

# A brief history of Madame Tussauds

Marie Grosholtz (later to become Madame Tussaud) was born in 1761 in Strasbourg, France, two months after her father's death. Her mother took a job as a housekeeper in Berne for Philippe Curtius, a doctor who was skilled at modelling wax to create anatomical figures.

**In 1767 Marie moved with her mother and Philippe Curtius to Paris where Curtius opened his first exhibition.**

At a time when visual media such as cinema and TV did not exist, people flocked to the exhibition to see for themselves what the famous people of the time looked like.

**Dr Curtius taught Marie the art of wax sculpting from an early age and she demonstrated natural flair.**

Soon she was sculpting her own figures of many of the prominent people of the era. Marie's skills came to the attention of Louis XVI's sister and Marie was invited to live at and work in the palace of Versailles. Marie spent nine years at court and whilst there created figures of Louis XVI and his family.

**In 1789 Dr Curtius asked Marie to return to Paris.**

Once back in Paris the French Revolution erupted and Marie was asked to make death masks of the prominent figures who were executed, including Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette. Marie herself was imprisoned by the revolutionists but escaped the fate of the guillotine.

**In 1794 Curtius died and Marie inherited the exhibition.**

However the exhibition struggled in the economic decline following the revolution and Marie decided to take the exhibition to England where it was a great success. Marie and her husband, Francois Tussaud, toured the British Isles with the exhibition for years. In 1822 the ship carrying the figures was wrecked on a crossing to Ireland but fortunately some of the figures were saved.

**At the age of 74, Madame Tussaud decided to settle the exhibition permanently at the Baker Street Bazaar, very close to the present site.**

Marie continued to work at the exhibition until her death in 1850.

Her sons and grandsons continued the business and in 1884 decided to move the exhibition to its present site.

**Over the years there have been several disasters which the exhibition has had to cope with.**

A fire in 1925 destroyed many of the figures but fortunately the moulds were saved so new figures could be cast, and in 1940, on the first night of the Blitz, 352 head moulds were damaged beyond repair, although ironically Hitler's figure remained unscathed!



Actual wax  
portrait of Madame  
Tussaud herself.

# Making Figures in Wax

For most visitors to Madame Tussauds, wax figures are startling, three-dimensional likenesses of all manner of people but little is known about how the figures are actually created. This is because the studios can never be visited – apart from by the subjects who come to be modeled in the private, purpose-built area.

At the sitting, the sculptor has the opportunity to take precise measurements with a tape measure and calipers, and to photograph the subject's head and body from every possible angle. During the sitting the sculptor also makes the all-important observations that will convey personality and character as the sculpture progresses.

A moulder is responsible for making a plaster "negative" from the sculptor's portrait, and great care must be taken to avoid damaging the precious clay original. Once the wax head has been cast it requires eyes, hair and colour. Eyes are made individually to exactly match the colour and detail of the subject, human hair is inserted strand by strand into the wax scalp and colour is carefully applied to bring the face and features "to life". The final assembly of the figure is supervised by the sculptor and wardrobe mistress.

When a figure enters Madame Tussauds, the studio remain closely concerned with its appearance and like every other figure it will undergo an early morning routine of checking and cleaning before the attraction opens each day.

This rigorous attention to detail is constantly maintained and continues to uphold the high standards for which Madame Tussauds is famed.

Read our studio's blog online for amazing behind-the-scenes info from our world famous artists at [www.madame-tussauds.co.uk/blog](http://www.madame-tussauds.co.uk/blog).

