



JAIME EGUIGUREN

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Last quarter of the 17th century

**THE CONVERSION
OF MARY MAGDALENE
(RELIEF)**

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The conversion of Mary Magdalene (relief)

Similar style to that of Josefa de Óbidos
(Seville, 1630 - Óbidos, Portugal, 1684)

Polychrome alabaster

17.7 x 13.3 x 3.2cm

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This piece depicts a female figure with a round face, wide brow, large eyes looking towards the heavens and a small mouth. Her short hair is neatly wavy and she wears a feather headdress from which a jewel is hanging down. Her dress is lavish with a wide neck, pleated sleeves with flowers and lace on her forearms, and one long glove covering her right hand. She is wearing a pearl necklace and a double bracelet, also with pearls, on her left wrist. She is depicted from the front and from the waist up, sat at a table holding the following objects: a miniature with a bust portrait that may be of *The Saviour*, in an oval frame, on which she rests her right hand; an upturned bottle of perfume that is leaking its contents; an octagonal box; another, flatter and rectangular box; a ring with a pearl; a round jar which has also been upturned, and from which pearls are spilling out; a two-sided comb, a small round recipient with a lid, and a spindle with tape wound around it. At the back of the scene, from the top moving down, we observe some clouds and horizontal stripes and, on the table, six-petalled flowers and semicircles.

According to the Gospel of Saint Luke (8:2), Jesus exorcised seven demons out of Mary Magdalene. She was present at the Crucifixion, along with the Virgin Mary and Saint John, and as such she tends to be included in Calvary depictions, either on her knees at the foot of the cross or with her arms around it. Her long, buoyant hair flows free, and she is often pictured with a jar of ointment with which she anoints Christ's feet.

Sometimes, Mary Magdalene is seen as a penitent, dressed in a simple cloak or naked, wearing nothing more than her long hair. She tends to be pictured with a crucifix and a skull, although on occasion she has a whip and a crown of thorns. She is either reading or meditating, and she raises up her weeping eyes to a vision of angels in heaven. Another episode, which is the one depicted in the work being examined here, bears witness to the moment of her conversion when, overcoming the vanities of the world, dressed in opulent robes, with jewels and gloves, she throws off her finery and perfume, which are pictured scattered at her feet next to an upturned box of jewels.

This little relief is of excellent technical quality, and both the model of the figure and the objects are depicted in great detail. It might be inspired in the Malinas series of alabaster reliefs that were so popular from the end of the 16th century and into the 17th century, although there are certain important differences that have led researchers to explore other avenues. The background is not as flat here, the figures and objects have greater volume and are executed with greater precision. Furthermore, the incorrect perspective of the table and the items arranged on it shows that this is the work of an artist more interested in the real representation of the items and their meaning than by the scene as a whole.

Josefa de Óbidos (Seville, 1630 - Óbidos, 1684)

The daughter of the Portuguese Baltazar Gomes Figueira (1597-1674) would start her training in Seville, her father having arrived there in the 1620s with the intention of serving in the military. On not being successful, he decided on a change of direction, joining the workshop of the painter Francisco Herrera "the Elder" as an assistant. Gomes Figueira married Catarina Camacho Cabrera Romero, the daughter of an important member of Seville Society, with whom he had seven children. When, in 1634, the family decided to move to the father's native city, Óbidos, the eldest child, Josefa, remained in Seville for a few years, in the charge of her grandfather, Juan Ortiz de Ayala, a lover of Fine Arts and the owner of an important collection of paintings. Under his tutelage, Josefa had access to works by the great Flemish, Spanish, Italian and French masters, as well as embarking on her own artistic development alongside Herrera "the Elder", who was her godfather.

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In 1644, Josefa found herself in Portugal, living at the Augustinian convent of Santa Ana, in Coimbra, very near to where her father was working as a painter. It was there, in 1646, at the age of 16, that she would undertake her first signed works, the engravings of *Saint Catherine* (Fig. 1) and *Saint Peter* (National Museum of Ancient Art, Lisbon).

