although in the fourteenth century artists began showing the Magdalen as the
main subject of biblical episodes in which she had previously played a supporting role.
This emphasis on her life was enhanced by representations of important scenes from her
legend. Three important cycles of Mary Magdalen’s life were painted in the Trecento and
would have been at least known to Donatello and his contemporaries, two of which were
commissioned by the Franciscans: the Magdalen Chapel in the Lower Church at Assisi by
followers of Giotto¹³ and Giovanni da Milano’s c.1360 Rinuccini Chapel in Santa Croce,
Florence. The third cycle is in the Capella di Podestà in the Bargello in Florence.¹⁴ In
these scenes, there is more emphasis placed on her contemplative life in penance for her
sins but traces of sensuality are also present.

In the Lower Church of St. Francis at Assisi, the frescoes adorning the Magdalen
Chapel depict the significant events of the Magdalen’s life and emphasize the penitential
and contemplative aspects of the saint’s character. The compositions of the *Resurrection of Lazarus* and *Noli me tangere* scenes (figs. 11 and 12) are almost identical to those from Giotto’s Arena Chapel in Padua (figs. 13 and 14).

![Fig. 11. School of Giotto, The Raising of Lazarus, 1320’s, Magdalene Chapel, Church of San Francesco, Assisi. Fresco.](image1)

![Fig. 12. School of Giotto, Noli me tangere, 1320’s, Magdalene Chapel, Church of San Francesco, Assisi. Fresco.](image2)

![Fig. 13. Giotto di Bondone, The Raising of Lazarus, 1304-1306, Scrovegni Chapel, (Arena Chapel) Padua. Fresco.](image3)

![Fig. 14. Giotto di Bondone, Noli me tangere, 1304-1306, Scrovegni Chapel, (Arena Chapel) Padua. Fresco.](image4)

However, at Assisi, the Magdalen is in the foreground in the *Lazarus* scene instead of positioned as a faceless form in the group kneeling before Christ. She is similarly highlighted in the *Noli me tangere* scene at Assisi where the sleeping guards at...
the tomb from Padua are notably absent. The cycle also includes: *Mary Magdalen washing the feet of Christ in the house of the Pharisee*, the *Journey to Marseilles*, the *Hermit Zosimus giving the Magdalen a cloak in the wilderness*, and the *Communion with the angels*.

The chapel, painted by the school of Giotto for Teobaldo Pontano, Bishop of Assisi from 1314 to 1329, reflects the patron’s advocacy of Franciscan devotion and support of the Conventual movement within the Order.\(^\text{15}\) Although St. Francis did not mention Mary Magdalen in his writings, the Franciscan Order became interested in the saint because of her association with penance. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 was integral to the Magdalen’s connection with the mendicants. The Council decreed that all members of the Church had to make annual confession of their sins in order to participate in communion. It also added confession to the formula of penance that also required contrition, satisfaction, and absolution. This same council gave the mendicant orders their mandate to preach.\(^\text{16}\) The Franciscan and Dominican Orders were already interested in the idea of repentance and the Magdalen as its exemplar. The new scheme of penitential theology afforded them a topic on which they could preach.\(^\text{17}\) Surviving sermons from the foundations of the Order allude to the Magdalen as the “paradigm of penitence.”\(^\text{18}\) The Magdalen served an intercessory role for the Franciscans, who often depicted Francis in Mary Magdalen’s traditional place beneath the cross at the *Crucifixion*.\(^\text{19}\)

In the Upper Church of St. Francis at Assisi, Francis takes the Magdalen’s place at the base of the cross in Cimabue’s *Crucifixion* from 1280-1283 (fig. 15). St. Francis
and the Magdalen also share the bodily expression of love for Christ. As the Magdalen’s emotional embrace of the cross and blood of Christ symbolizes her connection to the Saviour, Francis’ stigmata are also expressions of a deep connection with Christ that is manifested on the body.

The replacement of the Magdalen with another figure was not unique to the Franciscans. Fra Angelico’s depiction of St. Dominic in the Magdalen’s position at the foot of the cross at the convent of San Marco indicates a similar affinity for the saint in the Dominican Order (fig. 16). The Dominicans and the Magdalen also had a special relationship that dates to 1295 when the Order was made guardian of her major devotional sites: the grotto at Sainte La Baume and St. Maximin- the church where her relics were housed. Sarah Wilk argues that the Observant Dominicans centered at the Convent of San Marco in Florence spurred the city’s worship of the Magdalen as a penitent. The Dominicans and the Franciscans both established Second Orders for female

Fig. 15. Cimabue, Crucifix, 1280-1283, Upper Church, San Francesco, Assisi. Fresco.

Fig. 16. Fra Angelico, Christ on the Cross Adored by St. Dominic, 1442, Museo di San Marco, Florence. Fresco.
contemplatives and Third Orders for penitents shortly after their foundation, and the Magdalen was the favourite saint of both.\textsuperscript{20} The art of both the Mendicant Orders emphasizes the \textit{compassio} of the Magdalen at the foot of the cross and deepens her association with penitence.

Franciscan devotion to the Magdalen also involved, according to Nurith Kenaan-Kedar, a sensual piety that informed the depictions of the Magdalen at Assisi that detail the Magdalen’s period of withdrawal. The devotional literature of the Franciscans frequently used terms like joy-pain in moments of contemplation and burning love for the Divine.\textsuperscript{21} Kedar notes how a belief in the beauty of “an emotional attitude towards nature, God, and the universe [...] enabled leading artists to cast the Magdalen as a beautiful and emotional saint.”\textsuperscript{22} She appears naked and scantily covered amidst a small part of a barren expanse of rock in both the \textit{Zosimus} and \textit{Communion} scenes (figs. 17 and 18). In the scene with Zosimus, rocks cover her lower half, and he is giving her another means to cloak her body. Her hair covers her shoulders and chest but there is a faint outline of breasts apparent in the image. In her communion with angels, the hair of the Magdalen falls over her body but there is again a faint suggestion of the form of breasts, and her hair parts to reveal her right thigh and a long patch of her torso. In both scenes, her face is fleshy, rounded, and delicately colored. Lorraine Schwartz notes that this chapel shows a rare

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig17.png}
\caption{Fig. 17. School of Giotto, \textit{Zosimus giving the Magdalen a cloak in the wilderness}, detail, 1320's, Magdalene Chapel, Church of San Francesco, Assisi. Fresco.}
\end{figure}
occurrence in which an image of Mary of Egypt appears independent of the Magdalen. Mary Aegyptica is another example of a penitent and prostitute saint with similar iconography (long hair covering the body, an attribute also shared by St. Agnes) and although the images of these female saints are often confused, here the Magdalen is characterized as “fresh and fair” and the Egyptian as more “haggard and swarthy.”

There is no sign of the Magdalen’s emaciation and she is depicted quite sensuously in her penitence.

The penitential aspect of the Magdalen is often linked to her contemplative nature. Schwartz details how the communion of the Magdalen with angels was regarded by the Franciscans as an example of the effects of the contemplative life. The Order often paired images of Francis’ stigmatization with images of the Magdalen’s communion with angels and, despite St. Francis’ suspicion of intellectual pursuits, both miracles were ascribed to the saints’ contemplation. The Rinuccini Chapel at the Franciscan Church of Santa Croce in Florence also emphasizes this contemplative element. In addition to the traditional representations of the Resurrection and the Noli me tangere episode, Giovanni da Milano’s fresco cycle from 1365 depicts the Anointing of Christ in the House of Simon the Pharisee, the scene in Mary and Martha’s home in Bethany, and the Journey to

Fig. 18. School of Giotto, Communion with Angels, detail, 1320’s, Magdalene Chapel, Church of San Francesco, Assisi. Fresco.
Marseilles (fig. 19). The Magdalen’s consistent position at Christ’s feet in both the anointing scene and in the scene in her home emphasizes her choice of the “better part” and suggests an additional layer of meaning to her presence at the foot of the Crucifixion.

In addition to demonstrating sectarian or personal ties to the penitent saint, the life cycle of the Magdalen also served a civic function in the case of the 1330’s frescoes in the Magdalen Chapel (also known as the Cappella del Podestà) in the former Palazzo del Podestà in Florence. This particular representation would have been well known to Donatello and other citizens of the Florentine Commune. Now called the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, the building is a former courthouse and residence of the podestà or “chief administrator of civil and penal justice.”

Fig. 19. Giovanni da Milano, Scenes from the Life of the Magdalen, 1365, Rinuccini Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence. Fresco.
della Croce al Tempio administered to them their last rites. The decoration of the chapel illustrates the importance of penance in preparing the soul for judgment in the afterlife. The frescoes adorning this small chapel depict an image of Hell on the entrance wall, a scene of Paradise on the opposing wall, and life cycles of the Magdalen and St. John the Baptist on the lateral walls.

As the patron saint of Florence, an ascetic, and often an intercessor in Last Judgment scenes, John the Baptist’s appearance in the chapel is appropriate. He was widely associated with redemption, particularly with prisoners in Quattrocento Florence. The feast day of John the Baptist (24 June) was marked by the release of twelve prisoners in the saint’s honour.26 There are some striking similarities between the Magdalen and the Baptist in biography and in terms of visual representation. Both saints were known for their close relationship with and anointing of Christ (John the Baptist baptized Jesus and Mary Magdalen anointed Him with oil). They both preached and converted people to Christianity and were both associated with penance and asceticism. The Baptist spent time in the wilderness wearing “camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist.”27 The Magdalen’s long dress of hair from her thirty years in the wilderness is also a visual signifier of asceticism and has a similar texture in visual representation. Two scenes from his life are depicted on the north wall of the Cappella del Podestà: the Naming of the Baptist, and, beneath it, the Feast of Herod. The beheading of the Baptist, an intercessory saint, would carry special resonance for the condemned awaiting execution in the chapel.
Fig. 20. School of Giotto, *Miracle of the Pilgrim’s Wife*, 1330’s, Cappella del Podestà, Bargello, Florence. Fresco.

Fig. 22. School of Giotto, *The Magdalen Receiving Holy Communion*, 1330’s, Cappella del Podestà, Bargello, Florence. Fresco.

Fig. 21. School of Giotto, *Magdalen in Penitence*, 1330’s, Cappella del Podestà, Bargello, Florence. Fresco.

Fig. 23. School of Giotto, *Blessing from Bishop Maximin*, 1330’s, Cappella del Podestà, Bargello, Florence. Fresco.
The Magdalen’s life cycle, which covers the south wall,\textsuperscript{28} provides the condemned with an example of the path to salvation through penance.\textsuperscript{29} In addition to more commonplace images of the Magdalen in biblical episodes, the chapel also has scenes of the \textit{Miracle of the Pilgrim’s Wife}, the \textit{Magdalen in Penitence}, the \textit{Magdalen Receiving Holy Communion}, and the \textit{Blessing from Bishop Maximin} (figs 20-23). These scenes echo the actions of the holy men administering last rites to the condemned and help to enhance the Magdalen’s role as an example of the path of penance. When exiting the chapel, the last sight of the condemned would be the Inferno, a reminder of the result of sin.\textsuperscript{30} This incarnation of the penitential aspect of the Magdalen serves a specific civic function in addition to a devotional one, but again emphasizes the Magdalen’s \textit{compassio}, her penitence, and her role as an intercessor for the (repentant) sinner.

\textbf{The Magdalen as a Solitary Figure}

The final manifestation of the Magdalen in the visual record and arguably the most relevant to an understanding of Donatello’s \textit{Penitent Magdalen} is the solitary portrait of the saint, which appeared more frequently in the fifteenth century. The increase in popularity of this type of Magdalen image perhaps indicates an increased interest in and worship of the saint. Like narrative life cycles that often emphasize the penitential and contemplative components of the Magdalen’s character, the solitary figure of the Magdalen tends to refer to her period of penitence but there are examples of the saint as an emblem of more traditional saintly beauty in her pre-conversion raiment. The iconography of the penitent saint clad only in her long hair and standing barefoot was
developed earlier in the medieval period and was likely spread from southern France, where her cult was popularized by local interest in the legend of the Magdalen’s evangelization of the Gauls in Marseille. A representation of the Magdalen with long hair appears as early as 1225 in a fresco in the Church of San Prospero in Perugia. Another image of similar iconography from the same time period appears in the Church of San Bevignate and suggests that the visual attribute was developed and spread by the Franciscans. \(^\text{31}\)

In the fourteenth century, a variant of this type of Magdalen image emerges, showing the Magdalen holding a banner or scroll bearing the inscription: “do not despair, you who make a habit of sin, follow my example, renew yourself in God.”\(^\text{32}\) This banner that bears the saint’s message of hope and redemption through penance is visible in four Tuscan examples of the Magdalen in penitence. A panel painting dating to 1280 by the Magdalen Master in the Galleria dell’Accademia in Florence depicts a large, central, penitent Magdalen holding the inscribed scroll amidst a backdrop of the saint’s life cycle (fig. 24, detail, and 25). A fresco in the Church of S. Maria Maggiore in Florence from the
The fourteenth century shows the Magdalen dressed in her long hair holding the scroll in her left hand (fig. 26). The banner also appears above the head of a penitent Magdalen receiving communion in another fourteenth century fresco in the church of San Trinità in Florence (fig. 27). In 1340-1345, Bernardo Daddi (with some later work by Puccio di Simone) also produced an image of a penitent Magdalen in a series of five panels for an altarpiece, presumably for a hospital (fig. 28). The central image is a crucifixion in which Mary Magdalen embraces the cross and she also appears on the far left alone, followed by St. Michael the archangel, Saint Giuliano and Saint Martha. The same phrase is written on her scroll. The several examples of a penitent Magdalen bearing
this message directed at the viewer suggest the expansion of the saint’s cult but also a
growing understanding of the Magdalen as an intercessory figure, an example of
penitence, and a symbol of hope for the sinner.

A notable Florentine example of the Magdalen as a solitary figure suggests an
additional element to her character hitherto unseen in other examples mentioned thus far.
This piece depicts the saint preaching. The *Saint Mary Magdalen* from the Accademia in
Florence by the Master of the Magdalen depicts an eight scene narrative cycle of the
saint’s life with a large, solitary Magdalen in the centre of the panel (fig. 25).\textsuperscript{36} Based on
an examination of the iconography and composition of this piece, Angelo Tartuferi
suggests that it was created between 1280 and 1285, after the 1279 rediscovery of the
relics of Mary Magdalen in the church of San Maximin in Provence, and the expansion of
the saint’s cult.\textsuperscript{37} She raises her right hand and in her left holds a scroll bearing the
aforementioned inscription. In the far right scene of the second register, the Magdalen is
pictured preaching to a group of people in Marseille (fig. 24). The composition of the
piece mirrors the *Noli me tangere* scene on the left side of the same register. The
Magdalen’s stance, position, and the right hand gesture are the same as that of Christ,
suggesting that she has assumed the role of teacher and the people of Marseille are the
worshipping students. The image in the middle, of the Magdalen holding the scroll and
also raising her right hand, seems to refer to this scene of her preaching but the long hair
that covers her body also suggests the hermitic lifestyle she embraced after abandoning
her ministry. This is not to say conclusively that all images of the penitent Magdalen
with this inscription refer to the saint’s preaching, but that the figure of the Magdalen
communicated a message of redemption and hope and the Magdalen Master connects this with preaching.

The preaching scene highlights the Magdalen’s traditional title of *apostola apostolorum* and also derives from the *Legenda Aurea* and the *Vita Apostolica*. Katherine Jansen notes that the legend of Mary Magdalen’s evangelical activities was absorbed into her biography by the twelfth century. Her role as herald of Christ’s resurrection is linked with her preaching in Gaul in the manuscript by an anonymous twelfth century Cistercian. He writes that, “it was fitting then, that just as she had been chosen to be the apostle of Christ’s resurrection and the prophet of his ascension, so also she became an evangelist for believers throughout the world.”38 This aspect of the Magdalen’s legend is somewhat controversial not only because she was a woman and preaching was believed beyond the scope of woman’s abilities but also because of its reference to early Christian divisions of orthodoxy in which the Magdalen is set against Peter, Christ’s heir and head of the Church.

