



SHE WAS ONLY A HOUSEKEEPER'S DAUGHTER.... THE AMAZING LIFE AND TIMES OF MADAME TUSSAUD

From housekeeper's daughter to Royal tutor, master figure maker and thriving businesswoman, the life of Madame Marie Tussaud has all the ingredients of a best-selling novel. Add in French Revolution, escape from the 'Guillotine' and a spell making the death masks of former aristocratic friends and employers, and that life has all the ingredients of a Hollywood blockbuster. Undeniably, the life of Madame Tussauds' founder was as colourful as any of the celebrities who have been posed for the world famous attraction in its illustrious 200 year history.

Born Marie Grosholtz in 1761, two months after her father's death in the Franco-Prussian war, the young Madame Tussaud was taught all things 'wax' by her mother's employer, Dr Philippe Curtius. A talented wax sculptor, Curtius became her mentor and guardian, and was soon introducing Marie to some of the 18th Century's leading luminaries. Aged just 17, she sculpted famous writer and philosopher Voltaire, and followed that with a figure of US statesman Benjamin Franklin - both figures are still on display at Madame Tussauds today.

Marie's impressive work at a popular Paris wax exhibition run by Curtius prompted an invitation to the court of Louis XVI and his Queen, Marie Antoinette. For nine years she lived at Versailles supervising the artistic education of the King's sister and enjoying the splendour of court life. However, political unrest and social discontent was spreading across France, a reaction to frivolous, absolute monarchical rule, and so Curtius called Marie back to Paris.

Paris was actually to become the centre of a bloody Revolution that would rock Europe. Everybody came under the scrutiny of revolutionary leader Robespierre and his bloody henchmen, and Marie's connections with the Royal Family made her guilty by association. Both she and her mother were arrested and imprisoned, sharing a cell with future Empress Josephine. Their heads were shaved in preparation for gruesome execution by guillotine, a fate they only narrowly escaped....

On release, Marie's loyalty to the Revolution was severely tested - she was asked to prepare the death masks of executed nobles, including former friends from her time at court, and her one-time employers, the King and Queen. Some of these death masks can be seen today in Madame Tussauds' notorious Chamber Of Horrors.

Life after the Revolution also presented problems. By 1800 Marie was married to civil engineer Francois Tussaud, with two young children and an ailing business inherited from Curtius after his death in 1794. Madame Tussaud made the bold decision to take her exhibition of figures on tour; in 1802 she left her husband and country for Great Britain. She never saw either again....

For the next 33 years Madame Tussaud travelled the length and breadth of the British Isles, exhibiting a growing collection of wax figures to curious and admiring crowds. In these pre-TV and internet days this was the only way most people had direct contact with high-profile names, and they loved it. The show permanently based itself in London (Baker Street) in 1835, moving to its present Marylebone Road site in 1884.

Alongside her sons Madame Tussaud created one of the capital's leading attractions, a position that it still enjoys today. She remained actively involved in its running almost to the end of her life; her last work, a remarkable self-portrait currently on show in the attraction's Authentic History Zone, was completed just eight years before her death in 1850, at 89.

Madame Tussauds was an incredible woman. She survived one of the most turbulent ever periods in European history and, at a time when women were expected to stay home and raise the family, firmly established herself as an effective and visionary businesswoman. She tirelessly promoted, advertised and updated her attraction, to help ensure its relevance to the public for years to come.

That vision lives on in the 21st century. Madame Tussauds continues regularly to add figures that reflect contemporary public opinion and celebrity popularity. The attraction also continues to expand globally with popular branches in New York, Hong Kong, Las Vegas, Shanghai, Amsterdam and Washington DC – all with the same pioneering, high quality mix of interaction, authenticity and local appeal. After 200 years of entertaining, Madame Tussauds remains a truly famous day out.

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