



# Religious Affects and Female Subjects in the Altarpieces of the Finnish Artist Alexandra Frosterus-Sältin: A Case Study of the Jepua Altarpiece ‘Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene’ (1906)

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## Abstract

Before the mid-nineteenth century there were few subjects in the altarpiece tradition of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland in which the central figures accompanying Christ were female. Seldom used or new motifs involving female characters now emerged behind the altar. Most of the altarpieces with central women figures were painted in Finland at the turn of the twentieth century by the artist Alexandra Frosterus-Sältin (1837–1916).

In the nineteenth century Frosterus-Sältin was the only artist in Finland who realized the motif of ‘*Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene*’ in her altarpieces. In her final representation of the theme, the altarpiece in the church of the Finnish Jepua commune, she chose an unusual approach to the motif. My interest in the subject lies in the motif’s affective nature – the ways in which altarpieces in general have been actively used to evoke feelings.

Moreover, I consider the influence that Alexandra Frosterus-Sältin, a significant agent in Finnish sacral art, had on consolidating the position of women’s agency in the Finnish altarpiece tradition. I examine the motif in relation to the cultural and political atmosphere of the era, especially the changing gender roles and the understanding of women’s social agency as the women’s movement emerged.

*Keywords: affect; Alexandra Frosterus-Sältin; art history; Christianity; emotion; fin-de-siècle; Finland; iconography; religious art; women artists; women’s history*

In the mid-nineteenth century the circumstances surrounding the composition of altarpieces changed, as seldom used or new motifs involving female characters began to be seen behind the altar. There were few subjects in the

altarpiece tradition of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland in which the central figures accompanying Christ were female. Most altarpieces in Finland whose main figures are women were painted at the turn of the twentieth century by the female artist Alexandra Frosterus-Sältin (1837–1916).

In this article I discuss Frosterus-Sältin's altarpiece '*Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene*' in the church of the Finnish commune of Jepua. In the nineteenth century Frosterus-Sältin was the only artist in Finland who realized this motif in her altarpieces.<sup>1</sup> In her last representation of the theme, the Jepua altarpiece, she chose an unusual approach. My interest in the subject lies in the ways in which the altarpieces have been actively used to evoke feelings. I investigate the motif's affective nature, and how it conveys a message that aimed to turn the emotions of insecurity, fear, and despair stemming from rapid societal change in a more positive direction, benefiting the church and society.

Moreover, I consider the influence that Alexandra Frosterus-Sältin had on consolidating the position of women's agency in the Finnish altarpiece tradition. Frosterus-Sältin was generally a significant agent in Finnish sacral art, as her production covers nearly a third of the era's altarpieces.<sup>2</sup> I examine the motifs in relation to the cultural and political atmosphere of the era, especially the changing gender roles and the understanding of women's vocation as the women's movement emerged.

### **The role of female subjects in shaping the Finnish altar painting tradition**

Altar painting is a subgenre of monumental history painting. The artworks were therefore expected to be exceptionally sublime and distinguished. However, at the turn of the twentieth century, the attitude to altarpieces changed.<sup>3</sup> This was partly due to artistic Modernism, which emphasized the originality and autonomy of art. Altar painting and church art in general have often been considered inferior to other public art, due to its nature as commissioned work and the religious content of the genre (see, for example, Hanka 1988).

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1 I have come to this conclusion based on a list of altarpieces in Finland between 1800 and 1919 in Jorma Mikola's dissertation (2015, 360–79).

2 There have been different estimates of the exact number of Frosterus-Sältin's altarpieces. Jorma Mikola's (2015, 102, 104, 365–7) dissertation lists a total of sixty-five paintings, including not only Evangelical Lutheran altarpieces, but Methodist ones. The article by Heikki Hanka (1992, 137–57) supports these figures.

3 First, in the second half of the nineteenth century in Finland the old craftsman's tradition of church art was replaced by professional artists painting the altarpieces (see, for example, Hanka 1995, 20–4). However, by the end of the century, religious art in general was already seen as outdated and peripheral. The decline in the value of altar painting can be seen in the contemporary press response (see, for example, Mikola 2015, 176).

Fields dominated by women have also frequently been subject to disparagement. In the latter part of the nineteenth century altar painting in Finland saw an increase in women, both among its producers and in its motifs. Alexandra Frosterus-Såltin painted the great majority of such artworks, but other women artists, such as Elin Danielson-Gambogi (1861–1919) and Venny Soldan-Brofeldt (1863–1945), were also interested in the genre. In Frosterus-Såltin's oeuvre the most frequently used motif picturing a central female figure was *'Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene'*, which she painted as many as six times.

In the tradition of Protestant altar painting in Finland, few female subjects were seen behind the altar for a long time.<sup>4</sup> Yet in the late nineteenth century occasional motifs with female figures emerged, such as *'Jesus and the Canaanite Woman'*, *'Christ and the Samaritan Woman'*, and *'Christ Visiting Martha and Mary in Bethany'* – as well as *'Christ and the Fallen Woman'* and *'Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene'* in more numerous representations. Women also play an important role in the motifs *'Jesus Blessing the Children'* and *'Come unto Me'*.

