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Conversion of Mary Magdalen

Godefridus Schalcken
(Made 1643 – 1706 The Hague)

1700
oil on canvas
94.5 x 69.2 cm
signed and dated in brown paint, lower left corner: "G Schalcken 1700."
GS-114

How to cite

Jansen, Guido. "Conversion of Mary Magdalen" (2017). In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge. New York, 2023–. https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/conversion-of-mary-magdalen/ (accessed November 16, 2026).

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When Godefridus Schalcken moved to London in 1692 and began painting portraits of the stadholder-king William III, he enjoyed the patronage of one of the most powerful men in Europe. Possibly because of that patronage, his work was also held in high esteem at other royal courts.[1] In 1694, while Schalcken was still in London, Cosimo III de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, requested through his agent Thomas Platt that the artist send him a candlelit self-portrait, for which he would pay 25 pounds sterling. After Schalcken's return to The Hague in 1696, this purchase was followed by several others and, as a result, four paintings of the master are still to be found in Florence.[2]

This contact with Cosimo probably led to commissions from the court in Düsseldorf, the residence of Cosimo's son-in-law, Johann Wilhelm, Elector Palatine.[3] In 1700 Schalcken painted for the elector two rather large canvases (compared to his usual small format), both of which are magnificent demonstrations of his skill in portraying artificial lighting. Schalcken came from a family of Protestant clergymen, so the religious subjects portrayed in these paintings were most likely stipulated by the strict Catholic court. The elector and his Florentine wife would certainly not have appreciated the racy, candlelight illuminated scenes Schalcken often painted for other clients.

The more famous of the two paintings that Schalcken painted in 1700 for the court in Düsseldorf is his ingenious portrayal of the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1–13). This biblical story was the perfect vehicle for a display of the artist's complete repertoire of nocturnal lighting effects, to which the painting owes its well-deserved reputation **(fig 1)**.[4] *Conversion of Mary Magdalene* in the Leiden Collection is the other painting that Schalcken made for the elector that year. This story derives not from the Bible, but from the highly popular *Legenda Aurea*, or *Golden Legend,* a thirteenth-century collection of hagiographies by Jacobus de Voragine. The figure of Mary Magdalene was still particularly topical in Schalcken's day, for the proponents of the Counter-Reformation saw her as the penitent sinner par excellence.[5]

Schalcken portrayed Mary Magdalene with delicate brushwork and rendered her surroundings with an exacting eye for detail. We see her seated beside a sarcophagus; on it lies a thick book and on top of that a burning oil lamp, which she grips with her right hand. The light from this lamp falls mainly on the saint's nearly naked bosom. The Magdalen raises her left arm and turns her head upward in the direction of a number of angels, who hold a palm branch and a wreath and are bathed in a heavenly light. This supernatural illumination also falls on her head. Around her neck she wears a broken pearl necklace, and at her feet lie two costly pieces of cloth in purple and

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Godefridus Schalcken, *Wise and Foolish Virgins*, 1700, oil on canvas, 94 x 114 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. no. 296, bpk, Berlin / Alte Pinakothek / Art Resource, NY

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blue. Arrayed on these fabrics are gold and silver plates, cups and other precious objects, including a string of pearls and a gold medal hanging from a blue ribbon. The saint's left foot treads on an imperial crown, next to which lies a gold scepter, another symbol of worldly power. The left side of the composition is closed off by a large, red drapery decorated with fringe, which catches the light coming from the left from a source outside the picture. A round column on a high base stands behind Mary Magdalene, and visible at the right is a nocturnal view of a rough sea, with several ships in distress. This last scene refers to the *Legenda Aurea*, which tells how the Magdalen boarded an unnavigable boat in Palestine and finally disembarked in the south of France, near Marseille.[6]

Schalcken's discerning portrayal of the conversion of Mary Magdalene is an excellent illustration of the way in which she was viewed and interpreted at the time of the Counter-Reformation, when she was thought to embody the union of the sensual, profane life and the spiritual life of the Church. It was in the Magdalen that the feminine beauty prized in antiquity was united with the Christian ideals of conversion and atonement. Schalcken took great pains to portray her gracefulness: she wears only a white chemise, unfastened at the top, and has an ample blue cloth draped over her legs. No offense could be taken at the Magdalen's partial nakedness, because penance and nakedness were interrelated in post-Tridentine religious thought. The beautiful and scarcely concealed body of the converted woman was considered a "heroic nude," in which the figure was placed at a distance and surrounded by a spiritual glow. Schalcken heightened this effect with the radiant light of heaven shining on the Christian sinner.[7]

