

# closer look: Ten Commandments

Few know this painting now, but it was famous during its time for depicting a key biblical figure in a human, accessible way.

## Ten Commandments

Carved into the weighty stone tablets that the biblical figure Moses holds are the Ten Commandments. At God's calling, Moses traveled up Mount Sinai to receive instructions from the Lord for the Israelite people.

## A commission

Caring for the poor and ailing, though not expressly mentioned in the commandments, is among the Catholic Church's teachings—and was the mission of a major hospital in Paris. One of the greatest benefactors of that hospital, a statesman, ambassador, and philanthropist named Pompone II de Bellièvre, commissioned Philippe de Champaigne to paint this work.

## French text

The text on the tablets is in French instead of Latin, the traditional language of the church. Champaigne used his native tongue so that his French viewers could read the commandments, which was in keeping with the church's efforts to make Catholicism more accessible.



Philippe de Champaigne  
(French, 1602–1674)  
*Moses Presenting the Tablets  
of the Law*, ca. 1648  
Oil on canvas

## Rays of light

These two hornlike beams of light come from a mistranslation of the Book of Exodus in which Moses descends from Mount Sinai and is described as “horned.” In fact, the original Hebrew explains that his face shone after his conversation with the Lord. Here, rays of light are where previous artists had painted horns, indicating Champaigne had been aware of both interpretations.

## Moses's eyes

Moses looks directly at us, the viewers, as if imploring us to consider the messages of the tablets. Champaigne himself was deeply religious, part of a strict Catholic movement called Jansenism.

## Realistic detail

Moses is shown in great detail, down to his wisps of gray hair and noble blue eyes. The artist, Champaigne, was a gifted portrait painter who helped found French classicism, a realistic style that is evident here.

## Holy figure

By balancing Moses's flawlessly painted, noble pose with human touches, Champaigne made this holy figure recognizable and accessible to the ordinary viewer. Champaigne painted the work during the Counter-Reformation, when the Catholic Church used artwork to help people understand its teachings.

## Trompe-l'oeil

Moses's hand and the stone tablets rest directly on this plinth and appear to overhang the edge; they seem so close, as if we could touch them. Champaigne used a technique called *trompe-l'oeil*, or “fool the eye” in French, to heighten the feeling that Moses is a real person, coming into our space.

## Fingernails, wrinkles

With dirt beneath his fingernails and wrinkles in his skin, this Moses is a real person. The depiction of this key individual in Christianity with human qualities reflects the influence on Champaigne's style of the Baroque art movement, which valued expression and emotion.

## Royal blue

The rich blue color of Moses's robe, adorned with gold embroidery, is a royal color. The combination of blue and gold is found in other depictions of holy figures, namely the Virgin Mary.



