

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM  
FINE ARTS

**JUANA ROMANI**  
Velletri 1867 – Suresnes 1923  
Italian School

**MAGDALENE**

Oil on panel  
H. 1,15 m; W. 0,72 m  
Signed and dated: *Juana Romani 1891*

DATE: 1891

PROVENANCE: Private collection

EXHIBITION:

*Juana Romani (1867-1923), peintre et modèle. Un rêve d'absolu*, exh. cat. Musée Roybet Fould, Courbevoie, 2021, p. 127, no. 75 (ill.).

RELATED WORKS:

Another version dated 1890 was exhibited at the 1891 Salon, no. 1422 “Madeleine”;<sup>1</sup> Paris Hôtel Drouot sale, 7 December 1906, no. 73: “Une Madeleine”, oil on panel, H. 1.30 m; W. 0.70 m, “Standing, seen from the knees up, red hair hanging over her shoulders, bust and arms uncovered, a black velvet dress tightened around her waist: her eyes look down on a cross that she is holding with both hands. Signed on the right and dated: 1890”; private collection, London

**A painter in Belle Époque Paris, Juana Romani started her career as a model, posing for many famous artists. A sudden psychiatric illness put an end to her short but successful career, similar to her contemporary Camille Claudel. Our Magdalen, the red-haired biblical heroine, is reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Henner’s art, but is remarkable for her bewitching, wild character.**

Giovanna Carolina Carlesimo, better known as Juana Romani (1867-1923), was born in Velletri, about forty kilometres south of Rome. She arrived in Paris with her mother and stepfather in 1877. Her stepfather, a musician who had grown up in an intellectual environment, passed on an artistic culture to her. Her mother Marianna, who was illiterate, earned her living as a model. Juana Romani thus discovered the world of artists’ studios and began modelling professionally at the age of fifteen, first in the private academies of Rodolphe Julian and the Italian-born sculptor Filippo Colarossi, and then in private artists' studios.<sup>2</sup> In 1883, she began posing for Alexandre Falguière, a teacher at the École des Beaux-Arts, who used her features for his *Hunting Nymph*, a sculpture that won acclaim at the 1884 Salon. Its success, with a posture that was considered daring, undoubtedly contributed to Juana Romani's reputation.

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<sup>1</sup> Caricature “Madeleine Leaving for the Ball”, *Journal Amusant*, 9 May 1891, p. 5. Described by Armand Gouzien as *Madeleine at the Cross* : “Las exposiciones de bellas artes de Paris”, *La ilustración española y americana*, Madrid, 30 May 1891, p. 334

<sup>2</sup> Marion Lagrange, “Modèle italien et maîtres parisiens : la muse et l’élève”, exh. cat. *Juana Romani (1867-1923), peintre et modèle. Un rêve d'absolu*, Musée Roybet Fould, Courbevoie, 2021, p. 20.

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Her coppery hair and youthful body with its marked waist, deformed from wearing a corset, made Juana Romani one of the most sought-after models in Paris. She was not confined to Italian or Oriental roles, but was more like a “Parisienne from Paris, who could have posed equally for a Magdalen by Veronese, or for some allegorical nymph by Rubens”,<sup>3</sup> adapting perfectly to the subjects she dealt with. Juana became the model of the painter from Nancy, Victor Prouvé from 1883, and posed shortly afterwards for Jean-Jacques Henner and Carolus-Duran, both of whom inspired her.

While posing, Juana Romani took advantage of her breaks to scribble drawings, until painters recognised her potential as an artist and encouraged her to pursue this work.<sup>4</sup> Romani soon discovered a passion for painting and began to train by getting help from the artists whose studios she visited. Between 1886 and 1889, she probably studied at the “Atelier des Dames”, an important private studio set up in 1874 by Jean-Jacques Henner and Carolus-Duran, and then with Ferdinand Roybet (1840-1920), a highly sought-after painter at the time, but whose style had little influence on her. Juana Romani's painting was most influenced by Jean-Jacques Henner and the works of Henri Regnault (1843-1871), such as the sensual female figure *Salomé* (1870).<sup>5</sup>

### A Dazzling Career

Juana Romani began her career as a painter at the 1888 Salon. She was only twenty-one years old and immediately attracted the attention of critics. She went on to exhibit her work at the 1889 Salon and at the Universal Exhibition, where she won a second medal. Now “exempt from competition”, she no longer had to submit her work to the jury and exhibited at the Salon every year until 1904. Her impressive metamorphosis from a very young model to a promising artist seems to have inspired the novel *Le Maître* by Louis Fortuné Méaulle (1844-1916).<sup>6</sup> She stopped modelling in 1890, and her body was only shown dressed at the Salon in Ferdinand Roybet's works. His studio was a meeting place for many artists and art critics,<sup>7</sup> and she began a relationship with him that same year. The couple travelled to Italy and Spain in the 1890s. Juana's first psychiatric problems appeared in 1903. Her partner supported her during difficult periods and when she was interned, finally becoming her legal guardian in 1909.

### Biblical women

The depiction of isolated female figures from the Old and New Testaments was common at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly during the 1880s. Jean-Jacques Henner painted several biblical heroines, including *Herodias* (for whom Romani posed in 1887), *Judith* (1887-1891) and *Rebecca* (1903-1905). His favourite figure for almost thirty years was the *Penitent Mary-Magdalen*. Henner painted her reclining, kneeling, leaning forward mourning in tears, or standing, always with long red hair. These varied compositions certainly exerted a great influence on Romani, who was his model and later his pupil.

