

Artefacts: Autumn 2023

Friends' Acquisitions: 'An Owl' by Moses Haughton the Elder

By Melissa Hughes, Artefacts' Editor and Friends' Administrator

This Autumn edition of 'Artefacts' features an acquisition which the Friends purchased for Birmingham in 1935 - 'An Owl', an oil on panel by Moses Haughton the Elder (1734-1804), painted in 1780-90.

Haughton was born and grew up in Wednesbury in Staffordshire. He trained as an enamel painter and was employed at the workshop of his uncle, Hyla Holden. He was married to Elizabeth Haughton (1741-1816). Their son, Matthew Haughton, was an artist and engraver and their nephew, Moses Haughton the Younger (1772/4-1848), was a painter and engraver.

In 1762 Haughton moved to Birmingham to work for John Baskerville, where he worked on enamelled, japanned and papier-mâché products. In 1809, together with fellow artist Samuel Lines, he established a Life Academy in Peck Lane, just off of New Street, close to what was the Free Grammar School (on a site now occupied by New Street station). This life school was so successful that in 1814 it moved to a larger space in Union Passage and held its first public exhibition. In 1821 the (Royal) Birmingham Society of Artists grew from this venture.

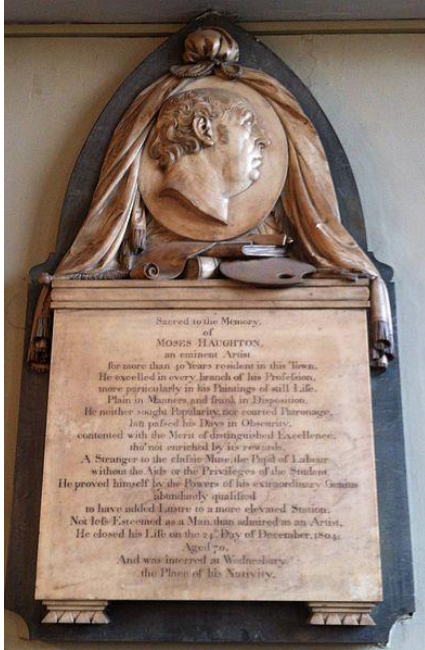
Haughton was noted for his portraits and still-life paintings of dead game, exhibiting at the Royal Academy between 1788 and 1804. A portrait of 'Lady Louisa Tollemache, Countess of Dysart (1745-1840)' (after Katherine Read), which is either by Moses Haughton the elder or Moses Haughton the younger, is in the collection of the National Trust and is normally on display at Ham House, Surrey. Birmingham's collection includes three other paintings by Haughton: 'Maria', painted in the 1780s and presented by the Friends in 1997; 'Fish', painted in 1790; and 'Gypsies in a Landscape', painted in 1804. 'Fish' is known to have been on show at Aston Hall in 1892 and has been included in the new 19th-century displays that opened there earlier this year.

During my research, thanks to Victoria Osborne, BMT's Curator (Fine Art) and Curatorial Team Leader, I discovered that Haughton collaborated with Matthew Boulton, the Birmingham industrialist and entrepreneur, in the production of so-called 'mechanical paintings'. These 'mechanical paintings' were image multiples produced using an etched plate, printed onto paper, transferred to canvas or panel, which were then hand-finished to resemble works in oil. This process was invented in the 1770s by Boulton and Francis Eginton, an employee of Boulton. In an article published in 'The Burlington Magazine' in 1970, 'Matthew Boulton's Mechanical Paintings', Eric Robinson and Keith R. Thompson comment that Boulton both commissioned pictures for reproduction and asked permission from owners to copy their pictures. However, 'the majority of pictures reproduced were from Boulton's own collection: the Angelica Kauffmanns, Moses Haughton's picture of birds and game, William Hodges's pictures, the de Louthembourg and others' (p.505). Robinson and Thompson go on to suggest that: 'The City Art Gallery of Birmingham also



'An Owl' by Moses Haughton, 1780-90; 1935P76; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1935

holds a picture of an owl (not on public display) painted by Moses Haughton. This also exhibits the aforementioned surface characteristics and it presented difficulties during cleaning and restoration.' These surface characteristics of Mechanical Paintings are an unusual sheen in places and craquelure. Moses Haughton's name appears in the Soho catalogue list of mechanical paintings and the article concludes that, although Birmingham's 'An Owl' does not feature, this is not a complete list, and it would appear to be a mechanical painting (p.506).



Memorial to Moses Haughton in St Philip's Cathedral, Birmingham

Haughton was not well-known outside Birmingham during his lifetime. This was perhaps because of his retiring disposition, a characteristic which was noted on a marble monument erected in his memory at St Philip's, Birmingham. The monument was sculpted by Peter Rouw and includes a portrait of Haughton. It records that he: 'excelled in every branch of his Profession, more particularly in his Paintings of still Life. Plain in manners and frank in Disposition, He neither sought Popularity, nor courted Patronage, but passed his Days in Obscurity, contented with the Merit of distinguished Excellence.' It goes on to say: 'He proved himself by the Powers of his extraordinary Genius abundantly qualified to have added Lustre to a more elevated Station.'

'An Owl' was presented to Birmingham by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery in 1935. It is usually on display in the Fossilry at Soho House Museum but, as the house is temporarily closed, it would be advisable to check before making a special journey.

I would like to thank Victoria Osborne, BMT's Curator (Fine Art) and Curatorial Team Leader; and Barbara Fogarty, a Member of the Friends whose thesis was on Mechanical Paintings, for their help in checking this article.

Illustrations:



'An Owl' by Moses Haughton, 1780-90;
1935P76;
Presented by the Friends of Birmingham
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- 1935P76 An Owl](#)

Memorial to Moses Haughton in St Philip's
Cathedral, Birmingham

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Bibliography:

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'Matthew Boulton and Francis Eginton's Mechanical Paintings: Production and Consumption 1777 to 1781', Barbara Fogarty, June 2010;
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