Finding Christ in Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo's Magdalen Paintings

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FINDING CHRIST IN GIOVANNI GIROLAMO
SAVOLDO'S MAGDALEN PAINTINGS

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Bachelor of Arts

College of Arts and Sciences
University of Redlands

Redlands, CA
March 2013
This thesis is accepted on behalf of the Department of Art and Art History, in the Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences, by the following committee:

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To my family, whose love and support is unconditional and in particular to my Grandad, who fostered my creativity and who passed away during this process.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is the result of a year of focused work as well as rumination upon the subject for approximately two years prior. Certainly, this paper would not exist without an introduction to the work of both Savoldo and Mary Pardo in 2011 during the class titled, *The Renaissance Artist*, taught by Piers Britton. The choice to work with Savoldo’s *Magdalen*, which I have had the pleasure of visiting in both Los Angeles and London, is the combination of a fixation and more importantly a dissatisfaction with existing research on the issues of Savoldo’s composition which this work addresses. Beyond introducing me to the topic, I am extremely grateful to Piers for his guidance and encouragement not only throughout this process but also throughout my academic career at the University of Redlands. I would also like to thank the members of my committee; Nancy Carrick for her ability to assist me at both the macro and micro levels of structuring my paper, Lillian Larsen who gave me insight into pertinent issues of religious studies, and who both provided active audiences which enabled me think about my topic in fresh and productive ways. I would also like to give special thanks to Vanessa Walker-Oakes who molded me into an art historian without me even realizing it and to Gianni Ponti, Pier Paolo Racioppi, Federica Giacomini, and Barbara Briganti who taught me many things but most important among them passion. Last but not least, Mallory Frantz my partner in this process, for keeping me sane.
ABSTRACT

This paper examines the techniques Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo utilizes to engage the viewer in his four known variants on the subject of Mary Magdalene. This is achieved through developing the context of an extremely devout Renaissance audience, not only knowledgeable on the subject but also trained to engage with paintings and their subject matter. By examining Savoldo’s paintings using John Shearman’s concept of the transitive mode, it is possible to understand the way that Savoldo and his predecessors utilize a single figure composition yet through the manipulation of eye contact, body position, and light qualities they are able to develop a narrative context and engage viewers by implicating them in the narrative. Savoldo not only utilized but also improved upon this tradition. Mary Pardo provides much of the inspiration for this work in her article “The Subject of Savoldo’s Magdalene.” Yet through a formal analysis of Savoldo’s body of work this paper questions some of Pardo’s notions on the role of the viewer and argues that when correctly read Savoldo’s Magdalen variants place the viewer in the role of the resurrected Christ. This quality creates engagement in an unprecedented way.
FINDING CHRIST IN SAVOLDO'S *MAGDALEN* PAINTINGS

Each of Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo's *Magdalen* variants (figs. 1-4) portrays a crucial moment from the New Testament using a solitary figure. Savoldo illustrates the narrative by implicating the viewer in an unprecedented role. Drawing upon the intimacy achieved in the Renaissance tradition of half-length devotional images, which portray solitary saints in a moment of conference with a figure beyond the canvas, Savoldo creates images that allow the viewer to imagine the spiritual significance of existing in the same space as Saint Mary Magdalene, but there is more to the relationship. In his paintings Savoldo unreservedly casts his viewer as arguably the most important figure in the Christian faith, the resurrected Christ, utilizing the tradition in a manner far more daring than any of his predecessors or contemporaries.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE RENAISSANCE VIEWER

The significance of this choice remains powerful even today, yet to Renaissance viewers understanding themselves in the position of Christ would have been a much more highly charged religious experience. It is therefore important to understand the period viewer and the tradition from which Savoldo has constructed his composition. By the Italian Renaissance, art and more specifically painting had long been established as an aid to devotional practices. John Shearman explains the nuances of the Renaissance audience's spiritual practices:

Now the more engaged spectator of the fifteenth century not only knew the Gospels better than we do but had also been encouraged, as we have not, by sermons and spiritual exercises like the Franciscan meditations on the Life of Christ to think, as he read, what it was like to be *there*, and then, in that very space and time in which the miracle occurred (1992, 33).
Renaissance viewers not only were taught to engage with scripture differently but they also had preconceived ideas of what they should see and feel when looking at religious paintings. As Baxandall explains it, “the public mind was not a blank tablet on which the painter's representations of a story could impress themselves” (1972, 45). Indeed the “experience of a painting was not the painting we see now so much as a marriage between the painting and the beholder’s previous visualizing activity on the same matter” (46). This level of engagement and pre-visualization is increasingly important in the tradition of half-length icons due to the fact that much of the narrative and the full experience is based largely upon information that is not directly represented in the images, but rather it is being implied. This personal and private relationship with not only god but also devotional images developed before Savoldo and was well established by the early sixteenth century when his paintings were received.