As a subject, Mary Magdalene was certainly no novelty in Schalcken's oeuvre. At least ten paintings feature the penitent Magdalen, though all of them are characterized by simple iconography, showing the saint praying by the light of a lamp or candle, with a skull or the Holy Scripture close at hand.[8] None of his other works portraying Mary Magdalene can compare with the present painting in its wealth of pictorial elements, a feature that undoubtedly reflects the wishes of the elector's court. Here, too, the artist succeeded in producing a variety of light sources, just as he did in *Wise and Foolish Virgins*. In addition to natural light from the left, there is the light of an oil lamp—as is to be expected in the work of Schalcken—next to the protagonist. The third and most important light source (and not only in the iconographic sense) evokes divine intervention. Heavenly light shines mainly on the Magdalen's forehead, an indication that she is now about to embark on a spiritual life that demands the rejection of all earthly splendor.

Striking in this supernatural setting are the angels, for they are portrayed here in a way not found in any other of Schalcken's works. Rather, they reflect his intentional

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study of the work of Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), in whose *Amaryllis and Mirtillo* we find a closely related putto. In Schalcken's day, Van Dyck's painting was in the collection of William III until it was transferred to Het Loo Palace near Apeldoorn in 1694–95. The canvas had been on display in the Stadholder's Quarters in the Binnenhof in The Hague, which means that Schalcken certainly knew it.[9]

Given the quality of the two paintings sent to him in 1700, Johann Wilhelm, Elector Palatine, understandably became a great admirer of Schalcken's work. The shipment of 1700 contained the earliest known purchases, but the elector eventually acquired eight paintings by the artist. In December 1702, Heinrich von Wiser, the elector's ambassador in The Hague, reported to Johann Wilhelm that Schalcken had a piece in stock for which he was asking 1,000 guilders: "And as Your Electoral Highness probably knows, he would not be willing to go much below that." [10] The work represented the Holy Family with John the Baptist and Elizabeth. It is not known if the elector decided to purchase this painting in spite of its high price, but it is a fact that in 1703 Schalcken spent some time in Düsseldorf, where he lived in the house called "In the Golden Helmet" (Im gold'nen Helm) on the Flingerstrasse.[11] It was probably at this time that Schalcken received the large gold medal from the elector that he displays in his last self-portrait of 1706.[12]

