



ROBERTA BALLESTRIERO



THE DEAD IN WAX: FUNERAL CEROPLASTICS IN THE EUROPEAN 17TH-18TH CENTURY TRADITION

There is in the Abbey a somewhat disconcerting tendency, to which one has to become accustomed, for inanimate objects to move and at length to reappear in a different place.¹

Westminster Occasional Paper, December 1973

Wax was known and used for numerous purposes since ancient times by the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. It was also used for encaustic painting, but the first known use of wax for modeling was the sculpting of bronze and jewelry with the lost-wax casting process (*cire perdue*). This process consisted of pouring the melted metal between two layers of refractory material divided by a layer of wax, which was then eliminated and substituted by the metal itself. The particular physical and chemical characteristics of

wax, such as malleability, resistance to atmospheric factors, the possibility of accepting paint, all justify the interest in choosing to adopt this material to create a wide variety of figures and portraits. The high burning potential of the material explains the use of wax figures in religious and magic rituals. This type of figure was in use in ancient Greece and remained popular up until the introduction of photography. The advantageous characteristics of wax have led to the use of this material over the centuries for numerous purposes: – funeral masks, – wax models, sketches, – portraits, – wax votive offerings, – anatomical wax modeling, – waxworks.

The main characteristic of wax is that it is capable of achieving a remarkable mimetic likeness superior to other materials. It is flexible, easy to work, can be colored, and can be adorned with organic materials such as body-hair, hair, teeth and nails. The versatility, flexibility and above all its amazing mimetic capacity (and also the fact that wax resembles so remarkably human flesh), explain why wax was used to create funeral masks and effigies. In fact, funeral masks were produced from an early age and since the 14th century became widely used in the West, confirming the macabre tendency of the art of Ceroplastics.

Lysippus and Lysistratos of Sikyon, two brothers who lived in the fourth century B.C., were renowned in Greece as skilled sculptors and portraitists; indeed, Pliny reports that the idea of obtaining a “mask” produced from a direct plaster cast of a face into which molten wax was poured originated with Lysistratos.² The ancient Romans created masks and images of the deceased in wax to keep in the atrium or in niches. During funerals, effigies were laid on the parade bed, while portraits of the ancestors were carried in processions to accompany the newly deceased.³ They were then laid to rest and adorned with laurel wreaths for festivities and special celebrations.⁴

Only the rich were in a position to commission such figures, although wax statues of allegorical subjects or gods (*lares*) could be found in the houses of all social classes. Dolls with a wax face

(*pupae*) are likely to date back to this period, or perhaps even to the times of ancient Greece, and are testimony to an art which survived until the nineteenth century.⁵ The earliest evidence of funeral heads was discovered in 1852 in a Roman grave in Cumae. Two skeletons were found, with wax heads, colored glass eyes and traces of natural hair. The male head was preserved in the National Museum of Naples, while the female disintegrated in situ.⁶ The museum guide of 1876 suggested that these bodies belonged to persecuted Christians from the earliest days of Christianity.⁷

From pre-Christian times to the present day wax was also the most suitable material to make votive offerings and ex voto images, not only thanks to its resemblance to human skin, but also for its plasticity and reasonably low price. The offering of objects to a divinity or saint to ask for a grace (*propitiatory ex voto*), or to give thanks for a received grace (*gratulatory ex voto*) is an ancient custom; the objects were generally placed at pilgrimage sites, churches, chapels and shrines.⁸

Votive offerings could be of any kind but were often reproduced parts of the human body, representing healthy or diseased organs. In Florence, from the 13th to the 17th century, the donation of votive offerings was so common that it created a real industry of *ex votos* in different materials but especially in wax. Votive offerings of all kinds were present in different Florentine churches but especially in the church of SS. Annunziata. The anatomical votive offerings progressed to life-sized statues. Nobles, Florentine as well as foreigners, commissioned life-sized figures of themselves in colored wax. These were dressed in their own clothes and then offered to the Santissima Annunziata as an act of devotion.

These ‘bóti’, as they were known in the Florentine vernacular, were present in nearly all churches in Florence, but in the church of the SS. Annunziata they became a major feature, turning the sanctuary into an enormous museum of wax figures of all types that included body parts as well as whole figures. This practice ended in 1786

when the reforms made by Leopold II, Holy Roman Emperor from 1790 to 1792, ordered the clergy to free the churches of all votive offerings; the remaining waxes were melted down to make candles.⁹

The fact that wax allowed the creation of remarkably similar figures linked this material to portraits and funerary effigies. In fact, replacing the real body with a waxen image was practical. This habit, which started with the Greeks and Romans, was necessary because of the duration of the funeral and sometimes because of the time between the death and the funeral itself. In Latin Christianity from the beginning of the 13th century, the exhibition of the dead showing the face became intolerable. Therefore the body was closed in the coffin immediately after the death. From the 14th century, the body was removed from inclusion in the ceremony. That did not express a desire for anonymity. Indeed, at the funerals of important people, the hidden body was replaced by a replica in wood or wax. Artists therefore tried to obtain the greatest possible similarity by taking a cast just after death to create a mask. The faces of these statues became death masks.¹⁰

