

Marthe et Marie-Madeleine: Deux modèles de dévotion et d'accueil chrétien, edited by Bruno Phalip, Céline Perol and Pascale Quincy-Lefebvre

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Under the direction of three scholars working in different fields, Contemporary History, Mediaeval History and the History of Art respectively, this

attractive on-line monograph looks at the many ways in which the images of Martha and Mary Magdalene (identified from ancient times with Lazarus' other sister) have been interpreted down the ages. Céline Perol's introduction sets the scene by tracing the parallel development of the two images, both symbols of hospitality, which was such an important part of mediaeval culture. She notes in particular the prominence given to Mary despite her well-known failings as a host in the original story, and the rather different traditions that grew up around Martha, including her encounter with Tarrasque, the mythical dragon, in Provence. Chapter 1 continues the introduction in a way with a beautifully illustrated survey of mediaeval sculptures, stained glass windows, wall-paintings and book illustrations from the Auvergne, mostly showing Mary Magdalene, but concluding with several striking portrayals of Martha, albeit in the shadow of her sister (Anne Courtillé).

In a study of the Benedictine abbey church of Sainte-Marie-Madeleine at Vézelay, Bruno Phalip discusses the apparent mismatch between the role of the Church as an important pilgrimage centre, housing important relics of Mary Magdalene, and her absence from the church's twelfth-century iconography. Next, Annie Regond examines sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French and Italian paintings of Jesus' visit to Martha and Mary at Bethany, the Resurrection of Lazarus, and Martha's Reproaches of Mary or the Conversion of Mary Magdalene, including works by Giorgio Vasari, Tintoretto, Il Guercino, Caravaggio and Orazio Gentileschi. Catherine Cardinal considers La Madeleine as a figure of vanity and a model convert in the works of Charles Le Brun, Charles Thorin, Francois Lombard and other seventeenth-century French painters, and provides a useful inventory of the Saint's attributes, her expressions and gestures, objects signifying the vanity of worldly pleasures and the passage of time, instruments of penitence and symbols of mysticism and sanctity. Francesca Fabbri's carefully argued essay on baroque paintings of Martha and Mary shows how closely these reflect the theology and religious attitudes of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation periods. In an intriguing chapter which takes as its starting-point the anthropologist Jean-Pierre Albert's *Le sang et le ciel: les saints mystiques dans le monde chrétien* (Paris: Aubier, 1997), Nicolas Adell-Gombert examines the tradition in French folklore that the two sisters are sterile: Martha the older sister, identified since Ambrose with the haemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:21–34), had no choice; while Mary Magdalene after her conversion voluntarily chose a life of chastity although retaining her role as spiritual mother to young converts.

The final chapter by Pascale Quincy-Lefebvre considers how perceptions of Mary Magdalene are expressed in Christian forms of hospitality in the context of establishments founded in the 19th century by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Charité du Bon Pasteur d'Anjou, to provide refuge for penitent women, known as “madeleines,” and then in their responses to the spread of Marxism in the 1950s and the impact of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

Despite the variety of material covered in this rich little interdisciplinary volume and its multiple authorship, there is a remarkable thematic unity about it. The original biblical texts about the two sisters and their house in Bethany are never totally lost sight of, and perhaps rather unexpectedly, the result is a kind of biblical commentary that has more to say on the dynamics of the story as it has evolved down the centuries, than many a more conventional commentary. It is to be hoped that it will reach students of the Bible as much as students of art history, anthropology and the other disciplines so well represented in this valuable resource.

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