The Magdalen is contrasted in Gnostic and other apocryphal texts of the early Christian era with Peter. Her role as the messenger of Christ to His disciples is cited as the source of her special sanctity and relationship with Christ. Peter’s questioning of the truth of her message is interpreted as a clash in principles between the two holy personages. Peter is typically representative of the rational principles of Christian dogma while the Magdalen’s intense emotion at Christ's death makes her the symbol of more mystical and affective sects of Christianity. The controversy posits a division between rational, masculine principles and emotional, feminine principles within the faith. The
full ramifications of these early philosophical clashes within the Christian faith is beyond the scope of this study but certainly accounts for the relatively few references to the Magdalen’s preaching in the visual record. In the *Legenda Aurea*, Jacobus acknowledges the dogmatic superiority of Peter. He relates how the Magdalen’s preaching was strengthened by the preaching of “her teacher Peter” in Rome and how the governor of Marseilles, doubting the Magdalen’s ability to defend her faith and seeking further instruction in Christianity, makes a pilgrimage to Rome to learn from St. Peter. When the Magdalen’s companions, Lazarus and Maximin, were later ordained as bishops, Mary Magdalen retires from preaching to live in the wilderness, shying away from the ecclesiastical ranks of the Church. The attachment of the Mendicant Orders to St. Mary Magdalen beginning in the thirteenth century is related to this philosophical clash. Both the Franciscans and Dominicans asserted their non-institutional spiritual authority through literary association with female virtues (such as Lady Poverty, the spiritual wife of St. Francis) and visual association with the Magdalen as a way of contrasting themselves with the rational, institutional Church represented by St. Peter.

**The Magdalen in Sculpture**

In addition to the images of the solitary Magdalen in penitence that grew in popularity through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, recent research has suggested that Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen* was also influenced by a tradition of wooden Magdalen sculpture. Until the late Quattrocento, when terracotta representations of the Magdalen were popular, sculptural images of the saint were almost exclusively wooden.
The delicate nature of wooden objects has resulted in few surviving wooden sculpture that date to the Renaissance or Middle Ages. This gap in available specimens complicates attempts to establish traditional patterns of representation. Andrea di Tuccio Manetti (1423-1497) describes a wooden Magdalen by Filippo Brunelleschi in his biography of the artist. Destroyed when fire consumed the church of Santo Spirito in 1471, the sculpture was approximately life-size and in the round. Although not dated, a will from 1421 provides a *terminus ante quem* for its completion as it places the sculpture in the chapel of St. Matthew at Santo Spirito in Florence. Antonio Billi, the earliest known source for the story of the competition of the two crucifixes also says that the Magdalens of Brunelleschi and Donatello were likewise made in a spirit of competition.

Deborah Strom, in her comprehensive work on Quattrocento Tuscan wooden sculpture, notes that there is only one surviving pre-Donatellesque wooden Magdalen from Tuscany. The predecessor dates from the first third of the Quattrocento in the Church of Santa Maria Maddalena in Pescia (fig. 29). This wooden sculpture shows the saint in a position of prayer but the posture is stiff and rigidly vertical. Although not shown as emaciated as Donatello’s wooden sculpture, the Pescia Magdalen is depicted in a similar pose, with hands raised in prayer and covered in long hair that parts at the rib cage. The
hair of the figure masks any sense of the body beneath, with the exception of three visible ribs, the only sign of emaciation on the body. The hair of this Pescia piece brings to light a significant iconographic element of sculptural representations of the Magdalen: the anonymous artist gilded the hair instead of just painting it yellow.

In other representations of the Magdalen mentioned thus far, the saint has not been depicted with gilded hair. Gilding in frescoed and painted images of the saint tends to be localized on halos and small decorative elements such as hems of skirts. However, the colour of the Magdalen’s hair does tend to vary. Giotto’s Arena Chapel frescos show the Magdalen as more of a redhead, almost a brunette (fig. 4 and 5). The scenes from the Magdalen Chapel in Assisi depict the Magdalen with lighter hair, generally blonde with a tinge of red (fig. 11, 12, 17, and 18). The Magdalen’s hair in the Rinucci Chapel frescos by Giovanni da Milano and in the Crucifixion scenes by Agnolo Gaddi, Taddeo Gaddi, and Masaccio is also blonde with some hints of red (fig. 19, 7, 8, and 9). The Magdalen Master differs from this convention by depicting a darker, brown haired saint (fig. 25). The hair of the Magdalen in later scenes of her penitence or communion with angels also tends to be brown. Whereas gilded hair in frescoes and panel paintings seems to be rare, gilded hair is a common trope of wooden sculpture especially of women. Jacopo della Quercia’s Louvre Virgin and Child (fig. 30) is an example of this.

Fig. 30. Jacopo della Quercia, *The Virgin and Child*. early fifteenth century, Louvre, Paris, Wood polychrome and gilding.
convention of gilding hair. It may be a way to imbue the inexpensive medium with greater value.

The visual record available to Donatello and his contemporaries, then, offered images of the Magdalen that emphasized her special relationship to Christ, her emotional and bodily grief, her penitence, contemplation, and redemption, and also her preaching. She was a figure that was respected and revered by the Franciscan and Dominican orders, which were important institutions in the city of Florence. They promoted her veneration in Florentine society and helped to shape the way in which she was viewed. In visually positioning themselves in her place beneath the cross, they demonstrate that the emulation of the Magdalen is important for understanding the message of the Passion. The Mendicant Orders held her as a model of penance and the redemptive powers of grace but also a saint that is more accessible. Her imperfect history made her more relatable to the faithful. As a beautiful former sinner, her intercessory capacity grew out of her relationship with and experience of sin. Her past and her association with sin allowed for a greater breach in decorum in her expression of grief and for more sensual depictions of her body in a state of grief. While not depicted as overtly sexual or naked, she is frequently the one who embraces the cross or Christ and is less physically restrained in her expression of grief. Her contemplative aspect relates to not only her penitence but also her preaching and even in this she uses herself as an example for the sinner, a source of hope for Christ’s mercy and forgiveness, positing herself as an intercessor for the faithfully repentant. Her penitence continued to refer to her beauty as she is not depicted as overtly emaciated before Donatello and her hair is usually draping
her body in an example of fair-haired beauty, sensuality, or as a source of modesty.

Although images of the Magdalen in solitude were relatively rare in the time period, they were increasingly esteemed by the fifteenth century and tend to emphasize the hope of redemption and suggest the Magdalen as a beautiful model of penance.
Mary’s maternity is reaffirmed at the Crucifixion as outlined in the Gospel of John when Christ addresses Mary from the cross: “Woman, behold thy son” and then John: “Behold thy mother.” John 19.26-2. Caroline Walker Bynum described a “feminization of religious language” in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that spoke to all Christians in terms of female experience. Medieval theologians beginning with Ambrose in the fourth century interpreted Mary’s motherhood of John to be her motherhood of the faithful and an analogy of the Church giving birth to its devotees. Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 129.

1 Kenaan-Kedar, 700.


3 Neff, p. 254.

4 Mary’s maternity is reaffirmed at the Crucifixion as outlined in the Gospel of John when Christ addresses Mary from the cross: “Woman, behold thy son” and then John: “Behold thy mother.” John 19.26-2. Caroline Walker Bynum described a “feminization of religious language” in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that spoke to all Christians in terms of female experience. Medieval theologians beginning with Ambrose in the fourth century interpreted Mary’s motherhood of John to be her motherhood of the faithful and an analogy of the Church giving birth to its devotees. Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 129.

5 Kenaan-Kedar, 700.

6 Kenaan-Kedar, 701.

7 Katherine Jansen, Making of the Magdalen, 147-190.


9 Luke 7.47.

10 John R. Kane, “Mary of Magdala in Medieval Drama,” Studi Medievali (1985) 681.


12 Kenaan-Kedar, 701.

13 Alessandro Tomei, Giotto: La Pittura (Florence: Giunti Gruppo Editoriale, 1997) 35. Tomei suggests that some of the scenes (the Resurrection, the Supper in the House of the Pharisee, and the Noli me tangere) may have been painted by Giotto’s hand.

14 Wilk, 689.


16 Katherine Jansen, Magdalen and the Mendicants, 3.
Higher theological matters were forbidden to lower ecclesiastical ranks.  

Schwartz, p. 32.  

Wilk, 687.  

Wilk, 691.  

Kenaan-Kedar, 702-703.  

Kenaan-Kedar, 704.  

Schwartz, p. 32.  

II Celano, 94, 95, 127; Legende Maior 10; Speculum of Perfectionis 93 in St. Francis of Assisi: Omnibus of Sources of the Life of St. Francis, ed. M Habig, 3rd ed. (Chicago, 1973) in Schwartz, 33. Schwartz describes how the image of the Magdalen suspended in mid-air is congruous with the descriptions in various texts of St. Francis ‘suspended in the sky’, ‘surrounded by a shining cloud’, and ‘forgetful of lower things.’  


Matt. 4. 11.  

On the south wall, reading left to right: (upper register) the Feast in the House of Simon the Pharisee, the Resurrection of Lazarus, a window, the Marys at the Tomb, (lower register) the Noli me tangere, the Magdalen talking with angels, the Communion of the Magdalen, and Bishop Maximinus blessing Mary Magdalen. The north wall adjacent to the entrance in the lower register also shows one scene of the Miracle of the Prince of Marseilles and two lost scenes.  

Elliot, 515.  

The area above the Inferno scene is damaged so it is not certain if it was once part of a larger Last Judgment scene. If the Inferno was divorced from a Last Judgment scene, which may be the case here since the Judgment of the condemned had already taken place and a larger allegorical image of the Commune weighing a balance in judgment was painted in the execution area of the Palazzo, it would be the first example of a separate, monumental scene of Hell. Jerome Baschet considered the frescoes of the Campo Santo in Pisa dated c. 1335 to be the first monumental example of a separation of the Inferno from its traditional placement in a Last Judgment scene and linked this rupture to writings of the Dominican friars in “Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa,” Classe di lettere e filosofia 1557-1643, s. 3, XVIII, (1988) 358-359 in Elliot, 518.

32 NE DESPERETIS VOS QUI PECCARE SOLITIS, EXEMPLEQUE MEO, VOS REPARATE DEO.

33 A triptych of the Madonna flanked by SS Mary Magdalen and Ansanus from 1350 for the same church shows the Magdalen in a red gown bearing the scroll.

34 Boskovits and Tartuferi, 79. The presence of Saints Giuliano and Martha typically demonstrate an association with a hospital.

35 I am indebted to Katherine Jansen for her identification of several of these images of the penitent Magdalen with a scroll. Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*, 235.

36 The scenes in the narrative cycle, from left to right: the *Feast in the House of Simon the Pharisee*, the *Resurrection of Lazarus*, *Noli Me Tangere*, the *Magdalen Preaching to the People of Marseilles*, the *Ecstasy of Mary Magdalen*, the *Magdalen Fed by an Angel*, the *Communion from Bishop Maximinus*, and the *Funeral of the Magdalen*.

37 Boskovits and Tartuferi, 151.


40 Jacobus, 379-380.


42 Strom, 112.

43 The crucifix by Donatello in Santa Croce was reportedly created in competition with Brunelleschi, who remarked that Donatello’s crucifix made Jesus look like a beggar and proceeded to render the Saviour in a more idealized style. To be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. Vasari, 70-71.


45 Strom, 111.
The visual tradition of the Magdalen emphasized her beauty, emotion, contemplation and penitence, but Donatello’s unique contribution to the saint’s iconography is her haggard, emaciated, and physically ugly appearance. Previously, the Magdalen was depicted like most female saints, as a beautiful expression of holiness, whose physical body reflected a beauty and purity that seems to befit a holy figure. The presence of a haggard and swarthy Mary of Egypt in the Magdalen Chapel at the Lower Church of Assisi highlights the Magdalen’s association with beauty in spite of her legendary ascetic retreat to the south of France. Regardless of similarities in their legends and their austere withdrawals from society, the artists at Assisi characterized the Magdalen as beautiful and Mary of Egypt less so. In depicting the Magdalen as emaciated and physically ravaged, Donatello rejects the convention of the Magdalen’s beauty. In depicting this saint in rough, ‘unfinished’ texture, Donatello also breaks with the custom of highly finished surfaces in sculpture. The *Penitent Magdalen* is an example of Donatello’s late rough style and is as significant to the development of his emotive and empathetic style as it is to the visual tradition of Mary Magdalen.

Donatello’s Magdalen breaks with the saint’s iconographic conventions and contemporary sculptural conventions, but the sculpture conveys an emotional content consistent with the Magdalen’s visual tradition.

Early in his career, Donatello demonstrated a desire to depict pathos and to convey a sense of humanity and naturalism in his works. Donatello’s early *Crucifix*
(c. 1410-1425) for the church of Santa Croce in Florence, demonstrates a heightened sense of reality and humanity in the figure whose worn head slumps, as His lower body seems to dangle from his torso (fig. 31). Now restored, the original polychromy appears to have cast a greenish-hue on the skin of Jesus, thus heightening the deathly pallor of the tragic figure. Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* mentions Donatello’s wooden *Crucifix* in an anecdotal story about the stylistic divergences of Brunelleschi and Donatello. In this tale, Vasari describes a competition between the two artists in the construction of wooden *Crucifix* figures. The art historian relates how Brunelleschi created a rebuttal *Crucifix* because he felt that Donatello’s depiction placed a “peasant on the cross, and not a figure resembling that of Jesus Christ, whose person was delicately beautiful, and in all parts the most perfect form of man that had ever been born.”¹ An examination of the two *Crucifix* figures illustrates Brunelleschi’s idealization and Donatello’s interest in pathos. In this sense, at least, Donatello seems to refer back to the “affective devotion”² seen in *Crucifixion* scenes of the medieval period. Laura Cavazzini notes the Gothic idealization and elongation of the figure and drapery as a continuation of the medieval crucifix tradition. She also notes an infusion of the style of

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Fig. 31. Donatello, *Crucifix*, 1412-1413, Santa Croce, Florence. Wood polychrome.
Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378 - 1455) in the natural, pathetic image of the still alive Christ shown with half-open eyes and cheeks puffing with the last breath.\textsuperscript{3}

The later development of Donatello’s style gave way to a unique manner of sculpture that continues the psychological content and pathos of his early work. From the end of his decade-long Paduan sojourn until his death in 1467, Donatello’s sculpture was marked by a ‘rough’ or ‘unfinished’ texture and this has led some to dismiss Donatello’s last, rough-textured works, the San Lorenzo Pulpits, as incomplete.\textsuperscript{4}

Donatello often exhibited scant interest in finishing details. Unlike Ghiberti, Donatello did not always repair flaws or disguise joints in his multi-piece works. The \textit{David}, for instance, has a hole under the chin and a patch on the thigh. This tendency to overlook finishing details suggested to John Pope-Hennesey that in the last phase of his career, Donatello “grew increasingly intolerant of the barrier of technique and […] this led him to investigate the possibilities of wooden sculpture.”\textsuperscript{5} Critics of the sixteenth century took exception to this rougher style and less polished finish. Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1574) criticized the artist for his imperfect castings. Michelangelo’s biographer, Ascanio Condivi (1525-1574), reported that while Michelangelo admired Donatello, he took exception to the Quattrocento artist’s lack of patience needed to give his work a clean finish.\textsuperscript{6} The rougher texture seems to belong to a Quattrocento aesthetic, antithetical to that of his Mannerist critics, but even in the fifteenth century it is a stylistic convention that is unique to Donatello.

The medium in which Donatello first demonstrated this rough style was wood but this may have as much to do with subject matter as with a desire for a break from the
bronze or marble process. Two examples of wooden sculpture launched the beginning of
Donatello’s late period and he carved them in a highly innovative way that suited both the
nature of the material and the character of their subjects. The wooden *St. John the Baptist*
is the first example of Donatello’s late period and was commissioned by a group of
Florentine ex-patriates for their 1437 acquisition of a chapel in the Venetian Santa Maria
Gloriosa dei Frari (fig. 32). Previously dated to the early 1450’s before Donatello returned to Florence
from Padua, the cleaning of the sculpture in 1972 revealed an inscribed date of 1438. The newer date
overturned a universally accepted and elaborate critical theory postulating that Donatello, homesick in
his golden years “expressed the pathos and uncertainty of his condition in a statue characterized
by a heightened spiritual anxiety.”7 The new date shows that the *Baptist* was carved before the artist
departed for Padua and was created shortly after the *Cavalcanti Annunciation* (1430’s), a gilded sandstone
tabernacle executed with a more polished finish (fig. 33). This suggests that the subject of the commission influenced the style chosen by Donatello. The Frari *Baptist* is a slender and rather withered patron saint of Florence standing with a scroll in his left hand and making a sign of benediction in his right.
Combined with his open mouth, this pose suggests that the eremitic saint is in the process
of preaching. Stabilized by a spread-legged stance and not the traditional massive drapery base, the Baptist and the *Penitent Magdalen* both demonstrate the artist’s distinctive technique that permitted these long, slender figures in wood.

Vasari stated that wood “did not have the softness or flesh-like appearance of marble, metal, stucco, wax, or clay,” however, the medium had properties that made it appropriate for depicting an ascetic saint like the Baptist or the Magdalen who is, obviously, neither soft nor fleshy. The fibrous nature of wood makes possible the elongated, slender forms that are inconceivable in stone, but there are other challenges in working with the medium. If the sapwood or outer layer of a trunk of wood dries out while the interior or heartwood is still saturated, the outer layers rupture and develop splits and cracks. Most wood sculptures were given substantial drapery bases and were hollowed out and joined with several other pieces to eliminate the heartwood and reduce the chances of a moisture imbalance.

