

**Da Vinci's Last Testament:
Magdalene-Madonna and Child with John the Baptist**



Image © Fiona McLaren

By Ariadne Green

Generic Madonna and Christ or Magdalene-Madonna and Child: An Analysis and Interpretation

There are three classes of people: those who see, those who see when they are shown, those who do not see. –Leonardo Da Vinci

With the discovery and unveiling of what could very well be Leonardo Da Vinci's final masterpiece, there was only a whisper of excitement when one would expect a thunderous roar. Outside of a week's worth of syndicated articles in August 2012, the discovery did not elicit many commentaries. The lack of enthusiasm was probably due to a weak first impression of the composition and because the painting has not yet been authenticated and scientifically dated. However, the expert evaluations done by Harry Robertson at Sotheby's, Sebastian Times of Antique Roadshow, and Professor Carlo Pedretti at the University of California form a consensus that if not painted by Da Vinci himself, at the very least, it is a 16th century work of the Da Vinci school.

The painting of a Madonna and Child hung in Fiona McLaren's family residences in Scotland for nearly half a century after it was gifted to McLaren's father in the 1960's. It was passed on to McLaren by her mother some time after her father's death and was nearly relegated to a rubbish pile because it was thought to have little or no value. Now, if authenticated as a Da Vinci, it is anticipated to fetch over 100 million at auction.

Few have attempted to analyze the painting or offer many insights and interpretations, except for those given by Fiona McLaren, author and owner of the painting. In her book, *Da Vinci's Last Commission*, she makes a gallant effort to authenticate the painting by drawing a few parallels to other Da Vinci works.

I must confess, in the first hours of examining the composition, it looked like any another generic Madonna and Child with John the Baptist, a common composition of the High Renaissance. However, after re-examining the painting with fresh eyes I was astonished by what and how much was cleverly concealed. The façade faded away to reveal what the "Master" Da Vinci encoded and envisioned: a heretical masterpiece composed of arcane symbols, optical illusions, purposeful omissions and layered meanings to put forth his last testament. There is no doubt in my mind, none whatsoever, that this painting was put to canvas by the man history has hailed the "Renaissance Man"—Leonardo Da Vinci. And there is no doubt in my mind that the Madonna in the painting is really Mary Magdalene, an opinion shared by McLaren.

I want to mention, I approached the task of interpreting the painting not as an art historian but as a dream and symbols expert who has a keen eye for hidden elements (good figure ground skills) and an understanding of the metaphoric language of the soul, symbology, mythology and the history of Christianity. All of the hidden elements, whether optical illusions or arcane symbols, are not figments of an over active imagination. Nor do they require mirrors or magnification to see. Similarly, others have seen some of the very same clues I discuss within these pages, however, the majority were either not clearly identified or left un-interpreted because they were not fully understood. As with dreams, a masterpiece must be seen not only for its individual symbolic elements but also for what the entire composition communicates.

Literary theorist, Northrop Frye wrote,

"Art is a dream for awakened minds, a work of imagination withdrawn from ordinary life, dominated by the same forces that dominate the dream, and yet giving us a perspective and dimension on reality that we don't get from any other approach."

This painting brings to light the secret symbolic world of the artist and unveils a legacy of heretical facts that Leonardo held as truths. Like a dream it is composed of many layers of meanings and contains both universal and personal symbols. It had to be painstakingly analyzed and interpreted with unbiased intuition to glean out the intended message of the artist dreamer. It was a puzzle that I had to piece together.

Art like dreams are often misinterpreted. A case in point was Sigmund Freud's interpretation of Da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with St. Ann*. Freud "imagined" a vulture in the Virgin's garment when the painting was viewed sideways. He associated the vulture with Leonardo's earliest childhood memory of a bird flapping its tail at his mouth. From this, Freud postulated Leonardo manifested a "passive homosexual" childhood fantasy caused by the memory of sucking on his mother's nipple (the vulture tail flapping at his mouth). Much to Freud's dismay however, the word "vulture" was a mistranslation by the German translator and, in fact, the bird in Leonardo's memory was a kite.

Hopefully, I have made no mistakes as grave as Freud's. My approach in the following analysis and interpretation was to let the painting speak for itself and for my intuition guide me in deciphering the clues.

The Facade

For the moment, let us consider the painting just as it appears on the surface—a Madonna and Christ Child with John the Baptist. Certainly, the Madonna's mantle, a rich ultramarine blue over a red under-dress is her standard attire and dates back to the Byzantine period. Ultramarine

was used for the Madonna's mantle in paintings because it was the most expensive pigment, considered more valuable than gold. The worth of the pigment and its color was considered appropriate for the Madonna's divine status as the Virgin Mother. It signified motherhood and her humanity. The color also denoted royalty, an attribute transferred over from the Byzantine empress. The red is said to represent her virginity according to Catholic sources, but for many it denotes her passionate love. Her attire in the painting is well within the parameters set by the Church in the 13th century that the Virgin was only to be depicted in her traditional blue mantle. We have only to search art catalogues for an hour or so to find fifty or more paintings of the Madonna in her Marian colors.

And certainly the symbol of the carnation she holds tightly pressed between thumb and forefinger also has associations with the Virgin Mary. In fact, Leonardo used the symbol previously in his painting *Madonna with Carnation*. A Christian legend tells us the first carnation started blooming on earth when the Virgin Mary wept for Jesus as he carried his cross. From this legend, the carnation came to represent a mother's undying love.