This change in motifs is interesting and seems especially prominent in Finland. I have compared the motifs of altarpieces with those in Estonia. It is remarkable that in Estonian altarpieces of the same era no such change is apparent. As in Finland there are many depictions of *'Gethsemane'* and the *'Transfiguration'* in Estonian Evangelical Lutheran churches, but only one painting on the theme of *'Jesus Blessing the Children'*, and no motifs with women in the central position have been preserved.<sup>5</sup> In Sweden I could find no comprehensive study or extensive database on the subject, and I therefore could not draw similar conclusions.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, few female figures seem to be depicted behind the altar in Sweden.<sup>7</sup>

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4 In general, Erik Erikson (1958, 22) has stated that in Luther's theological formulations the father and son roles were transformed and revitalized, but feminine roles, identity, and theological presence were ignored. The role of the Virgin Mary was impoverished, and almost erased (Doyle 1974, 30–1). Yet in the context of marriage women and sex came to be seen as fundamentally good (Douglass 1974, 292–3).

5 See the database of the Estonian National Registry of Cultural Monuments (accessed 22 May 2019).

6 Hedvig Brander Jonsson's study *Bild och fromhetsliv i 1800-talets Sverige* (1994) offers a good general introduction to the religious visual culture in nineteenth-century Sweden, but it does not discuss altar paintings. Mabel Lundberg's *Kristen bildkonst under 1800-talet och det tidiga 1900-talet. Ett urval av bilder och idéer* (1984) also offers some insight into the religious art of the era.

7 However, concerning the emerging representation of women in Christian art generally, it is important to note that French academic art introduced themes with biblical women from the 1860s. In the Paris Salon of 1864 there were several motifs with biblical women, such as *'Christ and the Samaritan Woman'* by François Charles Savinien Petit (1815–1878) and *'Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene'* by Amédée Beaumes (1820–?), (Website of Moteur Collections, French Ministry of Culture. Accessed 30 June 2020).

Between 1860 and 1919 twenty-seven altarpieces were produced in Finland with a woman as a central figure, according to the preserved evidence (see, for example, Mikola 2015, 360–79). I have not included here the motifs of ‘*Jesus Blessing the Children*’ and ‘*Come unto Me*’, in which women play a minor role. Eleven of the motifs with women were painted by Frosterus-Sältin, and four by other female artists. Frosterus-Sältin’s depiction of women deviates from that in other artists’ works. Furthermore, she introduced entirely new motifs to Finnish altarpieces: ‘*Jesus and the Canaanite Woman*’, the two realisations of which remain the only ones in Finland, and ‘*Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene*’, which the artist painted six times between 1879 and 1906.<sup>8</sup> In addition to Frosterus-Sältin only Kaarlo Enqvist-Atra (1879–1961) seized on the latter subject. He used the motif in the Lempäälä church, pairing it with ‘*Gethsemane*’.

When the statistics about altar painting in Mikola’s research are examined, it seems that the first altarpiece of the century representing a central female figure was ‘*Widow’s mite*’ (1847) in the Nummi-Pusula area, which, as far as is known, remains the motif’s only realization (see Mikola 2015, 375). Artist Carl Gustaf Söderstrand donated the painting to the parish, but it seems to be the work of an unknown painter from St Petersburg.<sup>9</sup> The painting was not therefore a premeditated ordered work, and the motif was

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8 Researcher Jorma Mikola has interpreted the Harjavalta altarpiece ‘*Christ and the Canaanite Woman*’ as ‘*Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene*’, even though the contemporary press repeatedly referred to the painting as the former motif. He argues that the painting differs from the artist’s other painting on the same theme, which is in Messukylä in Tampere, because the Harjavalta painting does not include the disciples, there are white lilies in the painting, and the sky resembles the sky at sunrise. Mikola *Alttarilta alttarille*, 116–7, 177. I do not find Mikola’s suggestion convincing; indeed, I think it is highly unlikely. First, Frosterus-Sältin herself refers to the Harjavalta painting as the ‘*Canaanite Woman*’, ‘*Christos och caneiska qvinnan*’, in her letter to her brother, as also does the press, as Mikola himself has also noted (see Alexandra Frosterus-Sältin’s letter to August and Tullia Frosterus 21.5.1872, the Private Collection of Kurt and Tora Segercrantz; concerning the press reaction, see, for example, *ÅU*, 30 April 1878; *Morgonbladet*, 2 May 1878; *Satakunta*, 8 June 1878.) Second, the gestures and the painting’s mode do not resemble the motif of Christ appearing to Mary Magdalene in Frosterus-Sältin’s oeuvre. There is no tomb or angel, and the woman has grabbed Christ’s garment in a fashion similar to that in the Messukylä painting. In ‘*Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene*’ there is no physical contact between the figures. The basic rule is ‘*noli me tangere*’, ‘do not touch’. I therefore posit a counter-argument that the Harjavalta painting is indeed the ‘*Canaanite Woman*’. Moreover, researcher Heikki Hanka (1995, 22) has noted that the Harjavalta painting was sometimes also called ‘*Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene*’, but this was a misunderstanding caused by the artist’s use of the same figures in different motifs.

9 Church inventory by H.A. Reinholm, April 1, 1887. Pusula. Index of historical topographic materials. The Archives of the Finnish Heritage Agency; ‘Pusula’. The card index of altarpieces. University of Jyväskylä.

probably a mere coincidence. Before Frosterus-Såltin's paintings a woman appeared as a central figure behind the altar only in the motifs 'Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery' (John 8:2–11) and 'Christ and the Fallen Woman' (Luke 7:36–38). Robert Wilhelm Ekman (1808–1873) presented the former subject twice in the 1860s, and Bernhard Reinhold (1824–1892) painted the subject once in the following decade. Frosterus-Såltin painted each of the motifs once between the 1870s and 1880s. Nina Ahlstedt (1853–1907) produced one representation of the 'Fallen Woman'. In addition Elin Danielson-Gambogi (1861–1919), Eero Järnefelt (1863–1937), and Väinö Hämäläinen (1876–1940) painted the motif of 'Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery' once. The number of women artists producing the motifs is considerable when the total number of women altar painters is considered.