The increase in private devotional practice in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was largely due to the fact that Book of Hours became widely disseminated (Ringbom 1984, 31). With the increase in private devotional practice came the rise in popularity of the half-length icon that Savoldo utilizes in his paintings of the Magdalen. Ringbom credits the success of this compositional type in part to the cost efficiency of a smaller painting of a single figure as opposed to that of a diptych or triptych filled with multiple figures and ornate framing (48). But another aspect is the already established tradition of engaging with paintings. When we consider this tradition in the context of private devotion, it becomes clear that the ability to construct a fictitious intimacy between the viewer and a single figure is exponentially greater than when a whole scene is being displayed entirely separate from the viewer's reality, opening up new possibilities for narrative and psychological
engagement. Ringbom describes the qualities of half-length images which make them ideal for assisting in religious experiences:

The intimate quality of the half-length icon made it particularly well suited for the private devotion and profound empathy of the individual. Its character of a ‘close-up’ gave to meditation the immediacy of a quiet conversation; it had the ‘nearness’ so dear to the God-seeking devout (48).

It is the implication of privately engaging with Biblical figures through episodes of visualization supported through painted imagery that led to the development of a style in which viewers are encouraged not only to interact with a divine or holy subject but also to experience that role for themselves; this method of engagement can be understood as “transitive.”

JOHN SHEARMAN’S “TRANSITIVE MODE”

The “transitive mode,” presented by John Shearman in his book Only Connect, is an extremely compelling technique for engaging the viewer (1992, 33). In an excerpt from the Oxford English Dictionary Shearman gives the definition of transitive to clarify his meaning and usage of the term: “taking a direct object to complete the sense, passing over to or affecting something else, operating beyond itself” (33). In a transitive image the viewer is the direct object. The image is made “contingent upon our presence” (13). In other words, not only is the image activated by the presence of a spectator but also it is completed and as a result only reaches its full potential narratively and emotionally when a viewer appears beyond the limits of the frame to activate it. According to Shearman, “the transitive mode will be adopted when and because it permits the most complete or vivid presentation of the subject to the viewer” (33). In the case of half-length images where the artist has made narrative elements directly contingent upon a secondary figure missing from the canvas this is certainly the case; without the second character, which the original narrative includes
and the painted image suggests, the following paintings and certainly Savoldo’s 
*Magdalenes* fail to reach their potential for conveying the intended moment of biblical 
significance and the range of emotions available to the devout viewer. Another 
important aspect necessary for transitive images to be effective is a shared narrative. 
In order for the implications to be perceived there must be a preexisting narrative 
commonly recognized amongst all potential viewers. The universality of Christianity 
in Renaissance Italy gives artists the ability to utilize this technique with varying levels 
of success.

Shearman first laid out the progression of the transitive mode examined here 
and while he does not include Savoldo’s *Magdalenes* in his study it is apparent that 
Savoldo was aware of and influenced by the developing tradition. One of 
Shearman’s earliest examples of the transitive mode comes in the form of Antonello 
da Messina’s *Virgin Annunciate* (fig. 5). In this painting the viewer is meant to identify 
the red dress and blue shawl as traditional symbols of the Virgin Mary, but she is 
noticeably lacking her most common attribute, the Christ child. With this the 
spectator may come to the conclusion that this image represents an episode in her 
life prior to the birth of Christ, in this case the annunciation. Yet for a depiction of 
the annunciation the image is lacking the second most important character present 
during that narrative, the angel Gabriel. But while the physical presence of Gabriel 
is not represented that does not mean the angel is not being included. Instead, the 
artist suggests to the viewer that Gabriel is not entirely absent from the experience of 
the image, but rather that he exists in the space outside of the frame, in the realm of 
the viewer.

