

# Classic Award

## Madame Tussauds

### A LIFE IN WAX

by Owen Ralph

What's in a name? Marie Grosholtz was only married to François Tussaud for eight years, but keeping his name turned out to be a significant branding move – without it, the Tussauds Group might well be the Grosholtz Group, and somehow the latter name doesn't have the flair of "Tussaud." More than two centuries after Marie departed the marital nest, Madame Tussauds is one of the world's leading visitor attraction brands, and a marvelous legacy to the French lady who founded an English institution.

It was in 1835, after 33 colourful years on the road, much of it in England, that Madame Tussaud set up her waxworks as a permanent attraction, settling in London's Baker Street. And it is the London iteration that TEA has honored with a Thea Classic Award, noting both the excellence of the parent attraction and the family it grew into. Today, at its six international wax museums – in London, Amsterdam, New York, Las Vegas, Hong Kong and Shanghai – Madame Tussauds entertains around five million curious guests a year. A portfolio of theme parks, three in the UK and one in Germany, plus England's Warwick Castle and the iconic London Eye, sit alongside Madame Tussauds as members of the larger Tussauds Group.

Mademoiselle Grosholtz learned her waxwork skills early on from Philippe Curtius, who employed her mother as his housekeeper. In 1770, he opened an exhibition of life-size wax figures in Paris, and at the outbreak of the French Revolution, Grosholtz helped him mold replica heads of guillotine victims. Five years later, Marie got married, inherited Curtius' collection and began touring it.

"Madame Tussaud herself was very interested in the fashion of the day and could create a new figure within a week and have it in the attraction," notes Glenn Earlam, managing director of the Tussauds Group's City Centre Attractions division, responsible for all six of the present-day wax museums.

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"One of the features that has been constant throughout is a figure of Madame Tussaud herself," reveals Earlam. "The version that is in the attraction today is an exact replica a self portrait she did in 1819 when she was 81 years old." In her 2006 biography *Waxing Mythical: The Life and Legend of Madame Tussaud*, author Kate Berridge suggests that the London attraction played a major role in establishing the concept of fame in the United Kingdom.

"At a time when there was no television, people couldn't see the famous so easily as they can now," highlights Earlam. "One of the reasons

they would go to Madame Tussauds was to see what the people they would hear about actually looked like. Today, at the heart of the Madame Tussauds attractions around the world there is still that absolute base human instinct for comparison: How big are they? How tall are they? How pretty are they?"

In more recent times a succession of corporate owners (lately Dubai International Capital) have opened Tussauds attractions on three continents, expanding the brand to global proportions. Even though the waxworks now account for less than half of total Tussauds Group attendances, the strength of the brand is sufficient for it to lend its name to the entire parent company. The latest international city to host Madame Tussauds was Shanghai, where there was already a 20 per cent recognition of the name before the attraction opened in 2006. Washington DC and Los Angeles are likely to be next.



At Madame Tussauds in London, Prince William gets ready for his closeup.



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"It is still regarded as a great honour to be in the pantheon of the good and the great at Madame Tussauds," reckons Earlam. This means selecting figures carefully for each of the venues. "Whereas 10 years ago it would be a right of passage that we would include certain present day political figures, now we ask if they are appropriate, interesting and of genuine relevance to our guests."

In an age when celebrity culture permeates the globe, Madame Tussauds has managed to remain relevant, embracing the stars of small and silver screen, and integrating reality TV properties such as Big Brother.

"We are really focused on creating a whole breadth of experience based around the famous people that we portray," notes Simon Opie, general manager of the Tussauds Group Studios. At its West London workshop, the Studio sculpts figures for the wax museums worldwide, but also deals with creative design and development for all of the group's attractions.

Ever since the 1920s, when figures were incorporated inside historical tableaux, Madame Tussauds has represented more than just an identity parade of famous faces. Increasingly interactive elements are being employed to engage the audience. Guests, for example, can dance with Beyonce, play soccer with David Beckham or ask George Clooney for a date – but

none of this takes away from the essence of the Madame Tussauds experience. "At the heart of our brand is that our figures are believably lifelike," highlights Earlam. "We spend three months on each figure, we still insert all of the hairs individually by hand, all the eye colorings, the skin colourings; it's a very lengthy process."

Specifically, Madame Tussauds has largely avoided adding animatronic figures. "We had a brush with animatronics back in the late '80s," remembers Opie. "I think the challenges of portraying famous people have really convinced us that the animatronic element can detract from the public enjoyment of a really good likeness. It's really hard, and the movement of the face distorts the features. So we've tended recently to be much more subtle, with such features as breathing (Britney Spears) or blushing (Jennifer Lopez). These sorts of things can be much more effective."

They might not quite be the real thing, but Tussauds' figures turn heads day after day, at city after city. "In our Far East attractions the ability to get close to people and take photos is still a massive draw, whereas in London you might say the quality is taken for granted so it's as much about how we can build on that and provide a really engaging experience that gives people more than they expect," concludes Opie. "But then isn't that key to attractions wherever you are?"

