

History: Heroes & Villains

Madame Tussauds Sydney — Schools Resource

NSW Syllabus: History K–10 | **Stage:** Stage 4 (Years 7–8)

Suggested duration: 1 pre-visit lesson, 1 excursion session, 1 post-visit lesson

Activity breakdown: Exercise 1 (pre-visit), Exercise 2 (excursion), Exercise 3 (post-visit assessment/creative task)

About this resource

Madame Tussauds Sydney's collection features global figures who have shaped history, culture, sport, science and entertainment — from world leaders to musicians, athletes and icons of popular culture. This resource uses the gallery as a lens for exploring how historical figures are remembered, celebrated or contested, and how history itself is a matter of interpretation.

Curriculum outcomes addressed

- **HT4-5** — identifies the meaning, purpose and context of historical sources
- **HT4-6** — uses evidence from sources to support historical narratives and explanations
- **HT4-9** — applies a range of relevant historical terms and concepts when communicating an understanding of the past
- **HT4-10** — selects and uses appropriate oral, written, visual and digital forms to communicate about the past

Key inquiry question

What makes a person "significant" in history — and who decides whether they're remembered as a hero, a villain, or something more complicated?

Exercise 1: Hero, Villain or Both?

Pre-Visit Classroom Activity | Individual or Pairs | 20–30 minutes

In pairs, list five historical or public figures you already know something about. They can be from any era, culture or field — politics, science, music, sport, activism, or entertainment.

Create a class table with these headings:

Figure Name	Admired For (Achievement)	Criticised For (Controversy)
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Reflection question: Can a person be both a hero and a villain? Does that depend on who is telling the story?

Exercise 2: Wax Figure Investigation

Excursion Activity | In-Venue at Madame Tussauds Sydney | Self-Guided

Choose three wax figures from different sections of the gallery. The History & World Leaders zone is a strong starting point — figures there have included Ned Kelly (bushranger and folk hero), Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Barack Obama, though the exact line-up may vary on the day.

For each figure, students record:

1. **Who are they, and what are they best known for?**
2. **What evidence can you see around the figure (costume, pose, setting, props) that tells you how they are being represented?**
3. **Rate this figure on the Hero–Villain Spectrum (1 = villain, 10 = hero) and explain your reasoning in 2–3 sentences.**
4. **What might someone from a different time period, culture or background think of this rating? Would they agree with you?**

Extension question: If you investigated Ned Kelly, discuss why he's remembered as both a criminal and a folk hero in Australian culture. Whose story do you think is missing from this gallery? Who would you add, and why?

Exercise 3: Create Your Own Wax Figure

Post-Visit Classroom Activity | Individual | Extended Task (1–2 lessons)

Using what you observed at Madame Tussauds Sydney, students design a wax figure profile for a historical or contemporary individual of their choice.

Instructions for students:

1. Choose a person you admire, or one whose legacy you think is debated.
2. Research their life, achievements and controversies using at least two different sources.
3. Design your figure: sketch or describe their pose, costume, expression and setting. What choices would you make to represent them fairly?
4. Write a 150–200-word placard, in the style of a museum label, explaining who they are and why they belong in the exhibition.
5. Include a short "curator's note" (50 words) addressing any criticism or controversy attached to their legacy, and how you chose to represent it.

Curator's Tip — Encourage students to look for the small details in each display — props, lighting, and positioning are deliberate choices that shape how a figure is perceived. This mirrors exactly the kind of source analysis historians do with primary evidence.

Teacher guidance: This task can be assessed against HT4-9 and HT4-10 for historical communication, and adapted into a gallery walk, digital portfolio, or class exhibition.

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Exercise 1: Hero, Villain or Both?

Pre-Visit Classroom Activity | Individual or Pairs | 20–30 minutes

Instructions: In pairs, list five historical or public figures you already know something about. They can be from any era, culture or field — politics, science, music, sport, activism, or entertainment.

Figure Name	Admired For (Achievement)	Criticised For (Controversy)

Reflection Question: Can a person be both a hero and a villain? Does that depend on who is telling the story?

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Exercise 2: Wax Figure Investigation

Excursion Activity | In-Venue at Madame Tussauds Sydney | Self-Guided

Instructions: Choose three wax figures from different sections of the gallery. For each figure, complete the investigation questions below.

Figure 1

1. Who are they, and what are they best known for?

2. What evidence can you see around the figure (costume, pose, setting, props) that tells you how they are being represented?

3. Rate this figure on the Hero–Villain Spectrum (1 = villain, 10 = hero) and explain your reasoning in 2–3 sentences.

4. What might someone from a different time period, culture or background think of this rating? Would they agree with you?

Figure 2

1. Who are they, and what are they best known for?

2. What evidence can you see around the figure (costume, pose, setting, props) that tells you how they are being represented?

3. Rate this figure on the Hero–Villain Spectrum (1 = villain, 10 = hero) and explain your reasoning in 2–3 sentences.

4. What might someone from a different time period, culture or background think of this rating? Would they agree with you?

Figure 3

1. Who are they, and what are they best known for?

2. What evidence can you see around the figure (costume, pose, setting, props) that tells you how they are being represented?

3. Rate this figure on the Hero–Villain Spectrum (1 = villain, 10 = hero) and explain your reasoning in 2–3 sentences.

4. What might someone from a different time period, culture or background think of this rating? Would they agree with you?

Extension Question: If you investigated Ned Kelly, discuss why he's remembered as both a criminal and a folk hero in Australian culture. Whose story do you think is missing from this gallery? Who would you add, and why?

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Exercise 3: Create Your Own Wax Figure

Post-Visit Classroom Activity | Individual | Extended Task (1–2 lessons)

Instructions: Using what you observed at Madame Tussauds Sydney, design a wax figure profile for a historical or contemporary individual of your choice.

Step 1: Choose Your Figure

Who will you feature?

Why did you choose this person?

Step 2: Research

List at least two sources you used to research this person:

Key achievements:

Controversies or criticisms:

Step 3: Design Your Figure

Sketch or describe your figure below. Include details about pose, costume, expression, and setting:

Step 4: Write Your Museum Placard (150–200 words)

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Step 5: Curator's Note (50 words)

Address any criticism or controversy attached to their legacy, and explain how you chose to represent it:

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