- Guido Jansen, 2017

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Endnotes

1. King Christian V of Denmark (1646–99), for example, shortly before his death, commissioned Schalcken to paint *Holy Family*, which arrived in Copenhagen in 1700 and is still preserved there; Thierry Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken* (Paris,1988), no. 5. It was not known until recently that the king also had his portrait painted, as emerges from Samuel Sylvius, *Gedigten* ('s-Gravenhage, 1729), 2:183, in which the portrait is honored with a four-line verse: "Christianus de Vijfde, Koning van Denemarken en Norwegen, Door den Hofschilder G. Schalke. Dus maalt een Schalke hand den Koning Christiaan, / Wijs, deugdzaam, dapper, kloek en goed, tot heil der Noren. / Euroope en Asië zien 't beeld verwondert aan. / Geen vorst op aarde is zo bestendig 't rijk beschoren" (Christian V, King of Denmark and Norway, by the court painter G. Schalcken. So an impish hand paints King Christian / Wise, virtuous, brave, strong, and good, to the benefit of the Norwegians. / Europe and Asia look at his image with wonder. / No king on earth is blessed with so solid an empire). It was no doubt these commissions that led the painter's widow to refer to him incorrectly as the Danish court painter in her will of 6 July 1742 (with a codicil of 13 October 1743): "Francoisia van Diemen, weduwe van Godefridus Schalcken, in leven kunstschilder en hofschilder van Z. K. H. van Denemarken" (Francoisia van Diemen, widow of Godefridus Schalcken, in life an artist and court painter to His Royal Highness of Denmark). The Hague, Gemeentearchief, Protocol book of the notary Jacob Spex, inv. 2654.
2. Marco Chiarini, *I dipinti olandesi del Seicento e del Settecento* (Rome, 1989), 511–23, inv. nos. 76.248, 76.250, 76.252, and 76.253 with illustrations; the inv. nos. 76.249 (copy after the painting in Dresden) and 76.251 are not by the master's hand.
3. See Karla Langedijk, *Die Selbstbildnisse der holländischen und flämischen Künstler in der Galleria degli autoritratti der Uffizien in Florenz* (Florence, 1992), 167. In 1692 Johann Wilhelm had purchased his first Schalcken at an auction for 121 guilders; Theodor Levin, "Geiträge zur Geschichte der Kunstbestrebungen in dem Hause Pfalz-Neuburg," *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Niederrheins: Jahrbuch des Düsseldorfer Geschichtsvereins* 22 (1910): 143. Coincidentally, in 1690 the artist had painted the portrait of the elector's sister, Maria Anna von der Pfalz-Neuburg (1667–1740); Thierry Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken* (Paris, 1988), 407, no. 314 and 379 (oil on canvas, 50 x 39.5 cm). With regard to this portrait, see my entry in Sabine Craft-Giepmans and Annette de Vries, eds., *Portret in portret in de Nederlandse Kunst 1550–2012* (Exh. cat. Dordrechts Museum) (Dordrecht, 2012).
4. See my entry in Ekkehard Mai, Sander Paarlberg, and Gregor M. Weber, *Vom Adel der Malerei: Holland um 1700* (Exh. cat. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum; Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Schloss Wilhelmshöhe) (Cologne, 2006), 264, no. 75. Also Reinhold Baumstark et al., *Kurfürst Johann Wilhelms Bilder,* 3 vols. (Munich, 2009), 1: 400.
5. John B. Knipping, *De iconografie van de contra-reformatie in de Nederlanden,* 2 vols. (Hilversum, 1939–40), 2: 96–109. At this time, in fact, the influence of the Counter-Reformation was overpowering in the Palatinate. Until 1685 the Electors Palatine had been among the leaders of the Protestant faction

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in Germany, but Charles II's death without issue in that year meant the extinction of the Protestant branch of the Wittelsbach-Simmern family. A dispute erupted over the succession, which was settled in favor of the Catholic branch of Wittelsbach-Neuburg. The new Catholic Elector Palatine was Johann Wilhelm's father, who did his best to make his largely Protestant subjects return to the fold of the mother Church, a policy that his son and successor pursued with increased zeal after 1690.

6. Engelbert Kirschbaum, ed., *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie,* 8 vols. (Rome, 1968–76), 7: coll. 516–41, esp. 534.
7. John B. Knipping, *De iconografie van de contra-reformatie in de Nederlanden,* 2 vols. (Hilversum, 1939–40), 1:62 and 80.
8. Thierry Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken* (Paris,1988), nos. 15–24. Remarkably enough, it was a representation of Mary Magdalene in the collection of Diego Duarte in Antwerp that ushered in Schalcken's international reputation. As early as 1687, the Swede Nicodemus Tessin the Younger (1654–1728) observed, during his visit to the collection: "aber sonderlich schön wahr die S^{ta} Magdalena, so von dem reflex einer Lampen gantz eclairiret wurde, dessent gleichen ich nimmer artiger gemahlet gesehen, der es gemacht hat heisst Schalcken undt wohnet in Dort" (but the Saint Mary Magadalene was exceptionally beautiful, as she was completely lit by the reflection of a lamp, something I have never seen painted more felicitously; the one who did it is called Schalcken and lives in Dordrecht); Gustaf Upmark, "Ein Besuch in Holland 1687," *Oud Holland* 18, no. 1 (1900): 202. For the inventory of Duarte's paintings, see Erik Duverger, *Antwerpse kunstinventarissen uit de zeventiende eeuw*, 10 vols. (Brussels, 1984–2009), 9: 154–64; for the Mary Magdalene by Schalcken, see 9:164, no. 192.
9. Susan J. Barnes et al., *Van Dyck: A Complete Catalogue of the Paintings* (New Haven, 2004), 294, no. III.60; Peter van der Ploeg and Carola Vermeeren, *Princely Patrons: The Collection of Frederick Henry of Orange and Amalia of Solms in the Hague* (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 1997), 114, no. 5. The painting had been acquired by William III's grandfather, Prince Frederik Hendrik.
10. "Und wie E. Ch. D. ihne wohl kennen, würdt er davon nicht vil nachlassen." For the letter from Von Wiser, see Theodor Levin, "Geiträge zur Geschichte der Kunstbestrebungen in dem Hause Pfalz-Neuburg," in *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Niederrheins: Jahrbuch des Düsseldorfer Geschichtsvereins* 22 (1910): 34. Just how high this amount was emerges from the fact that in those days 800 guilders was the highest price fetched at auction by a work of Schalcken. Jonckheere states that the average price for a work by Schalcken was 188 guilders, as evidenced by his database of 41 works. The mean was 130 guilders. Of all the artists whose work was sold at auction, Schalcken is thus the 36th most expensive painter on the list; Koenraad Jonckheere, *The Auction of King William's Paintings, 1713* (Philadelphia, 2008), 215, 217.
11. On his stay in Düsseldorf, see K. Strauven, *Ueber künstlerisches Leben und Wirken in Düsseldorf bis zur Düsseldorfer Maler-Schule unter Direktor Schadow* (Düsseldorf, 1862), 20. Schalcken had gone to Düsseldorf to work. While there he painted at least three portraits, including the portrait of Anna Maria Louisa de' Medici (1667–1743), second wife of Elector Johann Wilhelm, and the portrait of Theresia Catharina Lubomirska (1683–1712), the wife of his younger brother and successor, Karl Philipp of the

