

MOSES AND AARON: TWO FIGURES FROM THE REREDOS OF THE CHURCH OF ST. SWITHIN LONDON STONE

by

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The Victoria and Albert Museum has had in its collections since 1939 two large flat painted wooden figures of Moses and Aaron (Figs 1 and 2). Apart from the fact they came from the reredos of the church of St. Swithin London Stone, nothing was known of the origins and purpose of the figures, which have reposed for some years in one of the museum's stores. St. Swithin London Stone no longer exists, but before it was destroyed in the last war it was one of the smaller City churches, rebuilt by Wren after the Great Fire. In view of this provenance and the high quality of the figures, further investigation seemed worthwhile. It soon became apparent that while paintings or statues of Moses and Aaron were not infrequently incorporated in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglican reredoses, no other examples of this kind of figure seemed to exist. The next point of reference was the registered papers dealing with the purchase of the figures by the museum. These usually confine themselves to strictly bureaucratic detail, but on this occasion they proved more rewarding. They recounted a dramatic rescue story, which affords a convenient starting point for the relatively complete history of these figures which has now been established.

At 11 a.m. on 10 August 1938, Miss M.F. Pattinson was sitting in her office in the City which overlooked Salter's Hall Court and the back entrance of St. Swithin London Stone. What she saw through the window can be described in her own words. She 'noticed the Corporation Dustmen carrying out of the porch what appeared to be two very old and extremely dirty pieces of carved wood, at least a quarter of an inch thick in dust, along with other things. These pieces of wood were placed against the wall and a reflection of the bright sunlight cast on them revealed, but very faintly visible, the painting of a beautiful face on one of them'. Miss Pattinson rushed out into the street and accosted the dustmen who explained that the Rector had ordered that the belfry should be cleared of rubbish and whitewashed. She 'remonstrated with the dustman that underneath the dirt [she had asked the street sweeper who was standing nearby, to take his brush and brush some of the dirt off] were painted panels of the finest art . . . the Dustman said that had nothing to do with him, his duty was to obey orders, and his orders were to take the stuff away'. Eventually the redoubtable Miss Pattinson was able to rescue the panels from the



Fig. 1
Moses



Fig. 2
Aaron

dustmen and, after leaving them in the church porch overnight, have them taken to her home. After washing them down 'with lukewarm water and good soap', and removing a good deal of dirt and brown distemper in the process, the painted figures of Moses and Aaron were revealed (Fig. 3—snapshot of Miss Pattinson with the figures). Miss Pattinson then wrote to Ralph Edwards, at that time the Keeper of the Woodwork Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, describing the rescue of the panels (the passages above are taken from her letter) and asking whether the museum would be interested in acquiring them. He was keen, and after a prolonged and at times acrimonious four cornered correspondence between the Victoria and Albert Museum, Miss Pattinson, the Archdeacon of London and the Rector of St. Swithin's (who, to be fair, had had no idea that the figures were amongst the rubbish in his belfry), they were acquired by the Department of Woodwork in February 1939.¹

The figures which were so dramatically rescued were photographed after further cleaning in the Conservation Department (Figs 1 and 2). Both are painted in oils on tongued and grooved pinewood templates, bevelled from front to back, standing (rather puzzlingly, on first appearance) on bases painted to simulate the bases of columns, with triangular sections cut away at the bottom. Each figure is braced at the back by several horizontal pieces of wood. An iron ring is fixed in the back of each figure.



Fig. 3
Miss Pattinson with the figures of Moses and Aaron

The first figure, which represents Moses, stands 7'6" high by 2'9" wide. He is bareheaded, with a full brown beard and sandalled feet, and wears a flowing yellow cloak over a blue robe. His left hand holds a rod (the top of which has been broken off) and his right hand points downward. The companion figure of Aaron stands 7'10" high by 2'2" wide, and is dressed to conform with the description of his garments in Exodus ch. 39. He wears a blue coat with gold embroidery over a blue tunic fringed with gold pomegranates and bells and a white robe, with a jewelled breastplate and a multicoloured scarf with gold tassels round his waist. He has a jewelled head dress, sandalled feet and a large white beard. He carries a censer suspended from a chain. Apart from being cleaned on their arrival at the museum (at which point part of Aaron's right sleeve and the censer were repaired), the figures have not been restored or retouched in any way. The thick brown paint which Miss Pattinson scrubbed off had preserved the paint surface in remarkably good condition.