This lack of representation, but not absence, of the secondary character is 
achieved in Antonello’s painting through light qualities, but is not emphatically stated
in the pose of the Virgin. The light falls across the Virgin’s shawl and face, illuminating her with a divine light and signaling to the viewer an awareness of a holy presence. Yet the Virgin does not actively seek the viewer’s empathy, her gaze does not address the viewer outside of the canvas, and her pose is entirely passive. This passivity leaves the viewer in a relatively ambiguous relationship with the Virgin. The viewer may not even read the image as a representation of the annunciation at all without the context of the painting’s title. It then becomes entirely plausible that the painting could be read as merely representing the Virgin, or even an unidentified woman, dispassionately reading. Shearman describes this lack of direct implication in contrast to Leonardo’s *Angel of the Annunciation* (fig. 6): “the spectator may not recognize his implied role or may choose to read his situation as external to that of the action and to think of himself as no part of the narrative, as its witness rather than as participant, which are options not given to Leonardo’s spectator” (1992, 36).

And so we are to understand that Antonello began the process of engaging the viewer through the transitive mode, evoking emotionally charged relationships between painted images and living viewers, and also the process of placing oneself in the role of a holy figure. Opening up a tradition of engagement that is offers an entirely new and powerful experience for religious devotional practice. This experience was to be taken a step further in the hands of Leonardo da Vinci approximately thirty years later.

Leonardo da Vinci was one of the greatest proponents of the transitive technique and interestingly utilized it as a primary means of representation. In his *Angel of the Annunciation*, known to us today through a copy (fig. 6) and a sketch included in his studies for another work, he reverses the situation shown in Antonello’s painting and takes it farther by more confidently implicating the viewer
(Shearman 1992, 35). What Antonello has merely suggested, Leonardo emphatically states through eye contact and pose. The angel Gabriel looks directly at the viewer, his body in a clear state of contrapposto, the gesture of his arm stretches forward, seemingly projecting into the viewer's space. This issue of body position is extremely important to engage the viewer successfully in transitive images. Compare the relatively static posture of Antonello's Virgin with the much more energetic lines of Leonardo's Gabriel. Antonello's Virgin timidly faces the front of the frame while her gaze even more reservedly fails to reach anywhere above the viewer's knees. Placed in direct contrast to Leonardo's Gabriel, whose body is clearly in the process of turning towards the viewer, the arm stretched out, seemingly reaching beyond the frame to hail the viewer. This combined with the direct eye contact, lacking in Antonello's image, gives the undeniable sense that the viewer has no choice but to participate in the scene. With Leonardo’s image the spectators cannot escape the direct engagement, so much so that they must assume the position of the Virgin with no room for misinterpretation. Viewers now recognize their place in the biblical narrative of the annunciation. All of the psychological implications of that particular moment in the Virgin’s life and in the history of Christianity create a heightened devotional experience not possible in images where the viewer plays the role of witness but has no direct role in the scene playing out before them (Shearman 1992, 35). The full spectrum of emotional responses is possible when one imagines taking on the role of the Virgin and the responsibilities being placed upon her when told that she will bring the son of God into the world. It is the immensity of understanding oneself as that particular person, at that particular moment which gives the image power. The strength of the implication is dependent upon the artist's modification of the figure with the heightened realism achieved in
the Renaissance and to capture action in a single pose (Ringbom 1984, 71). Savoldo owes a great deal to Leonardo’s mastery of this technique. The ability to create a fictive emotional relationship through eye contact and pose, which elicits an emotional experience, gives many paintings by Leonardo and certainly Savoldo’s Magdalene variants their power, and as a related consequence their popularity.