In late nineteenth-century European art women were often generally represented as mystical and irrational creatures like merciless Salome or fallen Eve. For example, the thematic of a sexually active woman generally fascinated the imagination of nineteenth-century artists, writers, and social critics in England. The masculine viewpoint of such representations has been underlined by art historians, and their models were found in the Bible, Greek mythology, or in the Finnish context, in the national epic *Kalevala* (Konttinen 1998, 10–23; Nochlin 1982, 221). In contrast, at the same time the female figure was also considered a symbol of purity. In Victorian England a woman's passivity and inability to defend herself against physical violence were seen as tokens of purity and feminine heroism.<sup>10</sup> It is also noteworthy that at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the human soul was increasingly depicted as either a fair young woman or a child. Good examples of the former in Finnish art are Venny Soldan-Brofeldt's *Angel Taking a Human Soul to God* (1906), which was painted after the artwork *Towards a Better World* (1894) by Spanish artist Louis Falero (1851–1896), and Akseli Gallen-Kallela's (1865–1931) painting *Ad Astra* (1894), in which a young girl with flaming red hair can be interpreted as the soul of the male artist himself (Hätönen 1992, 65; Kokkinen 2020, 21; Takanen 2016).

However, a character that serves as an allegory or symbol represents something other than her inner self. According to the early feminist art historians from the 1980s, women artists in the same era represented their own sex differently. They pictured realistic and compassion-evoking suf-

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<sup>10</sup> For example, in paintings such as *In Memoriam* (1858) by Sir Joseph Noel Paton (1821–1901), which was dedicated to 'Commemorate the Christian Heroism of the British Ladies in India during the Mutiny of 1857'. The women were considered martyrs for kneeling down and stoically letting themselves be violated and killed (Nochlin 1989, 4–5).

fering, and the subjective feelings of women.<sup>11</sup> Yet, according to Riitta Konttinen (1998, 17), the mourning and remorseful female figure in Finnish art differed from the figure represented in Victorian England, for example. It is noteworthy that the female figure in Finnish art often mourned death, loss, or disappointment in life, whereas her English equivalent was more often a fallen wife, driven from the domestic paradise, as Konttinen states, referring to Lynda Nead (1988). Furthermore, Konttinen (1998, 18–9) finds it remarkable that a great number of the pictorial representations of women in Finnish art seemed to promote their intellectuality and the need for their own space; she gives images of women absorbed in a book as an example.

In my view it is reasonable to argue that women artists represented female figures in their own ways in a similar manner; Frosterus-Sältin emphasized women's role in the altarpieces, and powerfully raised women to the site of the Finnish altar. She also underlines the significance of the female figures in the motifs of 'Christ blessing the children' and 'Come unto me' (see Takanen 2016). I will next introduce Frosterus-Sältin's perspective on the motif 'Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene' and then return to an analysis of the Jepua altarpiece.

### **A shift in focus and affectivity in Frosterus-Sältin's oeuvre**

In this paper I present two main features of the artist's approach. First, my Finnish case, the artist Alexandra Frosterus-Sältin, reflects a more general shift in the representation of Jesus, shifting the emphasis from his divine essence and miracles to his human nature and social activity. Second, her performance of this shift represents a distinctive approach, which can be related to the role of women in the kinds of Christian social work that emerged as a response to the anxieties associated with modernization, paralleling the rise of the women's movement and the increased call for women's social agency (for women's social activity in Finland, see, for example, Markkola 2000; Ollila 1998).

I approach the altarpiece from the perspective of contemporary iconographic research and place the artworks in the social, political, and cultural contexts of the era. The basis of my methodology is the Warburgian school's

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11 In Barbara Eschenburg's terms for a male artist woman represented 'a different species' (Konttinen 1998 11; Ehrenpreis, 1997, 33–5). Such pioneers of the Anglo-American feminist art history as Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (1981), as well as Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (1982, 7), have stressed the possibility of women artists depicting the female figures in their paintings differently from their male colleagues. Konttinen (1998, 16) highlights that in the late nineteenth century Finnish women artists represented even nude women as agents instead of objects, without emphasizing eroticism.

tradition of comparative cultural studies (*Kulturwissenschaft*), the purpose of which is to understand art in relation to its social, psychological, religious, and philosophical motives (Vuojala 1997, 36–7; Forster 1999). The theories should be subject to critical examination, as a researcher can never gain a complete insight into a past era and its worldviews. A researcher must also construct the context from the premises of our own time and place. Nevertheless, the approach offers essential tools for the interpretation of images – particularly in this case study.

Moreover, I approach the subject through the concepts of *affect* and *affectivity*. The concept of affectivity is utilized in art history when a connection with emotional bodily experience is emphasized. In contemporary cultural studies the concept is used as a contrast to the concept of emotion, which is more culturally understood. Yet it is applied to challenge the concept of mind-body duality (Koivunen 2010, 9–14; Probyn 2005, xv; Grosz 1994, 20–1). Thus, an affect is a more primal reaction or feeling, less defined by the culture than an individual emotion. I use the concept of *emotion* when speaking of a *named feeling*, visualized in the artwork, such as sorrow or anguish. In using the concepts of affect and affectivity, I refer to the effectiveness of the artwork on the level of feeling, that is, the specific way in which affect is used in the religious context to evoke feeling.