But can we conclude from her attire and the carnation alone that the subject of the painting is without a doubt the Madonna and the Christ Child. After analyzing other Da Vinci masterpieces, many are convinced that with Leonardo "all is not as it seems." The owner of the painting and I agree—the subject is Mary Magdalene—but for only a couple of the same reasons.

A Christ Without Halo

The Christ child sitting on the Madonna's lap is without a halo, a curious omission. Instead, the infant has a fleur-de-lei, a trefoil or tri-leaf symbol or emblem projecting from the crown of his head. We notice, however, that the Madonna is adorned with her halo, as is John the Baptist, signifying their divine status. Had Da Vinci lost faith in Christ, stripping him of his halo and portraying him as a mere mortal? Was he hinting he was not the Son of God? Or did this incongruence mean something else entirely? Yes, it was something else. He was hinting at a secret, in much the same way that he hid clues in the Last Supper that Mary Magdalene was the "beloved disciple," not the Apostle John. What the missing halo signifies is that we are not looking at the baby Jesus at all.

The infant's pointing gesture is another clue that the Christ Child in the painting is not Christ. The most common gestural pose for this theme is with the Christ child holding two fingers (index and middle) up signifying Christ's blessing on John the Baptist. One example of the blessing gesture is in *Virgin and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist*, Correggio (Antonio Allegri, circa, 1489-1534) and in Da Vinci's own charcoal cartoon titled, *The Virgin and Child with St Anne and St. John the Baptist* which presents the same theme as *Virgin on the Rocks*. Although a subtle gestural change, it is significant in mentioning another identity, status and role for the child.

The Madonna's Facial Features: A Comparison

The face of the Madonna in our painting is quite demure, humble and compassionately maternal. In repose, she glances down at the child she holds with great respect and maternal love. Whether Da Vinci used a model or merely conceived her through his imagination is a question we will never be able to answer. But the face is not an unfamiliar one for those acquainted with his sketches. A sketch known as *Study for the Head of Mary Magdalene* (1465-1519 ca.), conserved at the Gabinetto dei Disegni e Stampe, of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, holds many similarities to the Madonna in the painting. So much so that we certainly could argue they are one and the same woman. The angled pose with head slightly bowed, the heart shaped face, pronounced broad forehead, delicate nose, eyelids and such are strikingly similar, in most cases identical. In fact, Da Vinci more than likely used his sketch as the foundation in constructing the face of the Madonna in the painting. Perhaps, he sketched her earlier in his career or just before commencing with his painting.

Not to say there are not slight and subtle differences such as the width and darkness of the brow, hair style, thickness of her lashes and a slight size variation in her lips. But for the most part, the faces resemble each other. The differences, perhaps, changes made at the last minute to his liking.



Study For Head of Mary Magdalene- Da Vinci

One could invariably argue that the Madonnas in Da Vinci's *The Madonna Litta* and *Madonna of the Carnation* also resemble the Madonna in our painting as well as the Magdalene in the sketch. In fact, there are some slight similarities in the facial features and hairstyle, especially in the depiction of the Virgin in the *Madonna of the Carnation*, whose hair is presented with small braids at the crown and delicate curls in the style of the sketch. However, the sketch was identified as the Magdalene not as the Virgin. The Madonna in our painting bears far more similarities to the sketch of Mary Magdalene than either of the other paintings I mention. Beneath the façade of Mary the Madonna (Virgin Mother) is Da Vinci's Mary the Magdalene, the beautiful maternal image he envisioned earlier when drafting the sketch.

A Madonna With Fleur-de-lis Tattoo

A prominent symbol of the painting, the stylized fleur-de-lis tattooed near the Madonna's clavicle just off the shoulder, immediately causes one to ponder its significance and poses a problem. Firstly, tattoos in the Christian world of the 16th century were not a fashion statement, reserved only for prisoners and generally frowned upon because of their association with pagan

practices. In fact, there is evidence to suggest they were prohibited. In the eyes of the Church, they would have been considered the mark of a sinner as set forth in Leviticus 19:28, “Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you.” Certainly, it would have been considered unbecoming for the Virgin Mary to be adorned with a tattoo, if not blasphemy. The inclusion of a tattoo on the Madonna was a brazen act of heresy and not likely to slip by unnoticed in a commissioned painting. This suggests the painting was never intended for public viewing, least the artist be hauled in front of Church inquisitors.

As for the symbol, the fleur-de-lis means, “flower of the lily” and is a well-established and recognizable emblem of France. Its origins at the very least are Merovingian, the French dynasty known as the longhaired Fisher Kings, whose royal blood was professed to trace all the way back to the biblical Noah and whose rule lasted over 300 years. The propaganda of the Church suggests that King Clovis (481 – 511 AD), who united all of Gaul under Merovingian rule, was the first to adopt the symbol at the time of his conversion to Christianity. Versions of the supernatural conversion vary from a vial of oil sent from heaven and delivered by a dove to anoint and sanctify Clovis at his coronation to a variation that says a lily appeared at Clovis' baptismal ceremony as a gift of blessing from an apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary. What is probably truer is that the fleur-de-lis was not given as a blessing of the Virgin Mother but one given by the Magdalene, especially in light of the fact she was Christ's anointer. The church has had its way of revising authentic legends to support their own Mariology doctrine.