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<sup>3</sup> Camille de Sainte-Croix, “L’Ecole des Beaux-Arts (notes d’un ami de la maison)”, *Le Figaro*, 28 August-4 September 1889, cited by Annie Jacques (ed.), *Les Beaux-Arts, de l’Académie au Quat’z’arts (...)*, Paris, 2001, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> Jacopo Caponi Folchetto, “La vita a Parigi”, *L’Illustrazione italiana*, no. 15, 14 April 1895, p. 238-239.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Regnault, *Salomé*, Salon of 1870, oil on canvas, H. 1,60 m; W. 1,01 m, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. 16.95).

<sup>6</sup> Louis Fortuné Méaulle, *Le Maître (la vie d’un artiste)*, Paris, 1906.

<sup>7</sup> They shared several friends such as the painter Louis Prétet, the photographer Antoine Lumière, the pharmacist et industrialist Angelo Mariani, and the art critics Armand Silvestre and Roger-Milès.

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Between 1890 and 1892, Juana Romani created a series of strong, sensual biblical women: *Herodias*, *Salome*, *Judith* and *Mary Magdalene*.<sup>8</sup> Her vaporous brushwork, akin to sfumato, and the luminosity of the skin tones emerging from a dark background, are a clear homage to Henner. However, she departed from them and began to find her own personal style. In contrast to the poetic anonymity of her master's figures, she approached her heroines with striking realism, to the point that some critics saw them as portraits of the same young red-haired woman endowed with the attributes of the various heroines. When Romani exhibited *Judith* and *Madeleine* in 1891, one critic described them as “twin sisters”.<sup>9</sup> Particularly noteworthy was the fierce and somewhat disturbing temperament of these characters, a clear departure from the aesthetic of Henner's world.

The poet and art critic Armand Silvestre (1837-1901), who was a friend of the couple, commented on this aspect: “For many who may not look at her carefully, could at certain moments, take her for a nice laughing child. But, with her, the Woman does not abdicate in the artist; on the contrary, her art is rather made of an exaggerated feminism. La Fontaine wondered what lions would paint, if they knew how to paint. Well, I imagine that if the great charmers Delilah, Judith and Lucretia had known how to paint, they would have drawn those figures that are both delicious and fierce, and that Juana charmed us with a certain amount of fear, and in which it has always seemed to me that there was a great deal of herself.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Sulphurous Mary Magdalene**

The image of a sulphurous Mary Magdalene, which emerged during the 19th century in the context of anti-clericalism, has no basis in Scripture or Tradition. She is an example of the sexualisation of biblical figures, as seen in Gustav Klimt's *Judith and Holofernes*<sup>11</sup> and in contemporary literary works such as Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, written in 1892 and performed in Paris in 1896. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a reaction to the constraints of traditional morality. By presenting religious figures sensually, artists challenged notions of sanctity and purity, while celebrating sexual liberation and questioning the traditional roles assigned to women.

### **Magdalene: a strange beauty**

To date, four compositions by Romani on the theme of Mary Magdalene are known. The artist painted her once holding a book,<sup>12</sup> and another time naked, in bust, turned to the left, tense hands reported on his chest, eyes closed.<sup>13</sup>

Our composition is a replica made by the artist after an oil painting on panel showing Magdalene standing.<sup>14</sup> A woman, her face in profile to the right, looks down at the cross she is holding. Her long red hair covers her shoulders. Like an apparition in darkness, her bare arms

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<sup>8</sup> Emmanuelle Trief-Touchard, “Hérodiade, Judith et Marie-Madeleine”, exh. cat. *Juana Romani (1867-1923), peintre et modèle. Un rêve d’absolu*, Musée Roybet Fould, Courbevoie, 2021, p. 124-130.

<sup>9</sup> E. Jacques, “Le Salon aux Champs-Élysées”, *L’Intransigeant*, 1 May 1891, p. 2, cited by Emmanuelle Trief-Touchard, 2021, p. 127, note 11.

<sup>10</sup> Armand Silvestre, “Juana Romani”, *Figures contemporaines tirées de l’Album Mariani*, vol. 2, 1896 (1894).

<sup>11</sup> Gustav Klimt, *Judith and Holofernes*, 1901, oil on canvas, H. 0,84 m; L. 0,42 m, Vienna, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere (inv. 4737).

<sup>12</sup> *Mary Magdalen Reading or The Reader*, about 1890-1892, Malden, Malden Public Library Art Gallery, acquired in 1940, see exh. cat. 2021, p. 130, fig. 83.

<sup>13</sup> *Mary Magdalen*, undated [about 1890], oil on panel, London, private collection, reproduced in exh. cat. 2021, p. 51, fig. 33.

<sup>14</sup> *Mary Magdalen*, oil on panel, H. 1,30 m; L. 0,70 m, signed on the right and dated 1890, private collection, London.

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and breast radiate light. She is wearing the same black velvet dress as other biblical heroines painted by Romani. It could be an evening dress, as a caricature from the Salon of 1891 suggests,<sup>15</sup> where one of her *Madeleines* is exhibited, probably the one in a private London collection, slightly larger in size, signed and dated 1890.



Victor Prouvé, *Study of Juana Romani in a Headscarf*, ink and wash on paper, H. 370 mm; W. 300 mm, signed lower right, Colnaghi Elliott Master Drawings, London.

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<sup>15</sup> Caricature “Madeleine partant pour le bal”, *Journal Amusant*, 9 May 1891, p. 5.