“First we come to Madame Tussaud’s as children, then as parents and finally as grandparents.” The remark, offered by one of the cheerful crowd who run the exhibition in Marylebone Road, had about it both the truth and sonority of the Biblical, a more charming Ecclesiastes perhaps. The tone was catching. The Tower of London, the Changing of the Guard, Hampton Court, Madame Tussaud’s; and which is the greatest of these? Surprisingly, that quartet of attractions endures. Come war, come peace, come changes of government, the fall of this power, the rise of that empire, the children and their parents still stare and gasp. Yet this one of the quartet is a commercial outfit, distinct from the authentic power of state. Not that children can always distinguish, as I recall on my visit in 1936, a midget on a day trip from Swansea when, as now, Madame Tussaud’s was a necessary staging post in the Big City. I found it hard to distinguish between the experience of the waxworks, the depiction of royalty, and the palaces which they once had lived in or occupied at present. Undoubtedly I recall a sense of the reality of the wax kings and queens and great murderers.

That it should be so among children of my time is understandable. We hardly knew the cinema, television was a generation away. The celebrated, either in history or on the football or cricket fields, were one-dimensional pictures or paintings, heroes on daggers, immobile, never in the round. Now the audience for the Tussaud figures have seen their heroes move and speak on the silver screen whether large or small. So why should it be that two-and-a-half million people every year visit this emporium of the past and present?

One reason, to be blunt, is that it is out of the rain. Another, to be equally blunt, is that it is an enduring characteristic of parents that they, like their own parents, have small idea what to do with children, and so, believing a child needs a treat, resume the folk-memory, however ill-remembered the treat. Indeed, a cynic might suggest that Madame Tussaud, that determined, brilliant 18th-century French death-mask maker, possessed an eerie insight into 20th-century taste. The Chamber of Horrors, the parade of royalty, the uproar of battle—our television moguls know nothing she didn’t; and television, too, is out of the rain.

Therefore, not trusting too much my own reflections on the matter, I moseyed about among visitors. It seemed to me most tourists were both adult and foreign. Juliet Simpkins who speaks (and very elegantly) for the place had suggested that Americans, Germans and Scandinavians came in the largest numbers; I just happened to meet a lot of Asians. Two Malaysians offered the view that they had learned more about British history in one day than in a lifetime, a remark of some ambiguity, but enthusiastically meant. Their true love was the Chamber of Horrors and especially the death of Gary Gilmore. This last I had thought effective enough to be almost as disgraceful as the event itself, but our Malaysian guests found such fastidiousness inexplicable. Two Brahmin Indian ladies offered the thought that they had always wondered what the kings and queens of England had really looked like. I gained the impression from them, as from some others, that they believed the figures of the Tudors and early Hanoversians had been created from life. For me, this was the beginning of a certain time-warp which stayed with me throughout my inquiries.

Americans there certainly were, as ignorant of British history as we of theirs. Madame Tussaud’s for them, had the edge on Disneyland, because the latter was only a substitute for a past. “How,” one asked me, “could Henry keep on forcing women to marry him when they knew their predecessors had been executed?” “Why,” I responded, “do American men marry so often when they have to pay so much alimony?” Brooding on this we moved along and came to Lenin. “Who, he?” asked the Brooklyn boy. “Lenin,” said his pal. “Lenin was the father of his people,” he added, as if that was that. The Bolshevik hero is a brilliant likeness, or is it that he composed his face so expertly for photographs? I suggest the people best captured in the 20th century are those we are least familiar with, whose still pictures rather than mobile images are in our mind’s eye.

But alongside whose waxwork, ask yourself next time you take the children or grandchildren, would you have your picture taken? Here two Swedish boys are photographed alongside Gustavus Adolphus; a middle-aged lady from Bradford with Koja; two grave women from Singapore with Margaret Thatcher; an Indian lady with Gandhi. While a young Indian girl had hers.
History in wax

taken—"I lost my head in London"—as if impaled on a spike.

That the exhibition can be educational is pretty soon evident once an area of personal ignorance is discovered. For example, in the representation of the Battle of Trafalgar: the dreadful noise of modern bombing and armour is familiar, but I had not realized how appalling was the volume of sound in sea battles of the past. Many sailors must have been deafened for life.

