

Jesus and Mary Magdalen

1. *Mary's Gift* by Chinese artist-theologian, He Qi (huh-chee) joins East with West in his painting of Mary Magdalene approaching Jesus, holding a jar of spices. Many have wondered about the ominous-looking faces in the background. These, He Qi explains are masks of Chinese folk-characters representing the self-righteous disciples who decried Mary's wasting perfume that could have been sold for money to help the poor. In his words, They were so hypocritical, I painted them in angry masks worn by actors in a Chinese drama. In the foreground, however, colorful swirling abstract forms suggest a blessed fragrance filling the room, the ointment preparing Jesus for his burial. During the Revolution, He Qi was employed painting huge public murals of Mao, but by night he secretly copied Italian renaissance artist Raphael's images of Mary and Jesus. It was the beginning of his conversion to Christianity. After the Revolution, He was the first Chinese artist and scholar to receive a degree from a western university.

2. *Christ Blesses Mary Magdalene*. In a poignant tribute of generosity and surrender to One she had grown to love and welcome into her family home, Mary Magdalene bends to wash Jesus' feet and learns with a heavy heart that she is anointing him for his burial. Paradoxically then, this joyous moment for her also anticipates a sorrowing separation and loss. In his stenciled print, Japanese artist Sadao Watanabe and his wife, bring a fresh narration to Mary Magdalene's devotion in bright primary colors. The beautiful linear patterns create a harmonious unity in the overlapping figures: the reverence of the Angel standing-by in prayer as Christ raises his hand in blessing, the finger tip of his other hand touches the woman's hair. Interestingly, Mary is dressed in red, Jesus in yellow and the Angel's whose wings resemble a butterfly's, is wearing blue.

3. *Washing the Feet of Jesus* Forgiven sinner or loving saint, this woman washes the feet of her Lord with tears of contrition and joy. Mary Magdalene's long unbound hair which she uses as a towel to dry His feet, binds her to the One she loves. Beside her is a vessel of precious ointment brought to anoint Yeshua (Jesus in Aramaic) for his burial. In the eyes of some, she is just giving the simple service any visitor in an Eastern home would expect; but for one disciple, she is too lavish, wasting expensive perfume that might be sold and given to the poor. Only then does everyone learn that Jesus is soon to die -- they will lose him, but may find him again in the poor they will always have with them. When painting Biblical scenes, Indian artist Frank Wesley was not interested in literal illustrations, but painted with an inner eye and sense of mystery -- a humble outward sign of inward grace.

4. The imaginative and deeply committed village people of Mafa parish in Northern Cameroon have learned to identify with and imitate the enthusiasms and sufferings of Jesus by reenacting more than 60 gospel scenes -- painted and now shared with missions around the world. Unlike most crucifixion scenes, this portrayal, evokes a sense of intimacy with the dying Christ, his agonies borne by Mary, his mother and Mary Magdalene, his disciple and friend. For Christians, suffering may be valued as redemptive, transforming those who participate fully, willingly in the mystery of the Incarnation. It is by his bruises that we are healed. (Is. 53) There are no halos in Mafa paintings, but often show a flat-gold background similar to medieval icons, that speak of hope, while living the Mysteries of God-among-us. It is the intention of the villagers in Mafa that this native imagery enhance and complete the fullness of Christ's presence on earth.

5. *Who Will Roll Away the Stone* by Malaysian artist, Hanna Varghese, captures in her batik image, the mundane work, and real distress of three women disciples who came to the tomb Easter morning to anoint their beloved Teacher and Friend. Courageously ignoring the dangers that kept others away, they seemed, however, less concerned about themselves and dared to approach the dead remains of a condemned and crucified man. Although these women have been admired for centuries for their steadfast convictions and pure audacity -- the Gospels do not agree on who they were. In one Gospel, the three Marys would include his mother, his aunt and Mary Magdalene; in another, they are named as Jesus' supportive women disciples: Mary Magdalene, Susanna and Joanna. All together, eight women are recorded. Nevertheless, three may have significance: As Jonah was in the belly of the whale 3 days and three nights, so shall the son of man be in the heart of the earth -- and on the third day He rose from the dead.

6. *Mary Magdalene, First Witness to the Resurrection* by Texas sculptor John Collier is part of Memorial at Ground Zero in a small chapel damaged by the terrorist attacks and used as an emergency shelter on 9/11 for rescuers to rest, eat, talk and pray together. The memorial honors victims, rescuers and survivors of the destruction, including all who lived and died that day -- witnessed by the entire world as an assault on our shared humanity. Mary Magdalene is seen running swiftly to the tomb on Easter morning, carrying spices to attend to her Friend and Teacher who had died. Her courageous, heart-felt presence is a remembrance for all the loved ones who perished: for airline employees and passengers, fire fighters and police, and workers in the Twin Towers. In this way the memorial honors the living, the survivors, loving family and friends and those who took part in the recovery -- all who offered time, talents and efforts following the fall of the Twin Towers. In the hopeful words of Cardinal Egan dedicating the Ground Zero Catholic Memorial, this image of Mary Magdalene invites us to share a belief in Christ's triumph over death, love over hate. It provides a sense of peace and hope amid memories of violence and hopelessness. In addition to the sculpture of Mary, artist John Collier was commissioned to design a memorial that includes several near-life-sized sculptures representing the patron saints of police officers and firefighters. He writes of his work: As grand as any secular memorial might be, it can only say, "Remember."