Leonardo created perhaps the most well known example of the transitive mode with his La Giocanda, more commonly known as the Mona Lisa (figure 7). The Mona Lisa’s facial expression has been credited with capturing the world’s attention, and while it is certainly true that there is something to be praised in the subtle and nuanced portrayal of facial features by Leonardo, Shearman suggests a more interesting approach to explain the popularity of the portrait. The portrayal of the face is not the most compelling attribute of the painting, but rather the expression gleaned through a careful reading of her body position and her relationship with the viewer. Leonardo has once again utilized the transitive mode and places the woman into a fictive narrative. La Giocanda seems to be enjoying a pleasant view from her loggia when she is disturbed; she turns in her chair to face her viewer, the cause of the disturbance. She allows her eyes to reach the new arrival but her body has not yet completed the motion. The “Mona Lisa Smile” is a result of the implied response to a fictive narrative in which the viewer plays the part of the new arrival being welcomed to the loggia. Her expression is something to be enjoyed by implicated spectators who recognizes their inclusion into the scene (Shearman 1992, 123). In Savoldo’s Magdale variants a similar narrative is taking place as Saint Mary Magdalene turns to recognize the risen Christ; it is interesting that the Mona Lisa, which invokes the transitive mode, using a similar composition and fictive relationship with the viewer, stands as Leonardo’s most widely reproduced image,
while Savoldo's *Magdalenes* utilizing the same technique stand as his most celebrated and often copied works (Gilbert 1986, 312). Certainly the transitive mode is highly effective in captivating an audience's imagination.

Yet while *La Giocanda* may be undoubtedly the most famous example of the transitive mode and narratively similar to Savoldo's *Magdalenes*, there is another image by Leonardo which relates to Savoldo's *Magdalene* variants in both the enacting of the transitive mode and the subject matter. Leonardo's *Studies for a Saint Mary Magdalen* (fig. 8) portrays the artist's interest in utilizing the transitive mode to the represent the saint in question. The study includes two images of the Magdalen, both done at half length, and shows an experiment in body position, movement, head position, and even a prop. The most significant difference between the two sketches is that they represent a choice between directly addressing the viewer and looking out to the left. Which option Leonardo preferred there is no way of knowing. Yet the implication of the choice is something Savoldo ultimately understood. With his variants on the subject of Mary Magdalen each woman stares directly out from the frame and at the viewer. In the case of Leonardo's sketches, the area of greatest significance present in both options is that the act of turning is compounded by another simultaneous action. As Leonardo's Magdalen turns she removes the lid of her attribute, the ointment jar, an act which is particularly specific when the biblical narrative is applied to the understanding of the image. While there is no record of a completed painting of this sketch being carried out by Leonardo himself, this invention was widely diffused by his followers both in Florence and Milan, most notably by Bernardino Luini, who himself completed a *Saint Mary Magdalen* (fig. 9) (Shearman 1992, 36). Indeed, it is possible to cast Luini as an intermediary character between Leonardo and Savoldo.
Bernardino Luini follows Leonardo's precedence to create a transitive image. Luini makes the decision we have no record of Leonardo electing: his figure's eyes directly address the viewer. Her body remains at three quarter turn. The action of opening the ointment jar gives the image its narrative. The Biblical context for this action is extremely powerful. The ointment jar is used by Mary Magdalene in only two specific instances: first when she mixes the oil inside with her tears to anoint Christ's feet and dries them with her hair and second when she prepares his dead body, which has been taken from the cross, at the lamentation (Shearman 1992, 36). Shearman is content to read this image as a meditation on a symbol of repentance or a possible suggestion of the viewer's presence at the lamentation. Yet in recognizing this as a transitive image there is greater potential for casting the viewer as more than a spectator, which Shearman does not address. While it is a bold statement, it seems clear that this image is an attempt at placing the viewer in the role of Christ. A close reading of the Bible suggests that there are only two possible reasons for Mary Magdalene to turn to address a figure with her ointment jar open (36). In both biblical instances the figure involved is Jesus Christ. This implication would certainly not be lost on a Renaissance audience, though it is rather easily over looked in a critical examination due to the static quality of the Magdalen's pose and the impassive expression on her face, which Luini presents.

While it is possible to dispute the implication of the viewer's positioning, the fact that Luini's Magdalen engages the viewer successfully using the transitive mode is undeniable. Cardinal Federico Borromini, writing in the year 1625 about a visit to the Pitti Palace, compared Luini's painting to Titian's Penitent Magdalene (fig. 10):

There is so much life and spirit in this head that Titian's Magdalen nearby seems what one might call bloodless, not a woman, but a ghost of a woman. The face of Luini's Magdalen is by no means
energetic, but nevertheless the painting is successful as a whole; the saint gazes at the viewer, and opens the small vessel very suitable for anointing the Savior's body (Bayer 2004, 78).