The reason for the columnar bases becomes clear on examining Figs 4 and 5 (Clayton engraving), which shows the figures in their original location over the reredos at St. Swithin's. The figures rested on the side pediments, their bases painted to imitate the real column bases beside them, and were presumably attached to hooks in the church wall by the rings in their backs. As Croft-Murray points out, this kind of reredos is typical of post-Restoration Anglican churches.² The Ten Commandments (and, usually, the Lord's Prayer and Apostles' Creed) would be written in gold on black tablets, enclosed with an architectural framework of carved oak, elaborating the precept laid down in the 82nd canon of 1604 'that the ten commandments be set upon the East End of every Church and Chapell where the people may best see and reade the same'. Supporting figures of Moses and Aaron were frequently incorporated into the framework, either as paintings or statues. Moses as Lawgiver and his brother Aaron as the first High Priest provided suitable imagery (with no popish overtones) for an established episcopalian church. Their use in an Anglican context can be traced back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, when they appear as supporters in Cornelis Boel's engraved title-page for the first edition of the Authorized Version of the Bible (1611).³ Their earliest appearance on a reredos is in a drawing by Wendell Cavell dated 1638-39 and relating to an altarpiece in Exeter Cathedral.⁴ Paintings of Moses and Aaron were incorporated into the reredoses of many of Wren's City churches—examples survive at St. Michael Cornhill (by the elder Streeter) and St. Stephen Walbrook (William Davies), for example. Two panels at St. Margaret Lothbury (formerly in St. Christopher le Stocks) are

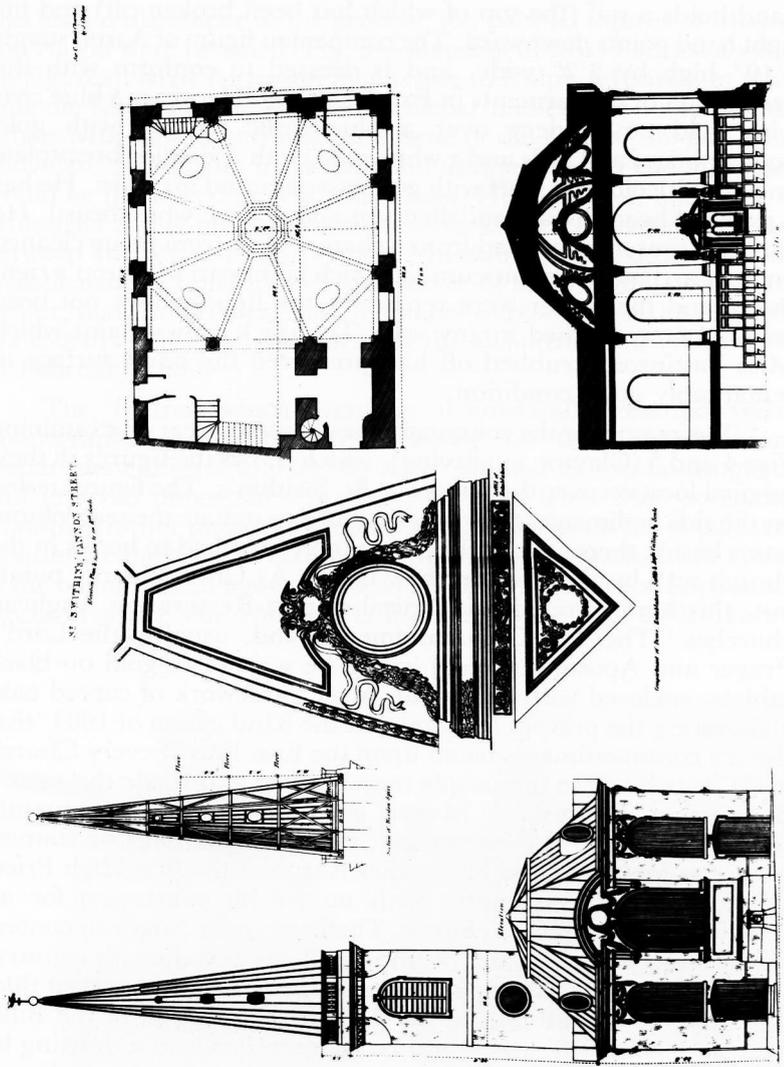


Fig. 4
Moses and Aaron in their original location over the reredos of the church of St. Swithun London Stone