Instead of hollowing out a figure and joining it with other pieces, as Donatello did with his five-piece Santa Croce *Crucifix*, the artist carved extremely thin and aggressively

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Fig. 33. Donatello, *Cavalcanti Annunciation*, c.1435, Santa Croce, Florence. Gilded sandstone.
textured, freestanding forms for his Baptist and Magdalen by actually carving into the heartwood and stripping through most of the sapwood on his way. The thinner, textured forms of wooden sculpture seem appropriate for representations of ascetic saints. The related style and medium of the eremitic Baptist and Magdalen in Donatello’s oeuvre reinforces the saints’ iconographic similarities. Both were anointers of Christ, according to the Gospel and legend, and thus both had an important and special relationship to Christ, who appeared in most churches in medieval and Renaissance Italy as a wooden crucifix. The tactile quality of the Baptist’s hair shirt is similar to the Magdalen’s hair, which is well developed in the artist’s technique and enhanced by gilding.

It is significant that wood lacks intrinsic value and was not a prestigious sculptural medium in the Quattrocento. Wood was almost universally used for crucifixions for church altars and its lower cost enabled smaller communities to purchase this type of artwork. The medium’s lighter weight would have also made it easier to ship than marble or bronze, which is certainly relevant when considering that the Frari Baptist was sent to Venice. The presence of gilding on the Frari Baptist and the *Penitent Magdalen* may be a way for the artist to imbue the sculptures with a greater sense of monetary value for their respective patrons, although this is by no means conclusive. Bennett and Wilkins suggest that the gilding of the *Cavalcanti Annunciation* (fig. 33) upgraded the value of the local sandstone from which the piece was carved. Although nothing is known about the commission of the *Penitent Magdalen*, one could speculate that the gilding was intended to increase the value of the sculpture for a patron that could not afford a different, more prestigious medium.
Gold obviously suggests monetary value, however, Donatello’s use of gilding in other sculptures suggests that gold also served an aesthetic or symbolic function. All of Donatello’s completely gilded works— the *Feast of Herod* (1423-27), *San Rossore* (1422-27), the effigy of Baldassare Cossa (1421-c. 1428), and *St. Louis of Toulouse* (1423-1425), date to the same time period, when the artist was experimenting with bronze. The *Feast of Herod* panel for the Baptistry Font in Siena was a prestigious commission intended for a special building and thus warranted gold (fig. 34). But the effect of light on the gilt surface also enhances the visibility of the lower relief background. The *San Rossore* reliquary bust was intended to hold very precious artifacts and the gilding of the container reflected the value of its contents.

The use of gilding on the sculptures of Cossa and St. Louis served a more symbolic function. The gilding of the effigy of Baldassare Cossa, the Antipope John XXIII (fig. 35), who had been deposed by the Council of Constance in 1415, was politically motivated. Cossa’s strong ties with the
Medici and his patronage of Florentine humanism ingratiated the man to powerful figures in Florence,¹⁴ and the presence of gilding suggests a sort of character redemption and the importance of Cossa to the Florentine elite. The Parte Guelfa commissioned Donatello to create for their niche in the Orsanmichele a sculpture of their patron saint, Louis of Toulouse, the Franciscan friar and son of Charles of Anjou. The Parte Guelfa had lost power in Florence following the Ciompi Revolt (1378) and sought a gilded work in bronze for the decoration of the building to reassert their wealth and authority.¹⁵

Louis of Toulouse is an interesting historical personality who renounced his royal inheritance to take up the Franciscan vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The gold on this statue of Louis reflects the political aspirations of the Parte Guelfa, but also the royal trappings of the Angevin lineage, as well as the higher spiritual merit of the Franciscan way of life (fig. 36).

The association of gilding, penitence, and sanctity in the Magdalen figure is increasingly apparent in light of the extreme emaciation and rough style of the sculpture and the effect this rough texture has on the gilding. If the Baptist was the first demonstration of Donatello’s non finito style, its fullest expression is the Penitent Magdalen. Described by Giorgio Vasari in his Lives of the Artists as, “wasted away by

Fig. 36. Donatello, St. Louis of Toulouse, 1413, Museo dell Opera, Sanca Croce. Gilded bronze.
her fastings and abstinence,”¹⁶ it is this extremely emaciated and haggard image of Mary Magdalen that became iconic of both the Magdalen figure and the artist’s rough style. Donatello further enhanced the texture of the emaciated and rejected hair and flesh of the Magdalen with his use of gesso. Earlier wood sculptors used the compound as a seal and stable ground for polychromy. Donatello, however, used gesso as an additive to sculpt form and often used bits of cloth in combination with the gesso to build up certain areas, notably the arms (fig. 37).¹⁷ This contributes to the increased texture and plasticity of the piece, which, in combination with the polychromy and gilding, creates a tremulous effect of light. In addition to the reddish tan under-color (possibly bole) of the hair with brushed oil-based gold on top, the polychromy of Donatello’s piece consists of bright blue and white eyes, white teeth, and a natural tan color on the skin (fig. 38).¹⁸ The gesso adds to both the roughness and the

Fig. 37. Donatello, *Penitent Magdalen*, detail, c. 1455, Museo dell’ Opera del Duomo, Florence. Wood with polychrome and gilding.

Fig. 38. Donatello, *Penitent Magdalen*, detail, c. 1455, Museo dell’ Opera del Duomo, Florence. Wood with polychrome and gilding.
brilliance of the sculpture by creating more surfaces for reflection.

Although the original location of Donatello’s Magdalen is unknown, her size suggests that she was intended for an altar or recess in a church, a common location for wooden sculptures of saints. A dimly lit recess with candlelight for illumination would create an effect of sparkling light on the gilding of this sculpture. The heavily sculpted textures in the gesso and woodcarving would highlight the flickering effect of light in the hair. Donatello was apparently intrigued by the possibilities of light and texture in this later period. His 1457 *St. John the Baptist* for the Duomo in Siena was cast in bronze and demonstrates the token rough texture of his later style but in a shimmering display of metal (fig. 39). The Duomo Baptist also contrasts the smooth skin of the arms and legs of the saint with the undulating quality of the hair shirt’s texture. Like the gilt bronze *St. Louis of Toulouse* the bronze Baptist seems to almost dissolve in the glare emanating from the texture of the hair shirt. The later date of the Sienese Baptist suggests that after the Magdalen, the artist was interested in pursuing further the effects of light on a rough texture in a different medium.
The emaciated flesh of the *Penitent Magdalen* depicts the saint's penitence but also refers to her sinful past. Enhanced by her expression of anguish, the ascetic Magdalen is meant to depict the mortification of the flesh. As Mary Magdalen rejects the world, mortal food, even clothing, she rejects the trappings of vanity and vice. The body of the saint, once beautiful and sensuous, has wasted away through devout asceticism, suggesting that her body was the locus of her sin, an indirect reference to her title of *meretrix* instead of mere *peccatrix*. The hair of the Magdalen, a symbol of female sexuality, becomes the source of her modesty. In legend, her hair grows to cover her naked body. Yet the hair parts at the chest in a sensual deep-V shape of an immodest neckline. Instead of revealing décolletage, however, the hair-dress reveals the emaciated ribcage of the Magdalen, thus playing with the paradox of profanity and sanctity as it relates to physical and spiritual beauty (fig. 40). The hair of Donatello’s Magdalen is also

Fig. 40. Donatello, *Penitent Magdalen*, detail, c. 1455, Museo dell’ Opera del Duomo, Florence. Wood with polychrome and gilding.

Fig. 41. Donatello, *Penitent Magdalen*, detail, c. 1455, Museo dell’ Opera del Duomo, Florence. Wood with polychrome and gilding.
tied in a knot on the figure’s waist (fig. 41). This knot is similar to the garb of holy men and women in the Mendicant Orders, particularly Franciscans who wore a rope belt in imitation of their patron saint. The gilding on the hair, while possibly motivated by financial concerns, actually serves a more symbolic function on the Magdalen. The gold refers to a hair colour highly prized by Renaissance Italians, but it also had special religious significance, particularly in Eucharist ceremonies. Only gold and linen were permitted to touch the consecrated Host or the body of Christ. Thus, the paten, (the plate that held the Host or covered the chalice in Eucharist ceremonies) was usually gold or gold-plated.\textsuperscript{19} Since the Magdalen touched Christ’s feet with her hair in an act of supplication, the association of her hair with gold would also be symbolic of her sanctity and close relationship to God. As her hair touched Christ in the House of Simon in an act of atonement for sin, it warranted gold and was sanctified through penance.

In another of Donatello’s female figures, his bronze \textit{Judith and Holofernes} (c.1455-1460)\textsuperscript{20} the artist plays with similar themes of sexuality and spirituality. Fully clothed and veiled, Judith symbolizes chastity and virtue while the drunk and nearly naked Holofernes represents licentiousness and lust (fig. 42).\textsuperscript{21} Significantly, Judith is dressed in finery and riches to highlight her beauty and to seduce Holofernes into letting her into his camp. Underneath this finery, however, is sackcloth, which the Jewish women of
Bethulia likely wore during Holofernes’ siege of their town. The sackcloth also refers to Judith’s modest dress as a widow. A glimpse of the sackcloth can be seen in the rough textured fabric along Judith’s forehead. In this sculpture, like the Magdalen, Donatello emphasizes a sense of sensuality in the pose and manner of the figures. Judith straddles Holofernes, with one foot on his wrist and another on his groin, and his head rests against her inner thigh. Although dressed in garments befitting a wealthy patrician woman, the real beauty of Judith is literally under the surface. The sackcloth beneath the splendid finery implies the modest and pure soul of the woman beneath her outward beauty. In this female figure of Donatello as well as the Magdalen, there are references to sexuality and outward dress reflecting character. Judith, a fully clothed widow and heroine is a figure of modesty and virtue, while the Magdalen, a naked but golden haired ascetic, is a figure of reformed vice.

Beneath the gilded hair dress of the Magdalen, the pronounced ribcage of the saint demonstrates her extreme asceticism. Exposed ribs typically signify emaciation in art and sculpture and convey the idea of an ascetic saint. The Pescia Magdalen shows three ribs exposed on the chest, but this emaciation is not extended to the rest of the body (fig. 29). It seems to be a simple signifier of emaciation in the absence of any other suggestion of
asceticism on the figure. Her arms are tubular but show no signs of the boniness that is so evident in Donatello’s version. Donatello also depicts the Magdalen with a sunken face, and extremely thin neck, hands, legs, and feet. This emaciation is also coupled with an expression of anguish, eyes that seem almost trance-like, and a slightly parted mouth that seems to prepare to speak (fig. 38 and 43). The face of the Pescia Magdalen is rounded and full, with a somewhat blank expression, and none of the nuances in countenance seen in Donatello’s sculpture. The hair of the Pescia Magdalen has no belt and its shape and mass are similar to older examples of wooden sculpture that required substantial drapery bases to stabilize the structure. A significant similarity, however, is the attempt at contraposto in the Pescia Magdalen, which is also seen in Donatello’s version except that this suggestion of movement exposes the upper thigh of the Magdalen’s leg (fig. 44). The hair of the Pescia Magdalen is column-like and betrays very little sense of corporeal form underneath its mass. These two Magdalens may participate in a tradition of wooden figures of the saint but Donatello’s version undoubtedly demonstrates a higher level of skill and a greater level of interest in conveying expression and depicting emaciation.

Fig. 44. Donatello, *Penitent Magdalen*, detail, c. 1455, Museo dell' Opera del Duomo, Florence. Wood with polychrome and gilding.
Vasari noted that Donatello’s *Magdalen* was a demonstration of the artist’s expert knowledge of anatomy.\(^{23}\) While the extremely emaciated figure proves the artist’s understanding of musculature and bone structure, familiarity with anatomy was also significant for conveying movement and meaning in sculpture. In *De Statua*, Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) outlines the significance of pose in understanding movement, and, by extension, personality. Alberti noted that creating a pose involved knowledge of the full range of movement of the human body and anatomy. Charles Seymour observes that Alberti’s treatise also exposed the potential for “expressive suggestion of an inner vitality deep within the mass of the figure, as the effects of a given movement were linked step by step logically to its mechanical and emotional cause. Outward expression in the figure could thus be connected with a core of imagined personality.”\(^{24}\) The pronounced musculature of the Magdalen’s arms has led Martha Levine Dunkelman to reinterpret the figure’s pose as a suggestion of her “continuing physical and emotional tenacity in the face of adversity.”\(^{25}\) While the arms convey a sense of strength, the action they imply is more significant. The Pescia Magdalen shows the saint with her hands converged in a position of prayer. The hands of Donatello’s version do not touch. This ‘almost-but-not-quite’ position, in combination with the slightly raised right heel and parted hair on the thigh, suggests motion. The implied movement in the pose of the wooden Magdalen involves prayer and exposes skin and thus demonstrates the spiritual but also sexual components of the Magdalen’s personality. Since she is usually shown in a position of prayer when lifted heavenward by angels, Donatello may be depicting the moment before her ascension. Regardless, the figure
demonstrates a moment of active prayer and is reminiscent of an earlier sculpture by Donatello for the Baptistry font in Siena entitled *Hope* (1427-1429). The face of *Hope* turns upward as do the painted eyes of the Magdalen and thereby anticipates a happy ending of redemption for this withered and penitent saint (fig. 45).

The extreme emaciation of Donatello’s Magdalen breaks with the convention of depicting the saint as a beautiful, full-bodied woman. However, the expression and the ravaged physical body of the sculpture convey an emotional intensity that parallels older representations of the Magdalen as the purveyor of emotional grief at the Crucifixion. The evocative and expressive capacity of the ‘unfinished’ style seems to have led Donatello to address subject matter with a higher emotional content, evident in the *Entombment* relief for the High Altar of Sant’Antonio in Padua (1449), the *Lamentation* relief (1458-1459) and the San Lorenzo pulpits (c. 1460-1470, completed by assistants). For Donatello, the outlets for the more extreme and active types of emotion and sorrow of a tragic event were women. These women were often examples of frenzied hysteria, and their hair is a significant iconographic feature as an extension of their emotional turmoil. In this context, they function much in the same way as Mary Magdalen in Crucifixion scenes in the medieval period and earlier in the Quattrocento.

Fig. 45. Donatello, *Hope*, detail, 1422-1429, Duomo, Siena. Bronze
Emotional outbursts from women is a common trope in Donatello’s work that appears in the artist’s stone *Entombment of Christ* (fig. 46).  

In the relief scene, four wailing women appear as an emotional backdrop to the act of placing Christ in his burial tomb, executed by four men. Hair plays an important role in the expression of grief for these women. The female figure on the far left pulls at her hair, the far right female cups her head in her hands, and the two central women have loose, flowing hair the undulations of which seem to echo the emphatic waving of their arms. The women act as emotional outlets for the more restrained sadness seen in the men. The finish of the Paduan reliefs is more controlled and varied in the contrast of textures, seen in smooth limbs against rough clothing, for example. Although a more finished and chased example of Donatello’s work, the wild use of hair in the grieving women recalls the appearance of the Magdalen in earlier Crucifixion and Lamentation scenes.

The *Lamentation* now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is also an example of the emotionalism of Donatello’s late work and a rougher style. The bronze relief may have been cast as a demonstration piece. The peculiar silhouetting of the figures with no background is likely the result of an attempt to salvage the piece from
offensive holes made in casting. The relief may be related to the abandoned commission for the Siena Cathedral doors on which Donatello worked in 1458-1459 and the apparent purpose of his trip to Siena in 1457. The Lamentation exhibits an intensely emotional scene where women are again the bearers of emotion (fig. 47). It depicts the dead Christ in his Mother’s lap framed by three female mourners and, presumably, St. John on the far right. St. John’s pose, with his left hand supporting his head and his right hand crossing his midriff, is reminiscent of the traditional pose of melancholia. With his back to the scene, he appears reserved and removed from the activity of the setting. He is bookended by the female figure second from the left who likewise turns away from the scene but whose hunched shoulders and flowing hair and clothing suggest more movement and anguish than the vertical and steadfast St. John. The other two women demonstrate more unabashed sorrow. The figure on the far left extends her hands to the bodies of Christ and the Virgin and the wailing figure to the left of St. John pulls at her hair that streams out from her head in an almost halo effect. They, along with the Virgin, have open mouths that suggest the noise of grief.

