



159. CHARLTON HESTON'S TEN COMMANDMENTS TABLETS FROM *THE TEN COMMANDMENTS*. (Paramount, 1956) DeMille's greatest film, and his last, has joined the pantheon of epic films revered from generation to generation. It has become an annual staple of the Easter season, and the few items

that have become available from it are dearly treasured – but none more so than the actual tablets of the Ten Commandments, “*written with the finger of God*”. There are few props in the history of film that are so easily recognizable, and so coveted by seasoned collectors of original Hollywood film relics.

RESEARCH BEHIND THE TABLETS

DeMille recognized the enormous burden of responsibility he faced in bringing this story to the silver screen, and consulted a number of scholars in various disciplines of antiquity to ensure complete authenticity. Respected Egyptologist Henry Noerdlinger was brought in, as well as a host of experts from the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. Noerdlinger later produced a detailed historiography discussing the extensive research that went into the making of the film. In the introduction, deMille himself writes of the pains taken to ensure that the film be historically accurate, and quotes a letter he received from Prof. Keith C. Seele of the University of Chicago,

“The challenge which you [deMille] meet...is even greater than that faced by the historian. What he does not know he may leave unexpressed; you, however, must solve every problem, no matter how small or detailed, for pictures can contain no gaps or lacunae and no uncertainties. Your decisions may be right or wrong, but decisions you must make; you cannot say, along with the historian, ‘I do not know.’”

The challenge was daunting. Dr. Ralph Marcus, another Chicago scholar, wrote a version of the Commandments in an early Canaanite script, practiced in the late Bronze Age (c. 13th century B.C.), Moses' era. The script is a precursor of what was to become the square Hebrew alphabet, with which the Hebrew Old Testament is written today.

Of additional concern was the order and number of Commandments on each tablet. Early Hebrew writings suggest that the tablets were inscribed with four Commandments on one and six Commandments on the other, the four dealing with Man's relationship with God, and the six on Man's relationship with other men. This order was also incorporated into the film Tablets.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE TABLETS

Once the design was researched, the actual prop Tablets were created by Paramount Studios scenic artist A.J. Ciruolo using thick, richly hewn fiberglass with hand-applied paint speckling to resemble the red granite of Mount Sinai – one of deMille's key requirements. As they were to be carved with God's “fire bolts”, Ciruolo made them to be slightly irregular with molded chips, craters and dings. The finished tablets measure 24 in. x 12 in. x 1 1/4 in., which approximates a “six handbreadths” dimension as noted in ancient Midrashic descriptions of the tablets.



EXTANT PROP TABLETS

As with most important props, more than one set of Tablets were made and used in the production. To our knowledge, only four pair – including this set – are known to exist. Mr. deMille wrote with great pride in his autobiography that he had one set of tablets cut from original Mount Sinai granite, used for some of the more famous publicity stills showing Heston holding them in his arms (albeit supported at the lower edge due to their weight); they are quite easy to spot as to their texture, grain and lack of side seams, and were not used in the film.

The three sets of lighter-weight fiberglass Tablets were used for the Mount Sinai scene and the Den of Iniquity scene when Moses confronts the Golden Calf-worshipping Israelites. One pair of these prop Tablets was sold at Christie's New York in June of 1985 for \$81,700. Another pair, which were discovered in a garage and were extremely weathered from exposure to the elements for over 43 years, were sold at our 1999 sale of Hollywood Memorabilia for \$63,250.

Offered here are the third – and arguably the finest – set of original Ten Commandments Tablets known to exist. With impeccable provenance, they were originally presented to a publicist for the film by Paramount executive Bernard Serlin, who kept them in his studio office. These Tablets retain the beautiful red and black-speckled patina of the Sinai-inspired granite, with translucent white engraved letters and nearly pristine edges. Two small holes are on the verso of one of the tablets (most likely from mounting in Serlin's office), but overall the Tablets remain in exceptional condition.

CONCLUSION

Cradled by Heston in the key scene of the greatest acting role of his life, these tablets are the most instantly recognizable icon from the greatest of all biblical epics, a film that crowned deMille's illustrious career. Yet they also transcend film history and use. Based on the collective agreement of the leading experts in antiquity, they are the most accurate physical rendition ever created of God's solemn Law as given to his people – the Ten Commandments as they would have appeared to Moses himself.

\$40,000 – \$60,000

