Reattributing the Magdalene: Sandys to Shields at the NGV

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Fig. 1. Frederic Shields. *Sorrow*. 1873.
Coloured chalk over charcoal and wash on green paper, 58.3 × 53.0 cm.
(National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne).

In 1904 the Director of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Bernard Hall (1859-1935), returned from a European buying trip, during which he spent the first instalment of the Gallery's magnificent Felton Bequest. In his report, Hall wrote:

> From Mr. Trench, I bought a very moderate [*sic*] priced drawing by F. Sandys (£25) which is engraved amongst others in the *Studio* for October 1904 in an article on his work. It is old-fashioned in manner but Sandys has a certain standing amongst the big outsiders, and was accorded the posthumous honour of a special Exhibition of his works at The Burlington House this year at the same time as the Watts Exhibition was held.[1]

The work acquired by Hall was the large drawing *Sorrow* (Fig. 1). Created in coloured chalks on green paper, it depicts a life-size bust of a woman in robes and a veil, bending her head

[1] B. Hall: *Report to the Chairman of the Gallery Committee*, July 1905, Felton Bequest Committee files, National Gallery of Victoria, p. 2.

over clasped hands. The rocky structure behind her, the covered vessel almost hidden by her flowing auburn hair, and the three crosses against the angry sky to the upper right clearly identify her as the grieving Mary Magdalene. In the upper left of the image, the monogram FS within a shield is set between the date 1873 (Fig. 2).

The earliest provenance known for this work is for 28 February 1903, when Betty Elzea's 2001 *catalogue raisonné* of Sandys's art records it as being sold for £10.10.0 by art dealers Thomas Agnew & Sons (through Christie's auction house) to the Irish poet Herbert Trench (1865–1923), as the work of Frederick Sandys (1829-1904).[2] As Hall notes, this drawing was later reproduced with Trench's permission (but not discussed) in a lengthy and glowing article in *Studio* in 1904, written by Percy Bate, Sandys's enthusiastic acolyte, curator and collector.[3]

Sorrow has been considered an important component of the NGV's Pre-Raphaelite collection, and is also significant for being among the first Felton Bequest acquisitions, although it has received little notice, either through scholarly research or display. However, it has recently had unexpected, and long-overdue, attention.

As a result of the ongoing digitisation of the NGV's collection, and high-resolution images being made accessible online, the NGV receives and responds to information about its collection from a wide variety of sources. In November 2015, the NGV's Prints and Drawings Department received an email from the British art historian Scott Thomas Buckle, pointing out that the distinctive monogram is not that of Frederick Sandys, but rather of the lesser-known artist Frederic Shields (1833–1911) (Fig. 3).[4]

Fig. 2. Detail of *Sorrow*, showing Shields's monogram.

[2] B. Elzea: *Frederick Sandys 1829–1904: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Woodbridge 2001, cat. no. 3.49, p. 249. No evidence of this work has been located in London auction records from the 1870s onwards. (Scott Thomas Buckle, email correspondence with author, 22 May 2017). *Sorrow* may not be the original title. Elzea gives the title as *Sorrow* (*or the Penitent Magdalen*).
[3] P. Bate: "The Late Frederick Sandys: A Retrospect," *The Studio* 33 (1904), p. 7.
[4] Scott Thomas Buckle: Email correspondence to NGV General Enquiries, 19 November 2015 and then the author, 19 November 2015 and following. Thomas Scott Buckle had been aware of the misattribution of the drawing in the literature for a number of years prior to communicating with the NGV.

