



Solomon, Simeon (1840-1905)

by Ray Anne Lockard

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Known for his association with the Pre-Raphaelites and the Aesthetic Movement, Simeon Solomon lived a life marked by both stunning success and wasteful tragedy.

He is significant for glbtq culture, for he chose to live openly as a homosexual at a time when it was not socially acceptable to do so; he wrote an important prose poem that may be read as a defense of male-male desire; and he created works depicting androgynous male figures who are representative of homoerotic love.

In addition, Solomon may be seen as a victim of late nineteenth-century English homophobia.

Although he had earned recognition as an artist, Solomon's life and career deteriorated after his arrest for "buggery" in 1873. He lived most of the remaining 32 years of his life as a social outcast and his work faded into oblivion after his death in 1905. It has only recently been re-examined.

Simeon, the youngest of eight children born to Meyer Solomon and Kathe Levey, was born on October 9, 1840. The Solomon family was the first Orthodox Jewish family permitted to conduct business in London during the nineteenth century.

Solomon's father became a prominent merchant in the city. Kathe Levey was an artist, as were two of Simeon's siblings--his brother Abraham (1823-1862) and his sister Rebecca (1832-1886).

At age ten Simeon began to take art lessons from Abraham, who had attended the Royal Academy of Art School. Two years later, Simeon attended Carey's Art Academy in the city and his sister, Rebecca, exhibited at the Royal Academy of Art for the first time.

Four years later Simeon also premiered at the Royal Academy Summer Art Exhibition. His work continued to be shown in the same exhibition through 1872.

Reflective of his Jewish background, Solomon's early works, such as *Isaac Offered* (1858), *Saul* (1859), *Moses in His Mother's Arms* (1860), *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego* (1863), and *Habet!* (1865), were based on Hebrew themes. Some of these Hebraic paintings, such as *David Playing the Harp before Saul* (1859), portray sexually ambiguous situations.

During 1857, Solomon met Pre-Raphaelite artists in the home of the group's leader, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Among the artists and authors he met were Edward Burne-Jones, Frederic Leighton, William Morris, and Algernon Charles Swinburne.



Top: A photograph (ca 1870) of Simeon Solomon by David Wilkie Wynfield.

Center: Solomon's painting *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego*.

Above: A sketch of Socrates and Agathodemos by Solomon.

Solomon learned the group's manner of draftsmanship and designed some stained glass pieces for William Morris's firm, Morris, Marshall, and Faulkner and Co. The contact with the Pre-Raphaelites, especially Burne-Jones, probably influenced Solomon's adoption of a more androgynous figure style.

By 1863 Solomon had also designed stained glass with Edward Burne-Jones for All Saints Church in Middleton and modeled for Rossetti's stained glass *Sermon on the Mount* at Christ Church in London.

The opening of the Dudley Gallery in London in 1865 allowed Solomon and other artists to exhibit works with more daring subjects than those accepted at the Royal Academy.

During these years Solomon created such works of homoerotic content as *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene* (1864), *Love among the School Boys* (1866), *The Bride and Bridegroom* (1866), *Sad Love* (1866), *Love in Autumn* (1866), and two versions of *Bacchus* (1866 and 1867).

These works envision an alternative to straitened Victorian ideals of heterosexual love and matrimony. Solomon exhibited frequently at the Dudley Gallery through 1872.

In 1864 Solomon began a close friendship with Swinburne, whose own fascination with flagellation rites, lesbianism, and decadence provided a wealth of subject matter for Solomon. His illustrations for Swinburne's novel *Lesbia Brandon* (1865) and poem *The Flogging Block* (1865), for example, allowed Solomon to explore deeply transgressive subjects.

In the late 1860s, Solomon began to travel to Italy in order to study the old masters. These trips stimulated his imagination and resulted in works on classical themes.

During this period, Solomon moved away from his family's Judaism toward an interest in the Anglo-Catholic Church. The church's use of colorful vestments and altar linens, as well as stained glass and grand architecture, liturgy, and music, appealed to Solomon's aesthetic sense.