What is mysterious and true is that there has been a shroud of secrecy surrounding the symbol of the fleur-de-lis, hinting at a bloodline connection of matrilineal descent from Mary Magdalene. A number of authors, beginning with Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln with their ground breaking book *Holy Blood Holy Grail*, have gone out on a limb trying to prove that Mary Magdalene was in fact the bride of Christ and that she and Jesus had at least one child, if not two. The theory makes a great deal of sense if we consider that a dynastic marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene would have been seen as necessary to preserve the bloodline of dynastic succession from King David. Laurence Gardner, author of *The Magdalene Legacy*, identified Mary Magdalene as a Hasmonean princess descended from the priestly line of Aaron from the Davidic throne. Her marriage to Jesus would have forged a tighter bond between the kingly line of Judah from which Jesus was descended and her priestly royal line of descendants from Aaron. With an aristocratic and wealthy lineage, Mary would have helped to support Jesus and his ministry.

Therefore, the fleur-de-lis was emblematic for the dynastic bloodline propagated through the vine of Mary Magdalene as well as a symbol of her cult. The bloodline produced a genetic pool of blood royals that included the Capetian kings and the descendants of Louis VII who was the first to adopt the symbol of the fleur-de-lis on his heraldry shield as a coat of arms. It

represented the vine of Mary Magdalene, much in the same way that the lion came to represent Jesus' dynastic inheritance from the vine of Judah.

Of the Merovingian connection, Margaret Starbird, author of *Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, points out that "Merovee" could be phonetically broken down to "Mer Vin," the vine of Mary Magdalene, perhaps intended to point out Merovee's descent from the vine of Mary Magdalene. Whether or not there was any phonetic connection intended, it is true the Fisher Kings stood out for their worship of the feminine, the cult of Diana, which was later transferred over to another goddess—Mary Magdalene as the cult of Mary Magdalene.

In Leonardo's mind, the child on the Madonna's lap is Mary Magdalene's own biological child. He discloses the secret with the omission of the halo and by replacing it with a fleur-de-lis. Mary Magdalene was another "madonna" to whom he was devoted and whom he believed deserved veneration over the Virgin Mother. This long held heretical secret was one that he and a brotherhood of others were bound to protect, but at the end of his life perhaps he had less fear and decided to throw out all caution to the wind. The fleur-de-lis springing forth from the baby's crown signifies his royal inheritance from his mother who also bears the insignia as the Hasmonean Princess who would become "Queen of the Heavens."

A coronation is an interesting theme conveyed symbolically in the composition. If we move away from the Christian legend connected to the carnation and towards its more esoteric and historic meaning, we can unravel the clue of the carnation. The carnation was originally named *dianthus* by a colleague of Plato, the Greek botanist Theophrastus (372-288 BC). The name *Dianthus* is from the Greek, *dios* ("god") and *anthos* ("flower"), and translates as "flower of God" or more precisely, "God's flower." Some scholars believe that the name "carnation" comes from "coronation" or "corone" because it was used in Greek ceremonial crowns as a garland of flowers. Others believe the name was derived from the Greek *carnis* (flesh), which refers to the original color of the flower, or *incarnacyon* (incarnation), which refers to the incarnation of God, "God made flesh." All three meanings bring new definition to the symbolic representation of the carnation. For Da Vinci, Mary Magdalene, was the coroneted Queen of the Heavens, "God's flower" and even perhaps the feminine face of God in the flesh.

The fact that the Madonna in the painting is really Mary Magdalene is supported by undeniable evidence found on the back of the canvassed wood on which it was painted, according to McLaren. Barely visible in writing, a description reads: "Magdalena." Alongside is a papal bull, a document and seal of decree from Pope Paul V. This strongly suggests the Vatican once possessed the painting and had discovered Da Vinci's heresy.

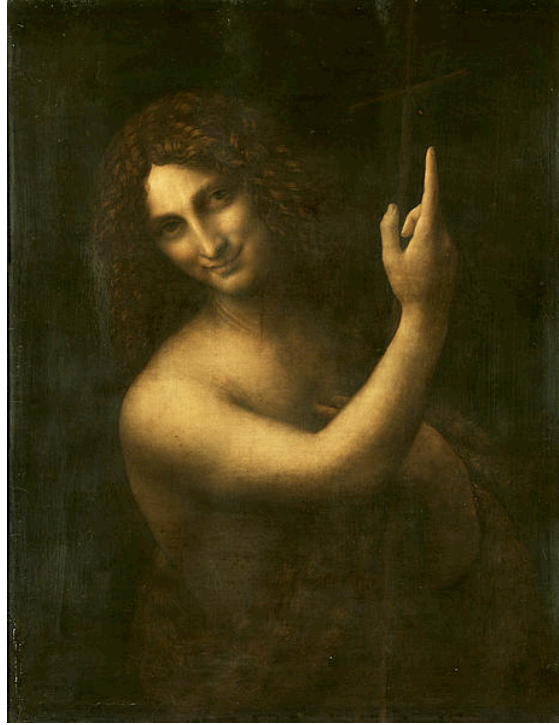
The John Gesture Debate About the Lamb of God