First, I will briefly introduce the artist. I will then proceed to the motif. Alexandra Frosterus-Såltin (1837–1916) (Fig. 1) was the daughter of theology professor Benjamin Frosterus and Vilhelmina Sofia (née af Gadolin). Her mother was the first woman in Finland to pass the matriculation examination. She died when Frosterus-Såltin was only seven years old. Her father wanted to educate his daughters as well as his sons, and Frosterus-Såltin therefore received a formal art education, first in Turku in Finland (1852–1857), then in Dusseldorf (1857–1859 and 1860–1862) and in Paris (1862–1863). In Dusseldorf she took private lessons from the portrait and history painter Otto Mengelberg (1817–1890), who greatly influenced her painting style. In 1866 Alexandra Frosterus married Victor Såltin (1833–1873), a hospital doctor in the Finnish city of Vaasa. However, she became the sole provider for her three children after her husband died unexpectedly in 1873 (Juusela 1983, 3–4; Hätönen 2001, 164–5). Over the years Frosterus-Såltin taught art, for example, at the nationally well-established Turku Drawing School, and utilised a large variety of motifs in her oeuvre, which included altarpieces, portraits, genre scenes, and illustrations.

The artist created almost a third of the more than two hundred Finnish altar paintings produced in the era (see Mikola 2015, 102, 104, 365–7),



Figure 1: Aleksandra Frosterus-Såltin. Photo: Daniel Nyblin, 1870–1875. Figure: National Board of Antiquities. The Historical Picture Collection.

and had a strong influence on the genre in the country, both on the variation of motifs and even on how the altarpieces are seen today. However, her work has been little studied. In Finland only Pirjo Juusela (1983) has embraced Frosterus-Såltin's entire oeuvre in her 1983 master's thesis in art history. Art historians Heikki Hanka (1992) and Jorma Mikola (2015) have produced a basic survey of her altarpieces in their presentations covering the entire Finnish altar painting production in the nineteenth century. However, no detailed analysis of the special characteristics of her artworks has been undertaken, although research focusing on Finnish nineteenth-century century women artists in Finland has increased since the 1980s. Furthermore, most late nineteenth-century church art was perceived as uninteresting – due both to its

commissioned nature and its popular appeal and the extensive use of the well-known prints of religious paintings as its models.<sup>12</sup>

The Lutheran church was the state church of Finland. Religious life was therefore very uniform in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Most people belonged to the church and saw their church's altarpiece regularly. The paintings reached a huge audience. Generally, since the mid-nineteenth century, the focus of Protestant altar painting in Finland moved towards a more human image of Christ. The previously popular '*Last Supper*' motif disappeared almost entirely. '*The Crucifixion*' also declined in popularity. They were replaced by motifs with different emphases, such as '*Come unto Me*'

12 Concerning copies, see, for example, Hanka 1995, 23.

13 The state church system of Finland was dissolved in 1870. Since then the state and the church have been separate actors. The Lutheran church is independent in its decision making. However, the Lutheran church continues to be the folk church of Finland, with most Finns as its members (website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, accessed 22 May 2019).



and 'Gethsemane' (see Hanka 1995, 22, 29). The change was part of a larger international phenomenon, as the themes of charity and compassion also became more common elsewhere in northern Europe, at least at the general level of religious art, if not behind the altar itself. For example, researcher Hedvig Brander Jonsson (1994, 267) mentions that Thorvalden's famous sculpture of Christ (1921) in the Vor Frue Kirke in Copenhagen 'was to be the most admired and reproduced work of art of the Protestant North' as 'to many people embracing the religious aesthetics of the 19th century a crucifix image was objectionable'. It was understood that Christ was to be portrayed as an embodiment of mercy and beauty. Brander Jonsson (*ibid.*, 279) finally notes that the iconography of compassion was abundant in pious imagery in nineteenth-century Sweden.

Frosterus-Såltin's works at first seem conventional in this context, but a closer inspection reveals variations and nuances that have renewed the depiction of these particular motifs in Finland. The women in many of her paintings appear in an active role – affecting their fate by seeking direct interaction with Christ (see Takanen 2011). The pathos is emphasized through the individuals' gestures and facial expressions. The artist introduced motifs in which individual women faced Jesus alone, as in '*Christ and the Canaanite Woman*' and '*Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene*', and made changes to other emergent motifs. Her treatment of the subjects such as '*Come unto Me*' differed from the prevailing convention.

### **Mary Magdalene in Frosterus-Såltin's oeuvre**

As previously mentioned, Frosterus-Såltin was the only artist in the nineteenth century in Finland who used the motif of '*Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene*' in her altarpieces, also known as *Noli me tangere* (Latin for 'Do not touch me'). The motif remained unusual well into the first decades of the twentieth century. Apart from Frosterus-Såltin only Kaarlo Enqvist-Atra realized it, once, in 1902 (Fig. 2). Yet I find it important to note that he paired the motif with '*Gethsemane*'. His treatment of the subject differs considerably from that in Frosterus-Såltin's paintings.