Frederic Shields's art is now largely forgotten, although he was well respected in his lifetime. Born into a poor family, he received early training from his father, a bookbinder and printer. As a teenager, unable to afford formal art study, Shields worked in lithographic workshops in London and Manchester, eventually saving to attend evening classes at the Manchester School of Design. Two distinct early events that influenced him were visiting the Art Treasures of the United Kingdom exhibition in Manchester in 1857, and discovering Moxon's illustrated edition of Tennyson's poetry. His developing reputation resulted in commissions to illustrate Daniel Defoe's *History of the Plague of London* (1862) and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1864); these brought him considerable attention, and praise from John Ruskin and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Shields met Rossetti in 1864, and through him entered his circle of artistic acquaintances. Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown and Shields became close friends and regular correspondents. Almost twenty years later, Shields was present at Rossetti's death bed; he drew the posthumous portrait much admired by Rossetti's family, and was later commissioned by Rossetti's mother to design commemorative stained-glass windows to overlook Rossetti's grave at the parish church at Birchington.

In 1878 Shields and Ford Madox Brown were jointly awarded a commission to paint six murals each on the history of Manchester for the Great Hall of the Manchester Town Hall. Shields later withdrew, allowing Brown to complete this impressive task himself.[5] The previous year, he and his wife had moved from Manchester to London, and from that time on, his principal output was designing stained glass and other decorative work. The most significant of these projects was to create a sequence of religious and allegorical paintings to decorate the interior of the Chapel of the Ascension being built in Bayswater, London. Shields worked devotedly on this project from 1888, and died within a year of the Chapel's completion in 1910. This great achievement was bombed during World War II, and subsequently demolished. He was recognised during his lifetime, with exhibitions held in Manchester in 1875 and 1907, and a lengthy book surveying "his life and letters" was published the year after his death.[6]

[5] S. Thomson: *Manchester's Victorian Art Scene and its Unrecognized Artist*s, Manchester 2007, p. 122. Brown used Shields as the model for his depiction of John Wycliffe on trial in the Manchester Murals.
[6] E. Mills: *The Life and Letters of Frederic Shields*, London and New York, 1912. For a recent summary and commentary on Mills, see Mark Jones's discussion of this book at *Albion Magazine* Online, August 2012, http://www.albionmagazineonline.org/albion-autumn-2012-art-the-life-and-letters-of-frederic-shields.html, accessed 21 May 2017.

During his lifetime Shields's art developed from Victorian genre scenes, such as *Bobber and Kibs* (1856), his first painting exhibited at the Royal Institution, which depicts children playing conkers on the street, to monumental designs of religious figures and narratives, in accordance with his devout Christianity.[7] The subject matter and sculptural quality of the Magdalene in *Sorrow* can clearly be viewed in this light, but also fits closely with the abundant portraits of strong-featured women—real, religious, historic, mythical or allegorical—drawn and painted by Sandys, Rossetti and others in this period. That the attribution to Sandys was never questioned on stylistic grounds is, in many ways, understandable given the close connections in subject matter (both artists produced multiple images of the Magdalene),[8] the half-length composition and the emotive atmospheres created in their art. Yet closer examination reveals differences. When compared, for example, with the National Gallery of Victoria's admittedly later example of Sandys's work, *Proud Maisie* (1880-90) (Fig. 4), differences between Shields's and Sandys's manner of draughtsmanship seem apparent. Sandys's pouty, flirty young woman, with her carefully-drawn individual strands of hair, and strategic touches of red chalk to add warmth to her flesh, is quite unlike the statuesque figure of Mary, which employs much more generalised layering of coloured chalks to convey volume, and a softness of line that contrasts with Sandys's crisp precision.[9] A watercolour portrait painted by Shields in 1874 of his new wife Matilda Booth (known as

Fig. 4. Frederick Sandys. *Proud Maisie*. 1880-90. Red and black chalk on paper over cardboard, 39.2 x 28.8 cm. (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne).