John the Baptist, who figures prominently in the composition as a child of comparable age to the child on the Madonna's lap, lends to the façade that the painting is a composition of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child with John the Baptist. John is easily identified wearing his woolen tunic,

holding his cross staff and standing in close proximity to a lamb, as he is often depicted in art conveying the Gospel narratives in John 1:1-32, summarized in the quote, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" In the painting, John is seemingly pointing to the lamb while looking in the direction of the child. At the same time, the baby on the Madonna's lap points back to John the Baptist in contradiction, as if to proclaim John the true Messiah (the Lamb of God). This heresy is also depicted in Da Vinci's *The Virgin of the Rocks* in which the angel Uriel all-knowingly points back to John the Baptist while John reverently bows in prayer before the Christ Child. This allegorical debate within the composition represents a controversial stance about who in the artist's mind is the legitimate bearer of the title, Lamb of God. For Da Vinci, at least for a time, it was John the Baptist who he venerated. According to Lynn Pickett and Clive Prince, authors of *The Templar Revelation*, the "John gesture" (pointing finger up) was an arrogant pose of superior knowledge that suggested Leonardo might have adhered to the Gnostic tenets of the Mandaeans. The Mandaeans were a Gnostic sect from the Northern part of Mesopotamia, who migrated there from Judea and whose name is derived from the Aramaic root, "manda", meaning: "knowledge." They claimed to hold the secret laws of God and believed that John the Baptist was the true Messiah. They rejected Jesus Christ as the Son of God, maintaining that he corrupted John's teachings. John's gesture, as rendered in the portrait *John the Baptist*, doesn't seem to be born out of arrogant superiority, but is instead a simple yet meaningful proclamation: "There is only one God." The index finger in the air pointing up coupled with his other hand at his heart, reminds us that the one God in heaven is in our hearts.

This heretical debate over who was the legitimate Lamb of God is even more clearly defined in a 16th century painting from an unknown artist who may have been one of Da Vinci's contemporaries. Titled, *Virgin and Child with Saints Elizabeth John and Michael*, the painting depicts John the Baptist perched next his mother Elizabeth holding onto a lamb and the Christ child on the Virgin's lap with his hand in the bowl of a balance scale held by Archangel Michael. Interpreted, Michael is determining the measure or worth of Christ's soul, presumably to determine if he is the legitimate Messiah as prophesized in Isaiah 53:1-12.

By reviewing the collection of paintings attributed to Leonardo Da Vinci, we notice the main subject of the vast majority of his paintings was John the Baptist. Some have suggested that his painting *John the Baptist*, like the *Mona Lisa*, possesses transgender or androgynous features. Others, including myself, have gone so far as to conclude that *John the Baptist* was in fact a self-portrait. Da Vinci may have painted himself as John the Baptist because he strongly identified with John as the archetype of the mystic preacher who had not received his due recognition. He painted John the Baptist in a darkened background perhaps to reference the description of St.



St. John the Baptist- Leonardo Da Vinci- 1513-1516



Virgin and Child with St. Elizabeth, John the Baptist and Michael, unknown artist 16th century

John in the Bible as 'a light that shineth in the darkness'. Perhaps, Da Vinci himself wished to be hailed: a bright shining light in the world.

On the surface, it appears that this last painting re-opens the same subject portrayed in *Virgin on the Rocks* for the same debate. But again, all is not what it seems, as I will explain later.

The Picturesque Setting

The backdrop and setting for the painting has been identified by experts as in Aix en Provence, where according to legend Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea, along with others who fled Judea after the crucifixion, resided and ministered. By legend, Mary died in Aix en Provence, at St. Baume in a mountain cave and was laid to rest at St. Maximin, not all too far from the valley in Da Vinci's representation. A trinity of three mountains, Mount Aurelien, Sainte-Baume and Sainte-Victoire, stand as sentinels for the valleys of Aix, a region of frequent pilgrimages in honor of the Saints who evangelized in the area bringing Christianity to Gaul.

The white limestone mountain in the distance, jeweled with tiny villages at its base, is Mount St. Victoire. Up until the 17th century, St. Victoire was called St. Venture a name probably derived from the earlier name, "Vintour," from the ancient Celtic-Lingures who named it to honor the gods of the wind. A chapel was built at its summit in the 13th century dedicated to "Sainte Venture." Since then the Provençaux call the mountain Sainte-Venture, Sainte-Adventure or Mont Venture. The Cross of Provence stands erect near the summit.

Leonardo probably chose St. Victoire as a backdrop because of its distinct features. It is a recognizable point of reference in Aix en Provence and therefore the viewer could easily make the connection between the location and the legends of Mary Magdalene. Or perhaps, Leonardo had his own more personal reasons for choosing this particular location such as memories born out of his own spiritual pilgrimage to the area.

With two strokes of his brush, Da Vinci brings attention to the apex of the mountain by painting a bird that after closer examination we notice forms an arrow pointing to the mountain summit. It is difficult to make out but there appears to be a tiny golden cross on the peak. Its significance may point to something less noticeable, something I will explain in due course.

John's cross-staff angles, pointing our eyes towards a small chiseled mound of earth and rock that serves as a pedestal for a cedar or cypress tree, a dominant feature in the scenery. What may not be immediately recognized is that the mound, in size and shape, possesses some of same features as Golgotha (Calvary), the site of the crucifixion. Behind John's cross is an elusive shadow of a perpendicular standing cross that could signify the "true cross" of the crucifixion. Symbolically, I would interpret it as the shadow of suffering and memory of the crucifixion that has lingered far too long.

When we adjust our eyes, we discover the first of the many optical illusions in the painting. On the front face of the mound of earth, a spirit face takes shape. First we may notice the eyes and the brows created out of the overhanging ledge and then perhaps the nose. The spirit face resembles Green Man, the pagan fertility deity. The face of this vegetative deity was commonly found carved in wood or stone in churches and on the facades of Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals dating from as early as the 5th and through the 20th century. Green Man has been interpreted to represent, rebirth, resurrection or “renaissance” because of its association with the vegetative cycle and the arrival of spring. Leonardo included him in the composition to convey something important.