Frosterus-Såltin used '*Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene*' as the main altarpiece motif, rather than pairing it with another. The motif is based on a passage in the Gospel of John, in which Mary Magdalene encounters



Figure 2. Kaarlo Enqvist-Atra: Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene, 1902. The right-hand panel of the Lempäälä twin altarpiece. Photo: Parish of Lempäälä.

the risen Christ while visiting the tomb on Easter morning.<sup>14</sup> The other gospels mention two, three, or more women visiting the grave. The artist has therefore consciously chosen the one passage in which Mary Magdalene encounters Christ alone. The motif in her paintings thus differs from the altarpieces *'The Women at Jesus's Grave'* by Alma Judén in Nuijamaa (1904) and Berndt Lagerstam in Koivulahti (1905), in which an angel is addressing the women. The Koivulahti altarpiece is in fact a copy of Axel Ender's (1853–1920) painting *Engelerscheinung* (s.a.) in Molde Cathedral in Norway. It is indeed especially valuable to examine the lithographs of famous artworks in illustrated Bibles, which influenced artists widely.

Frosterus-Sältin painted the motif six times, the first in 1879 at Ilmajoki and the last in 1906 at Jepua.<sup>15</sup> I focus here mainly on the Jepua altarpiece, because its *gestics*,

14 'But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him. And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God'. John 20:11–17 (Authorized Version, AV).

15 She also painted the motif in Hämeenlinna (1892), Orivesi (1893, destroyed in a fire in 1958), Valkeala (1893, destroyed in a fire in 1920) and Virrat (1897).

or body language, differ remarkably from her other depictions of the motif. In Frosterus-Såltin's altarpiece for the church of Virrat, for example, she makes use of the usual *Noli me tangere* theme, where Christ forbids the awed Mary Magdalene to touch him immediately after he encounters her outside the tomb following his resurrection. According to the Gospel of Mark (Mark 16:9) Mary Magdalene was the first person to whom Jesus appeared alive after the resurrection. In the Authorized Version (John 20:17, AV) the passage reads:

Jesus saith to her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father; but go to my brethren, and say to them, I ascend to my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God.

Mary Magdalene reaches out to Christ, who avoids the touch. Doctor of theology Turid Karlsen Seim (2013, 47–49) has pointed out that in the passage Jesus is in a liminal phase, 'betwixt and between', in the middle of a transformation. The ascension is thus in process, and there is a certain tension in the scene. However, exegetes have long disagreed about the syntax of the original expression. Some researchers argue that Christ's words may indeed mean the more abstract 'do not hold on to me' rather than the physical 'do not touch me' (Rafanelli 2013, 145). Indeed, in the New International Version (John 20:17, NIV), the passage reads:

Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'.

The Ilmajoki altarpiece (1872) (Fig. 3) is the most traditional of the artist's uses of the motif, as Juusela (1983, 69) has already noted. On the right-hand edge of the painting Christ is standing in all-white clothing. Mary Magdalene, with reddish hued hair and dressed in a green dress, is kneeling next to a rock, diagonally in front of him. She is reaching out to Christ with both hands. Christ gestures to her with his right hand, which can be interpreted either as blessing or forbidding, or both. His left hand is pointing towards the heavens. The white lilies growing next to Christ are often connected with him and purity in Christian iconography (Ferguson 1961, 41). The surrounding landscape is bare and flat; a group of buildings can be seen in the distance. As an interesting detail the ground is green and fertile where Christ is standing, but the earth under Mary Magdalene's feet is barren and



Figure 3. Alexandra Frosterus-Sältin, *Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene*, 1879, oil painting, 191 x 96 cm. Altarpiece, Church of Ilmajoki, Finland. Photo: Heikki Hanka.

over death and sin (Ferguson 1961, 46). In the Virrat altarpiece the three crosses of Golgotha are seen in the distance, contrasting with the miracle of the resurrection.

Mary Magdalene is known as one of the most devoted followers of Christ. In the European tradition she has also often been identified as the sister of Martha and Lazarus in Bethany, though views have differed on this. Moreover, it is important to note that the figure of Mary Magdalene has often been connected to that of the fallen woman whom Christ encounters at the house of a Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50, AV), though the woman is unnamed (Murray and Murray 2004 [1996], 315–6). It remains unresolved whether these women are one and the same, or three completely different women. However, it is important to recognize the connection, as it may have affected the overall representation of the figure. This understanding of the figure of Mary Magdalene was especially present at the turn of the twentieth century.

covered with reddish sand. This contrast emphasizes the duality between humanity and divinity, death and resurrection. Green as a symbol of hope, life, and growth has often marked the anticipation of resurrection in Christian iconography (Lempiäinen 1988, 30–55).

The altarpieces of Hämeenlinna and Virrat are more similar to each other in their composition than to the Ilmajoki piece. Nevertheless, the basic gestures and the mode of representation are similar. There is only one exception: in the Virrat painting (Fig. 4) Christ's left hand is no longer pointing towards the heavens but is bent against his chest. However, the main transformation in the motif is the presence of an angel leaning on a stone slab and holding a palm leaf, symbolizing victory

It is therefore noteworthy that Frosterus-Såltin seems to have separated the two figures in her paintings. Traditionally, long red hair has been essential in picturing Mary Magdalene (Loverance 2007, 114). However, the Fallen Woman in Frosterus-Såltin's painting is dark-haired, while the woman in *'Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene'* has light hair with a reddish hue. In addition, in *'The Crucifixion'* and some of her other motifs, Mary Magdalene is represented with similar reddish hair. It seems to me that the artist may not have seen the fallen woman and Mary Magdalene as the same person. Yet the Mary in her Bethany painting bears a strong resemblance to Mary Magdalene.

