NOLI ME TANGERE

Theme: Noli me tangere (“do not touch me”) or Mary Magdalene recognizes Christ after his Resurrection.

Keywords: Mary Magdalene, Noli me tangere, Christ, Resurrection Appearances, New Testament, Christian Iconography, Middle Ages

Summary: After his resurrection, Christ appears to Mary Magdalene, the most fervent and most beloved of his disciples, and when she tries to hug him he replied “Let me go because I have not yet ascended to the Father.”

According to Réau, one had to wonder why the risen Christ does not allow Mary Magdalene to touch him when he allowed the Holy Women and St. Thomas to do it.\(^1\) This contradiction can be understood as a mistranslation of the Greek Me aptou mou. This expression was translated into Latin as “Noli me tangere”, that is “do not touch me.”\(^2\) However, the correct translation would be “do not go on touching me” or “I do not hold on to me.”\(^3\)

Attributes and types of representation: The scene of the noli me tangere may appear isolated, as part of the iconographic cycle of the Passion of Christ or as part of the iconographic cycle of the Mary Magdalene.\(^4\) The most popular iconography of Mary Magdalene is the one of the Magdalene kneeling before Christ and spreading her arms to hold him. Christ separates his body from the woman’s and extends his right hand to prevent Mary Magdalene from touching him. The scene is usually represented in a garden because the episode took place outdoors. In some cases a palm tree is represented, which would place the action in a garden of Palestine. Sometimes Mary Magdalene is represented with her attribute, a container of perfume oils that she took to the tomb, while Christ is usually wearing a cross (symbol of the resurrection) or a spade as a gardener (which refers to John 20: 15) or both things at once.

Primary sources: The story of the noli me tangere is described by two Evangelists, Mark and John. There are several Vitas of Mary Magdalene, both in Latin and Greek, which reflect these scenes. As an example we will describe the Vita written by Jacobus de Voragine in the thirteenth century in the Golden Legend.

- Mark 16: 9-10: “When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping.”\(^5\)
- John 20: 11-18: “Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at

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\(^2\) In fact this term is what has given name to the iconography and the reason why it is known.


\(^4\) The iconography cycle of Mary Magdalene can be seen in the murals of the Rinuccini chapel in the church of Santa Croce in Florence, created by Giovanni da Milano in 1365. In this cycle the scene of the Anointing at Bethany is also represented.

the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabbuni!” (which means “Teacher”). 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.’” Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.”

- Jacobus de Voragine, The Golden Legend, Volume 3, Chapter 36 (13th century): “This Mary Magdalene washed the feet of our Lord and wiped them with the hair of the head, and anointed them with ointment, and did solemn penitence at the time of grace, and was the first to chose the best site, which was at the feet of our Lord and heard his preaching. It was she who anointed his head, during his passion she stood at the foot of the cross, she was the one who prepared the ointments, and who anointed his body, and she was the one who refused to depart from the grave when his disciples left. She was the one who Jesus Christ first appeared to after his resurrection, and she was a companion of the apostles...”

Non-written sources: There is no evidence of oral history or popular religious practices that could have influenced the creation of the theme of the noli me tangere.

Geographical and chronological framework: The noli me tangere is the first of a series of appearances of Christ that were used as a way to reiterate the reality of the resurrection of Christ. That is why it was part of the first representations of the Life and Passion of Christ and was a popular subject throughout the Middle Ages. There is evidence that this episode appeared in an ivory casket (lipsanoteca of Brescia) created in the workshops of Milan (Italy) between 330 and 360. Few examples have survived from this time, however it is very possible that there were more and that they spread through Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire. The bronze doors of the Church of St. Michael in Hildesheim in Germany from the eleventh century, is one of the most interesting due to the artistic media in which it was made. In Leon, Spain, the remaining ivory plaques, probably from a casket, made in 1115 contain the representation of the resurrection appearances of Christ among which is the noli me tangere. During the Romanesque period, this scene decorated the capitals of the basilica of Saint-Andoche in Burgundy (France) and the monastery church of Santa Maria la Real in Aguilar de Campo in Palencia (Spain), among other places. It also appeared in the tympanum of the church of the Holy Sepulcher in Estella, Navarra (Spain) and in high relief on the choir of Bourget (Savoie). The noli me tangere is represented in numerous Spanish, English, German and Italian manuscripts from the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was a popular subject in the Italian Trecento with artistic examples created by artists such as Duccio, Giotto and Giovanni da Milano. The subject is also represented in what remains of the Münnerstadt bas-relief wood altarpiece by Tilman Riemenschneider created in the fifteenth century in Germany. These are but a few examples to show the scope of this iconography that

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6 Ibid.