Fig. 47. Donatello, Lamentation, 1458-1459, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Bronze.
The only face that appears completely visible to the viewer is that of Christ. The view of the other figures’ faces is obstructed. The veil of the Virgin casts a shadow on her eyes, St. John is somewhat veiled by his hair, the hair pulling mourner turns her face from the viewer, and the hair of the far left mourner conceals most of her face and the face of her companion. The vivacity and emotion of this piece is not expressed in facial features, but rather in the pose and rough texture of the fabric and hair of the mourners and the Virgin, who are noticeably rougher than St. John and who contrast with the smooth texture of Christ’s skin. The obscured facial expression is a convention to heighten emotion but also to preserve dignity, according to Alberti. He wrote in Della Pittura that:

They praise Timanthes of Cyprus for the painting in which he surpassed Colotes, because, when he head made Calchas sad and Ulysses even sadder at the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and employed all his art and skill on the grief-stricken Menelaus, he could find no way to represent the expression of her disconsolate father; so he covered his head with a veil, and thus left more for the onlooker to imagine about his grief than he could see with the eye.\(^{30}\)

Alberti quotes Pliny in this passage and emphasizes the importance of *ingenium* or ingenuity/invention in the artist, as exemplified by Timanthes, whom Pliny regarded as inferior to Apelles.\(^{31}\) Leaving the intensity of grief to the imagination of the viewer indicates an awareness of the viewer’s participation in the scene represented. In the *Lamentation*, the face of the dead Christ is presented to the viewer to invoke the same emotional response that is evident in the rest of the scene.

The evocative and emotional women seen in these previous examples are most evident in the final commission of Donatello’s career and the ultimate example of
Donatello’s rough style; the Pulpits of San Lorenzo (c.1460-1466). Although no
documents pertaining to the pulpits survive, Vespasiano di Bisticci (1421-1498)
contended that Cosimo de’ Medici commissioned the artist to do the bronze twin pulpits
from which to read the Gospel and the Epistle.”

In the Medici church of San Lorenzo,
the two, large bronze structures stand on either side of Brunelleschi’s nave in the last bay
toward the crossing. The left pulpit (when facing the altar) bears six scenes of the
Passion and the right pulpit contains five of the post-Passion miracles and the Martyrdom
of St. Lawrence. Given his age, it seems likely that the pieces were conceptualized by
Donatello, but the finishing touches were left to his assistants (Bertoldo, perhaps), and
brought to their present state after the master’s death. The advanced age of the artist
obviously necessitated the use of assistants but given the artist’s interest in rougher
textures at the end of his career, it is still reasonable to suggest that Donatello intended
the pieces to have the level of finish of their present condition.

By the time Donatello embarked on the design of the pulpits, from 1460-1466,
Christological cycles illustrating scenes from the Passion and post-Passion were
relatively rare. The paucity of examples in Florence and the narrative possibilities
inherent in the commission type and scope, gave Donatello an opportunity to showcase
his technique and his imaginative interpretation of the subjects. While the full
significance of the pulpits’ iconographic originality is beyond the scope of this study, it is
noteworthy that innovative iconography seems to go hand in hand with innovative
technique and emotional content in Donatello’s career.
In any context, the scenes of the Passion involve grief. In the San Lorenzo Crucifixion scene, Donatello omits the traditional figure of the Magdalen at the base of the cross. The densely populated scene of activity and energy, at the center of which is a calmer, more dejected group at the base of Christ on the cross (fig. 48). The Virgin and another figure (presumably St. John) flank the cross of the crucified Christ, standing upright and in a more somber mood with heads bowed. Here again, Donatello veils the face of the Virgin, perhaps allowing her more private, interior grief. Another woman sits in the foreground in a more dejected, melancholic pose. The more active anguish is expressed through the hair and clothing of the female mourners at the periphery of the scene and the body language of the angels that flank Christ’s body. The woman to the left of the Virgin moves toward the cross and her line of vision connects with the angle of the slumped head of Christ. Another woman behind the cross hides her face in her hands as her hair and clothing billow out behind her. The women do not wail or pull out their
hair as in previous scenes of intense despair by Donatello. There is a sense here of more interior emotion beneath the cross amidst a flurry of activity in the soldiers and horses behind the three crucified men.

Like the *Crucifixion*, the San Lorenzo *Lamentation* scene depicts a variety of emotional responses to the death of Christ, but the wailing women previously seen in the London *Lamentation* and the Paduan relief reappear (fig. 49). The wailing women contrast with the other veiled figures not only in their dress, but also in their expression of grief. The Virgin and Christ have a tender moment beneath the ladder at the center of the piece, the more reserved nature of which seems to extend to the group of four directly to the left of the Virgin, one of whom, a saint, sits in quiet prayer. Except for the male figure, the rest of the group consists of veiled women. The Virgin also wears a veil, which is substantially more three-dimensional than the rest of the relief to allow for shadowing of her face and also to emphasize her position as the chief mourner of Christ. In direct contrast to this hushed mourning is the wildly emphatic mourning of the unveiled women. On the left of the scene are two wailing women: one who rushes into

![Fig. 49. Donatello, Lamentation, left pulpit, 1460-1466, San Lorenzo, Florence. Bronze.](image)
the scene, hair spilling out behind her and the other standing and pulling out clumps of hair. This is the most poignant example of this relationship between hair and emotion. She looks upward pulling at her flowing locks with her right hand, and clutching a clump of freshly excavated hair in her left. Both of these wailing women deviate from the seated, robed saint who clenches his fists silently with eyes cast downward.

The hair pulling continues on the other side of the scene, as another woman gazes upward and pulls her hair out at the roots, while some strands cover her face as a pseudo-veil. The long-haired woman behind the ladder buries her head in her hands and hunches her shoulders in a deep sob also contrasts with the male figure holding and contemplating the nails that once secured Christ to the cross. These quieter figures exude an air of contemplation commingled with sorrow. The most dramatic example of emotion in this scene is the woman half bent over with arms extended over her head, reminiscent of the mourner in Giotto’s *Lamentation* (fig. 5). The wild movements of hair seem to be extensions of emotion but also contrast with the more reserved, veiled and perhaps more honorable women. These wailing women function much in the same way that Mary Magdalen functioned in earlier medieval *Crucifixion* and *Lamentation* scenes. They are beautiful and emotional outlets of intense anguish at the base of the cross.

Donatello’s depiction of women as emotional outlets is also seen in the San Lorenzo *Entombment* (fig. 50) in which two women sit at the front of the sarcophagi hunched over, with faces covered by veils or hair. This placement of the women suggests a precedent in Florentine art. The tradition in Florence since the first half of the fifteenth century called for a simplification of the Entombment scene. Donatello includes a large
number of onlookers at the Crucifixion, Lamentation, and Entombment scenes and the rougher texture of these pieces enhances their energy. These additional figures add to the feverish sense of emotion but also allowed the sculptor an avenue to explore the varied types of responses to tragedy and how these stirrings of the soul were reflected in the body.

The frenzied and exuberant hair and clothing of the female mourners in Donatello’s more emotional relief subjects were inspired by the classical revival in Quattrocento Florence. These frantic females refer to ancient representations of maenads, the ecstatic and hysterical participants in Bacchic rites but also funeral processions.36 The source of Donatello’s ancient female figures is likely Roman sarcophagi illustrating the death of Meleager.39 Even if Donatello did not know that these women were Maenads, their poses and gestures would have been read by the sculptor and other viewers in Quattrocento Florence as less decorous. Donatello used the exuberant gestures and hair pulling of these female figures for the ultimate Christian tragedy. His pupil, Bertoldo di Giovanni transformed the maenad into a Mary Magdalen under the cross in the Crucifixion relief from the Bargello in Florence40 and thus suggests a link between the two figure types in Donatello’s school. The
association of the maenad with the Magdalen is of interest to the understanding of the character of the saint. The maenad, a participant in ancient mysteries of wanton revelry, is often associated with sexual behaviour, even licentiousness, and dance, as was the Magdalen in her past foray into prostitution.\textsuperscript{41} The choice of Maenad types for the figures beneath the cross and surrounding the dead Christ, and later for Mary Magdalen demonstrate ongoing links between the past and penitence of the Magdalen’s story.

In medieval depictions of Crucifixion scenes and other episodes illustrating the dead Christ, the Magdalen is frequently the beautiful and more overtly emotional figure mourning beneath the cross. In contrast to the Virgin and St. John, who frequently mourn in more reserved ways, the Magdalen makes more emphatic, less decorous, and even more sensual overtures in her grief by waving her arms and embracing the cross. Mary Magdalen’s hair, often shown cascading down her back or billowing out around her head, is a symbol of her anguish but also a symbol of beauty and her licentious past as a sexual sinner. In the wooden statue of the Magdalen, Donatello diverges from earlier depictions of the saint by creating a figure ravaged by extreme asceticism, void of bodily attractiveness. However, the rough textured and turbulent pattern of curls in the Magdalen implies an emotional element to the sculpture’s character, which hearkens back to the Magdalen’s early role as an emotive element in scenes of the Passion and the untamed hair of these earlier Magdalens.

His late, ‘rough’ style of sculpture coincided with his interest in subject matter of higher emotional content and he used an ‘unfinished’ texture to enhance the sense of pathos of his work. The wailing, hair-pulling women from Donatello’s depictions of the
death of Christ function as emotional outlets much in the same fashion as the Magdalen. Likely inspired by maenads from Roman sarcophagi, these female mourners would have been understood as less decorous women in fifteenth-century Florence. Donatello did not designate any of these wailing women specifically as Mary Magdalen in his San Lorenzo pulpits or any of the other Lamentation scenes discussed. There seems to be no need since they serve the same symbolic purpose as less decorous and more sensual examples of grief. There is a connection between the anguished passion of female figures and their moral looseness, especially in the Magdalen figure. Breaches of decorum were more acceptable if they came from a person of known moral turpitude. In addition to its melancholic symbolism, the hair of Donatello’s wooden Magdalen has sensual connotations as it parts to reveal sexually charged parts of the body such as the upper thigh and décolletage. The association of the anguish of mourning and the wailing, hair pulling Maenad types in Donatello’s later relief work suggests a new understanding of the hair in the Penitent Magdalen. Her hair, an iconographic feature of the saint, is a visual symbol of brazen grief and passion.
Il che vedendo Donato, lo pregò, per quanta amicizia era fra loro, che gliene dicesse il parer suo; per che Filippo, che liberalissimo era, rispose che gli pareva che egli avesse messo in croce un contadino e non un corpo simile a Gesù Cristo, il quale fu delicatissimo, et in tutte le parti il più perfetto uomo che nascesse già mai.” Vasari, 71. Translated in Geoer Bull, 175.

2 Neff, 254.

3 Cavazzini, 56-58.

4 Olson, 73. Although, his work on the Cantoria (1433-1439) and the St. John the Baptist (1438) in Venice was also noticeably rough in texture.


6 Bennett and Wilkins, 117.

7 Strom, 95.


10 Helms, 22.

11 Strom, 117.

12 Paoletti describes how wooden sculpture embodied a ‘sacral presence’ and that this applies to crucifixes, which were usually wooden and polychromed to heighten verisimilitude especially in Easter processions where the Crucifix was carried. However, he suggests the possibility that the understanding sacral presence was extended to the viewer’s interaction with other forms of wooden sculpture. John T. Paoletti, “Wooden Sculpture in Italy as Sacral Presence,” Artibus and Historiae, vol. 13, no. 26 (1992).

13 Bennett and Wilkins, 132.
Bennett and Wilkins, 74-76. Cossa became a cardinal in 1402, a title which he was accused of buying with Medici money. He was elected Pope in 1410 in an attempt by the Cardinals who supported the Council of Pisa to end the Great Schism, instead he became one of three papal claimants. When Cossa was driven from Rome by King Ladislas of Naples in 1413, he took refuge near Florence and befriended many powerful families in Florence in his failed attempt to rally a league of Florentines to confront Ladislas. The Council of Constance ended the Schism but deposed Cossa and accused him of a litany of crimes. Giovanni di Bicci de’Medici paid his ransom in 1419 and allowed him to return to Florence partly because Cossa had been an important link between the Medici banks and Rome and paved the way for Medici control of papal finances. Cossa finally made peace with the new pope, Martin V, in 1419 before his death that same year. Giovanni became an executor of Cossa’s will, which stipulated that the estate would pay for a monument and chapel in a Florentine church. Cossa left the Baptistry several relics, including the finger of John the Baptist and this likely influenced the decision to erect his tomb in the Baptistry.

Bennett and Wilkins, 73. The success of this piece is debatable since it was removed from its position on the Orsanmichele by January 1460, less than 40 years after its completion. No contemporary comments on its reception in Florence have survived.

“Vedesi nel medesimo tempio, e dirimpetto a quest’opera, di mano di Donato una Santa Maria Maddalena di legno in penitenza, molto bella e molto ben fatta, essendo consumata dai digiuni e dall’astinenza, intanto che pare in tutte le parti una perfezzione di notomia benissimo intesa per tutto.” Vasari, 72.


Strom, 117.


Sarah Blake McHam, “Donatello’s Bronze David and Judith as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence,” The Art Bulletin, vol. 83, no. 1 (Mar., 2001) 32. Although an undocumented commission, contemporary sources place the bronze Judith in the Medici Palace garden and courtyard by 1469, less than twelve years after Cosimo and his family took residence of the recently completed palace. It was likely a Medici commission with a political subtext, namely the Medici family’s attempt to distance themselves from associations with tyranny in the Florentine republic.

Holofernes sought to seduce Judith. Judith 12.16-20.

McHam, 45, note 24. See also Judith 10.2-6 for the reference to sackcloth.

Vasari, 72.

Dunkelman, 10.

26 The High Altar was begun in 1446 and likely completed by 1452 but was dismantled in 1579 and replaced with a new altar. It was reconstructed in 1895 but does not accurately reflect the original state of the altar as Donatello intended. Several scholars have proposed more accurate reconstructions, notably Alessandro Parronchi, L. Planiscig, John White, and H.W. Janson. Janson’s version, the most generally accepted describes an aedicule in the form of a temple over the altar, with six bronze statues grouped on either side of the Virgin: *St. Louis of Toulouse, St. Justina, St. Francis*, then *St. Anthony, St. Daniel*, and *St. Prosdocimus*. The reliefs on the stone predella below are in front: the *Miracle of the Repentant Son*, the *Miracle of the Miser’s Heart*, behind: the *Miracle of the Mule*, and the *Miracle of the Newborn Child*. Further reliefs representing the four Evangelists, a *Pieta*, an *Entombment*, and twelve music-making angels are scattered throughout. Bernard Ceysson, *The Great Tradition of Sculpture*, vol. 2 (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2006) 581.

27 Avery, 94.

28 Janson, 206-207.

29 This pose is also seen in one of the female mourners in Giotto’s *Lamentation* from the church of San Remigio in Florence, datable to 1360.


Lavin suggests that they were originally intended to attach to the columns flanking the altar and that the miracle of Mass would metaphorically replace the Last Supper scene that Donatello curiously omitted from this Christological cycle. He hypothesizes that the reason for this move is the popularity of preaching for indoctrination and the resulting tendency to move the pulpit further away from the altar and closer to the congregation.


Bennett and Wilkins suggest that the discrepancy in size (the left pulpit has a height and length of 123 and 292 cm, respectively, and the right has a height and length of 123 and 280 cm, respectively) is because they were not intended to be twin pulpits. They suggest that the Passion cycle pulpit was intended for San Lorenzo while the post-Passion pulpit was intended for the tomb of Cosimo de’Medici. Bennett and Wilkins, 13. This debate is not relevant to this study. Only the iconography and rough style will be examined.

On the left pulpit: *Christ on the Mount of Olives, Christ Before Pilate and Caiphas*, the *Crucifixion*, the *Lamentation* as well as the *Flagellation of Christ*, and *St. John the Evangelist* (later additions). On the right pulpit: *Three Marys at the Tomb, Christ in Limbo*, the *Resurrection, the Ascension, Pentecost*, and the *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, as well as *Luke the Evangelist and the Mocking of Christ* (later additions).

Ghiberti’s doors (c.1404-1424) or the frescoes in San Marco (c.1436-1445) by Fra Angelico (1395-1455) are exceptions, although they are not quite comparable since they cover the entire life of Christ, not just the Passion and post-Passion episodes.

Bennett and Wilkins, 15.

Lavin, 28.


Antal, 71.

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Magdalen was associated with dance and music. H. Colin Slim, “Mary Magdalen, Musician and Dancer,” *Early Music*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Oct., 1980) 461-464.
Alberti called for the Quattrocento artist to undertake a difficult task: to make movements of the body reflect the stirrings of the soul. Alberti goes on to say that a work of art will “move spectators when the men depicted in the picture obviously demonstrate their own feelings as clearly as possible [...] yet these feelings are known from the movements of the body.” On a basic level, the body is a mirror for the soul and the body of a holy figure or saint should reflect the beauty and sanctity of the spirit within. The Virgin Mary, for instance, is always represented as a beautiful woman. Mary Magdalen is known for her association with sin, contemplation, penitence, and beauty. The physical ugliness of Donatello’s sculpture seems inconsistent with the standard for representing a saint and the artist appears to have sacrificed a defining feature of Mary Magdalen’s character for emotional content. The juxtaposition of the gilded hair, a marker of beauty, with the haggard body of the saint demonstrates tensions and ambiguities about the beauty of a saint whose physical allure was such a significant part of her sin as a prostitute.