According to Giorgio Vasari, in his “Life of Andrea del Verrocchio”, wax masks, portraits and effigies were very rough/clumsy “...o vero di cera e goffi affatto...”. Apparently it was thanks to Verrocchio, who was taking plaster casts from nature, that this art improved. Thanks to Verrocchio’s innovations, a new custom developed in Florence and death masks started to appear in every Florentine house on fireplaces, doors and windows.¹¹ Eventually the tradition of funeral masks and effigies declined in Florence but the custom continued in France, probably until the 17th century not only as part of the royal ceremonies, but also of the nobility.

In France the custom slowly disappeared with the Enlightenment, but the English royalty successively copied it at funerals. In Venice, an analogous ceremony was in use from the 17th century until the fall of the Republic in 1797.¹² The concept of “double funeral” also as a political cele-

bration where a three-dimensional effigy was placed on the coffin is an ancient custom and was first documented in England in 1327 for Edward II, and then in France for Charles VI in 1422.¹³

The effigy was regularly used for the burials of the English and French royals and it played an important role in the funerary protocol, overshadowing the real corpse. This custom reached extremes in 16th century Europe. In France in 1514 at the death of Anne of Brittany, wife of Louis XII, the effigy was served sumptuous meals. The same treatment was reserved for the effigy of Francis I of France in 1547.¹⁴ Interestingly, with Francis I, the corpse was separated from the wax effigy and adorned with the royal insignia during the funeral procession. The mortal remains preceded the cortege while the effigy advanced in the position of honor at the back surrounded by the dignitaries, leaving the corpse virtually alone.¹⁵

The first effigy in Venice was used in 1485 when Doge Giovanni Mocenigo, killed by the plague, was buried in haste and in secret as a result of the development of the disease in the city. Until then the funerals of doges had been characterized by modesty; from that moment effigies were used occasionally, usually at the request of the dying man.¹⁶ In 1612, the austere Leonardo Donà was the first doge who did not want to be embalmed, and he was buried privately the same night he died. The body was replaced by a wax effigy for the rituals, which lasted several days, in the Doge’s Palace and in the church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo. Likewise doge Antonio Priuli stated in his will that he did not want to be embalmed and that a ‘figure’ be placed on the litter, as for his predecessor Leonardo Donà.¹⁷ Julius von Schlosser, in his “History of portraiture in wax” of 1911, stresses the importance of the resemblance between the real person and the portrait. Death masks provided a rapid and effective way of achieving this likeness

Currently in Venice there are a number of funeral masks kept in storage at the Museo Correr. Recently researchers tried to discover whom these masks portrayed. It is likely that they represented

FIGURE 2.1 *Main façade of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco*, 16th century, Venice, Italy. (Foto: Ballestriero R. & Burke O.)



Alvise III Mocenigo, who died in 1732, and Francesco Loredan, who died in 1762. Often the effigy was just a dummy with a wax face and hands; in the Museo Correr there is a wax funeral mask modelled on a plaster cast and a pair of clasped hands arranged as though lying on a body, which are probably more recent than the other pieces.

At the Scuola Grande of S. Roch, (Fig. 2.1) famous for hosting the great cycle of paintings by Tintoretto, is kept an eighteenth-century gilt wood case containing the wax head of Doge Alvise IV Mocenigo, modelled by an unknown artist and probably used during the public funeral ceremony for the Doge (Fig. 2.2). The head, at one time on show to the public, is dressed in the typical headwear of a Doge and was undoubtedly a funeral

mask. A close inspection reveals that there are several small holes where the eyebrows should be, indicating how initially real hairs were used to enhance the resemblance to the deceased, a commonly used practice in the art of wax modeling. The Mocenigo family provided as many as seven Doges, of which Alvise IV Mocenigo was the seventh Doge from the family and one of the last of the Serenissima.

Venetian custom included a double funeral for the doges. A few days after the death, the embalmed body was buried in the family tomb, followed by the lavish “*obsequies of the statue of the Most Serene Prince*”. The custom of using death masks and effigies in wax is well documented in the *Ceremonial Book of the doges*.¹⁸ The effigy of the deceased, dressed in the traditional beautiful attire, with the sword (*Stocco*) in his right hand, was shown for three days in the Hall of the Ducal Palace (*Sala del Piovego*).¹⁹

FIGURE 2.2 *Funeral effigy of Doge Alvise IV Mocenigo*, c. 1779, wax mask, h approx. 33 cm, Scuola Grande Arciconfraternità di San Rocco, Venice, Italy. (Foto: Ballestriero R. & Burke O.)



