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HISTORY OF WAXWORKING

Walter's International Wax Museum
New York World's Fair, 1964-65

The intricate process of creating likenesses of famous personalities for wax museums constitutes a specialized art, based on family and guild secrets handed down for centuries.

Although installations such as the International Wax Museum at the New York World's Fair are bringing this art to new heights of beauty and excellence in a resurgence that promises to continue for many years in this country, the wax medium was in use long before recorded history.

Wax sculpture has been mentioned in records of temples in ancient Babylon and Assyria. Waxen effigies were used in the earliest practice of black magic.

In about 500 BC a pharaoh decreed that wax representations could be offered as sacrifices to the gods in place of humans.

The ancient Greeks modeled fruits and flowers and created wax statuary. Lysistratus of Sycion, wax modeler to Alexander the Great, contrived the art as it remains in modern times. In about 300 BC he developed the craft of casting wax figures from plaster molds of original subjects. He also established the technique of tinting wax so that colors might engender a three-dimensional and vibrant translucence.

(more)

History - add 1

Roman senators were entitled to wax busts that were exhibited in the halls of their villas. When Caesar's legions invaded Europe and Britain, they took along their household gods, black magic, and effigy magic, the latter still being used today. The method is to bury, drown, burn, or otherwise destroy a wax figure to bring about a similar fate to the individual in whose image it was created.

Wax replicas replaced the remains of departed high officials during Anglo-Saxon times, when bodies were placed on view as evidence that the subject had died naturally rather than having been eliminated by a rival.

Effigies were substituted for bodies if a ruler expired far from home where embalming was inefficient. These were for display during ceremonies back home. At first these were made of wood, later of boiled leather that was painted. Wax was used for the first time at the funeral of Henry III in 1272. This practice continued for nearly 500 years.

A few of these figures remained at Westminster Abbey at the end of the 17th century. Servants at the abbey pocketed fees paid by visitors to see the effigies. Business ran so brisk that they bought added replicas of popular personalities, and the first wax museum was in business.

Early in the 19th century this practice was stopped by the authorities, and it was not until the late 1920s that the abandoned effigies were hauled out of closets and restored.

(more)

History - add 2

An Italian surgeon invented wax reproduction of body organs for use by medical students, who until the 17th century contented themselves with the remains of criminals who had been caught.

Churches in mediaeval times used wax figures to explain their beliefs to the illiterate. Wax impresarios who traveled about with religious displays in England were the prototypes from whom Charles Dickens created the immortal Mrs. Jarley.

These shows were common at British fairs during the 1600s and 1700s.

Earliest of the more famous latter-day waxworks was developed by Mrs. Salmon, who in the late 1600s opened for business in St. Martins le Grand, London, and later moved the establishment to Fleet Street. This vast exhibit changed hands twice after Mrs. Salmon's death in 1760. It survived until about 1812, then failed.

The 1800s were the golden age of waxworks, with shows appearing throughout the world. England had many, ranging from shoddy to elegant, and wax exhibitions were on view in Russia, Germany, Turkey, and Mexico.

By the end of the 19th century, about 150 waxworks were operating in the British Empire and as many again in the eastern United States. One by one these faded and expired, leaving only a few enduring establishments in Europe and a handful of traveling shows in many parts of the world.

(more)

History - add 3

It was 1962 before the resurgence began--an artistic rebirth that fortunately was synchronized with a widespread new interest in the fine arts. This new interest owes its existence to a desire by the people to extend their individualism for a richer and more meaningful life. And it comes during a tremendous population explosion when more and more leisure is available for esthetic advancement.

The Walters already are planning permanent installations for key cities and expect to spearhead the renaissance of this venerable art medium for many years to come.

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