Frosterus-Såltin painted *'Jesus visiting Martha and Mary in Bethany'* (1912) (Fig. 5) once for the Palosaari church in Vaasa. In the passage, Jesus and the disciples visit a village and stay at the house of Martha and her sister Mary. Martha serves the guests. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus to listen to him. Martha asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her, but Jesus tells her that Mary has chosen the 'good part, which shall not be taken away from her'. (Luke 10:38–42, AV) Constance Parvey (1974, 141) states that the story of Mary and Martha enables women to choose a new alternative, to depart from their ascribed role at the encouragement of Christ himself. This reflected a change in the status of women.

In my view the Bethany motif's treatment of Mary supports my perspective well with respect to the paintings of the *'Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene'* motif in Frosterus-Såltin's oeuvre. The artist herself offered to paint the altarpiece as a gift for the new church of Palosaari, completed



Figure 4. Alexandra Frosterus-Såltin: *Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene*, 1897, oil painting, 258 x 172 cm. Altarpiece, Church of Virrat, Finland. Photo: Parish of Virrat / Anssi Nyman.



Figure 5. Alexandra Frosterus-Sältin, Jesus visiting Martha and Mary in Bethany, 1912, oil painting. Altarpiece, Palosaari church, Vaasa, Finland. Photo: Parish of Vaasa.

in 1910. She suggested the motif of 'Jesus Visiting Martha and Mary in Bethany', because the name of the prayer house at the time was Bethany (in Finnish *Betania*).<sup>16</sup> The name, of course, partly motivated the choice, yet it remains noteworthy that this was the first time Frosterus-Sältin painted it. I assume that she preferred the theme herself, because it was she who made the suggestion. Jorma Mikola (2015, 181–2, see also Hall 1995) has observed that the motif of Martha and Mary in Bethany in the European tradition has often included the women's brother, Lazarus, and some disciples were also present. I therefore find it very typical of Frosterus-Sältin to rule the men out of the picture and focus on the relationship between the women and Christ.

### The case of the Jepua altarpiece

In the Jepua altarpiece (Fig. 6) the composition is quite different from the motif's previous representations in Finland. Mary Magdalene is kneeling towards the entrance of the tomb. Her back is turned to Christ, and she has buried her face in her hands. Rather than withholding his touch, Christ has extended his left arm towards Mary Magdalene, which suggests that he is encouraging the woman to take his hand. The woman and Christ are in complete contrast, both as regards their body language and the colours of their garments. Christ is illuminated from behind by the morning sun, which blends into his aureole. The sunrise is a traditional symbol of Christ's atonement, through which the darkness of sin was overcome, and the light

<sup>16</sup> She described the painting as follows: '*Den tafla jag talade om med ämne ur syskonens lif och hem med Jesus såsom gäst, är en skänk af mig till bönehuset Betania här*' ['The piece I talked about, with the motif of the sisters' life and home with Jesus as a guest, is my gift for the prayer house Bethany here'], Alexandra Frosterus-Sältin's letter to Vilhelmina (Minna) Helander, 12 March 1912. Gunnar Mårtensons samling. 3. Helanderska Brevsamlingen. Åbo Akademi University Library, Manuscript Collections; see also Mikola 2015, 182; *Wasa-Posten* 26.11.1910.



of redemption was brought into the world (Ferguson 1961, 54).

According to Moshe Barasch (1987, 173), in the western tradition two typical gestures are depicted in representations of the motif of Christ appearing to Mary Magdalene: Mary Magdalene's outstretched hands; and the emphasized *contrapposto* of Christ. The Jepua altarpiece is an exception to this convention. The gestures and position of Christ are calm as he reaches out to the woman. However, in the sketch the artist made for the painting (see Hanka 1995, 59) Christ is not reaching out. On the contrary, he is standing in a neutral upright position, with his hands crossed on his chest. The gesture can be interpreted as rejection, but I prefer to suggest it should be read as a neutral representation of his posture. The reason for the variation in the composition is that the painting represents the moment before the distressed and weeping Mary Magdalene notices Christ, as the note 'John 20: 11–14' on the sketch indicates. However, what is surprising is Christ's gesture of reaching out, which Frosterus-Sältin has added to the final painting. In the verse immediately following Christ explicitly says that no one must touch him. Given that it contradicts the biblical text, what could have made the artist make this change?<sup>17</sup>

The Jepua altarpiece made a great impression on the editor of the women's journal *Veckans Krönika*, who visited Frosterus-Sältin's studio in the spring of 1906. The editor praised the painting as one of the artist's best altarpieces (Mikola 2015, 127; D. S-m. 1906, 651–2). The atmosphere of the finished painting is indeed very dramatic and powerful. The despair and

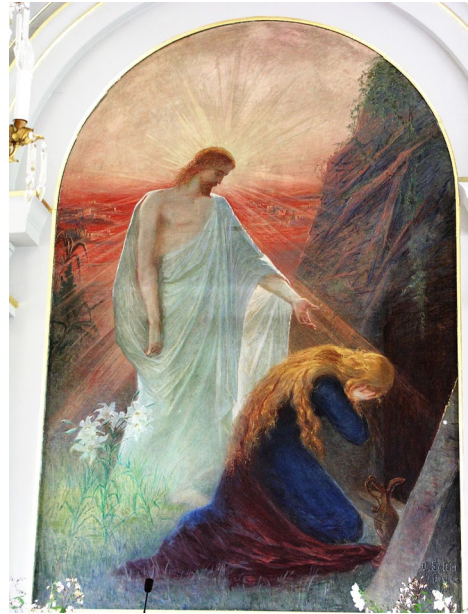


Figure 6. Alexandra Frosterus-Sältin: Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene, 1906, oil painting, 258 x 175 cm. Altarpiece, Church of Jepua, Uusi-Kaarlepyy, Finland. Photo: Heikki Hanka.