What was Leonardo communicating with these symbolic elements? He is tying two important locations together, Golgotha in Jerusalem and Provence, to remark on the conclusion of one legacy and the beginning of another, a genesis—a new dawn. There atop Golgotha instead of the cross, a cedar stands as the symbol of immortality. The cross has transformed back to its root or original form, an evergreen cedar, which many have suggested was the wood used to construct the true cross. This transformation remarks on a rebirth or a renewal of consciousness. Adding to this interpretation, we notice the evergreen cedar has rich vegetation at its base, signifying abundant growth. Perhaps Da Vinci intended the vegetative growth at the base of the tree to be a part of Green Man's head. Green Man is often depicted in art and sculpture with vegetation growing out of his mouth and head. An example is the Disgorging Green Man on the tomb of St. Abre (c. 4th or 5th century CE), now in the church of St.-Hilaire-le-Grand at Poitiers, France.

Conversely, Golgotha, the place of the skull, was so named because of the unusual naturally chiseled rock formation that still maintains the shape and faces of skulls as a geological feature. It remains a poignant reminder of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross for pilgrims who journey to the Holy Land. It appears Leonardo replaced the skull faces with the face of Green Man to remark on a transformation from death to rebirth, a regeneration theme of renewal. He replaced one mythology for another to mythologize rebirth through resurrection, not the resurrection of Christ but instead the resurrection of the divine feminine—Mary Magdalene. She is resurrected out of the guise of penitent sinner and the shadow of Eve and emerges reborn as the Bride of Christ, but not alone. She is with her son and with him the promise of the continuation of the bloodline. Aix en Provence is the setting where her spirit survives.

Thus far and without a doubt it evident that Da Vinci is speaking to us about the legacy of Mary Magdalene in Provence while at the same time mentioning the crucifixion of Christ and the heretical debate over who was the legitimate lamb of God. This bridge between Golgotha and Provence mentions a renewal of consciousness and of faith, from the suffering of Christ's crucifixion to a renewal with a new focus on his sacred bride, Mary Magdalene. Perhaps even intimating that the New Jerusalem was born through her arrival in Gaul. However, what is even more probable is that Da Vinci is pointing to his own revelations and a shift in his own consciousness achieved through some sort of spiritual experience with the divine feminine, Mary Magdalene. This brings us to what in truth John the Baptist is pointing his finger.

Mary Magdalene as The Lamb of God

If we reexamine the painting, shifting our perspective just enough, we notice that John's finger points to Mary Magdalene (her lap) not to the lamb, as our mind first perceived it out of our expectation. Leonardo's genius created this ambiguity with his knowledge of optics.

In Leonardo's mind, the debate is over and he must admit his mistake in overly identifying with John the Baptist, proclaiming him the Messiah, and dismissing the Goddess. Leonardo as John the Baptist now proclaims a different heresy: Mary Magdalene is the Lamb of God. His choice of the carnation she is holding punctuates this revelation through its symbolic meaning. As we recall, it represents her "coronation," as Queen of the Jews, Queen of the Heavens, Daughter of God, and God made flesh, "in-carnation." For Leonardo, Mary Magdalene is the salvation for the world as the embodiment of wisdom Sophia, the feminine aspect of God and "the one who knew the all." One might wonder if Leonardo reread Isaiah 53 and recognized how if one substituted "she" for "he," the prophecy takes on a whole new meaning. It must be appreciated in its entirety but this portion makes this point:

"He was despised and rejected – a man of sorrows, acquainted with bitterest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way when he went by. He was despised, and we did not care."—Isaiah 53:3

We must admit that Mary's penitent sinner status certainly could be equated with "a woman of sorrows, acquainted with the bitterest grief", someone whom others would reject as the bride of Christ.

Leonardo might have appreciated this redaction (gender change) of the 16th century translation of John 3:16:

For God so loved the world, as to give his only begotten Daughter; that whosoever believeth in her, may not perish, but may have life everlasting.

Why John Has No Foot

A curious element in the painting, John's missing foot, leads us to believe Leonardo once again left a masterpiece unfinished, something truly characteristic of his paintings that drew criticism and frustrated his patrons. However, I believe the painting to be near finished and that this missing element was deliberately left unfinished to mention a cripple. Leonardo was pointing out his own physical condition. Furthermore, Leonardo is revealing his identification with John the Baptist by painting him with no right foot, symbolizing his own paralysis. There was no better way to portray a handicapped man without confusing the viewer.

If the painting truly was Leonardo's last commission as proposed by McLaren, then he was in the later stages of his life when he painted it. The last three years of his life were spent in the service of Francis I, the King of France, who offered him the manor house, *Clos Luce*, as his residence in Amboise. While there, in 1517, he suffered a stroke that paralyzed his right side. But, because he was left-handed this disability did not hinder him from painting. It was during this time, between 1517 and his death in May of 1519 that Leonard painted this Magdalene-Madonna. Some twenty years after Leonardo's death, Francis I was quoted as saying, "There had never been another man born in the world who knew as much as Leonardo, not so much about painting, sculpture and architecture, as that he was a very great philosopher."

The Grail Table

John's invisible foot rests and bears its weight on another important element that at first glance merely appears to be a piece of wood in the foreground. To understand what it represents, we must look again to the symbol of the lamb posed lying on it. Considering an alternative meaning for the lamb, we can render it a double meaning. In this case, the lamb represents the Pascal lamb associated with the Passover meal at the house of Simon, the Last Supper. Therefore, the slab of wood is really a table. Though not the same height as the table Da Vinci painted in *The Last Supper*, we do notice that Mary's left knee does fit beneath it, confirming that we are looking not at a slab or plank of wood on the ground but a table as a foreground that extends on three sides beyond the paintings parameters. Leonardo probably shortened it to make the painting work as a composition. Although McLaren didn't recognize the piece of wood as a table, she did mention that Mary's slanted pose is reminiscent of her position in the Last Supper. The angles line up well when the image is superimposed.

