

Morphing Moses: Images of Santa

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

At George Washington's home, the Mount Vernon Ladies Association is evidently taking lessons from TV advertisers, some megachurchers and others who act as if the whole citizenry were made up of 18-to-34-year-olds. And they have a particular kind of 18-to-34-year-old in mind. They presume that members of this age group are easily bored, uninterested in anyone who is not like them and incapable of imaginatively engaging with anyone of the past. No doubt the Mount Vernonites have also consulted the requisite market surveys that urge them to adapt to the interests of this cohort. But many in that generation do not fit the market stereotype, and we are all victims of the assumption that they do.

The MVLA has announced an \$85 million endeavor to make George Washington look youthful and, thus, more attractive. It seems that the face on the Gilbert Stuart portrait, the dollar bill and thousands of park statues does not quicken the attention. So the Ladies have asked computer experts, forensic specialists, surgeons and other pros to peel back the wrinkled tissues on Washington's face, and make him into an "action figure of his times," no longer the stately sage and senior of the portraits. Other patriotic associations are likely to follow suit.

Havoc is ahead for Jews and Christians. First, there's the problem of God as Old Graybeard. Admittedly, the one thing we can say for sure about God is that she does not match that image. But making God cute and hip, an "action figure of his times," could strand God when the times and the market change.

Then there are biblical heroes. David can get by unchanged because we know what he looked like, thanks to Michelangelo. A young, unbearded "action figure of his times," a threat to the other bandits and the nubile women of his reign, he saw and got plenty of action. But what about Moses, passive in his basket as an infant among the bulrushes? The image updaters could turn to the time when Moses had grown up and murdered an Egyptian. That's being an action-figure. Unfortunately, Moses is usually shown as an old, bearded man climbing down the mountain with the two tables of the law, demanding more inaction by publicizing the "Thou Shalt Nots."

The Mount Sinai Ladies Association would need more than \$85 million to retool such an image.

Crack open the book of Christian saints, and you will see that there are plenty of “action figures of their times,” since so many of them were martyred when young. One wonders whether the target audience likes to be reminded that much “action figure” activity involves dying and similar inconveniences.

A candidate for being made over is Nicholas of Myra in Asia Minor, patron saint of children and pawnbrokers, to say nothing of Greece, Russia and Sicily. He was an “action figure” who suffered persecution and condemned the heretics at Nicaea. For several centuries, say the saint books (e.g., *Lives of Saints*, by Richard P. McBrien), he was “the most frequently represented saintly bishop.” The icon shown in McBrien’s book presents him as fiercely scowling.

His image has already radically been changed once. Legends tease us with this: “The practice of giving gifts to children on his feast began in the Low Countries and became popular in North America through the Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam,” no doubt en route to Macy’s department store. There this “action figure of his times” evidently needs no further makeover, no face lift, no shaving of the beard, no replacement of false teeth with real teeth to connect with the young. We know him as Santa Claus.