17 Juusela (1983, 69) and Mikola (2015, 194–5) have also noted the artist's exceptional mode of representing the motif. Mikola (*ibid.*, 195) has connected the Mary Magdalene figure in the Jepua painting to Frosterus-Sältin's own personal feelings of despair, on the basis of Riitta Kontinen's (2008, 116) argument that the artist felt misunderstood in her later life.

anguish of Mary Magdalene are more pronounced in the Jepua painting than in earlier depictions of this event by Frosterus-Såltin, where the artist has chosen the moments before Mary Magdalene discovered Christ's resurrection. The Jepua altarpiece was a donation made by Finnish emigrants in South Africa. In 1905 the newspaper *Pohjan Poika* (20 September 1905, 3) stated that the donors had proposed '*Jesus Comforting Martha and Mary at the Grave*' as the subject (Mikola 2015, 126). It therefore cannot be ruled out that the unusual execution was prompted by the donors' wishes. Nevertheless, the romantic sentiment was typical for the art of Frosterus-Såltin, and the details in execution were her innovations. However, the artist clearly understood the affective power of the iconographical type of Mary Magdalene she used in her Jepua altarpiece, because she used exactly the same *topos*, the iconographical type, in some of her other altar paintings such as '*The Crucifixion*' and '*Come unto Me*'.<sup>18</sup>

The reuse of such practically motivated gestural types is common in religious art. In the late nineteenth century Aby Warburg developed a theory about the useful gestural images and iconographical types describing emotion that have persisted through different periods in western Europe. They always emerge anew, though sometimes they have changed somewhat, either in appearance, content, or context. Warburg has called such images of passionate and emotionally charged gestural language the *Pathosformel* (Vuojala 1997, 107–9; Kleinbauer and Slavens 1982, 76–7; Warburg 1999 [1907], 249; Forster 1999, 15. See also Johnson 2012, 62–3; Becker 2013). I see the figure of Mary Magdalene in the Jepua altarpiece as a *Pathosformel*, because its basic emotion is very strong and communicates clearly with the viewer. The whole composition is very affective, both in the physical language of the gestures and in the immaterial connotations. The connotations relate to the implied viewer's knowledge of all the biblical passages that include Mary Magdalene. The altarpiece thus affects the viewer at an emotional level, either consciously or without a full recognition of either the affect or the biblical detail.

### **Mary Magdalene in the context of a changing society**

Frosterus-Såltin's altarpiece provides new information about and understanding of the agency and position of women in the period. Moreover, the Jepua altarpiece can be analysed in relation to the social context of the

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18 This detail has already been noted by Pirjo Juusela (1983, 69).



time. In the period between 1860 and 1914 most European societies were experiencing extensive modernisation. In Finland major transitions were also occurring in the social structure and at an ideological level. In the late nineteenth century religious sentiment was undergoing change. With the rise of individualism, the relationship between God and the individual became more of a personal matter than the previous experience of a collective faith. Everyone was responsible for her or his own salvation, and was alone before God. Contemporaries reminded themselves and each other of the importance of continuous spiritual striving and the need to beware of the danger that love of the world might lead them away from the right path (Siltala 1992, 28–9, 31, 35–8).

During the nineteenth century four revivalist movements emerged in Finland.<sup>19</sup> According to psycho-historian Juha Siltala, the process of individualization was accompanied by anguish, as the breakdown of traditional life and a stable community made people lose their sense of direction and awakened anxiety about what would happen to the individual. At the social level an attitude of despair and the need for a state of grace in some form was common in the face of the turbulence of modernization. In his study Siltala notes how the Finnish revivalists reminisced in old age about how easily people were overcome by emotion. The mere tolling of death bells caused people to burst into tears and filled them with contrition.<sup>20</sup> The changes in society and religious life also manifested themselves in altarpieces, especially those by Alexandra Frosterus-Såltin, because they began to emphasize the compassion and mercy of Christ. At the turn of the century religion offered comfort and the promise of God's acceptance and benevolence, as long as one humbled oneself and accepted divine guidance.

This was also a guiding principle of the Christian charity and social work movement, most of which was organized and carried out by women volunteers. This domestic mission's practical social work was driven by Christian conviction, and it sought to remove or at least to alleviate societal defects, as Pirjo Markkola (2000, 2002) has asserted in her research on

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19 The movements were *Supplicationism*, *Pietism*, *Laestadianism*, and the *Evangelical Movement*. In Finland revival movements have characteristically organized themselves within the church. The nineteenth-century revivals therefore did not generally lead to the establishment of free churches as in other western Protestant countries. However, they catalysed a process of renewal within the church itself (Huotari 1982, 113–23).

20 According to Siltala (1992, 28–31, 35–8), revivalism spread like a group psychosis in early nineteenth-century Finland. Farmworkers in distant fields would suddenly feel severe distress. Siltala suggests that the origins of the phenomenon are related to the changes in society towards a more individualistic culture.

Christian social work in Finland between 1860 and 1920. What is especially noteworthy in this work of mercy is that a great many upper- and middle-class women saw this work as a woman's calling. They established homes for 'fallen' women and orphaned children. They worked among the poor in towns, visited prisons, and became involved in improving the harsh living conditions endured by women and children (see, for example, Markkola 2000; Antikainen 2004). This calling was also used as a justification by and for women to work outside the home.