7 The text of Jacobus de Voragine can be consulted at the following web page, consultation done April 30th, 2011. See also Jacobo de Vorágine (Ed. de 1984): La leyenda dorada. Alianza, D.L., Madrid.

8 Réau, Iconografía del arte cristiano, p. 579. In addition to the story of his life, the resurrection appearances are the best proof of the divinity of Jesus Christ.
took over much of the Middle Ages in Western and Eastern Europe. In fact this iconography has not lost any popularity over the centuries, and it is still the subject of numerous artistic representations throughout the world.

**Artistic media and techniques:** The *noli me tangere* has been reproduced in almost all types of artistic media and using many different techniques. In the previous section the examples showed the most popular media where this iconography was represented such as stone, ivory, parchment, fresco or wood. To this list one has to add stained-glass windows, the sumptuary arts, oil painting and liturgical furnishings, among other media.

**Precedents, transformations, and projection:** This episode has no precedent in the Ancient world. Its iconography was taken directly from the biblical texts. The iconography of the *noli me tangere* did not change much over time, only the details but the basic form of Mary Magdalene kneeling before Christ remained the same. The clothing of Christ was one of those details that underwent a transformation. At first, until the thirteenth century, Christ, the conqueror of death, was represented wrapped in his shroud and holding the cross of the Resurrection. According to Réau from the fourteenth century onwards Christ is represented as a gardener following the text of John the Evangelist. However, this iconography was already represented in the Bible of Avila in the first half of the twelfth century in Spain. In the instances in which Christ is represented as a gardener, he usually carries a spade in his hand or shoulder and sometimes he wears a straw hat. From the fifteenth century on, Christ holds both the spade and the cross. According to Réau this “disguise” is usually highlighted by a realism of bad taste by some artists where Christ holds his foot to his spade to dig carrots (Poussin).

**Prefigurations and related themes:** The *Noli me tangere* is also part of the Christian typological system. The prefiguration of this scene from the Passion of Christ is the prohibition to approach Mount Sinai that Moses imposed on the people of Israel. Sometimes this iconographic theme has been confused with the healing of the hemorrhage woman. There are no other themes that can be related to this iconography.

**Images:**

- *Noli me tangere*. Bronze. Door of Saint Michael of Hildesheim. Hildesheim, Germany, 1015.
- *Noli me tangere* (lower register). Ivory plaque. Leon, Spain, ca. 1115-1120. New York, Metropolitan Musuem of Art, Accession Nummber 17.190.47.
- *Noli me tangere*. Stone. Capital of the Basilica of Saint-Andoche, Saulieu, Burgundy, France, ca. 1130.
- *Noli me tangere*. Stone. Capital of the church of the monastery of Santa María la Real of Aguilar de Campoo (Palencia, Spain). 12th-13th centuries.
- *Noli me tangere*. Altarpiece of the Monastery of Klosterneuburg, Austria, ca. 1331.

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9 Ibid., p. 580.

- *Noli me tangere*. Fran Angelico. 1395-1455. Florence, Museum of Saint Mark.

- *Noli me tangere* (right). Tympanum of the Gothic portal of the Church of the Saint Sepulcher, Estella, Navarra (Spain). 14th century.


- *Noli me tangere*. Fresco in the nave of the basilica of San Nazaro Maggiore in Milan, Italy, 15th century.

- *Noli me tangere*. Book of Hours. Rouen, France, ca. 1480. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. 131, fol. 111r.

- *Noli me tangere*. La vie de Jesus Christ. Tours?, Francia, ca. 1470-1480. Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine, Ms. 976 (f.001-127v), fol. 111v.


- *Noli me tangere* (lower part of the right panel). Flemish altarpiece. Brabant, Belgium, 16th century. Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts.

**Bibliography:**


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