Manifold, then, are the causes of popularity of this national institution, but one above all; and one which accords with the view of Ian Hansen who, with a team of 28, is in charge of making the graven images. He thinks they provide, as television and still pictures cannot do quite so satisfactorily, a sense of proximity to the historical figure or the celebrity. Visitors, he points out, however absurd this might seem, gain a sense of physical presence. Often they are surprised at the stature of public figures, guessing them wildly too tall; it seems still a popular belief that famous people must be big people. Yet who among the shortest, had the smallest feet? Napoleon, Lloyd George, Hitler. Visitors are puzzled to find that Churchill was not a physical giant.

Television and the familiarity it creates must give rise to a difficulty Madame Tussaud's sculptors did not face in the past, for all that Ian Hansen minimizes it. The immobility of the waxes focuses attention on the expression, which an audience can at once place. While I was there the portrait of Geoffrey Boycott was being prepared. Which Boycott were we to see? We have seen him in so many moody over the years. For Ian Hansen this was no new problem since before coming to Madame Tussaud's he had been a sculptor in bronze living in Yorkshire. As he points out there are substantial differences in working in wax from working in bronze, one of which is that wax is translucent and lacks that lively reflection of light bronze affords.

Here is his team matching eyeballs. There are few experiences quite so disconcerting as walking back-stage at Madame Tussaud's and glimpsing a bowl full of eyes, perhaps because it reminded me of arriving for dinner with a sheikh in Kuwait and realizing that I was the guest nominated to eat the sheep's eye that stared at me from a mound of rice. And there is the hair. A young lady was spending five weeks on one head alone manoeuvring each hair into a scalp. Others are specialists in colouring. Making wax images is a far from simple business.

You find much that is strange as you wander round Madame Tussaud's. There is a dressing room crowded with uniforms of all periods, cricket bats, high boots, suits, dresses, mostly belonging to people now dead. It looks for all the world like a costume department in a television centre or an opera house. 

Top and above, in the Chamber of Horrors, a victim of the Terror, and Burke and Hare with a "specimen" for dissection.
Opposite, heroes of yesterday in the store room at Wookey Hole include Ho Chi-minh, Tommy Steele, Khrushechev and Shaw.
Ian Hansen does not in general nowadays mould the wax on a sitter’s face. Hands, yes, from time to time. Tom Baker, Dr Who in the BBC’s enduring serial, has had three sittings for his hands. Ian Hansen had just returned from seeing Lord Carrington, the Foreign Secretary; it was a hectic period of critical EEC negotiations, so Hansen enjoyed a shorter period of time with him than is ideal for all the measurements and studies that need to be made. Here again it is the capturing of the significant expression that is as vital as any statistics. Lord Carrington was presenting a suit, shoes and tie for his image to wear. Most subjects do. And such is the appeal throughout the world of the exhibition that President Sadat of Egypt, when his perpetual crisis was at one of its frequent moments of explosion, not merely found time for Ian Hansen but offered him the suit he had been wearing on the day he was inducted as head of state. A little different from the circumstances described in a cheerful verse of 1884:

“There was an old woman called Tussaud
Who loved the grand folk in Who’s Who
That she made them in wax

Top left, making the sculpture—in this case of Mao Tse-tung; centre left, pouring wax into the mould; left, breaking the mould and removing the head; top, casting hands; above centre, a choice of hands and arms; above, the pernickety process of inserting individual hairs into the waxen scalp. In addition eyes must be carefully matched to those of the subject, and the model must be appropriately dressed. Often the subject gives clothes for this purpose.
History in wax

Both their front and their backs
And asked no permission to do so.

All this began at the end of the 18th century when the young Madame Tus- saud in Paris visited the graveyard where the heads of the guillotined lay and made death masks. The heads of Marie Antoinette and Robespierre remain in the exhibition. Madame Tus- saud had known them in life. Napoleon and Marat had been among her acquaintances and subjects. Before this visit I had read her extraordinary life written by Anita Leslie and Pauline Chapman (Madame Tussaud published in London), a book warmly recommended as a study of one of those determined, self-willed women of that time. Her own self-portrait, made when she was 81, stands in the hall way at the Exhibition, a permanent evocation, along with the French Revolutionary death model, of a genuinely disconcerting insight into the past.