The gold, working in tandem with the rough texture of the sculpture, symbolizes the sanctification of the former sinner, her transformation through penance, and her newfound spiritual beauty at the expense of her bodily attractiveness. The golden hair of the sculpture, a mark of beauty prized in the Renaissance, would have been understood as part of a literary tradition of describing female beauty but would also be relevant in terms of the descriptions of Mary Magdalen’s character in the hagiography and drama of the
Quattrocento. Visual representations of female beauty were closely related to the
language of poetry and prose of the same subject matter. This affinity arises from the
commonality of a standard ideal of beauty within the culture. The poetry of Petrarch, the
hagiography of Jacobus de Voragine, and the sermons of San Bernardino, in addition to
Passion dramas, were widely diffused in Florentine society, especially among the elite
members of the Medici court. Even if Donatello had not read or heard specific poems or
sermons, he would have been exposed to a wide variety of poetic, literary, and religious
discussion as a friend of the Medici family. The influence of these additional aspects of
the culture of Quattrocento Florence is significant for understanding the symbolism of the
gilded hair in Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen*.

The localization of gilding on the vigorously textured and iconographically
significant hair of the Magdalen demonstrates interplay between beauty and sanctity and
sensuality and purity. One of the Magdalen’s chief attributes is her long hair. According
to the Gospel of Luke (Luke 7.36-50), this attribute is a key component of her penance
and devotion to Christ in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Hair has a symbolic
significance for women and piety in the Christian faith. In Paul’s First Letter to the
Corinthians, the author writes that because woman was made from man and for the sake
of man, she should wear a veil on her head when praying, as a symbol and reminder of
authority. He argues that the veiling of women is in accordance with nature, stating, “does
not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a
woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.” The
glory of women is in the beauty of her long hair but also in its modesty. This sense of
beauty through modesty in hair illuminates the peculiar feature of miraculous hair growth seen in the *vitae* of Saints Mary Magdalen, Mary of Egypt, and Agatha.

The Magdalen’s hair is associated with her act of atonement and devotion to Christ in the house of Simon, but also with her sinful past as a prostitute. The Magdalen’s hair became an integral component of this line of thought and acted as a signifier of the saint’s sin and her redemption. Following classical principles of rhetorical symmetry, Gregory argued that since the Magdalen “made satisfaction for her sins with her eyes, hair, mouth, and oils, therefore she must have used them for wicked purposes in the past.” The sites of the body involved in atoning for sin signaled the sites involved in the commission of sin. This became a standard trope of sermons and other writings about Mary Magdalen in the Middle Ages through to the sixteenth century. In Donatello’s Magdalen, there is an emphasis on the loci of sin in the body of the saint ravaged by abstemious piety. The eyes of the Magdalen are hollow and sunken although they betray an element of former beauty in their blue colour. Her cheeks, mouth, hands, neck, and chest are also similarly conveyed as hollow and emaciated, revealing what once was a fair and proportioned bone structure (fig. 38 and 43).

These areas of the body that so clearly demonstrate the figure’s emaciation were also the areas of the body extolled in poetry about female beauty. In Petrarch, the image of Laura is “a collection of exquisitely beautiful disassociated objects.” His poetry focuses on the particular beauties of Laura and the individual fragments of her body, notably her hair, hands, and eyes. John Freccero comments that, “[Laura’s] virtues and her beauties are scattered like the objects of fetish worship…Each part of her has the
significance of her entire person.” Similarly, the hair of the Magdalen and its relationship to her sin as well as her atonement became a signifier for the entire character of the saint in popular preaching and hagiographic texts.

The hair of the Penitent Magdalen is interesting not only for its golden colour but also because it suggests the sensuality of her former occupation as it reveals erotically charged areas of the body (the upper thigh and chest.) The hair is parted in the Pescia, Empoli, and San Trinità Magdalen as well, but not as deep and with scant suggestion of the body beneath. Instead of revealing sensual forms, the parted hair unveils emaciation. Because of the Magdalen’s association with vanity, lust, and prostitution, her asceticism carries sensual meaning to which other fasting hermits would not be subject. The rough texture of the hair- a sign of the effects of an abstemious lifestyle- actually heightens the effect of the gilding. The gesso used to prepare the surface for polychromy and gilding is used sculpturally by Donatello and adds to both the roughness and the brilliance of the sculpture by creating more surfaces for reflection. Essentially, her penitence makes her more beautiful. In making the withered flesh and haggard hair of the Magdalen gilded, Donatello exemplifies the sanctifying power of grace as it renders the rejected and emaciated flesh into a vision of splendor.

The language of light imagery in the biography of the Magdalen from the *Legenda Aurea* (1260) by Jacobus de Voragine (1230-1298) is also significant for understanding the gilding of Donatello’s sculpture of the saint. The popularity of the hagiographic text has lead some to conclude that the only book more widely read in the late Middle Ages was the Bible. The author was a Dominican archbishop of Genoa who
produced several volumes of sermons and other minor writings in his lifetime as well as his compendium of saints’ lives, which was originally entitled *Legenda Sanctorum*. The enduring and widespread popularity of the work in manuscript and printed form (c.1450) in the original Latin and most other European languages led to the change of title.\(^\text{10}\)

Jacobus’ text became a sourcebook for the description of the saints in sermons, poetry, and art. In his account of the life and legend of Mary Magdalen, Jacobus recounts her association with light, which has a multivalent meaning for the saint that references her conversion, beauty, love, and contemplation.

The name of Mary, writes Jacobus, means *amarum mare* (bitter sea), illuminator, or illuminated. These different understandings of her name represent her tri-partite character as a symbol of penance, contemplation, and heavenly glory. The emphasis on illumination is significant since in her contemplation she became an illuminator as she “received the light with which she afterwards enlightened others.”\(^\text{11}\) In her association with heavenly glory, she “is enlightened with the light of perfect knowledge in her mind, and she will be illumined with the light of glory in her body.”\(^\text{12}\) The reference to the Magdalen as an illuminator and one who is illuminated indicates her preaching to and conversion of the pagans in Marseilles as well as her own conversion. Jacobus emphasizes that the act of penance performed by the Magdalen in the house of Simon the Pharisee sanctified the areas of her body that touched Christ and made her capable of proselytizing. This change to gold makes sense in light of Eucharistic practices in the Renaissance. Only gold and linen could touch the consecrated Host and thus the paten used for Communion was often gold or gold-plated.\(^\text{13}\) Her mouth “which had pressed
such pious and beautiful kisses on the Saviour’s feet should breathe forth the perfume of the word of God more profusely than others could.” The act of kissing, an activity of her former occupation as a prostitute, is made holy through their connection and devotion to Christ. Kissing and perfume refer to the Magdalen’s sensual past but they are given a new, sanctified context when she uses them for making atonement for sin. The hair of the Magdalen, in its contact with Christ, merits gilding under the same argument.

Jacobus’ interpretation of her last name, Magdalene, also suggests an association of light with penance and the stain of her former occupation. Jacobus describes how the name Magdalen means ‘remaining guilty’ or armed and unconquered, or magnificent and how these connotations demonstrate the sort of woman she was before, during, and after her conversion. The guilt obviously refers to her life of sin, but her armed and unconquered status derives from the “armor of penance” that she earned by immolating herself for every pleasure she had enjoyed. Immolation has connotations with burning and therefore light but also relates to Purgatory, a part of the afterlife in Christian eschatology where sinful and repentant souls are purged of their sins and prepared for entrance to Heaven.

The *Legenda Aurea* also notes the Magdalen’s special relationship with Christ and how He “set her totally afire with love of Him.” Mary Magdalen, the sinner in the house of Simon the Pharisee, loved Christ because He forgave her sins. The Gospel of Luke notes that her many sins were “forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little.” Through her faith and devotion to Christ, Mary earns forgiveness for her sins and loves Christ. After her conversion, Jacobus notes
that she was “magnificent in the superabundance of grace, because where trespass
abounded, grace was superabundant.”\textsuperscript{19} When she received her Last Communion from St.
Maximin, the radiance of her face, from continuous exposure to angels, rivaled the
dazzling effect of the sun.\textsuperscript{20} The connection of the Magdalen to light imagery in Jacobus’
text constantly refers to conversion and the effect of love and grace on the penitential
sinner. Through her continued penance and ascetic withdrawal to the wilderness of
Sainte Baume, the Magdalen becomes even more radiant. As the acts of penance made
by Mary Magdalen reflected acts and sites of sin in the edict of Gregory and medieval
sermons, the metaphors of light described by Jacobus de Voragine also reflect the sin,
penance, and salvation of the Magdalen. The light of the body symbolizes a spiritual
conversion and a sanctified spiritual state.

The contrast and connection of the beauty of the body and the beauty of the soul
is a common theme associated with the Magdalen. The effect of gilding on the highly
textured form of Donatello’s \textit{Penitent Magdalen} reflects the beautification and
sanctification of the saint’s soul at the cost of her mortal beauty. This seems to present a
paradoxical relationship between the beauty of the penitential body and the beauty of the
repentant soul. However, a physically ugly Magdalen highlights the beauty of her spirit
and contrasts with her former acts of prostitution, when her beautiful body led to the
sickness of her soul. The interplay between physical and spiritual beauty was common in
the Tuscan poetic tradition that flourished in the culture of the Medici court where
Donatello found patronage. The bodily ugliness of Donatello’s Magdalen seems at odds
with the aim of a Petrarchan sonnet, but the interplay between the beauty of the body and
the beauty of the soul is a thematic element of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*. The undisputed master of Renaissance poetry was hailed for the description of the course of love in his collection of poems- his lifelong work that chronicles his love of the lady Laura.\textsuperscript{21} Petrarch praises Laura’s beauty from the outset and parallels the beauty of her body with the beauty of her soul, the latter of which he only really appreciates after her death.

The *Canzoniere* are ambiguous about the value of beautiful mortal things. Despite the praise for Laura’s loveliness, the ultimate message is that physical beauty is an impediment to salvation and something that estranges the soul from God.\textsuperscript{22} The fault does not originate in the beauty of Laura but rather the poet’s improper love of her. Petrarch learns to praise and love the spiritual beauty of Laura, and this higher type of love culminates in his final poem in tribute of the Virgin Mary. The origin of Petrarch’s ambiguity about beauty is his interest in the writings of St. Augustine. Augustine’s influence and presence in Petrarch’s work is significant since the fifth-century saint lived a life of struggle with his own sinful nature before converting, which is chronicled in his autobiographical *Confessions* (397). Petrarch formats his very personal *Secretum* (1345) as a dialogue between himself and St. Augustine.\textsuperscript{23} The subject of the dialogue is the nature of the poet’s unhappiness, the origin of which Augustine establishes as Petrarch’s improper love of the lady Laura. The first book of the *Secretum* marks the imprisonment of the soul in the corruptible mortal body as the fundamental weakness of the human condition and the major impediment to the clarity of mental and spiritual vision. Much of the debate on love in the third book of the *Secretum* concerns whether or not Petrarch
loved Laura’s soul more than her body, the answer to which is never clear in the *Secretum* or the *Canzoniere.*

Although Laura’s death in 1368 is only affirmed by Petrarch in Poem 267, the division of the collection into two parts, one dealing with his love before her death and after, demonstrates the progression of the poet’s love throughout his lifetime. Part II of the *Canzoniere* demonstrates how the “separation of [Laura’s] soul from her body is an essential aspect of the significance of her death for the poet.”

The wasting away of Laura’s physical loveliness is frequently mentioned, and it is during this time that Petrarch begins to appreciate fully the lasting beauty of Laura’s soul. After Laura’s death, she appears to the poet in dreams, and teaches him to go straight up and to turn himself away from the mortal prison. After her appearances to him in dreams, he finds a new objectivity regarding his love, and he thanks Laura in poem 289 for spurning his desire to save him from sin and her from shame.

As the collection draws to a close, there is more a sense of a spiritual love of Laura or at least solace derived from the belief that part of her endures in heaven. The poet writes, “But her best form, which still continues living / and will forever live high in the heavens, / makes me fall more in love with all her beauty.”

The description of Laura’s soul as her best form suggests his realization of the enduring beauty of her soul. The word form or *formosa* relates to the Platonic concept of Forms, the essential or ideal nature of a thing, and also to the word *formosa,* meaning beautiful.

After the death of the body of his beloved, Petrarch can fully appreciate the transience of physical beauty and the permanent and perfect beauty of the soul. This
movement to divine love culminates in Petrarch’s final poem of the Canzoniere in which he makes a full apology and poetic tribute to the Virgin Mary, the most perfect and beautiful woman, instead of Laura. In contrast to his veneration of Laura’s particular beauties, Petrarch praises the Virgin’s total and unified beauty. Her specific, physical attributes he leaves untouched save for one reference to her eyes, which he calls lovely because they witnessed the death of Christ and cried in sorrow. They showed pity for Christ, much like Laura’s eyes wept for the events of the Passion, but Laura never felt pity for the poet and the Virgin’s compassionate nature will. In this poem, Petrarch praises the Virgin’s beauty, wisdom, purity, sanctity, kindness, constancy, and virginity. He refers in passing to Laura as dust and suggests that his love for the amaranthine beauty and nobility of the Virgin will far surpass his love for Laura. In praising the Virgin’s personal qualities and not her particular beauties, Petrarch pays tribute to the perfect spiritual and bodily beauty of the Virgin, the most perfect example of womankind, who will return his love in recognition of his faith.

Metaphors for the body in the writings of Petrarch regularly imply heaviness, darkness, and imprisonment but also beauty. The poet describes the body, both his own and Laura’s, as an earthly burden or prison. This theme is echoed in the Secretum, in which Augustine chastises Petrarch for his ignorant attachment to love and glory, the two chains that bind him. Augustine explains the peril of the bondage:

All the same, they are plain enough to see; but, dazzled by their beauty, you think they are not fetters but treasures; and, to keep to the same figure, you are like some one who, with hands and feet fast bound in shackles of gold, should look at them with delight and not see at all that they are shackles. Yes, you yourself with blinded eyes keep looking at your bonds; but, oh strange delusion! You are charmed with the very chains that are
dragging you to your death, and, what is most sad of all, you glory in them!\textsuperscript{32}

Both glory and love involve the figure of Laura, who is at once the beautiful woman with whom Petrarch fell in love on Good Friday in 1327 and also the figure of laurel, the highest award for the poet and Apollo’s love. In addition, Laura’s name has other associations with light and Petrarch plays with these different connotations by referring to her interchangeably as: Lauretta (Lauretta), l’aura (breeze), laurea (laurel wreath), laureto (laurel grove), l’auro (gold), l’aureo (highly praised), l’aurora (dawn), and l’òra (hour).\textsuperscript{33} Laura’s countenance is frequently referred to as the sun, the ultimate source of light. The effect of Laura’s beauty is a dazzlement, the blinding power that the sun has on the eyes of men. He later says that her physical and worldly traits divide him from her true image, that is, her soul.\textsuperscript{34} Light imagery has as much to do with beauty as with the distractions of bodily beauty. The veil, too, is a metaphor for the body but also an impediment to the viewing of the body. In cantos 11, 52, and 199, Petrarch describes how Laura’s veil impedes his access to the source of his visual pleasure and is thus a symbol of modesty and chastity, but it also calls attention to the poet’s desire as he imagines what is hidden beneath it.\textsuperscript{35} Chastity thwarts desire but makes a woman more beautiful and therefore heightens desire.

The ambiguous nature of Petrarch’s love for Laura and its wavering between base and higher forms of passion is most evident in the poet’s expositions of Laura’s beauty, which usually focus on her eyes and hair. While certainly no Laura, the polychromed features of the \textit{Penitent Magdalen} are congruous with the appearance of an attractive Quattrocento woman and consist of: bright blue and white eyes, white teeth, and golden
hair. Of significance to this discussion are Laura’s tresses because of the iconographic and theological significance of hair to the Magdalen, but also the implications of hairstyles on the perceptions of female beauty and morality in the Renaissance. The golden hair of Laura, with its connection to the value of gold, the sun, and light imagery, is also associated with the bondage of the body and physical beauty. Petrarch frequently describes Laura’s hair as curly and the facets of these curls catch light and the attention of the poet. Hair, for Petrarch, is often associated with a noose (il laccio), which is a metaphor for the curls, a tie that binds the love of Laura with the love of the body, and also an ominous attraction. In reference to the extended metaphor of the body as a prison, Petrarch says that, “within the locks of gold was hid the noose/ with which Love bound me tight.” The hidden noose within Laura’s hair is a metaphor for bondage but also implies death especially because the harder one pulls against the noose, the more it constricts its grip.