[7] The most comprehensive research on Shields to date is a biographical chapter in Thomson, *op. cit.*, and continuing research by Margaretta S. Frederick on his work on the Chapel of the Ascension, Bayswater.
[8] A watercolour of a full-length kneeling Magdalene, signed with Shields's monogram and dated 1879, sold at Christie's London, 16 June 2010 (lot 27); another is illustrated online without details at http://www.wikigallery.org/wiki/painting_269573/Frederic-James-Shields/Mary-Magdelene#information accessed 17 May 2017.
[9] In correspondence with Shields, Rossetti writes of using a light green paper for his chalk drawings, and working black and red powdered chalk into it with his fingers to create his ground. 27 August 1869, quoted in Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

Cissy) bears similarities in facial form and long red hair (Fig. 5). She had modelled for him since she was a young child (she was only sixteen when they married) and seems likely to have been the inspiration for *Sorrow*. The monogram FS within a shield is located at the lower left of the painting, above the Madonna-blue garment.

Fig. 5. Frederic Shields. *The artist's wife*. 1874. Watercolour, 27 x 20 cm. (The William Morris Gallery, London).

How did this mistaken attribution come to pass, and why was it not detected sooner? Frederic Shields did not die until 1911, long after *Sorrow* entered the NGV's collection. Reclusive, ill and engrossed in his work on the Chapel for so many years, Shields was apparently unaware of its reproduction in Bates's article and subsequent acquisition by the NGV.

In his book *The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters: Their Associates and Successors* (1899), Percy Bate included Shields in the chapter on "Pre-Raphaelites and Decorators," writing: "Frederic Shields . . . has been content to do his life's work in the quietest and most unassuming manner, so that few people know what the extent of that work is."[10] On the other hand, in the *Studio* article five years later, Bate writes of his "thrill of pleasure" when he first came across Sandys's art, and his many hours spent with Sandys. He described his collection of reproductions of Sandys's art as "one of my treasures, complete as it is in every respect" bar one elusive woodcut.[11] Yet, despite his experience, he failed to distinguish the different hand; indeed, *Sorrow* was selected as one of twelve works to illustrate his summation of Sandys's artistic achievements.

Nor did Bate note the distinctive monogram, which is eminently legible when viewing the work, and still discernible in reproduction. Did he perhaps not see the work personally? Admittedly Sandys experimented with a range of signatures through his career including, in the late 1850s and early 1860s, an entwined monogram of AFS or FS—at least once, this was enclosed within a shield shape.[12] But, from the early 1860s onwards, Sandys signed his name

[10] P. Bate: *The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters: Their Associates and Successors*, London 1899, p. 93.
[11] Bate, *Sandys*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
[12] *Portrait of Susanna Rose*, 1862, The Cleveland Museum of Art

as "F. Sandys" in a Gothic-style font, usually with a double vertical stroke on the F, and a diagonal stroke through the capital S. Inscriptions giving sitter details, and the signature, are occasionally included within a scrolling *cartouche*. Significantly, the form of an FS monogram, within a shield, for a work clearly dated 1873, is an anomaly for Sandys, and was noted as such by Elzea in her *catalogue raisonné* (Fig. 6).[13]

Fig. 6. Monogram from *Sorrow*, as illustrated by Elzea in 2001 (Appendix 19, p. 336).

However, neither she, nor staff at the NGV, saw any reason to question the attribution of this work to Sandys, given its acquisition and publication history. Yet the information was available—Peter Nahum had listed and illustrated this monogram as Shields's in his reference work, *Monograms of Victorian and Edwardian Artists* (Fig. 7).[14]

Fig. 7. Monogram of Frederick James Shield, as illustrated by Nahum in 1976 (p. 106).

One must wonder if this mistake was ever pointed out to Bate. He (1868–1913) and Trench (1865–1923) were of a younger generation than Shields (1833–1911), many of whose close contemporaries were deceased by 1903, their experienced knowledge gone. Or was this mistake realised by some, but not conveyed to Trench, and thus Hall? Over one hundred years later, this misattribution can finally be corrected.

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[13] Elzea, *op. cit.*, cat. no. 3.49, p, 249.
[14] P. Nahum: *Monograms of Victorian and Edwardian Artists*, London 1976, p. 106.

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