Meanwhile, her first painting, signed and dated 1647, is a small copper work depicting the *Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, which she based on an engraving by Cornelis Cort, for the Monastery of Santa Cruz in Coimbra, currently kept at the National Museum of Ancient Art in Lisbon (Fig. 2). That same year she finished a number of similar works, all painted on copper and on a small scale, measuring between 5cm and 10cm, depicting the *Virgin and Child* and a *Nativity Scene with Saint Francis and Saint Clare adoring the new-born child* (Private Collection).

By 1653, Josefa de Ayala, as she was also known, had moved with her family from Coimbra to Óbidos, where that year she executed the engravings of the *Novos Estatutos da Universidade de Coimbra*. The frontispiece was carried out by her father, who was the one that introduced her into Portuguese artistic circles. Despite how unusual this was in her day, she decided to devote herself to painting, and soon received commissions from convents and churches, such as the Monastery of Alcobaça, or that of Saint Jerome in Lisbon. In 1661, at the age of 31, she emancipated herself from her family, with her father's consent, and for the rest of her life worked independently in Óbidos.

At least 53 signed works by this artist have survived, not just paintings and engravings, but also sculptures, wall hangings and reliquaries, often miniscule or small-scale pieces.

As Vitor Serrão admits: "Tradition documents that Josefa de Óbidos was not just the painter of religious subjects, still lifes and portraits, an engraver and ceramic worker, she also illustrated books, painted frescos, made sculptures and executed religious imagery, and may even have created templates for tiles, but these aspects are yet to come to the surface."¹



Fig. 1. Josefa de Óbidos, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, engraving, 1646, National Museum of Ancient Art, Lisbon.



Fig. 2. Josefa de Óbidos, *Saint Catherine's Mystical Marriage*, paint on copper, National Museum of Ancient Art, Lisbon.

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Fig. 3. Josefa de Óbidos, *Still life with sweets, terracotta and flowers*, Municipal Library, Anselmo Braamcamp Freire, Santarém.

Her favourite subjects included religious iconography, which she was able to execute with great perfection and sensitivity, being highly influenced by Zurbarán, as can be observed, for instance, in her depiction of the *Mystic Lamb*. But she was also a renowned portrait artist, as demonstrated by the portrait of the *Beneficiary Francisco das Neves* (c. 1670, Évora Museum). Although perhaps what she was most well-known for was the series of still lifes inspired in Flemish art, in a very similar style to that of Daniel Seguers, which she may have learnt during her training in Seville (Fig. 3).

The critical fortunes of this artist have varied over the years, given that she was first treated as an unusual and interesting rarity carrying out commissions for her local clientele but, thanks to the temporary exhibitions of her work, particularly the most recent one, organised in 2015 at the National Museum of Ancient Art in Lisbon, she has started to be considered as one of the early forerunners of Portuguese Baroque.²

The Conversion of Mary Magdalene

A comparative study of works created by Josefa de Óbidos and the little relief of the *Conversion of Mary Magdalene*, clearly points to similarities in the choice of model, the details included, as well as the technique and style of execution.

The first thing we notice in the alabaster polychrome relief is the *Mary Magdalene* model, depicted like a child, the sweetness of her expression, the detail of the hair, clothes, objects, and the ingenuousness of the entire ensemble, successfully executed on such a small scale. The almost infantile appearance of the Saint is a characteristic found throughout the work of Josefa de Óbidos, who showed a predilection for depictions of the *Infant Jesus* even going so far as to portray him like a little girl on occasions, as in the case of the painting *Pilgrim Infant Jesus*. These all share the same physical features, including the round face, tiny mouth and the hair and hairstyle similarly executed (Fig. 4).

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Fig. 4. Josefa de Óbidos, *Pilgrim Infant Jesus*, oil on canvas, Collection of the Venerable Third Order, Coimbra.



Fig. 5. Josefa de Óbidos, *Conversion of Mary Magdalene*, paint on copper, Machado de Castro National Museum, Coimbra.