With this quotation we are given a sense of how Savoldo's images were read in comparison to his contemporary Titian's attempts on the same subject. While the two artists were dealing with the same subject matter at the same time, the methods they chose in an attempt to elicit a devotional response from their audience could not have been more different. Savoldo, working in the vein of Antonello, Leonardo, and Luini before him, chose to portray his Magdalene in concert with her audience fully engaged and evoking the transitive mode. The figure directly addresses her audience, which is cast in the position of Christ, evoking an extremely powerful relationship which Titian's weeping penitents do not achieve or address. It is this total engagement and the implication of the viewer in the role of Christ which make Savoldo's images not only useful for devotional practice but also provocative.

SAVOLDO'S MAGDALEN: THE PARDO THESIS

In her article “The Subject of Savoldo's Magdalene,” Mary Pardo recognizes the ways in which Savoldo's Magdalene paintings engage the viewer, and indeed her article is based upon the idea that “the subject” of Savoldo's image is, at least partially, the viewer (2006, 447). Pardo also recognizes the moment of the Biblical narrative being portrayed, but she fails to use the narrative to define the role of the viewer as one of only two subjects. She does not exploit the full implication of the

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1 While there is evidence to suggest that both Titian and Savoldo's depictions of Mary Magdalene achieved popularity in Renaissance Italy, it is interesting that the image of the more overtly sexualized Mary Magdalene is the legacy that has been more widely dispersed and has persisted in modern culture (Pardo 443). While Titian's career was certainly more celebrated and prolific, there is something to be said about the religious and cultural implications of the sexualized Magdalen as the accepted method of representation, while the painting which directly references Mary Magdalene's role as the first witness to Christ's resurrection, "the apostle to the apostles," has been long ignored (Ward 10).
precise moment Savoldo has chosen. In the same way the action of opening the
ointment jar in the sketches of Leonardo and the painting by Luini allows the viewer
to determine their direct role in the narrative, Savoldo has chosen an equally precise
moment that implicates the viewer in a similar way and in the same role.

It has been widely accepted that the choice of the early morning sunrise, so
clearly portrayed in both the Florence (fig. 3) and London (fig. 4) variants,
demonstrates Savoldo's choice to portray the moment in John, when Mary
Magdalene alone bears first witness to Christ's resurrection (Dunkerton 1999, 80). In
this biblical account Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb by herself at sunrise on the
first day of the week and sees the stone has been removed. Upon seeing the open
tomb she goes to get Simon Peter and another disciple. She tells the two disciples
that the Lord has been taken. The men go with her to the tomb, and finding it
empty they return to their homes. Mary however stays, weeping in front of the
tomb. She is then addressed by two angels within the tomb, replies, and is
confronted by Christ (John 20:1-13):

They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid
him.' When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus
standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her,
'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?'
Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have
carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him
away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew,
'Rabbounil' (which means Teacher) (John 20:13-16)

Pardo recognizes this passage as the inspiration for Savoldo's representations, but she
fails to see the significance of the most important aspect in this telling of the Biblical
narrative and therefore does not to utilize it appropriately in her study of Savoldo's
paintings. In the gospel according to John it is Mary Magdalene sole presence at the
tomb which is so significant. She alone bears first witness, making her the first
apostle and a pivotal figure in solidifying the future of the Christian faith (Ward 1987, 10). She is given the task of telling the world what she has seen. Therefore, when Savoldo chooses to paint his images with the early sun rising and Mary Magdalene the only figure visible at the sepulcher, turning to address another character outside the frame, the only role for the viewer to take in the narrative is that of Jesus Christ.

In his paintings, Savoldo perfects the aspects that make the transitive mode successful and implicates his viewer. His figure is given life through the turning pose, which not only has narrative significance, but also illustrates that she is reacting to something beyond the scope of the painting. Her cloaked hand is raised to her face as a sign that she has been weeping, yet she does not weep in this moment because this is the moment when her eyes meet those of the risen Christ, the moment of recognition (Pardo 2004, 446, Barasch 1976, 11). She not only recognizes who he is but that another, and possibly the greatest, miracle has occurred. Savoldo has chosen one of the most highly charged moments of the bible. The image does not explicitly represent the entire sequence of events but instead relies on devout viewers’ beliefs in the miracle of Christ’s Resurrection and their full appreciation of the intimacy of the moment between the Magdalen and Christ alone, a moment so heavily charged that it serves as an excellent subject for a fully transitive half-length devotional image. The full weight of the experience is based upon the understanding that the viewer is undoubtedly experiencing the role of Christ as he returns to his corporeal body to absolve the sins of the world (Shearman 1992, 89).