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Palatinate; Thierry Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken* (Paris, 1988), 406, no. 289 (dated 1703, oil on canvas, 131 x 98 cm) and 407, no. 330a (dated 1703, oil on canvas, 118.8 x 88.4 cm). Another portrait painted at that time was a likeness of a Count of Bylandt, which E. W. Moes reported in 1892 as being in the possession of a descendant, along with the curious correspondence between the artist and the patron; see G. H. Veth "Aanteekeningen omtrent eenige Dordrechtsche schilders. XXXII. Godefridus Schalcken," *Oud Holland*, 10 (1892): 5. It is not known if either the portrait or the letters are still extant. The only heir and grandson of the owner, Willem Frederik Lodewijk, Count of Bylandt (1896–1990), informed me in writing in 1986 that he had never heard of an ancestral portrait by Schalcken in his family's possession.

12. The self-portrait is discussed in Thierry Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken* (Paris, 1988), 156, no. 58, and figured in a sale at Christie's in London on 10 July 1998, lot 36, with color illustration. See also Roland, Browse, and Delbanco, *Old and Modern Paintings 19 Cork Street, Old Bond Street, London, W1 Regent 7984,* cat. 1963, 10–11. The medal Schalcken wears features a younger image of the elector than the medal Adriaen van der Werff (1659–1722) proudly displays in his *Self-Portrait* of 1699 in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, inv. no. Sk-A-465 (oil on canvas, 81 x 65.5 cm); Peter J. J. van Thiel, ed., *All the Paintings of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 1976), 599, with illustration. See also Guido Jansen, "Selbstporträt mit der goldenen Medaille von Johann Wilhelm von der Pfalz, 1706," in *Schalcken–Gemalte Verführung*, ed. Anja K. Sevcik. (Exh. cat. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum. Stuttgart, 2015), 106–9, no. 7 and Annelise Stemper, *Die Medaillen der Pfalzgrafen und Kurfursten bei Rhein* (Worms, 1997): S. 378, Nr. 372 for the medal in Van Der Werff's *Self-Portrait* and S. 390, Nr. 379A for the medal in Schalcken's *Self-Portrait.*

Provenance

- Johann Wilhelm (1658-1716), Elector Palatine of the Rhine, Count Palatine of Neuburg, Düsseldorf, ca. 1700-16; by descent to the Bavarian Royal collections.
- Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, by 1893 (possibly in 1876).
- (Sale, Parke-Bernet, New York, 5 March 1952, no. 64.)
- (Sale, Parke-Bernet, New York, 6 October 1971, no. 75.)
- [Spencer A. Samuels & Co., New York, by 1972.]
- (Sale, Christie's, New York, 9 January 1981, no. 111.)
- [Christopher Janet Ltd., New York, by 1984.]
- Martin Pomp, New York, consigned to Lawrence Steigrad Fine Arts, New York, 1996; consigned to Jack Kilgore, New York, 1997 [to Johnny Van Haeften, Ltd.].
- [Johnny Van Haeften, Ltd., London, 2004.]
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2004.