The question arises how does the Last Supper table fit into the setting of Provence and what was Leonardo wanting to convey symbolically? For the answer, we must look for deeper meaning and associations in Grail mythology, specifically in *La Queste del Saint Graal*. In this Christianized version of the myth attributed to a Cistercian monk of the 13th century, the worthy knight Galahad is offered his place at the Grail table (the Perilous seat) and a glimpse of the Holy Grail. Part of the legacy and history of the Grail table is given in the following passage:

After Christ's coming were three chief tables: first, that of Christ, at which the apostles often ate, and of which David spoke; second, the table of the Holy Graal, brought here by Joseph of Arimathea, when he came with 4000 poor companions.

The description of the histories of the three chief tables remarked on either three churches that emerged from Jesus' ministry or what is more correct three periods in the evolution of the same church. The table that "David spoke of" referred to the account of the love bond and covenant between King David and Jonathan, the son of Saul. This relationship of kinship propelled David to offer the "kindness of God" to Jonathan's son Mephibosheth, a cripple, seating him at David's own table rather than eradicating Saul's line. The covenant symbolically united two tribes of

Israel that of Benjamin and that of Jesse. In the same way, Christ's table as described in the grail quest was merciful, inclusive and the place where a covenant was formed between apostles, brothers and brethren. The Grail Table, as the second table, represented the table of initiation where a dissemination of mystical teachings from master to disciple was accomplished. These rites of initiation and teachings were brought to Gaul by Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea and represented the second chapter of Christ's ministry, hence the second table. And the third table, referred to the "roundtable" connected to the Templar legacy.

Therefore, Leonardo is referencing two tables in his painting, and two periods in the history of Jesus and Mary Magdalene's legacy, drawing from the mythology laid out in *La Queste del Saint Graal* which we can be sure he would have enjoyed reading for its mythologizing of the high history of the Holy Grail. By seating Mary Magdalene at the Grail table, Leonardo is mentioning that Mary Magdalene carried the covenant forward with her ministry in Provence.

Why does Leonardo rest John's missing foot on the table? The obvious answer is to bring attention to the missing foot. But I can't help but wonder if Leonardo wasn't humbly asking for the power of the Grail, Christ's intercession and Mary's compassion, to restore him to health and for his sins to be forgiven as they were forgiven in the gospel of account of the paralyzed man (Mark 2:1-12). He also could have been pointing back to the legend and account of King David welcoming the crippled son of Jonathan to sit at his table as an act of humility and compassion.

V's and Widow's Peak

To authenticate the painting as a Da Vinci, McLaren points out a number of "V's" in the painting and describes them as representing the divine feminine, the V-shape chalice pointing to the mystery of the Holy Grail. The theory that Da Vinci encoded *The Last Supper* with the V-shape, signifying Mary Magdalene was the Holy Grail, was first introduced by Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln in *Holy Blood Holy Grail* and later sensationalized in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Specifically, McLaren points to the noticeable V part-line in Mary Magdalene's hairline as a known characteristic in another of Leonardo's paintings. However, from our perspective the hairline symbol is the inverted V, not the chalice V, and therefore, the interpretation may not be exactly correct. Needless to say, it is only part of an equation being conveyed by Leonardo. After closer examination, we notice the baby has the reverse, the V, as a quite pronounced widow's peak. Da Vinci had encoded this painting with arcane symbols, the V and inverted V that point to a mystery associated with the tenets of the underground Gnostic stream of Christianity. These two symbols fused together form the "X" that can be found in religious art of the Middle Ages and recognized now as a symbol adopted by a secret underground community of Christians. The two symbols further point to the mystery of the sacred union, sacred bride and bridegroom united in the bridal chamber. In psychological alchemy it is referred to as the *sacred marriage*. The V (masculine) and inverted V (feminine) join together as the unification of

opposites, male and female, descending spirit and ascending matter, fire and water. This unification principle is also symbolically represented in the Star of David that merges descending and ascending triangles. The same mystery Jesus taught to his disciples as the key to the realization of the Kingdom of God. The *Gospel of Thomas* saying 22 reads,

They said to him, "Shall we then, as children, enter the kingdom?"

Jesus said to them, "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter the kingdom."

And what of John the Baptist who has a quite pronounced inverted V in his hairline to complement Mary's? Now that we have established that Leonardo had painted himself as John the Baptist, we can perhaps understand why he would distinguish himself with the inverted V. My thoughts are perhaps Leonardo was in fact gay, as many have concluded from his history and from the androgynous features in the *Mona Lisa's* face and the portraits of John the Baptist. I believe Leonardo identified more with the feminine soul than with the masculine archetype and that he was hinting at a personal secret as cleverly as he could.

Afterlife of Optical Illusions

The day after the photo of the painting was released in a UK newspaper article about the discovery, a comment left by a young man mentioned an illusive image of an animal that he described as a horse in the right hand side of the upper quadrant of the painting. The image emerges from the seemingly blank space as an illusory spirit horse whose profile faces right near the edge of the wooden canvas. Once the nostril opening is noticed, the head of the horse crystallizes. After closer examination, not only does a horse become visible but also two, if not more, superimposed or overlapping faces emerge within the same area. They appear as two bearded men, one a profile facing left, the other a frontal pose. The faces emerge as our eyes and brain adjust and interact to perceive the many optical illusions Leonardo painted into the background. The profile of the man with beard facing left I concluded to be a self-portrait.