Yet in her reading of the image Pardo has disregarded the absence of other witnesses at the resurrection in the Bible according to John and envisions the viewer
as a sort of superfluous third party. She thereby weakens the image, suggesting that
the viewer is in some sort of triangular relationship with the Magdalen and Christ,
acting as a sort of distraction in the Magdalen's quest to recognize Christ (2004, 449).
She correctly asserts that the image “crows a historical development” and “provides
unprecedented interaction between the viewer and the painted image,” but she fails
to realize the extent in which it does so, selling the image far short of its potential
(449).

Pardo understands much of what is at play in the image, yet her analysis of
how to read illumination in the work of Savoldo leads her off course. Pardo
correctly professes that the light being cast upon the Magdalen’s shawl acts to alert
the viewer to Christ’s presence and also to direct them to Christ’s position:

It seems crucial that the reflective garment reveals the general
position – and not just the presence – of the light source; the
apparition’s specificity, and our involvement in it, hinges on this.

Assuming one stands directly in front of the canvas, the figure of
Christ should be imagined to the right, since the light burns brightest
against the Magdalene’s hood and her jutting arm as their surfaces tilt
rightward into the picture space (the effect is evident in the modeling
of the ointment jar)... The viewer is effectively caught up in a
triangular relationship with two fictive entities (2004, 447).

While Pardo correctly recognizes the source of the divine light, she fails to see that
the light pattern does not imply the inclusion of a third character, that in fact it
supports the reading of the viewer in the position of Christ. There is a strong
tradition in Renaissance and general religious imagery of using light to signal the
presence of the divine or the miraculous, but this tradition does not necessarily mean
that divine light must emanate directly from the figures themselves. In the case of
Savoldo, which Pardo seemingly fails to consider, there is in actuality strong evidence
to suggest the contrary. Savoldo has a very distinct style of painting light in religious
imagery, that signals the placement of the viewer in the position of Christ.
READING LIGHT IN SAVOLDO'S OEUVRE

Savoldo's body of work consists largely of religious subjects, and the lighting patterns of these works can provide insight into the reading of light in his Magdalen variants. In the theme of a conference between a human and a divine presence we are offered two examples. The first, *Saint Matthew and the Angel* (fig. 11), was done contemporaneously to the *Magdalenes*. In this image the light comes from two sources: a small burning fire in an outdoor scene and a much more dramatically portrayed candle at the front of the canvas, which illuminates Matthew and casts some light on to the angel. With this image it seems clear that Savoldo is experimenting with light qualities but certainly does not support the idea that it is necessary for divine figures to emanate light without apparent reason. The second example is *Tobias and the Angel* (fig. 12). Light in this image is far more prominent. This event is clearly happening in the day. The sky is presented as pale grey, fairly evenly illuminated except for a cloud formation in the top left, which appears to be backlit due to the brightness of the clouds on the outer edges and the darkness of those in the center. There is also a sense that the trees are in shadow. These qualities support the identification that the sun's presence is somewhere towards the back of the image. Yet the figures in the front are being bathed in an entirely different light, a divine light. Here, undoubtedly, a holy presence is being suggested through the addition of a secondary light source. The light appears to be coming from the top left of the image, but more specifically it appears to shine brightest over the right shoulder of Tobias and the right shoulder of the angel. It casts shadows on the side.
of Tobias’ body turned away from the left side as well as the farthest right portion of the angel’s side and wing. With these images it becomes clear that Savoldo does not represent divine light as a quality of the figures themselves but rather as an illumination being cast upon them.