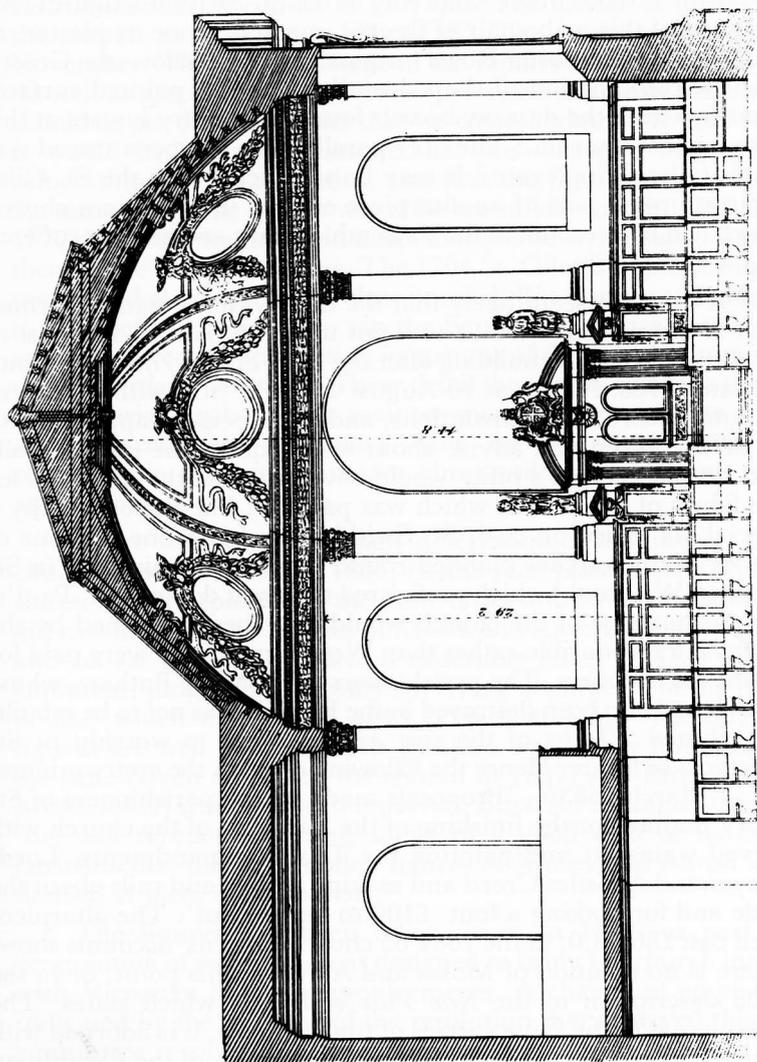


Fig. 5

Moses and Aaron rested on the side pediments, their bases painted to imitate the real column bases beside them

particularly close in style to the St. Swithin's figures, even standing on similar bases.⁵ Occasionally they took the form of statues fixed above the reredos in the same way as the St. Swithin's figures. An example of this is the pair of figures, made of stone or plaster, at St. Michael Paternoster Royal (originally in All Hallows the Great). But the combination of shaped outline and flat painted surface, reminiscent of the dummy boards found in country houses at this date is most unusual.⁶ The only parallel that has been traced was at St. Giles Cripplegate.⁷ It may be significant that the St. Giles figures formed part of an altarpiece erected in 1704, in a church which had been rebuilt in the sixteenth century and had not suffered in the Great Fire.