In Canto 90, Petrarch comments on the hair of Laura flowing in the wind that whirls it into thousands of dolci nodi, or sweet knots. The beloved’s hair has a dual, bittersweet meaning as it is a source of bondage to the mortal prison and the painful unrequited love of Laura, but also a source of beauty and pleasure to the lover. Free-flowing hair, according to Renaissance popular opinion, suggested vivaciousness, a sense of beauty, but also sensuality. Unmarried women left their hair down and losoe as a symbol of their availability and, ultimately, their sexuality. A married woman tended to braid or to cover her hair in public, reserving the loose hairstyle for her husband’s eyes only. The chaste and upright noblewoman had her hair coiffed or braided, especially in
church in accordance with the writings of Paul. Significantly, Petrarch would never have seen Laura’s hair undone and loose because he only saw her in church. His imaginative reconstruction of this sensual element of her beauty literally originates from a sacred place. The perilous and pious nature of hair is especially relevant to the hair of the repentant sinner in Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen*.

Petrarch usually regards Laura with a “mingling of Christian and vaguely pagan emotion.” The free flowing hair of Laura recalls Venus in Virgil’s *Aeneid* and of Daphne in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The term *chiome* is used in reference to hair but also connotes foliage. Ovid describes how Daphne fled the amorous advances of Apollo, “her hair behind her streaming as she ran;/ and flight enhanced her grace.” As Daphne turned into the laurel tree to escape the amorous advances of Apollo, so does Laura evade the grasp of the poet but both titillate their pursuers in the course of the pursuit. Laura’s beauty adorns the treasure of her chastity. Laura is both chaste and tempting and is made more tempting for her chastity, because it makes her reverent and good.

Donatello’s *Magdalen* similarly participates in this interplay between body and soul, sensuality and purity. She also bears a knot in her hair: the belt-like mass of locks that ties at her waist. Although this is likely not a reference to Petrarch, it suggests the traditional garb of the Franciscan order, the members of which revered the penitential Magdalen. As the hair of the sculpted figure is at once free flowing and yet bound like the habits of mendicant preachers, Donatello plays with the ideas of sensuality and chastity that are also evident in Petrarch’s writing and especially his description of hair.
In a series of four sonnets (Poems 155, 156, 157, and 158) describing the effect of sorrow on the beauty of Laura Petrarch suggests that grief enhances the lady’s desirability. The theme of the four sonnets in question is the weeping of Laura on the first day that Petrarch saw her, Good Friday 1327. The poet describes how Laura’s sorrow sparked his love:

My lady wept and my lord wanted me
To see her there and listen to her sorrow,
To fill me full of grief and with desire
To move me to the marrow of my bones.\(^{47}\)

The weeping of his lady, Laura, filled the poet with grief and desire. However, the weeping of Laura involves a larger question of beauty. At the end of poem 154, Petrarch asked: “when has vile desire ever been extinguished by ultimate beauty?”\(^{48}\) Petrarch responds to this question and posits the instance of Laura grieving over the death of Christ as the one and only time that base desire was slaked by highest love.\(^{49}\) The beauty exhibited by Laura on the day Petrarch fell in love with her was unique and never seen again on earth.\(^{50}\) In her grief, Petrarch describes Laura as having an air of \textit{gentil pietate} or gracious pity, a head of fine gold, and colored with “pearls and red roses where the gathered grief/ was transformed into ardent, lovely words,/ her sighs a flame, her tears as though of crystal.”\(^{51}\) The flaming sighs and crystal tears suggest an ardent love of Christ and sorrow for His death, which makes Laura more beautiful. Her \textit{leggiadro dolor} or lovely/ graceful sorrow, inspires pity in a noble heart.\(^{52}\) As described by Petrarch in the poem to the Virgin, ultimate beauty involved piety, compassion, and emotion. Petrarch admits that it is Laura’s grief that makes her beautiful and this inspires his love, but the tears are still described in sensual terms. The Magdalen is frequently associated with
weeping and sorrow, not only in art beneath the cross, but also in popular preaching. The Magdalen’s weeping after Christ’s death is described in the Gospel of John. When the angels question the reason for Mary’s tears, she replies; “because they have taken away my lord and I do not know where they have laid them.”\(^5\) This message gives the sense that the Magdalen by Donatello, with her ardent and profound emotion conveyed on her sculpted body, is made ultimately more beautiful through penitent tears and anguished suffering.

The beauty of the body, according to Petrarch, is a distraction, albeit a pleasant one, that mars the youthful would-be lover’s ability to appreciate the fuller and deeper beauty of his beloved. He writes:

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All things adorning our world with their beauty
Came forth in goodness from the Master’s hand,
But I, who cannot see so deep within her,
Am dazzled by the beauty on the outside;
Should I ever again see the true light,
My eyes will not resist,
So weak they have become
By their own fault and not by that day’s fault
When I turned them to her angelic beauty
“In the sweet season of my early age.”\(^5\)
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Petrarch describes how all things come from the goodness of God’s hand but he cannot see deep enough within his beloved to observe her inherent goodness. Instead, he is dazzled by her outward beauty. By rendering the Magdalen physically haggard and ugly, Donatello eliminates the distracting qualities of dazzling physical beauty except for the hair, which is a source of modesty and sanctified beauty even as it refers to her former vanity and licentiousness. In stripping the Magdalen’s body of its voluptuousness, he describes the beauty of the penitent and emotional soul.
The ‘dazzlement’ described by Petrarch in Poem 70 is not the fault of beauty, but the poet’s improper love. This admission of his own error highlights the fact that the collection of poems is not really about Laura, but rather, the turbulent inner struggles that the loving poet endures throughout his life. The progression of Petrarch’s love increasingly esteems the spiritual realm. The spiritual aspect of love was an intriguing concept for the philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) in his attempt at reconciling Platonic philosophy and Christian theology. Although celebrating the heavenly origin of her qualities and nature, Petrarch’s description of his love of Laura is not an exposition of true Platonic love. Plato’s concept of love, expounded in the *Symposium*, is allegorized as a ladder and a progression from observing beauty in a beloved person, then recognizing beauty in others, in actions, in character, and in ideas. At the end of the ladder, the lover understands that the essential object of love is the Idea of Beauty, in which all beautiful things participate. Platonic love is intellectual and a process of the rational faculties, whereas Petrarch’s love of Laura has more religious and emotional overtones.55 Although poem 360 refers to the charioteer of the *Phaedrus*, one of the most famous Platonic metaphors, Petrarch’s continued regression to an ambiguous love of Laura’s body negates the clear path of love outlined by Plato.

Ficino’s interest in reconciling Christian theology and Platonic philosophy took the chief teaching of Christianity, the love of God, and emphasized the spiritual ascent of the individuated soul toward unity with God.56 The 1474 publication date of *De Amore* negates theories of its widespread influence on the reception of Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen*. However, the very elite class in Florence would already have been interested
in Platonic thought by the early 1450’s. In the first half of the Quattrocento, Leonardo
Bruni (1369-1444) and others had already begun to translate Plato but after the Peace of
Lodi in 1454, philosophical study and interest intensified.\textsuperscript{57} Rudolph Wittkower has
argued that as early as 1440, Donatello’s artwork showcased Platonic imagery and it has
also been suggested that the \textit{David} is an example of the Platonic beloved youth.\textsuperscript{58} The
philosophical concept of love is relevant for the elite Florentine understanding of the
Magdalen figure because she represented an example of proper and ardent love for God.\textsuperscript{59}

As much as Donatello’s Magdalen reflects elements of the poetic tropes that
describe the physical and spiritual beauty of Laura, it is the description of the poet’s
experience of love that seems to have the larger bearing on Donatello’s sculpture. The
emotional, often sorrowful, experience of love endured by the poet and the intense grief
of losing his beloved connects with the Magdalen’s emotive brand of love. As much as
the lamentable vision of Laura has bearing on the Magdalen’s anguish beneath the cross,
the weeping and sorrow of Petrarch also evokes Mary’s place at the Crucifixion. The
Magdalen, like the poet, once fell prey to the allures of the bodily realm, at least in the
eyes of the Quattrocento audience, who viewed her pre-conversion life as the epitome of
vanity and lust. The inner, spiritual transformation of the Magdalen’s love is
demonstrated by depictions of the saint and Christ in dramatic literature and popular
preaching. In the thirteenth century Benediktbeuern Passion play, Mary Magdalen sang a
Latin lyric entitled “Mundi dectatio” which described her as a woman who enjoyed the
pleasures of the body. The audience also watched her buy perfume before her conversion,
and the stage direction notes that she changed out of her lavish raiment and into a black
cloak. Then she returned to the apothecary to buy ointment for Christ’s feet.\textsuperscript{60} The change of clothing and the alternative purchase from the apothecary symbolize in metaphor the inner conversion of the Magdalen.

The conversion of the Magdalen’s love is the focus of a 1501 \textit{Passion} play compiled by Jean Michel, in which the Magdalen is exhorted by her sister Martha to hear a preacher (Christ). Mary pays no heed but the formation of a crowd around the Saviour piques her interest and she inquires about His appearance with a note of professional interest. Audiences of the Renaissance imbued the Magdalen’s interest in Christ with an erotic element. After she encounters Christ, she undergoes her conversion, which is symbolized, according to the stage direction, by putting on a simple head-dress over her lavish clothing.\textsuperscript{61} Her anguish is aimed at the physical loss of Christ. Even after her conversion, the actions of the Magdalen continued to be framed in terms of the body and refer to her former life. As much as the imagery of the beloved influenced the depiction of a beautiful woman or a saint, the Magdalen was referred to as a lover, and so the emotional turmoil that Petrarch endures as his love is transformed also has bearing on the Magdalen, who endured the ravages of the ascetic life as an example of her devotion and love of Christ.

The transformation of the Magdalen’s love was a favored convention for preachers. Bernardino of Siena, a popular Franciscan preacher in the fifteenth century, once preached that the Magdalen was an example to the repentant and demonstrated how empty and profane love was transformed into the fullness of sacred love.\textsuperscript{62} This particular passage suggests that audiences understood that Magdalen’s base love of the
body developed into an appreciation and love of the beautiful spirit of Christ. Her love moved her to make satisfaction for her sins.\textsuperscript{63} Preachers frequently commented upon Luke’s account of the Magdalen’s devotion to Christ in the Pharisee’s house. Bernardino described how the repentant sinner loves more intently. In reference to Luke, he said that the one to whom more was given [the repentant sinner] was more obligated to the Lord and hence experienced more love from and for Christ.\textsuperscript{64} As a consequence of this relationship to the merciful Saviour, “a great fervor is born from the sinner converted to God” and the example of this great fervor is Mary Magdalen.\textsuperscript{65} Bernardino also allegorizes the Magdalen’s love for Christ as a flame. She derived love and joy from the words of God, such that every time she heard them, she was stupefied and so inflamed that she recalled nothing else.\textsuperscript{66}

The stupefaction of Mary Magdalen described by Bernardino relates to another important aspect of the Magdalen: her association with the contemplative life. The ultimate goal of the Christian contemplative is a mystical union with the divine or God. The Magdalen’s legendary levitation by angels is symbolic of this mysticism and one of the reasons for Franciscan devotion to this saint is the congruity of this levitation with St. Francis’ stigmata experience. The Biblical origin of her connection to contemplation is her conflation with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Bernardino recounts that at the feet of Christ, Mary Magdalen “forgot every other thing; she had given thought, strength, and mind over to God. She opened her mouth […] and contemplated as she looked (up) at His face.”\textsuperscript{67} The stance and gaze of Donatello’s Magdalen demonstrate a parallel with this description of the ecstatic Magdalen. The
wooden sculpture depicts the eremitic saint with arms almost in prayer, slightly open mouth, and her unfocused eyes gazing off into the distance (the direction of the pupils do not line up) (fig. 38). Her countenance is consistent with a mystical experience that is happening internally, since she is not physically lifted by angels, but is also reflected externally with the gilded hair. The descriptions of Mary Magdalen’s ardent and incendiary love for Christ suggest that the gilded hair of the Magdalen reflects not only a beautiful soul cleansed by penance, but also the purification of the love she had for Christ, and her subsequent mystical experience.

Although Donatello would likely not have read all of Petrarch’s works or heard Bernardino speak, the messages of these popular sources of poetry and preaching were diffused so widely in the discourse of Florentine culture that the majority of the citizenry would be familiar with them. The fifteenth century viewer could have read the gilding of Donatello’s Magdalen as a reflection of the inner conversion of the saint, her profound love for Christ, and her mystical connection with God. An examination of Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* and Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* demonstrates an association of light and gold with sanctity and beauty. The gold of the hair not only signifies the conversion of the penitent soul, but also the transformation of the love of Mary Magdalen for Christ and her mystical union with the divine. The beauty of the Magdalen is complex and paradoxical, referring to both her sensual and sacred qualities in Renaissance religious understanding. The gilded hair of Donatello’s Magdalen is an adornment of her beauty and an integral component of her sins as a prostitute but also the ornament of her sanctity. The effect of light on the gilding is beautiful and designed to convert the physically ugly,
emaciated, and haggard figure into something beautiful. Enhanced by the carving
technique and additive use of gesso, the aggressive texture of the sculpture heightens the
effect of the gilding and makes the saint more attractive, thereby signifying the
beautifying and sanctifying effect of grace on the sinner’s soul.

For Petrarch, the golden hair of his beloved Laura is a hook, a beautiful lure that
binds like a knot to his desire, but it is ultimately a distraction that mars the poet’s
ttempts to love the better form of Laura. The paradox of beauty and sanctity is
important for understanding the Magdalen figure. The fact that Mary Magdalen retains
her crowning feature—her hair—in her penitence does not eliminate the erotic connotations
of beautiful, golden hair. Female beauty in Petrarch can never be totally void of fetishism
and erotic connotations, except in the Virgin, whose perfect soul and body belong to
Heaven. Petrarch is moved by Laura’s grief and compassion and esteems her piety, but
her weeping is still described in sensual terms. The holy beauty of Laura’s pious tears
still inspire worldly desire just as images of the grieving Magdalen beneath the cross
would still be appreciated for their beauty. While not shown as physically beautiful, the
affective devotion of the Magdalen illustrated in Donatello’s sculpture would still be
understood as an expression of spiritual beauty that refers to this older type of Magdalen.
Thus, although in some ways a departure from the medieval vision of Mary Magdalen as
an emotional and physically lovely figure at the Crucifixion, in other ways, Donatello’s
*Penitent Magdalen* reveals new conceptions of beauty and sanctity that emphasize the
beautification of the repentant soul converted through love of Christ.
“Res enim perdifficilis est pro paen e infinitis animi motibus corporis quoque mootus variare.” Alberti, 80-81.

“Animos deinde spectantium movebit historia, cum qui aderunt picti homines suum animi motum maxime prae se ferent [...] Sed hi motus animi ex motibus corporis cognoscuntur.” Alberti, 80-81.

Cropper, 393.


1 Cor. 11.5-16.


7 See Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*, 199-244.


11 Jacobus, 375.

12 Jacobus, 375.

13 Plogswerth, 437.

14 Jacobus, 377.

15 Jacobus, 377.
Dante’s *Divine Comedy* describes the use of fire to purge souls of the remnants of sin, and fiery punishments abound more in *Purgatory* than in the *Inferno*.

Jacobus, 376.

Luke 7.47.

Jacobus, 375.

Jacobus, 381.


The *Secretum* was published posthumously and may not have been intended for publication although other works of Petrarch with similar personal and autobiographical elements were published, such as the *Ascent of Mt. Ventoux*.

Petrie, 55.


“Or comincio a svegliarmi, et veggio ch’ella / per lo migliore al mio desir contese/ et quelle voglie giovenili accese / temprò con una vista dolce et fella.” Petrarch, Canto 289. 5-8.

“Ma la forma miglior che vive ancora / et vivra sempre sun e l’alto cielo, / di sue bellezze ogni or piu m’innamora.” Petrarch, Canto 319. 9-11.


“Vergine, tale è terra e tposto à in doglia / lo mio cor, che vivendo in pianto il tenne.” Petrarch, Canto 366. 92-93.

“Chè se poca mortal terra caduca / amar con si mirabil fede soglio, / che devrò far di te, cosa gentile?” Petrarch, Canto 366. 121-123.
Petrarch, Cantos 32. 6-7; and 264.7-8.

“Si infamem turpemque mulierem ardeo, insanissimus ardo bellezza, non catene ma
tesi le giudichi; e accade a te (per restare nella similitudine di prima) non altramenti che
ad uno che, impedito da ceppi e lacci d’oro, mirasse lieto l’oro e non vedesse che sono
legami. Ora anche tu vedi ad occhi aperti cio che ti avvence, ma, o cecita, proprio di quei
vincoli che ti traggono a morte ti compiaci e (che e la maggiore delle disgrazie) ti vanti.”