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Exhibition History

- New York, Spencer A. Samuels & Co., “Recent Acquisitions,” 8–29 April 1972.
- New York, Christophe Janet Ltd., “The Intimate Vision,” 19–21 April 1984, no. 11.
- New York, Otto Naumann Ltd., “Lawrence Steigrad Fine Art Exhibiting at Otto Naumann,” 5 December 1996–4 January 1997, no. 51 [lent by Lawrence Steigrad Fine Art].
- Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, “Schalcken – Gemalte Verführung,” 25 September 2015–24 January 2016; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Museum, 21 February–26 June 2016, no. 79 [lent by the present owner].
- Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, “The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection,” 28 March 2018–22 July 2018, no. 71 [lent by the present owner].
- St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, “The Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer: Masterpieces of The Leiden Collection,” 5 September 2018–13 January 2019, no. 71 [lent by the present owner].
- Amsterdam, Hermitage Amsterdam, “Rembrandt and his Contemporaries: History Paintings from The Leiden Collection,” 4 February–27 August 2023, no. 25 [lent by the present owner].

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- De Pigage, Nicolas, and Chrétien de Mechel. *La Galerie Electorale de Dusseldorff ou catalogue raisonné et figuré de ses tableaux: Dans lequel on donne une connoissance exacte de cette fameuse Collection, & de son local, par des descriptions détaillées, & par une suite de 30. planches, contenant 365. petites estampes.* Basel, 1778, no. 322, fig. 24.
- *Catalogue de la Galerie de Mannheim actuellement au Chateau de Nymphenbourg … 19 novembre 1799*. Bayerischen Staatsgemäldesammlungen Archive, 1799, inv. Ma A 799/1.
- *Churfürstl Gemaelde-Sammlung von Mannheim, den 26. October. 1802*. Bayerischen Staatsgemäldesammlungen Archive, 1802, inv. Ma A 802/1.

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- *Verzeichniß der Gemälde der Churfl: Bilder-Galerie von Mannheim, verfasst den 22ten July 1802. in München*. Bayerischen Staatsgemäldesammlungen Archive, 1802, inv. Ma A 802/2.
- *Verzeichniß derjenigen Gemälde, welche aus der Churfürstl. Mannheimer Gemälde-sammlungen nach den Churfürstlichen Schloß Schleissheim abgeschiket worden sind.* Bayerischen Staatsgemäldesammlungen Archive, inv. Ma A 802/4.
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- Franits, Wayne. *Godefridus Schalcken: A Late 17th-century Dutch Painter in Pursuit of Fame and*

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Fortune. London, 2023, 119–24, fig. 63; 133.

Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of a fine, plain-weave fabric, has been lined. All four tacking margins have been almost entirely removed. Narrow tacking margin remnants and cusping along all four edges indicate the original dimensions have been retained. Remnants of paper tape are present along the right side of the lower edge only. There are two canvas stamps, two labels and one inscription, but no wax collection seals along the lining or stretcher.

A light gray ground has been thinly and evenly applied and extends onto the right tacking margin. A red underlayer is visible along the right tacking margin and can be seen below much of the composition. The paint has been applied with loose fluid brushstrokes in thin, smooth glazes, with no use of impasto. Details along the gold objects in the foreground and tassels hanging from the red fabric have been applied with fine dabs and strokes of color.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. Compositional changes visible in the images include the following: the stars along the edge of the blue drapery over the figure's proper right knee were originally smaller; and the toes along the figure's proper right foot have been shifted downward closer to the edge of the crown. A pentimento along the pink drapery wrapped around the waist of the putti in the upper right corner indicates a change to the fabric's contour.

The painting is signed and dated in brown paint along the lower left corner.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2004 and remains in a good state of preservation despite areas of thinness along the blue drapery, the locks of hair draped over the figure's shoulder, the rays emanating from the putti, and the area where the white clouds meet the red drapery.[1]

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The painting was examined on-site without the use of a stereomicroscope.

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