During 1867, Solomon traveled to Italy as the lover of Oscar Browning, who was later to become headmaster of Eton and a don at Cambridge. The couple journeyed to Rome and Genoa again in 1870. While in the Mediterranean Simeon began to write his prose poem entitled *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*.

The 1870 trip, however, ended on a regrettable note. According to written accounts of some friends, the couple left the country earlier than planned. The trip's abrupt end may have been caused by legal reasons related to their same-sex relationship. If that is true, it is no coincidence that Simeon's troubles with alcohol began around this time.

The artist completed his prose poem when he returned to England, and it was privately published in 1871. The poem is a spiritual allegory that illuminates the iconography of Solomon's paintings and that may be read as a defense of homosexual relations. While the work won critical acclaim from John Addington Symonds, it was condemned by others and was never republished in England.

Solomon, however, continued to create art. He exhibited three works at the Dudley Gallery and drew a portrait of critic Walter Pater in 1872.

Then tragedy struck.

The artist was arrested on February 11, 1873 for having sex in a public lavatory with a sixty-year-old stableman, George Roberts. Both men were charged with indecent exposure and the attempt to commit "buggery." They went to court thirteen days later, were judged guilty, fined one hundred pounds, and later sentenced to eighteen months in prison at hard labor.

At the intervention of a wealthy cousin, Meyer Solomon, the artist's sentence was reduced to police supervision. (Roberts was not so fortunate.)

Eager to escape the shame he felt, Solomon traveled to France for a time. However, he was arrested there on March 4, 1874 for the same reasons. The French court fined him sixteen francs and sentenced him to three months in prison. The nineteen-year-old man he was with received a lesser sentence.

After these legal experiences, the artist was never the same. Most London galleries, previous patrons, and former friends, including Swinburne, shunned him.

He did receive some support: some gallery owners gave him monetary advances, one former patron remained loyal, some friends assisted him, and his cousin Meyer Solomon commissioned several paintings from him.

Still, the artist remained depressed and became increasingly reliant on alcohol in an attempt to numb his shame and the pain of society's rejection.

Solomon's depression was exacerbated by the loss of his livelihood and the deaths of immediate family members. His older brother and first art teacher, Abraham, had already died at the age of thirty-nine in 1862, on the same day that he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy. His older sister, Rebecca, a fellow artist, was in a fatal accident with a cab and died at the age of fifty-six on November 20, 1888. The following month his mother, also an artist, died of natural causes.

Solomon continued to paint well into the mid-1890s. The works of the later period of his life are expressive of his feelings of hopelessness, alienation, fear of rejection, and thoughts of death. These themes are signaled by the titles of the works: *Love at the Waters of Oblivion* (1891), *Tormented Soul* (1894), *Death Awaiting Sleep* (1896), and *Twilight and Sleep* (1897).

Simeon spent his final years living alternately in the St. Giles Workhouse and on the street. He often was reduced to begging.

He suffered a heart attack on May 25, 1905 and had a second one within three months. He died of heart failure aggravated by bronchitis and alcoholism on August 14, 1905.

Even though he had forsaken his Jewish faith, he was buried in Willesden Jewish Cemetery.

The London *Times* did not publish an obituary, but the artist was not entirely forgotten. He was honored with an exhibition of 122 works at the Baillie Gallery from December 9, 1905 until January 13, 1906. Also in 1906, Burlington House in London held a retrospective exhibition of Simeon's work, and sixteen of his pieces were included in the 37th Winter Exhibition of Works of the Old Masters and Deceased Masters of the British School held at the Royal Academy.

In addition, sixteen of his works were included in a 1906 exhibition of works by Jewish artists at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. *Simeon Solomon, an Appreciation* by Julia Ellsworth was published in New York in 1908.

However, Simeon soon fell into neglect. His contribution to British art in general, and to the Pre-Raphaelite movement in particular, was lost to scholars for nearly a century.

He and his work have been re-examined through the lens of gender studies only during the 1990s. A web site devoted to him has recently been mounted on the internet by art historian Roberto Ferrari. It includes digital images of some works, full text files of some writings about the artist, and a comprehensive

bibliography. The site should facilitate scholarly study of this important Victorian artist.

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