For Leonardo, optics was at the foundation of painting. Throughout his life, he observed optical phenomena and recorded them in geometrical diagrams and jotted down lengthy notes, made sketches and drawings within his notebooks. Leonardo studied ancient and medieval optical treatises such as those of Aristotle, Euclid, and Ptolemy to name a few. He imagined and created experiments with colored light sources, projective screens, mirrors and apertures, and investigated optical illusions and their errors. He seemed fascinated by the interaction between sensory information and the intellectual processes of the 'sensus communis' (Aristotle's principle), imagination, and memory, in an attempt to explain the role of the senses in the

acquisition of knowledge. The genius of Da Vinci should never be underestimated. He had developed techniques beyond any artist in his time or for that matter in our time to create complex and astonishing imagery with many layers of visual experience all loaded with meaning.

The question arises: What did Leonardo have in mind in painting such an illusory space with layers of faces and to include his own? Was he merely practicing an illusionary optic technique to create supernatural ghostly figures for mere amusement or was something plaguing his mind?

Leonardo had been plagued by ill health the last two years of his life. The paralysis that left him disabled would have surely frustrated him. As his body weakened he probably knew he would soon depart this world for the next. He recognized death was eminent and perhaps welcomed it. His philosophy of death is best expressed by this quotation, "As a well spent day brings happy sleep, so a life well spent brings happy death."

After piecing together the clues, I have concluded that Da Vinci was contemplating his own death, his transition from this world to the next— an afterlife. The ghostly and elusive and illusory faces were painted in a spirit world, heaven, beyond the world we know yet at the same time interfacing it. Perhaps one of the faces alongside him was his father whom he imagined would be there in a bardo to greet him. And if the other faces are not just creations of the imagination, then perhaps they are friends who had made their transition years before and there now to help him complete his own journey. The bridled horse for the heaven bound traveler mentions another helper on his journey to the other side. We know that Leonardo was an animal lover. Horses were often the subjects of his sketches and he once created a silver lyre in the shape of a horse's head on which he performed an improvisational piece that drew him praise. It would be natural for him to paint a beloved and familiar animal ally to be with him on this journey into the heavenly realms. What is clear to me is that Da Vinci was preparing spiritually for his death and that perhaps the process of painting was helping him make peace with the fact.

Da Vinci's Conversion

The painting now can be accurately named: *Magdalene-Madonna and Child with John the Baptist*. Painting this masterpiece was Leonardo's way to record and define his awakening, knowledge and revelations, a change and complete transformation in his consciousness and in his thinking. For Leonardo, Mary Magdalene was not the epitome of penitence or merely one of the Apostles. And she was more than the carrier of a bloodline, more than a Hasmonean Queen whose lineage was more regal and priestly than Jesus' and she was more than the bride of Christ. She was the divine feminine through whose heart Leonardo could embrace the afterlife and touch the more divine aspect of his own feminine soul. She had truly become defined in his painting as the feminine face of God and also perhaps as a substitute for his own mother, Caterina, who he was separated from at an early age. He was intimately bonded to the Magdalene in his last years.

The painting remarks on a progression and integration of spiritual knowledge and understanding that he could no longer keep to himself. He left enough obvious and even brazen clues in the painting to demand a more thorough search for additional clues to put the pieces of a puzzle together of a truer legacy for Mary Magdalene as well as for him. A scientist turned mystic who had transcended his arrogance and abandoned his previous spiritual misconceptions in defiance of the Church, he was now a humble man and a determined soul. He was desperate and determined to leave this world having expressed what he knew to be true and what his heart felt. One can't help but wonder if he foresaw a time when his heresy would be more accepted.

There is evidence to suggest that Leonardo had a deep calling, a destiny that he may have been privy to at an early age. Da Vinci reveals in *Selections from The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, that one of his earliest memories was a dream of a kite. In his own words,

"Writing about the kite seems to be my destiny since among the first recollections of my infancy it seemed to me that I was in my cradle and a kite came to me and opened my mouth with its tail and struck me several times with its tail inside my lips."

Numerous dream researchers including Freud and Erich Neumann have discussed Leonardo's dream. From a transpersonal and shamanistic perspective of dream interpretation, the kite (Falcon) was an animal ally, a spiritual messenger helping to open the mouth of the young Leonardo before he could even speak. Perhaps, he arrived to signal the time for Leonardo to utter his first words. The dream was to remind him throughout his life that his destiny was to express through his gifts and genius what others could only imagine. He was to express the unspeakable truth.

Jesus Hidden In the Background

In further examining the painting, we see an irregularity with Mary's right hand resting against her son's chest. The thumb and forefinger are recognizably those of a man, not of a woman. When compared to the other three more delicate and slender fingers with long nails they are quite larger and the broad thumbnail is noticeably clipped. This oddity was one of the first I noticed in the painting and puzzled me for several days. My first thought was that once again Leonardo was pointing to the androgyny of the soul as he had in so many earlier paintings like the *Mona Lisa*. However, with closer examination, we can see there are really two hands. Mary's hand and arm covers the majority of the man's fingers and her son rests his hand on the man's hand signifying an emotional connection and bond. The three hands together represent a family bond: father, mother and child, as a unit bonded with love. But from where does this hand appear? Would Da Vinci have painted such a surreal anomaly without artistic explanation? No. Figuratively speaking, the hand belongs to the man sitting with them—Jesus Christ.