Josefa de Óbidos painted the subject of the *Conversion of Mary Magdalene*, c. 1653, in at least one of her copper works (Coimbra, Machado de Castro National Museum). In said painting we can but admire the freshness and precision of the draftsmanship and the transparency of the colour (Fig. 5). Furthermore, the extent of detail in the objects depicted on the table in the alabaster relief, almost in the style of a still life, the flowers drawn and scattered on the surface, is something most, if not all of Josefa de Óbidos' works share. And one further detail, the tiny bust of *The Saviour* which, in the relief, appears in a little oval frame being stroked by Mary's hand, is also present in the tunic of the *Pilgrim Jesus* canvas (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Josefa de Óbidos, *Pilgrim Infant Jesus* (detail), oil on canvas, Collection of the Venerable Third Order, Coimbra.

The reliquary chapel of the Monastery of Santa Maria de Alcobaça

The chapel was started in the last quarter of the 17th century by Friar Constantino de Sampaio, and is at the head of the vestry. It has an octagonal floorplan, vaulted with a dome with a lantern, sculpted by Antonio Rodríguez Carvalho and Manuel García. Six levels of wall recesses house reliquary statuettes of polychrome clay, executed over a short period of time by various sculptors, official painters and gilders. This is an exceptional piece of Portuguese art, in which we cannot rule out the participation of painters from the Óbidos circle. Furthermore, one should bear in mind the influence of the paintings of Baltasar Gomes Figueira and those of his daughter Josefa de Óbidos for the Monastery, supported by the presence of José Pereira da Costa, an engraver married to Antónia de Ayala, Josefa's sister, on the work carried out on the altarpiece.³



Fig. 7. Anonymous Portuguese, *Virgin martyr (Saint Agnes?)*, reliquary bust, polychrome terracotta, 1669-1672, Reliquary chapel of the Monastery of Santa Maria de Alcobaça.

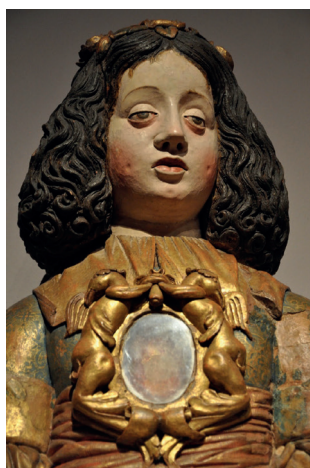


Fig. 8. Anonymous Portuguese, *Virgin martyr*, reliquary bust, polychrome terracotta, 1669-1672, Reliquary chapel of the Monastery of Santa Maria de Alcobaça.



Fig. 9. Anonymous Portuguese, *Virgin martyr*, reliquary bust, polychrome terracotta, c. 1675, Reliquary chapel of the Monastery of Santa Maria de Alcobaça.

The three “Holy Martyr” reliquary busts (Fig. 7, 8 and 9) present models with round faces, ecstatic eyes, cylindrical necks, elaborate hair adorned with crowns of flowers, and dressed exquisitely. They bear a close relationship with the figures depicted in the paintings of Josefa de Óbidos, as well as with the relief of the *Conversion of Mary Magdalene*. This small yet magnificent work successfully transmits the sensitivity and charm that characterise Josefa de Óbidos.