It does not seem likely that the St. Swithin's figures formed part of the reredos when it was put up in 1684. As with most of the City churches, rebuilding after the 1666 Fire did not begin until the late 1670s. As late as 10 August 1675 the St. Swithin's vestry minutes record 'Churchwardens, and other persons appointed, to go to Dr. Wren and advise about taking down the church walls and steeple'.⁸ Wren's office would have provided the drawings for the fabric of the church which was paid for, like the others, by a special tax levied on coal. St. Swithin London Stone was one of the series of churches planned round a dome (culminating in St. Stephen Walbrook) which prefigured the great dome of St. Paul's. The furnishings of the church would have been designed by the craftsmen responsible rather than Wren himself and were paid for by the parishioners. The parishioners of St. Mary Bothaw, whose church had also been destroyed in the Fire but was not to be rebuilt, contributed 5/14ths of the cost as they were to worship in St. Swithin's in future. Hence the following entry in the vestry minutes for 17 March 1683/4, 'Proposals made by the parishioners of St. Mary Bothaw for the finishing of the East End of the church with carved wainscott and painting the Ten Commandments, Lords Prayer and Apostles Creed and making a table and rails about the table and for making a font. £100 to be laid out'. The altarpiece itself cost £86.18.0, as the 1684-85 churchwardens' accounts show. There is no mention of Moses and Aaron at this point, or in the 1708 description in the *New View of London* which states 'The altarpiece is of the same species of timber [oak], it is adorned with four fluted pilasters, entablature and pediment of the Corinthian order; in the pediment the Queen's arms are carved, gilt and coloured. The intercolumns are the Decalogue depencil'd in gold letters on black, within gilded frames, under a glory and two cherubims, and all this betw the Creed and Paternoster, each under a cherubim, with enrichments of fruit and leaves of various kinds'.⁹ Unfortunately a search through the parish records of St. Swithin London Stone and St. Mary Bothaw, now in the Guildhall

Library, has failed to turn up any mention of Moses and Aaron. It would seem likely that they form part of the laconic entry in the churchwardens' accounts of 1707-08: 'The charge of beautifying the church as workmen's bills £148'. The vestry minutes of 14 November 1708 mention some of the repairs included in this bill. As well as specifying that two new pews and a table of benefactors should be put out, they order that 'ye commandments be new writt'. It would be logical to assume that this was part of a general refurbishment of the reredos, and that the figures were added at the same time. The church was to be beautified again in 1726, 1748, 1772 and 1798, but it would make more sense stylistically to ascribe them to the 1708 alterations. The 1704 St. Giles Cripplegate figures mentioned above provide a close parallel. But it seems unlikely that it will every be possible to pin the figures down to a precise date or artist, given the infuriating vagueness of the vestry minutes and churchwardens' accounts. These detail the money spent on the care of the parish orphans, the maintenance of the parish fire engine and the purchase of canary wine for vestry meetings with considerable precision, but are almost silent on changes to the appearance of the church.

There seems to be no new description of the interior of the church between 1708 and 1807. In this year James Peller Malcolm states: 'the altarpiece is of the same order and almost covered with gilt carvings; but the figures of Moses and Aaron painted on wood and *cut out* [his italics] have a miserable effect'.¹⁰ This is a fair comment, judging by the only surviving illustration of the figures *in situ*, which dates from 1848 (Figs 4 and 5).¹¹ Although the figures are well painted, their position was rather ludicrous. By the time Niven described the church in 1887, and Birch in 1896, Moses and Aaron had been removed. Birch for example states that 'the oak reredos has been shorn of a good deal of its carved enrichments; the flat wooden figures of Moses and Aaron which flanked it have disappeared'.¹²

The figures had been taken down in 1857, as part of a programme of refurbishment designed to bring the church into line with Victorian liturgical requirements. A change of emphasis is indicated by the wording of the resolution that achieved this: 'the committee resolved . . . that the Royal Arms be removed from over the communion table to a more suitable place [to the front of the gallery, it was later decided], also that the figures of Moses and Aaron be not reinstated'.¹³ Presumably they had been taken down when work started. Eleven years later, a faculty granted by the Bishop of London gave permission for more extensive changes.¹⁴ The reading desk and west gallery were to be removed, the north gallery altered, the font and pulpit moved, the pews

chopped down and reorientated, a new vestry created and the clear glass of the east window was to be replaced with stone tracery and stained glass. Other unsympathetic alterations, not mentioned in the faculty, were carried out: 'A beautiful brass chandelier [presented by William Nash the Lord Mayor in 1772] was taken away and destroyed . . . a magnificent oak sounding board . . . removed and sold for old timber'.¹⁵ It was fortunate, by comparison, that Moses and Aaron were simply stored in the belfry.