The question is, what would be the future for Madame Tussaud could stand, for those who like that kind of analysis, as a metaphor for Britain. Here we are with a dubious prospect before us, yet what a history, so let's pull up the bedclothes and dream. More puzzling is that in a period of increasing unemployment, what might be called a leisure industry should be so dynamic; and yet it is so puzzling? The majority of people are still in work and with higher wages than ever; and there are always the tourists. So much so that one of the concerns of the managing director, Michael Herbert, is how to keep the crowds happy when they have to queue; how to keep the flow moving without discomfort or overcrowding in a business so brisk in the holiday season.

By profession Michael Herbert is an accountant; he came to the Marylebone Road in 1968 and so was there when the plan was launched to open a similar exhibition in Amsterdam and when the company bought Chessington Zoo, then Wookye Hole in Somerset in 1973 and Warwick Castle in 1978. He took over as managing director in 1976, just before the company was taken over by the Pearson Group, an event that caused much perturbation which has proved to be misplaced. The firm has expanded more confidently, catching the tide of a new audience footloose and anxious to gape. Herbert speaks quite frankly of the difficulties of success, as when, in August, 2,000 tickets an hour are being sold:

"We try to open early if we can; the staff talk it over and try to reassure them. But if you are a popular place there is a limit to what you can do without making people cross; so many of them have come a long way. To ration by price would seem unfair. One solution would be for the patterns of school holidays and examinations to change, but that is out of our hands. Amsterdam and Warwick are just as popular. In Wookye Hole we had over 300,000 visitors a year, so that it is much the same in Somerset and there we did assure everyone that we would do nothing to disturb the character of the area."

I dare say the incursions will be as steady at the new exhibition at Windsor, even handler for tourists than Wookye Hole. Ian Hansen had described to me with much spirit his plans for converting Queen Victoria's waiting room at the Windsor and Eton station into yet another flower of British nostalgia: it will be June, 1897, the Diamond Jubilee. Here will be the royal train; there 30 Guardsmen on parade; and there imperial dignitaries hot foot to the junketing. Barrel organs will play. If it is the case, as it seemed to me, that foreign visitors hold in regard the British past as much as do the British, little wonder Sir Peter Parker and BR are so enthusiastic about the enterprise.

For this particular tourist Wookye Hole was handy for an examination of that problem of success the managing director had talked about. I could see his point, although on the Sunday I was there the passage of visitors through the awesome caves, the antique, working paper mill, Lady Banger's colourful and musical fair-ground into the orthodox Tussaud section, was comfortable enough. Had there been, say, an extra 500 people, then we would not have had groups small enough for a guide to cope with. And then how would we have known that this is generally understood to be the place Coleridge had in mind when he wrote of Alph, the sacred river, whose caverns were, as you will recall, measureless to man? Or that an 18th-century vandal, another poet, Alexander Pope, had come here with a few fellow-hooligans, and blasted down stalagmites that had stood a few millennia and taken them home to Twickenham?

Here that discomfiting time-warp that can strike in the Marylebone Road becomes acute. These caverns were occupied by our ancestors from 250 BC to AD 400, a thought which can occupy the mind for a while. But there is more to come, because here are kept what might be called the melancholy spares or rejects of Madame Tussaud's. Here sceptre and crown have certainly tumbled down and in the wax been equal made. If ever there was a place for Hamlet to offer his thoughts about "poor Yorick" it is here.

The poignancy of seeing on a shelf the head of an old colleague, the late Richard Dimbleby, is comprehensible; equally the late Lord Attlee. Yet here also is Lord George-Brown who is very much alive, and there Eamonn Andrews. It was remarked of a biographer that he lent a fresh terror to death: Madame Tussaud's offers a fresh peril to the successful. How awful to have enjoyed a transient fame and then, taking the children or grandchildren on an outing in the Mendips, to stare at one's head placed among the rejects. To be truly secure it is best to be without great success or, if that cannot be managed, to be a monarch or a spectacular murderer. Then fame, at Madame Tussaud's, is likely to be eternal.

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