Savoldo’s paintings of religious imagery also include several depictions of Christ himself. This includes three adoration scenes. The first, *The Virgin Adoring the Child with Two Donors* (fig.13), was completed slightly prior to the *Magdalen* variants. Here once again the sun appears to be somewhere in the rear portion of the image, and a separate divine light illuminates the figures in the front of the image. The light is clearly directed over the right shoulder of the Virgin, but most importantly over the right shoulder of the Christ child. There is an established Medieval and Renaissance tradition of depicting scenes of the adoration with the Christ child emanating holy light and sometimes even the Virgin, yet Savoldo clearly eschews this stylistic interpretation. The second and third examples depicting the adoration (figs. 14 and 15) were completed later and have a slightly more naturalistic approach to lighting, which makes a single source of holy light much easier to identify, since it is more uniform across all of the figures presented. These images also give the illusion of a sky being lit from a distant point towards the back of the image. They also have an interesting addition to their composition as Savoldo has chosen to include a divine presence and separate narrative taking place in the background which is displayed through an illuminated cloud formation with dark edges. But most importantly for this study the central figures are being lit from a single source in the top right corner, with the greatest concentration of light on the Virgin and the Christ child, but the light clearly does not come directly from within them. These images show Savoldo’s
experimentation with techniques of illumination and they clearly support the notion that Savoldo does not chose to paint light as directly emanating from his figures.

In Savoldo's Transfiguration (fig. 16) the figure of Christ stands in front of a mandorla shaped illuminated cloud formation, but while the clouds are illuminated a bright yellow color the direction of the light falling across the figures is not defined by that source. Instead, the figure of Christ has a pattern of light and shadow upon his draped robes, which clearly suggests a light coming from above, particularly when we take into account the shadows being created under his outstretched arms. Taking this further it can be said that the light comes slightly from his right when we notice that the shadow does not fall evenly below the arms but is clearly skewed to his left. So while the light is certainly focused upon the figure of Christ and it falls across the accompanying figures in a manner which clearly suggests it's being directed at the Christ figure, it does not in actuality appear to emanate from his physical body. Once again, it seems clear that it is directed from somewhere above Christ's right shoulder.

Finally, the clearest example of Savoldo's choice for depicting light in relation to the mature Christ comes in the form of his Lamentation over the Dead Christ (fig. 17). This image, completed prior to the Magdalen variants, follows the lighting pattern of his early career. The sky in the distance is blue, suggesting the sun's illumination exists somewhere behind the central group. A separate divine light comes streaming onto the central group directly over the right shoulder of the deceased corporeal figure of Christ, his face and the left side of his body shrouded by shadow. This image offers clear support that while Savoldo makes use of a specialized divine light in his portrayal of Christ, he does not choose to depict the light as emanating directly from Christ's being. Instead he is much more interested in the light's being
directed down upon him, as if from heaven itself, and symbolizing his place as god's right hand.

So while Pardo is correct in utilizing the location of the light source as evidence not only of Christ's presence but also his location, she has interpreted the light without taking into account Savoldo's style and methods of representation. When Savoldo's body of work is taken into account, there is direct support for the reading of this image as a completely transitive devotional image that engages viewers in a conversation with Saint Mary Magdalene by placing them in the position of the resurrected Jesus Christ. In the Berlin Magdalen (fig. 1) the sky behind the wall is illuminated in blue while the light shining on the central figure has a less obvious direction of origin. But what is clear is that there is a source secondary to the sun. This secondary source reflects brightly off of the gold shawl and touches the tip of the Magdalens nose. In the Getty Magdalen (fig. 2) the sky is a similar shade of blue, while the shawl and the ointment jar more clearly display the secondary light source as coming from the upper right hand corner directly over the imagined shoulder of the implied Christ figure. The Florentine Magdalen (fig. 3) has a much more dramatic representation of the dawning sun; the sky is characterized by dramatic golds and purples as the sun rises from behind a mountain and a body of water. In this image the source at the upper right hand corner is once again made evident by the contrasting lights and shadows of the shawl, as well as the ointment jar in the lower left corner. The London Magdalen (fig. 4) also has the appearance of dawning day and the Venetian lagoon scene is complemented by a softer, grayer sky. Uniquely it is the only surviving autograph variant in which the shawl is painted a silvery hue, yet once again the secondary light source is easily read as the top right corner through the light treatment of the shawl and the ointment jar. These readings of Savoldo's
Magdalenes make it clear that light is being dramatically cast down from heaven, directly over the right hand shoulder of the implied Christ who exists beyond the frame directly above the viewer’s shoulder, unquestionably placing the viewer in the role of Christ.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLACING THE VIEWER IN THE ROLE OF CHRIST

The emotive power of implicating the viewer in the role of Christ, while based upon the traditions established in both devotional practices and half-length icons, is significantly distinct choice. A choice that places the Magdalenes seemingly in a category all their own. Savoldo’s Magdalen variants do not place the viewer in the position of spectator or just any role from the Bible, but in the hallowed role of Jesus Christ, son of God. The choice to assign the viewer the role of Christ certainly stands out in the tradition of visual representation, but it may not be as significantly out of place in the Renaissance tradition of devotional practice.