To find Jesus in the painting we must travel up the canvas back to the arrow created out of the bird's wings. There we may notice that a wing lies adjacent to a cheek and points down to the

jaw line of another large illusory face emanating from the background. Its chin rests in the concave dip of the mountain and once our eyes adjust, comes completely into form above and adjacent to Mary's right shoulder.

The face that is in correct proportion to the disembodied hand, I thought at first to be masculine. Someone else who noticed the emanating spirit face mentioned it looked like a Sun god. For a time, I concluded the face must be Jesus, whose hand appeared manifest beneath Mary's hand as well as beneath the infant's. However, the feminine features of the face haunted me for several days and because I noticed a shadow of light outlining a veil descending from the figure's head down the bridge of the Magdalene's nose, I decided to take another look with fresh eyes the next morning.

What emerged was nothing short of astonishing. Another face emanates from in front and behind as well as just above the feminine illusory face as if the two were partly superimposed. It is another optical illusion and more difficult for the brain to grasp. The eyes and nose of the face are captured within the left side of Mary Magdalene's halo. Once noticed, it takes only a moment or two for the image to crystallize. This face is clearly masculine and because of its proximity to the now clearly defined feminine face with veil, we are delivered to the images Leonardo had in mind.

We can venture a guess that these godly spirit figures are the ascended spirits of Mary Magdalene and Jesus, portrayed as divine complements, god and goddess, Christ and Christa and husband and wife. Apparitions born out of the vision of a genius and put to canvas. Amongst other things, Da Vinci had painted a worldly and otherworldly family portrait. And he had included himself as he envisioned his entrance into the heavenly realm would be. With this in mind, we recognize that Leonardo fully expected to be greeted by Christ and the Magdalene at the end of his life as he made his transition. Now we notice Mary does seem to be looking in Leonardo's direction and that he stands humbly before her and her partner, Jesus.

Seeking to add a bit more so that important connections were made, Leonardo again applied his knowledge of optics to the eyes he painted for the spirit of Mary Magdalene (the woman spirit with veil). With a perceptual shift, the eyes change from glazing downward and towards the right side of the canvas to glancing back in the direction of the cedar tree, as if to stress the importance of the mound with the tree. And, of course, as mentioned earlier, it is important in conveying the completion of the crucifixion mythology to usher in a period of rebirth and renewal. An old cycle is completed with God and Goddess resurrected together and reunited, reconciling the separation created in a pseudo-myth of a dying God without a partner.

There is a bit more meaning that we can extract from Leonardo's depiction of Jesus. We must first ask why Leonardo painted the hand fully manifest in human form instead of merely carrying forward the entire figure as an illusory spirit. Those already familiar with the discovery of a disembodied hand in Da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper* may see this in the same light—a hand

with a difficult to establish hidden meaning. My thinking is that Leonardo had a change of heart and change in position as to whether Jesus was an incarnated god. In combination, the human hand and divine spirit, translates to mean, "God made flesh," something I believe Leonardo was unwilling to accept in earlier years when he became influenced by many conflicting views of other traditions and because of his obvious disdain for the doctrine of the Church of Rome.

The depiction points to a conversion in his beliefs, but one that recognizes both God and Goddess as divine, having served humanity together. I believe this conversion was born out of a spiritual experience that expanded Leonardo's view and turned his old opinions and religious beliefs upside down. It is well documented that Leonardo planned for his own funeral, calling for three major masses and some thirty smaller masses at four different churches. He asked the church deacon and sub-deacon to accompany his body for burial, as well as a procession of sixty paupers to follow the casket. One might conclude he sought absolution for his sins and to be seen as a humbled true Christian, if not by his fellow man then to his heavenly companions, Jesus and Mary.



Jesus' face (eyes and nose) within the halo



Mary's Spirit: Her chin rests in the concave slope, eye and brow at edge of halo and veil cascades down the middle of the Madonna's face.

In Conclusion

The painting *Magdalene-Madonna and Child with John the Baptist* may very well be the most brilliantly laid out multilayered heretical painting of all time. I am of the opinion, after considering all the hidden clues found by myself and a few others, that its authenticity is a given: This was Da Vinci's creation, at the very least in its conceptualization, design, and composition. If not all done by his own hand, because of his weakened condition, then completed with the help of his lifelong companion and apprentice, Francesco Melzi, who may have assisted in rendering it to canvas. The expert verification of this fact will unfortunately have to wait until the painting is sent to the labs to be thoroughly examined. This is not scheduled until 2013, according to McLaren. Until then there are apt to be those who discover even more hidden symbols, illusory optical images, divine numbers and proportions that could add even more to this interpretation.

Packed with symbolic meaning, the painting summons us to see with new eyes to grasp a secret legacy that few in Da Vinci's time had any knowledge of. Leonardo, I am sure wished everyone could have known what he did and could comprehend what he envisioned for renewal, struggled with spiritually and believed to be true: Mary Magdalene was not the penitent sinner the Church had painted her to be. She was the Bride of Christ and the mother of his son.

This once lost and probably last masterpiece offers the clearest evidence to date that with certainty Leonardo coded his paintings with clues, metaphorical elements with hidden meanings, and arcane symbols to disclose heretical secrets. It should spark new interest and open the door

for more thorough analysis of Da Vinci's earlier works. Hopefully this interpretation will reopen what was begun by the authors of *Holy Blood Holy Grail* and dramatized in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* for serious discussion and debate, not only from conspiracy theorists, but those open-minded individuals who were waiting for some more substantial evidence.

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Links

Leonardo and Optics

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Fiona McLaren's Website

<http://fionamclaren.co.uk/>

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