The position of women in Finnish society experienced a gradual change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The 1863–1864 parliament granted sovereignty to unmarried women, which made them free to dispose of their property and earn wages. This reform made it possible for women to survive even without marriage and a family. Nevertheless, women were still at a disadvantage to men in proprietary and succession rights, and a married woman was subject to her husband's guardianship. The women's rights movement demanded equality in the new Marriage Act (Pollari and Pollari, 2009, 112–3).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, male and female sexuality was perceived very differently among the bourgeoisie. The leading Finnish sex educator, the professor of hygiene Max Oker-Blom (1863–1917), saw women as pure, fragile, spiritual, and non-sexual beings. Men, on the other hand, were more corporeal, carnal, and stronger. The sexuality of men knew no boundaries, but they were expected to learn to control their urges out of respect for their wives and families. The author Maria Furuhjelm (1846–1916), a central agent in the Finnish Women's Association, wrote that men had double standards, committing acts they would never allow other men to commit, much less their own wives and daughters. The same degree of purity should be demanded of men as of women. Most of the women's movement condemned premarital and extramarital relationships, because it was women who suffered their consequences (Pollari and Pollari 2009, 117–8, 120, 136).

This view of women and women's new calling was in a sense in line with women's expectations, because humility was especially required of them, and religion, with its requirement to submit to the will of God, was likewise seen as more relevant for women than for men (Ollila 1997, 120). However, their increasingly individual relationship with God also gave women their own personal space. Siltala (1992, 48; see also Moilanen 1987,

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21 In Finland married women were liberated from the guardianship of their husbands as recently as 1930, when the new Marriage Act was passed. This was much later than the granting of the rights to vote and run for parliament, which were passed in 1906 (Pylkkänen 1992, 106–7).

81–90, 100–6) remarks that although women were expected to submit to their fathers' will and to earthly obligations, their relationship with God allowed a certain freedom and personal feelings. The idea of a social calling simultaneously broadened the conception of women's position in society, the midpoint of which had been their duties as a wife and mother. For example, Lucina Hagman (1853–1946), a central figure in the Finnish women's rights movement, criticized the female ideal that discouraged young women from being strong and active, encouraging them only to please others with their appearance and conduct. She felt that this style of upbringing for gentlewomen prevented their development as human beings and left them in a state of helplessness. She cited the strong agrarian woman, whose physical strength was not restricted by clothing and codes of conduct, as the gentlewoman's opposite (Ollila 1997, 122.) However, this new female ideal, 'a societal mother', was expected to be a fully moral and ethical figure, who also guarded the morality of others (see, for example, Helén 1997, 152–4).

The increase in the number of feminine motifs behind the altar coincided with a phase in which the debate about women's vocational status in society was in transition and the object of much attention. The 1880s especially were a time of many social changes and the rise of the women's movement in Finland. Women's great involvement in civic activity and in different organisations was especially new (see Ollila, 1998, 10; Kontinen 1988, 18, 45). In the '*Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene*' motif it is a woman who is told to spread the message of Christ's resurrection – and not just any woman, but Mary Magdalene, who was a disciple of Jesus.<sup>22</sup> This is especially fitting in an era in which women, following Christ's example, were engaged in Christian social work and charity. I find it especially noteworthy that it is Christ who is reaching out to Mary Magdalene in the Jepua altarpiece. He is the one commencing a dialogue and paying attention to her; in the usual execution of the motif it is the other way round.

Art historian Lisa Marie Rafanelli (2013, 151) has interestingly underlined that 'in many respects, the Magdalene acts with the capabilities and authority of a man: she hears and comprehends the Word of God, recognizes Christ, and tells the male disciples that she has seen the Lord.' Thus, she assumes apostolic primacy. According to Rafanelli feminist theologians have also argued that early Christianity broke with the Judaic and other

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22 There were other women with a special status, including those referred to as disciples. It should be remembered that there is no agreement in the New Testament concerning how many disciples there actually were, or who they were (see, for example, Parvey 1974, 144–5; Marjanen, 2002, 41.)

ancient traditions by encouraging women to participate more fully in the faith. Women assumed not only the roles of disciples, but ministerial and leadership positions. I find it fascinating that a passage in which a woman is an important messenger of the gospel became an important motif at a time when the proportion of women participating in the public life of society was increasing.

### **Conclusion**

The affect conveyed by the character of Mary Magdalene on the Jepua altarpiece strongly communicates agony and sorrow. It can also be viewed in the context of shame, because Mary Magdalene is considered a penitent sinner. However, the painting represents two sides of the same coin, because Christ offers Mary acceptance and salvation by reaching out with his open hand – a gesture which conflicts with the biblical passage and the motif's conventional iconography.

In my view the fact that the artist has represented the passage in an unusual way and has given Christ a role as the comforter of the grieving and absolver of sinners is connected with 1) the psychosocial need for redemption, exaggerated by the rapid social changes of the time, and 2) an emphasis on the Christian charity and social work carried out mostly by women among the poor, the 'fallen', and others in need of both spiritual and physical help.

In conclusion I argue that it is significant in the Jepua painting that it is specifically Christ who is seeking to make contact with Mary Madgalene, not the other way round. The female figure thus becomes a link between the sacred and the profane as she is told to spread the message of Christ's resurrection. This was especially appropriate in an era in which many women, following Christ's example, engaged in Christian social work and charity. This female agency also sums up the modifications that Alexandra Frosterus-Såltin introduced to the iconography of Mary Magdalene.

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