It was equally fortunate that the figures came to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1939, since two years later St. Swithin London Stone was to be destroyed in the blitz. This time it was not to be rebuilt, and now only the ancient stone which gave the church its name survives to make the site.¹⁶ The figures are unfortunately in store at the moment, but it is hoped that they can be redisplayed in the near future, possibly in the English Baroque Galleries of the museum.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. All this correspondence is to be found on the registered papers dealing with the purchase of the figures, RPs 1939/861. The objects are numbered W8&9-1939.
2. Edward Croft-Murray, *Decorative Painting in England*, 1962, Vol. 1, p. 48.
3. An article by Hasia Rimon 'The Decalogue Painting from the Great Synagogue, London' (*Annual Report of the Jewish Museum*, 1983), traces the association of Moses and Aaron in Jewish iconography back to 1430. The author illustrates several late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century paintings of Moses and Aaron from London synagogues which form an interesting contrast to their Christian counterparts.
4. Croft-Murray, pl. 94. See also G.W.O. Addleshaw and Frederick Etchells, *The Architectural Setting of Anglican Worship*, 1948, p. 161, n.1, for other pre-Civil War examples.
5. Illustrated *Wren Society*, vol.x, pl. xxvii, wrongly captioned.
6. Cf. the figure of a woman peeling an apple at Dyrham Park (National Trust), which is regularly mentioned in inventories from 1703 onwards. The figure of a guardsman at Canons Ashby (also National Trust) can be dated between 1714 and 1717. Moses and Aaron are better painted than the majority of these figures.
7. E. Hatton, *A New View of London*, 1708, vol. 1, p. 249: 'and on pediments over these [i.e. the Lord's Prayer and Apostles Creed] are Moses and Aaron; the first holding in his hand a rod, the second an incense-pot'. John James Baddeley, *An Account of the parish and church of St. Giles Cripplegate*, 1888, illustrates one of the figures on p. 38. On p. 36 he mentions that they were taken down in 1858, having become very indistinct.
8. All the parish records of St. Swithin London Stone that survive are in the Guildhall Library. Vestry minutes and churchwardens' accounts for the whole of

the period under discussion survive, as well as a committee book for the rebuilding of the church, 1677-84 (very scrappy) and one for repairs, 1857-69. There are extracts in *Wren Soc.*, vol. xix, p. 53-56, and in J.G. White, *A History of the Ward of Walbrook*, 1904, p. 457-483. Separate vestry minutes and churchwardens' accounts for St. Mary Bothaw from 1704 onwards are also in the Guildhall Library.

9. *New View of London*, vol. 2, p. 559. This description obviously predates the 1708 restoration detailed below, as he specifically states 'no table of benefactors'.
 10. James Peller Malcolm, *Londinium Redivum*, 1807, vol. iv, p. 620. Descriptions in eighteenth century guidebooks merely regurgitate the Hatton description, where they mention the interior of the church at all.
 11. John Clayton, *Plans Elevations and Sections of the Parochial Churches of Sir Christopher Wren*, 1848-49. Reprinted in *Wren Soc.*, vol. ix.
 12. William Niven, *London City Churches destroyed since 1800 or now threatened*, 1887, p. 43. George Henry Birch, *London Churches of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*, 1896, p. 73.
 13. Minutes of the committee for church repairs, 1857-69, 29 May and 2 June 1857.
 14. Also in the Guildhall Library. See Faculty Books, 19 August 1868.
 15. J.G. White, p. 414.
 16. The London Stone is now located on the south front of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation in Cannon Street. Pevsner (*London I*, 1973 ed., p. 224) stated 'The portion preserved is merely a rounded apex, shaped in Clipsham limestone . . . its purpose and significance are unknown, but it may not be coincidental that it appears to be have stood on the site of the entrance to a great Roman official palace'.
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