The translation is from William H. Draper, Petrarch’s Secret, (Westport, CT: Hyperion

Mark Musa, “Introduction”, Canzoniere, xxxi.

“Così carco d’oblio/ il divin portamento/ e ‘l volto e le parole e ‘l dolce riso/ m’aveano,
et si diviso/ da l’imagine vera/ ch’ I’ dicea sospirando:/ “qui come venn’ io o quando?”
Petrarch, Canto 126. 56-62.

Sara Sturm-Maddox, Petrarch’s Laurels (University Park, PN: Pennsylanvia State

Strom, 117. There is also a natural tan color on the skin, to emphasize her exposure to
the elements as a hermit living in the wild. Her hair also has traces of red, which may be
bole, a red primer that imbues a warmer hue to the top layer of gold.

Petrarch, Cantos 90, 160, 197, 227, 270, and 292 depict Laura’s hair as curly.

“Le crespe chiome d’or puro lucente/ e ‘l lampeggiar de l’angelico riso.” Petrarch,
Canto 292. 5-6.

“Tra le chiome de l’or nascose il laccio/ al qual mi strinse Amore.” Petrarch, Canto 59.
4-5.

“Erano i capei d’oro a l’aura sparsi/ che ‘n mille dolci nodi gli avolgea.” Petrarch,
Canto90. 1-2.

Penny Howell Jolly, Hair: Untangling a Social History (Frances Young Tang Teaching
types of hairstyles for younger and older women. Elaborate coifs were more common
amongst married women. Richard Corson, Fashions in Hair, the first Five Thousand
Years, (London: Peter Woen Ltd., 1965) 139-140.

Robert Valentine Merrill, “Platonism in Petrarch’s Canzoniere,” Modern Philology,
vol. 27, no. 2 (Nov., 1929) 164.

Virgil, Aeneid, trans. Frederick Ahl and Elaine Fantham (Oxford University Press,
2007), 1. 319.


“il bel tesoro di castita.” Petrarch, Canto 263. 12-14.

“Piangea Madonna, e ‘l mio signor ch’ i’ fossi/ Voles a vederla et suoi lamenti a udire/ Per colmarmi di doglia et di desire/ Et ricercarmi le medolle et gli ossi.” Petrarch, Canto 155. 5-8.

“Or quando mai fu per soma beltà vil voglia spenta?” Petrarch, Canto 154. 13-14.

Mark Musa, notes to cantos 155-158, *Canzoniere*. 617-618.

“Amor e ‘l ver fur meco a dir che quelle/ ch’i’ vidi eran bellezze al mondo sole/ mai non vedute più sotto le stele.” Petrarch, Canto 158. 9-11.


“Con leggiadro dolor par ch’ ella spiri/ alta pietà che gentil core stringe.” Petrarch, Canto 158. 5-6.


“Tutte le cose di che ‘l mondo é adorno/ Uscir buone de man del mastro eterno/ Ma me che cosi a dentro non discerno/ Abbaglia il bel che mi si mostra intorno/ Et s’al vero splendor giamai ritorno/ l’occhio non po star fermo/ Cosi l’à fatto infermo/ Pur la sua propria colpa, et non quell giorno/ Ch’i’ volsi in ver l’angelica beltade/ ‘Nel dolce tempo de la prima etade.’” Petrarch, Canto 70. 41-50.

Merrill, 165.


Field, 3-7.

Sears Jayne, “Introduction”, Marsilio Ficino Commentary on Plato’s Symposium of Love, trans. Sears Jayne (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, Inc., 1985) 3. The emphasis on the function of love has allowed some scholars to interpret Ficino’s 1474 Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love (referred to as De Amore) not as a report on Plato, but rather, as an example of the literary genre of trattato d’amore.

Kane, 680.

Kane, 681-682.

Bernardino da Siena, Sermon 46, Opera Omnia, vol. 2 (1950) 73 cited in Jansen, Making of the Magdalen, 146

Jansen, Mary Magdalen and the Mendicants, 21.


“Nasce anco del peccatore convertito a Dio uno grande fervore. ‘Ubi abundant delictum superabundant gratia; dove abondano e peccati vi soprabonda la grazia di Dio quando torna a pentimento.’ L’esempro l’hai, di Maria Maddalena.” Bernardino, Predica CLV.113.

“E questo fu solo per l’amore e per la dilezione ch’ella aveva nelle parole di Dio; ché ogni volta che l’udiva, stava come stupefatta; tanto s’infiammava, che di nulla altro si ricordava.” Bernardino, Predica III.57.

“dimenticava ogni altra cosa; ella aveva dato il pensiero, le forze, e la mente tutta in Dio. Ella stava a bocca aperta […] e contemplativa in guardarlo nel viso.” Bernardino, Predica III. 57. The importance of listening to the preacher for conversion is a highly stressed theme in this sermon and a way for Bernardino to stress his own importance in religious life.
Chapter Six  
Hooker with the Hair of Gold

The complex elements of the Magdalen’s conversion from sinner to saint, especially the conversion of her love for Christ, have bearing on the interpretation of Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen*. Although the intended placement of Donatello’s sculpture is unknown, it could reasonably have been intended for the Baptistry of Florence or for a small chapel attached to a home for reformed prostitutes. In either case, the sculpture would have had a varied audience of different social classes, since all levels of society were christened in the Baptistry and a *convertite* house was populated by uneducated former street walkers, reformed courtesans, and the more learned sisters in charge of the facility. While the influence of Petrarch would affect the reading of the sculpture in more educated levels of society, others would make more prosaic connections between the image of the saint and actual prostitutes, since Mary Magdalen was the patron saint of the trade. The conversion of the Magdalen’s love for Christ in Passion dramas and sermons would likely have a more literal connotation in the minds of Quattrocento audiences, resulting in associations of this theme with the conversion of prostitutes, regardless of the sculpture’s placement.

The cult of the Magdalen has strong ties to penitential theology, which are born out of her association with sin and prostitution. Some members of the Quattrocento Florentine community attempted to emphasize the Magdalen’s penance over and above her prostitution. The Observant Reform movement within the Dominican Order—a movement characterized by an austere observance of poverty and discipline—was in part
responsible for the Quattrocento trend of depicting the Magdalen as a figure engaged in ascetic solitude.¹ The concept of penance and a stricter sense of religious discipline became increasingly important to Florence, reaching its zenith by the end of the century with the reforms of Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498). The Archbishop of Florence, Antonino Pierozzi (1389-1459) was an early, pivotal figure in this movement. His special veneration of the Magdalen is evident in the inclusion of a first-person narrative account of Mary Magdalen’s confession in his manual on the subject, *Omnium mortalium cura* (1475). His recognition of the Magdalen as an exemplar of penance is further noted in his *Summa Historialis* (c.1440), which also significantly downplays the saint’s former life of sin and also disputes some of the sexual charges traditionally brought against her.² This minimizing of the carnal aspects of the Magdalen’s biography demonstrates a campaign to clean up the Magdalen’s image.

The sexual elements of Mary Magdalen’s biography were ingrained in the Christian understanding of the saint’s character despite Antoninus’ attempts at sanitizing the Magdalen. Neither the Gospels nor the *Legenda Aurea* specifically refer to the Magdalen as a prostitute, yet she continued to be invoked to describe the dangers of vanity, pride, and lust; sins associated with prostitution and the promiscuity of women.³ As the patron saint of prostitutes, sermons for the Magdalen’s feast-day and Lenten sermons often featured the pre-conversion saint and gave preachers “a platform to discuss the problem of prostitution.”⁴ Medieval dramas and popular preaching were responsible for promoting the idea of Mary Magdalen as a common woman. The saint’s designation as a *meretrix* was made worse because of believed her noble birth and because it was
believed that she became a harlot to feed her indiscriminate sexual appetite and not out of financial concerns.\(^5\) Her penance and conversion were made all the more dramatic given the gravity of her offense.

Passion plays and sermons often described the pre-conversion Magdalen’s sins in detail in order to highlight the significance of her conversion. To a certain degree, audiences would have been “titillated by descriptions or depictions of the prostitute saints’ beauty and erotic activity before their conversion.”\(^6\) In the fifteenth century Arras Passion play, one of Mary Magdalen’s pre-conversion speeches clearly bears erotic overtones commingled with a message of redemption:

\begin{verbatim}
I am abandoned to all.
Let everyone come, do not fear.
Here is my body which I present
To anyone who wants to have it,
I don’t want to sell it,
I don’t want to have gold or silver,
Let each one do his will with it,
I can’t offer it any more than this:
It is ready to receive all
Without refusing anyone.\(^7\)
\end{verbatim}

The passage is reminiscent of Christ’s words at the inception of Holy Communion when He passes the bread at the Last Supper and remarks that, “this is my body.”\(^8\) Quattrocento audiences would have understood both the erotic elements of the Magdalen’s meretricious behaviour and also the Eucharistic meaning of the word ‘body’. This reference to Holy Communion is also significant for Donatello’s Magdalen since her open mouth and slightly raised heel suggest that she is about to be lifted heavenward to receive the Host from angels, as her legend describes (fig. 1). The erotic language used by the saint in her former occupation prefigures her conversion to Chris but, as this
passage demonstrates, the common prostitute, like the Magdalen, was a source of both erotic pleasure and moral concern to Quattrocento Florence. Despite the negative attitude toward prostitutes in Medieval and Renaissance society, the sensual elements of their patron saint’s life were still of interest.

The relationship of the church with prostitution was tenuous at best and some of the tensions between its practice and Christian theology may animate the treatment of Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen*. The traditional position of the church regarding prostitution was disapproving toleration. This stance dates to classical times but in Christendom, its biggest proponents were St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, who both contended that prostitution prevented far worse sins than it promoted. It was a threat to the moral constitution of society, but also a necessary element of the sexual culture of Renaissance Italy, and an integral part of the behaviour of masculinity. In a society where young chaste women were the currency of familial honour, men were much older than their spouses by the time they were able to afford one. For men who were not yet able to marry but who nonetheless required sex, brothels provided a more appropriate sexual outlet than sodomy with men or fornication with honourable women. Quattrocento Florence was increasingly interested in the moral constitution of society and took measures to ensure the control of deviant moral and sexual behaviour. Regulating prostitution was one of the ways in which this control was manifested.

Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, city officials attempted to curtail or at least control the activities of prostitutes to maintain levels of decency in the medieval city. After the failure of Florence to expel prostitutes from within the
municipality in 1287, city administrators began to set limitations on their activities and establish regulations regarding identification of prostitutes. In 1403, the city opened the Onestà, the Office of Decency, the mandate of which was to control prostitution, though not to altogether eliminate it.\textsuperscript{12} A public Florentine document dating from 1415 reports that city officials were providing for the establishment of communal brothels in the city as a measure to “eliminate a worse evil by means of a lesser one.”\textsuperscript{13} Prostitution was seen to be an effective means to stem urban sexual violence and adultery, as well as sodomy, a vice that deeply troubled preachers and citizens alike. Prostitution was a vice, but a lesser vice that would temper sexual deviance and ultimately maintain the moral cohesion of society.

As much as Quattrocento Florence was concerned with institutionalizing prostitution, the citizens were also concerned with the conversion of prostitutes. The concepts of forgiveness and redemption that are so much a part of the Magdalen character and the sculpture of Donatello are important in a specific context in the later Middle Ages and early Quattrocento, namely the proliferation of \textit{convertite} houses or convents for former prostitutes. Despite general toleration, the church was still interested in the possibility of reforming these women, either by encouraging marriage or inducing women to enter the religious life. As early as the twelfth century, religious houses were established with the aim of housing reformed prostitutes. In 1227 Pope Gregory IX gave the highest ecclesiastical sanction to the Order of Saint Mary Magdalen, an order dedicated to redeeming prostitutes.
While the redemption of sinners was a principal concern in the climate of Quattrocento Florence, the demarcation of prostitutes became especially important for the city as they sought to limit the moral contamination of honourable men and women by association with prostitutes. At the end of the twelfth century, Pope Clement III (1187-91) ruled that harlots should dress differently from honest women. Authorities found private prostitutes, or women who worked from home, particularly troubling because they were indistinguishable from honourable women and polluted respectable areas. This phenomenon together with the practice of more affluent courtesans imitating the fashion of patrician women “blurred social distinctions between donna oneste [honest women] and meretrici [prostitutes].” By 1384, Florence had instituted sumptuary legislation for prostitutes that required the wearing of bells on their heads, gloves, and high-heeled shoes. Susan Haskins describes how prostitutes in Renaissance cities were widely prohibited from wearing a veil or coiffures, meaning they had to leave their hair loose so as not to imitate an older woman of higher social class, but also to showcase their sexual availability. Early modern Florentines sought to distinguish prostitutes visibly and clearly from respectable women. Such was the case in the early fifteenth century indictment of a woman named Salvaza, wife of Seze, on grounds of prostitution. The documents of her case note that “if she is found guilty of walking without gloves and bells on her head or with high-heeled slippers” she was to be punished. The bells, gloves, and heels required in Florence identified the women, but other cities had different requirements. Ferrara, for instance, obliged prostitutes to wear a yellow mantle.
emphasis of the court records is on bodily adornment being appropriate to one’s station and as a marker for morality amongst women.

Although not adorned in the garb of a prostitute, the shape of the hair-dress worn by Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen* breaches the boundaries of decorum that these regulations addressed. One commentator in 1437, C. Falletti Fossati, wrote that to preserve “decorous modesty” women or girls over ten years when in public, should show no more flesh than two fingers from the pit of the throat so that no uncovered bosom would be visible.21 The Magdalen, with her revealed décolletage, obviously contravenes this code of modesty but because her ‘dress’ reveals her emaciation this breach is somewhat mitigated. She was redeemed and made holy through her penitence. The asceticism that she endured ravaged her body and made her physically ugly, but it purified her soul and made her spiritually beautiful. This beauty of the soul is reflected in the gold that is made more resplendent by the effects of asceticism. She was a promiscuous woman, but also an ascetic, a redeemed sinner, and a saint.

Although a concern for Fossati, sumptuary laws did not tend to address nudity or exposure. Rather, they were more concerned with excessive adornment, a sign of vanity and a stepping stone on the way to the more serious offense of *luxuria* or lust.22 Ensuring that ladies’ dress reflected the larger social and moral order of the city was an important aim of sumptuary law. Pistoia specifically prohibited certain materials, such as: gold lace, gold and silver embroidery, and velvet for shoes. The excessive use of gold and jewels for ornament was particularly targeted in Florence as well.23 The golden hair-dress of the Magdalen, then, could also be interpreted in terms of sumptuary legislation.
and common codes of dress. The gold material of the dress would be seen as an example of the vulgar finery that once adorned the Magdalen. However, this meaning is mitigated by the other, more spiritual connotations of gold, and the fact that the texture of the dress implies sackcloth.

One law passed in Orvieto in 1311 that prohibited gold, silver, and pearl detailing on dresses as well as ornate tiaras, explicitly linked women’s dress with men’s desire, which leads to moral destruction. It bans ostentatious raiment “...lest for the foolish things of women men kindled by excessive love be confounded and destroyed.”24 The Judith figure in Donatello’s bronze Judith and Holofernes (fig. 42) seems to associate women’s dress with the downfall of men since Judith arrayed herself in fine clothes in order to attract Holofernes, and then kill him. However, the presence of sackcloth beneath the finery worn by the bronze Judith redeems her character, especially considering the moral aim of her enterprise. The physical ugliness of the Magdalen and her dress of hair similalry plays with ideas about moral codes of dress. Her hair dress is at once a garb of sackcloth but also a dress of gold. The texture tempers the more sumptuous elements of the Magdalen’s dress. Its texture implies asceticism, but its colour implies sanctity and luxury.

In lieu of resplendent clothing, a “sweet disposition and gentle piety” should be the adornments of holy women, according to early and medieval Christians.25 Bernardino of Siena, in one of his infrequent references to harlotry, used a comparison with prostitutes to shame and ridicule the extravagance in the dress and cosmetics of women.26 He also noted in a 1427 sermon that one recognizes a good woman from the way she is
dressed.  

He explains that, “the exterior shows what is inside. On this point I want to say, of a woman who is dressed like a prostitute, I don’t know what the inside is like, but from the outside I see signs of dirt.” Bernardino would likely have recognized in the figure of Donatello’s sculpture, a repentant woman. Her pose and expression also indicate that she is a figure bearing the so-called “adornments of holy women.” With her hands almost in the position of prayer and the easy sense of contraposto evident in her legs, she is an example of “gentle piety.” Her unfocused stare and slightly open mouth may not convey a “sweet disposition”, but they suggest a trance-like and mystical communion with the divine.

As it did in fifteenth century Florence, the dress of women represented the decay of moral order. These ideas were reinforced through readings of the Bible, especially in imagery relating to to the Last Judgment. On the Day of Judgment, the Lord will take away the finery of the bedizened women and:

- instead of perfume there will be a stench;
- and instead of a sash, a rope;
- and instead of well-set hair, baldness;
- and instead of a rich robe, a binding of sackcloth;
- instead of beauty, shame.