Through Irwin Panofsky’s reading of Albrecht Dürer’s Self-Portrait of 1500 (fig. 18) we may begin to contextualize the Renaissance viewer’s understanding of placing oneself in the position of Christ, an experience which can be understood as powerfully spiritual and not in any way extraordinary or blasphemous as modern readers might presume (Panofsky 2005, 43). Panofsky largely credits Dürer’s choice to depict himself as Christ to the Renaissance interpretation of the widely popular Imitatio Christi, translated as The Imitation of Christ, which was probably much more literal than it might be read today (2005, 43). The fifteenth-century text written by Thomas A Kempis was highly popular and is credited as being secondary in importance in the Christian religion only to the Bible (Kempis 1957, vii). When
examining the words of Kempis in the literal sense we can understand that the
Renaissance audience, following the words of Kempis, endeavored not only to
"imitate His life and example," but also to "meditate upon the Life of Jesus
Christ" (33). Applying this to Dürer's *Self-Portrait of 1500*, where it has been
suggested that he has chosen to paint himself as Jesus Christ, Dürer presents a visual
eexample of himself imitating Christ, in a sense completing an act of devotion
(Panofsky 2005, 43). Savoldo's images allow not only the artist but also the viewer
the opportunity to imitate Christ.

Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo's body of work has been subjected to very little
examination throughout the course of art history. Indeed this is the first study to
emphatically argue the placement of the viewer in the role of Christ, a choice which
is significant not only in the oeuvre of Savoldo but in religious imagery in general.
Certainly this study opens up many new areas of inquiry into religious, social, and
most significant to this author art historical issues. But what this thesis successfully
claims, with the support of the Renaissance tradition of transitive devotional images,
the Biblical narrative, and a study of Savoldo's style of light treatment, is that
Savoldo's Magdalen paintings directly implicate the viewer as the Risen Christ;
creating an ideal opportunity for religious transcendence in an extremely compelling
fashion.
FIGURES

Figure 1. Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo, *Mary Magdalene*. ca. 1530-1539
Oil on canvas. 94.2 x 75.3 cm. Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

Figure 2. Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo, *Mary Magdalene at the Sepulchre*. ca. 1530s
Oil on canvas. 99.7 x 76.2 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
Figure 3. Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo. *Mary Magdalene.* ca. 1533
Oil on canvas. 83 x 76 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi (on deposit in Palazzo Pitti), Florence.

Figure 4. Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo, *Mary Magdalene.* ca. 1535-40.
Oil on canvas, 89.1 x 82.4 cm. National Gallery, London.
Figure 5. Antonello da Messina, *Virgin Annunciate*. ca. 1476
Oil and tempera on panel. Galleria Regionale della Sicilia, Palermo.

Figure 6. After Leonardo, *Angel of the Annunciation*.
Oil on panel. Offentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel.

Figure 8. Leonardo, *Studies for a Saint Mary Magdalene*. ca. 1480-82. Pen and ink. Courtauld Institute, London.

Figure 10. Titian, *Penitent Magdalene*, ca. 1533. Oil on canvas. Palazzo Pitti, Florence.

Figure 12. Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo. Tobias and the Angel. 1542. Oil on canvas. Galleria Borghese, Rome.
Figure 13. Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo. *The Virgin Adoring the Child with Two Donors.* ca. 1527.
Oil on canvas. Hampton Court, Royal Collection Trust.

Figure 14. Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo. *Adoration of the Shepherds.* ca. 1540.
Oil on wood. Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo, Brescia.
Figure 15. Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo. *Adoration of the Shepherds*. ca. 1540.
Oil on canvas. San Giobbe, Venice.

Figure 17. Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo. *The Lamentation Over the Dead Christ*. ca. 1520. Oil on wood. Kunsthistórisches Museum, Vienna.
Figure 18. Albrecht Dürer. Self-Portrait of 1500. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.
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