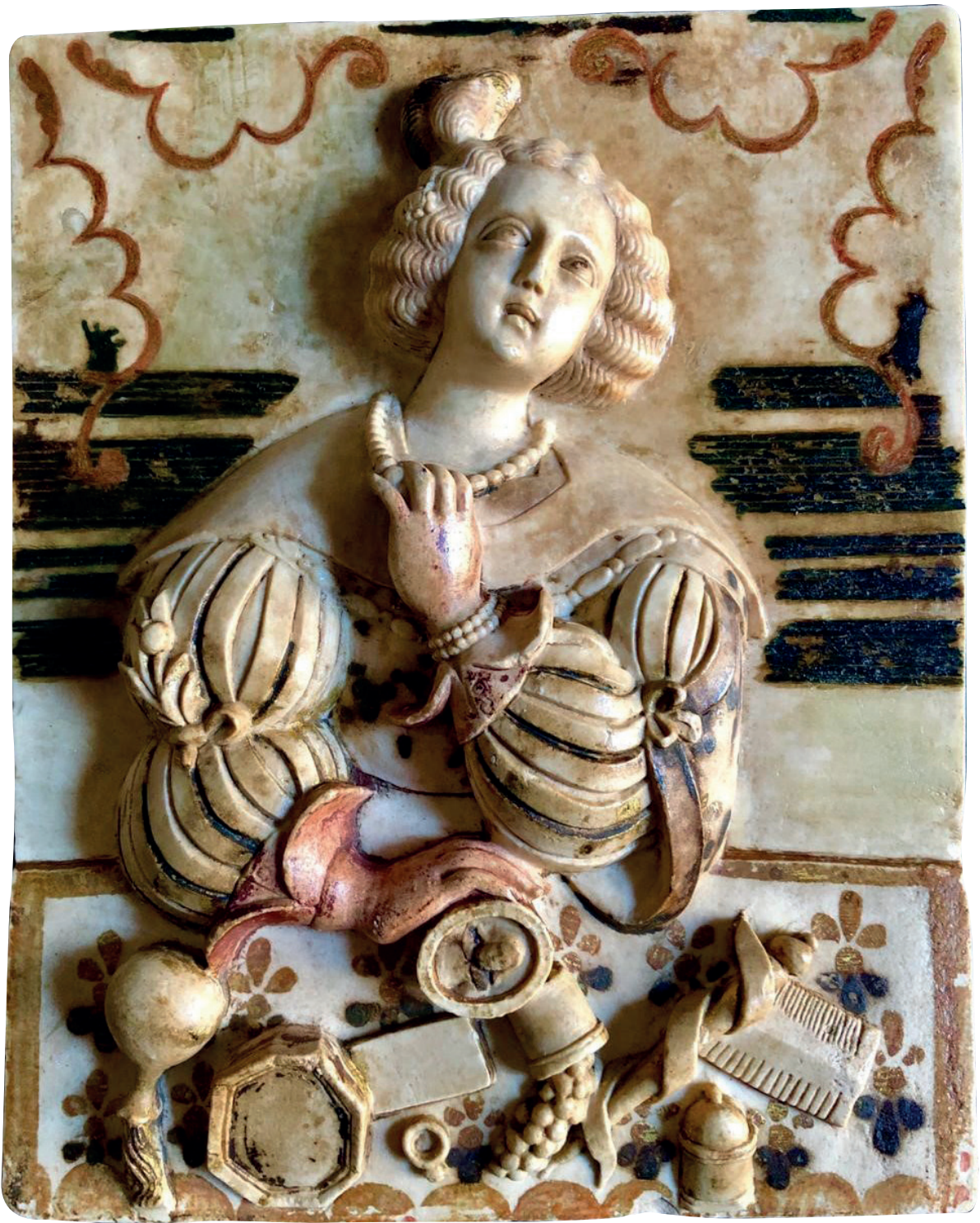
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Notes

- 1 Vitor Serrão, “The Painter Josefa de Ayala: A tribute to Innocence”, Ex. Cat. *The Sacred and the Profane. Josefa de Obidos of Portugal*, The National Museum of Women in Arts, Washington, D. C. 1997, pp. 15-31 (cit. on p. 31).
- 2 Ex. Cat. *Josefa de Óbidos e a invenção do Barroco português: National Museum of Ancient Art, Lisbon*, 2015. Previous exhibitions were held in 1949 and 1997, as may be seen in the end Bibliography.
- 3 M. J. Vilhena de Carvalho, “O Relicário de Alcobaça”, Ex. Cat. *Josefa de Óbidos*, Lisbon, 2015, cit., pp. 123-127.

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