The metaphorical rejection of the trappings of vanity in favor of lowlier and holier substitutes is significant for a sculpture such as Donatello’s Magdalen that shows a dress of ragged hair. The passage identifies physical beauty with sinfulness. The hair dress of the Magdalen image is a sort of middle ground between the well-set hair that defines the ostentatious woman and the baldness that defines the shameful woman, at least in its texture. The Magdalen keeps this trapping of her beauty but in such a way that it resembles a dress of sackcloth. The term sackcloth also refers to repentance and
mourning\textsuperscript{31} in the Bible. Yet that same hair is gilded and also has the appearance of a low cut dress that reveals the emaciated body in lieu of an ample bosom. The gilding seems to be ostentatious in a sense, and definitely not a material listed as acceptable in sumptuary legislation. Yet, it is reflective of the process of penance, and is the crown and glory not of the Magdalen’s beauty, but of her sanctity.

The language of conversion and redemption that colours the reading of the wooden Magdalen is obviously relevant to the conversion of prostitutes in the Quattrocento. By the late Middle Ages “prostitutes were required to listen to sermons attempting to convert them and religious orders were established for repentant prostitutes.”\textsuperscript{32} A mid-fifteenth century statute from a house for repentant prostitutes in Avignon takes stock of the uniforms worn by the women under its roof and notes that the vestments of these converted women were to reflect their internal merit much like the garb of a prostitute demarcated her social and moral status. They were to dress in clothing of plain white wool cloth with robes in the same material but black. They were also to be veiled like decent widows. There was to be no adornment or decoration of the outfits so that “by exterior honesty their intrinsic purity can shine through to be an example of good life.”\textsuperscript{33} Clothing again demonstrates social standing and reflects an inner purity of the soul gained through the redemptive powers of grace. In addition to the requirements of dress, the women accepted to this institution had to be meet requirements of age and attractiveness. The women admitted must be: “of the age of twenty five years who in their youth were lustful, and who by their beauty and formliness could still be prompted by worldly fragility and inclined to worldly voluptuous pleasures and to attract
men to the same.” It was believed that the vestiges of beauty were dangerous not only to the converted prostitute’s soul, but also to society. Beauty could cause a relapse into sin for the women and the men they attracted. Therefore, efforts to convert prostitutes had to focus on those most likely to continue in sin. This sense that beauty can lead to relapse sheds light on the emaciated physical ugliness of Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen*. If she had been depicted as full-bodied and beautiful, she would have inspired more desire than reverence and the threat of relapse would cloud the image.

Despite the suggestion that women had greater proclivity toward sex, the capacity for women to become ardent followers of Christ was well noted by medieval preachers. A misogynist who often preached about the sinful nature of women, San Bernardino also asserted that women were “more illuminated with divine splendors” and were more spiritual by nature than men. The paradoxical nature of Bernardino’s argument for women’s supposed inclination towards sin but greater capacity for spiritual awakening is significant for Donatello’s Magdalen, as it simultaneously reflects the effects of sin on the body and grace on the soul. This paradox of greater propensity to both vanity and piety in women resonates with Dunkelman’s argument that Donatello’s Magdalen was an image of the strength of female piety and an example for reformed prostitutes. Dunkelman argues that although emaciated, her arms are muscular as they form the position of prayer. Bennett and Wilkins note that Proverbs 31 was commonly read during the office of the Magdalen: “Favour is deceitful and beauty is vain;/ but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.” An additional element of this chapter of
Proverbs resonates with Dunkelman’s interpretation of the muscular arms of Donatello’s *Penitent Magdalen*. It states that a good wife:

- considers a field and buys it;
- with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
- She girds herself with strength,
- and makes her arms strong.\(^{38}\)

This Biblical excerpt stresses the work of a good woman in the household, tending to a vineyard that usually symbolizes sexual fidelity or chastity. The strength of woman is therefore her chastity since it overcomes her natural proclivity towards sex. The musculature of the wooden Magdalen then, refers to the spiritual strength of a woman’s defeat of her own innate propensity towards promiscuity. The emphasis on spiritual resolve champions the beauty of the soul over the beauty of the body.

The importance of the Magdalen for prostitutes seeking to leave the profession is obvious and makes Dunkelman’s assertion that Donatello’s Magdalen belonged in a *convertite* house very appealing. However, Mary Magdalen did not simply serve as an example for repentant harlots; she was a much larger example of female sin and sanctity.

The sexual transgressions of the Magdalen’s past that Antoninus and the Observant Dominicans sought to allay, actually contribute to her role as the epitome of penance. According to medieval canon law, women had a greater natural inclination towards sexual activities than men. Medical concepts reinforced this opinion, specifically the earlier sexual maturity of girls and beliefs in the “perpetual” readiness of women for intercourse (in that they did not need sexual excitement to perform) and in the medical necessity of coitus for female health.\(^{39}\) Early modern culture “emphasized the equation of women and lust,”\(^{40}\) and chastity was thus more highly prized in women than in men.
Ruth Mazo Karras asserts that late medieval sermons about the importance of repentance to salvation used sexual sins and female sexual sinners to demonstrate the process of repentance most dramatically. Penitence in female saints was associated with atonement for sexual sin since female penitent saints were usually prostitutes. Karras argues that the prostitute could represent the Everywoman more easily than the murderer could represent the Everyman because sexual transgressions were identified as the prototypical ‘female’ sin. As a paradigmatic figure of female sin and repentance, the sculpture of the *Penitent Magdalen* could easily have belonged to the *convertite* house or to the Baptistry and related to broader issues that involved prostitution, but were not confined to it. Mary Magdalen embodies the necessity of penance in salvation. Her association with St. John the Baptist in the fresco cycles of the Cappella del Podestà suggests that penance was a counterpoint to baptism and an important part in salvation history. This understanding of the character as the prototypical female sinner and an example of penance certainly made her eventual placement in the Baptistry appropriate.

By the late fifteenth century, prostitutes were banned from areas near churches and were not allowed to ply their trade in their homes, so as not to taint sacred and private ground. In 1463, the Onestà set up an iron collar outside their offices for the punishment of prostitutes who were involved in blaspheming God, theft, fraud, or sodomy. Similar public punishments were used in Ferrara as well and in some cases offending prostitutes would be paraded publicly and partially nude through the streets of the city. Such punishments reinforced the public nature of their crimes, the moral implications they had upon the virtue of the city, and demonstrated a shift away from the
institutionalization trend earlier in the century. Public nudity would also have been understood as a form of penance or punishment for sexual transgression. Often female martyrs were stripped as part of their suffering. The nudity of the Magdalen in the wilderness that necessitated the miraculous growth of hair certainly involves this sense of nudity as punishment, or at least a means of atonement, for promiscuity.

The ambiguities about prostitution and female sexuality in general feeds into the understanding of Saint Mary Magdalen and Donatello’s sculpture of her. The erotic elements of the Magdalen can never be totally erased and thus her brand of sainthood is not the same as a virgin martyr’s. Medieval and Renaissance audiences likely understood her erotic language in Passion plays as a reference to her former life of sin. They understood the codes of dress for women as representative of varying levels of moral and social standing. This was evident in the treatment of prostitutes in law and in sermons and this would in some ways relate to a sculpture of the profession’s patron saint. The Penitent Magdalen wears a dress of hair that has the texture of sackcloth, but is covered in gold. The rejection of the trappings of finery was a hallmark of an ascetic saint but the Magdalen retains an element of gilded finery and sensual beauty. The purity and luxury of gold was readily understood by Quattrocento Florentines who would have likely noticed the gold paten for the Host and the gold that filled their streets on the backs of women and in their pocketbooks. The gold symbolizes the Magdalen’s sanctity and conversion, but also suggests her former sin of vanity and the physical beauty that was an integral component of her vice. Her sin made her reprehensible, but her penance made her magnificent.
1 Wilk, 688-696.

2 Wilk, 692-693.


5 For more information on the Magdalen’s former life of wealth and luxury and how this contributed to her fall into sin, see Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*, p. 145-196. The canonists’ position on prostitution vis-à-vis poverty was vague. Although the canonists saw financial need as a root cause of prostitution and thus made the sin more understandable, they did not consider poverty as a mitigating circumstance. Brundage notes that the canonists generally agreed that the acceptance of money for sex was not sinful or illegal, rather, the act performed for the money was the sole offence. Roman lawyers, on the other hand, cited gain and promiscuity as markers for prostitution. James A. Brundage, “Prostitution in the Medieval Canon Law,” *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976) 835-836.


8 Karras, 22.


15 Ghirardo, 406.


17 Brackett, 277.


19 Brucker, 192.


22 It should also be noted that sumptuary legislation also aimed to demarcate social classes and address larger economic problems with marriage and spending habits of the middle class. Women of the rising middle class were held to these codes of dress whereas higher ranking families were not. The rising costs of trousseaus and dowries, associated with women’s vanity and need for finery, also made marriages almost prohibitively expensive.


25 Brundage, *Sex, Law, Marriage*, 344. Brundage refers to: 1 Tim. 2.9-10; 1 Peter 2.3-5; Isaiah 3.16-24.


28 “A lo strinsico puoi cognoscere lo intrinseco. A proposito vo’ dire che la donna che port ai vestimento meretricio, io non so lo intrinseco, ma quello di fuore mi pare vedere di sozzi segni.” Bernardino, Predica, XXXVII.14.
Isaiah, 3.24

Matt. 11.20-21

Genesis, 37.33-35.

Karras, 32.


P. Pansier in Rossiaud, 202.


Dunkelman, 12.

Proverbs, 31.30.

Proverbs, 31.16-17.


Karras, 32.

In addition to Mary Magdalen, five other prostitute saints were appeared frequently in medieval hagiographical literature: Mary of Egypt, Thaïs, Pelagia, Mary the niece of Abraham, and Afra of Augsburg.

Karras, 6.


Ghirardo, 402.
Conclusion

Two common themes animate the character of Mary Magdalen: sexuality and penitent asceticism. The Magdalen is a sexual saint. She is one of only a few prostitute saints in the canon and was regarded as an extreme example of female licentiousness because she sold her body for pleasure and not for gain. Invoked as an example of vanity and lust, she was a paradigmatic female in the sermons of the Medieval and Renaissance periods. The erotic overtones of her character were linked to her legendary beauty. Early images of the Magdalen from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries illustrated a beautiful and emotional figure that broke bonds of decorum in her grief and in her penitence. Her blatant and indecorous activity beneath the cross in the Arena Chapel frescoes have erotic overtones, as do the images of the penitent Magdalen from the Magdalen chapel in Assisi. Her status as a peccatrix and a reformed prostitute explains the various levels of undress seen in these images. In the Magdalen figure, sensuality and emotion are often linked, as the body is the Magdalen’s means for conveying emotion. Her body, face, and hair describe her inner turmoil and reflect the loci of her sins, according to Pope Gregory the Great.

The emotion of the Magdalen is an important link between her two natures. Her sexuality is mitigated by her obvious grief and this intensity of emotion inspired the Magdalen’s conversion and penitence. Her despair is strong because, as a sinner, she is more complicit in Christ’s death. But she also loves Christ, and the transformation of the Magdalen’s love from profane to sacred is a common convention in the drama of the middle ages and the Renaissance. Her period of penitence, which became so popular in
the fifteenth century, cleansed the soul of Mary Magdalen, and demonstrated how her love of sin and the body’s passions was transmuted into a love of the divine.

Donatello’s version of Mary Magdalen in penitence breaks with the convention of depicting the saint as beautiful, although the rough texture, pose, and expression of his wooden sculpture still preserve the emotionalism of these older examples. In gilding his extremely emaciated *Penitent Magdalen*, Donatello created a new iconographic type that emphasized the saint’s abstemious spirituality but also suggested vestiges of her beauty and sexuality. The body that was the site of her sin is now rendered ugly. Her hair, once the hallmark of her beauty, is now the hallmark of her penitence. Her long and loose mane of hair is rough and coarse, resembling the Baptist’s hair shirt. But the long and gnarled hair is gilded, which would produce a ripple-like effect of light on its surface. This effect of light is significant because it renders an otherwise physically ugly sculpture into a beautiful spectacle of light. The coarseness of the hair contributes to the sculpture’s brilliance by adding more facets for reflection. Thus, the penitence of the Magdalen renders her beautiful even as it renders her body ugly.

The gilding connects directly to the light imagery found in Jacobus de Voragine’s biography of the saint but also to poetic tropes found in Petrarchan verse. Like the “beautiful monsters” described in Elizabeth Cropper’s article, the sculpted image of a woman in the Renaissance is an amalgam of idealized body parts that satisfies cultural standards. The fetishism of love poetry from the period that similarly narrows its focus on the particular relates to the same standards of beauty. Although the extreme emaciation of the figure subverts its physical attractiveness, Donatello’s composition of
the Magdalen participates in the standards of beauty by depicting a woman of fine proportion, delicate features, graceful pose, pious demeanour, and golden hair. The artist clearly focuses his attention on the hair of the Magdalen hat forms a belt like that of a mendicant preacher, but also reveals the upper right thigh and the ribcage. It embodies the complexities of the saint’s character and is the only attribute that Donatello chose to represent, omitting her other standard feature, the jar of ointment.

Mary Magdalen’s hair was a subject of fixation in literature and in sermons dating back to Gregory the Great, who argued that since she made satisfaction with her hair, she must have sinned with it. This fixation on hair functions in a similar way to Petrarch’s description of particular parts of the beloved’s body. The dolci nodi of Laura’s hair are metaphors for the poet’s love. The hair is a rope or noose that mortally binds the poet to Laura through lust but also suggests the beauty and chastity of Daphne from Ovid. In the same way, the Magdalen’s hair embodies her love and is a metaphor for her entire conversion. Once used as an adornment of sin and a lure to attract clients, the Magdalen used her hair to bathe the feet of Christ and prepare Him for burial. The Magdalen’s pre-conversion purchase of perfume and post-conversion purchase of unguent is paralleled in some Passion dramas, and thus serves a similar symbolic function to her hair. However, the hair of women was significant in the Renaissance as a marker of female modesty, sexuality, and beauty in a way that perfume and oil were not. Blonde hair was a standard convention of beauty that was highly prized in women in Renaissance Italy, despite and perhaps because of its rarity. Donatello’s choice to focus on the hair of Mary Magdalen
as the sole iconographic marker for the saint demonstrates more effectively the Magdalen’s abandonment of vanity and her newly earned spiritual beauty.

In 1909, Lord Balcarres noted that the Magdalen’s ‘type’, owing to her composite nature, is a “creation of the artist […] according to the prevailing standard of social and religious thought.” The ambiguities and tensions between sanctity and sexuality that pervade the Magdalen character and Donatello’s rendition of it reflect social anxieties and ambiguities about prostitution, beauty, and female sexuality. Quattrocento Florence was uncomfortable with the moral implications of institutionalized prostitution, but tolerated it for fear of the other, ‘worse’ sins that it tempered. There was a clear sense of fear about female sexuality and fornication apparent in the fifteenth century discourse. Prostitutes were marked and segregated in society because their ability to contaminate respectable men and women was feared. The chastity of women was highly prized and reflected the honour of the family and the city. The use of already tarnished women for fornication would not impact the established moral order as much as the pollution of a honourable woman. Yet, at the same time that Florence and other Italian city states established public brothels, they still required prostitutes to listen to sermons attempting to convert them, and advocated the path of the *convertite* institutions that would reform the sexual tendencies that sustained the sex industry in the city. Alberti advocated that the artist use gesture and expression to convey the internal workings of the mind, heart, and soul. The soul of a penitent prostitute is complex and full of contradictions in the eyes of a church and society that prized female chastity and condemned female sexuality, while it valued the usefulness of institutionalized prostitution.
The focus of this study has been on Donatello’s Penitent Magdalen and how this multifaceted and complex figure negotiated societal attitudes about sexuality, sanctity, and beauty in the female sex. The language of poetry and hagiography, the rhetoric of preaching, and the visual record of the Magdalen all contributed to the larger social discourse and reveal tensions and ambiguities about the nature of female beauty and spirituality. Although no documentation about Donatello’s sculpture survives to suggest the intended location of the piece, its rather quick placement in the Florentine Baptistry demonstrates its significance for the citizenry. In his Penitent Magdalen, Donatello converges the discordant themes of sexuality and asceticism into a unified and powerful figure that embodies the concept of penance and particularly female penitence. As a literally shining example of the redemptive powers of grace on the soul, Donatello’s Magdalen suggests that the rejection of worldly concerns is the path to salvation.
1 Jacobus, 375.

2 Cropper, 393.


4 Kane, 680


____. “Prostitution in the Medieval Canon Law.” *Signs.* vol. 1. no. 4. Summer 1976. 825-845.


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