During those three days the effigy was veiled by priests, patricians and senators and on the third day it was accompanied by an immense, slow procession across the square to the church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo for the funeral. The preparation was the responsibility of *nonzoli* (sacristans) of San Marco, supervised by the ducal master of ceremony.²⁰ In the celebration of the funeral, a leading role was traditionally allocated to the Scuola di San Marco and in the 17th century occasionally to the Scuola of S. Roch. A dispute between the two Schools to establish which one should play the pre-eminent role in the funeral of Alvise IV Mocenigo indicated how important at that time this honor was.

The fact that the funeral head is still kept in the School of S. Roch underlined that this school won the privilege.²¹ At the Correr Museum there is also a whole wax head of the Patriarch of Venice, Francesco Antonio Correr who died in 1741. The head was modeled with cloth soaked in wax, a technique similar to the one employed to make the carnival masks so popular in Venice. This head

reminds us of the 12 wax portraits of Capuchins present in the right sacristy of the Redentore Church. The Sanctuary of the SS. Redentore was constructed as a votive offering following the safe delivery of the city from the plague, which had decimated the population in the years 1575-1576 ([Fig. 2.3](#)). The architect of this church was Andrea Palladio who supervised the works right up to his death in 1580. In the first vestry, together with the paintings of Paolo Veronese, Palma the Young and others, the busts of eleven Capuchin saints are conserved in glass cases.

Not related to the funeral ceremonies but more to the commemorative portraiture, Saint Francis and the other canonized and beatified capuchins dated from probably the second half of the 18th century are represented. These waxes were dressed in a coarse Franciscan cowl and finished with real beards and hair; their eyes appear to have been made from colored glass and accentuate the realistic appearance of the busts ([Fig. 2.4](#), [2.5](#), [2.6](#), [2.7](#), & [2.8](#)).

FIGURE 2.3 *Façade of the Basilica del Santissimo Redentore*, Andrea Palladio, 1577-1592, Venice, Italy. (Foto: Ballestriero R. & Burke O.)



FIGURE 2.4 *Seraphicus Patriarca S. Franciscus Assisiensis, (1182 – 1226)*, second half of the 18th century, wax bust, h. approx. 60 cm, Chiesa del Redentore, Venice, Italy. (Foto: Ballestriero R. & Burke O.)



FIGURE 2.5 *S. Laurentius A Brund: Generalis Or.C., (1559-1610)*, second half of the 18th century, wax bust, h. approx. 60 cm, Chiesa del Redentore, Venice, Italy. (Foto: Ballestriero R. & Burke O.)



FIGURE 2.6 *S. Veronica De Julia Ord. Cappuccinarum Abbatissa (1660 – 1727)*, second half of the 18th century, wax bust, h. approx. 60 cm, Chiesa del Redentore, Venice, Italy. (Foto: Ballestriero R. & Burke O.)



FIGURE 2.7 *B. Angelus Ab Acrìo Mission. Cappuc.*, (1669-1739), second half of the 18th century, wax bust, h. approx. 60 cm, Chiesa del Redentore, Venice, Italy. (Foto: Ballestriero R. & Burke O.)



FIGURE 2.8 *B. Crispinus A Viterbio Lus Ordin. Cappuc.*, (1668-1750), second half of the 18th century, wax bust, h. approx. 60 cm, Chiesa del Redentore, Venice, Italy. (Foto: Ballestriero R. & Burke O.)



In England between 1413 and 1553 were terms such as 'pycture', 'personage', 'image' and 'cast' were used to describe full-length robed and supine effigies paraded atop the coffins of deceased monarchs and consorts at the time of their funeral.²² The English funerary tradition of the monarchy comes directly from the French one, however in the French custom some of the effigies were presented seated, such as the stone/marble sculptures on "*Transi tombs*". Also in London a transformation occurred over the centuries where the effigies evolved into something closer to portraits.

According to Schlosser another singular funerary custom appeared, occupying a middle position between the votive statues of Florence and the French effigies. This was the practice of exhibiting wax figures of high personages in Westminster Abbey, standing erect in glass cases, richly dressed and leaving them on display permanently. This custom made this place of worship the forerunner of wax museums such as the famous Madame Tussaud's.²³

The earlier Westminster effigies may have possessed two functions: first within the funeral service, as a recumbent representation of the dead monarch and then, after the service, as a memorial figure.²⁴ In fact, with the death of Charles II in 1685, the custom of funeral effigies lying supine ended and the tradition of figures standing upright began. It is not known who ordered this effigy, or why it was commissioned, not even the name of the artist is known, but a new custom had begun for the British royalty and aristocracy.

The example of Charles II was followed by Frances Stewart, Duchess of Richmond and Lennox, famous for her beauty and for refusing to become the mistress of King Charles II. Often nicknamed as '*La Belle Stuart*' for her beauty, she probably wanted to emulate the new style begun with the effigy of the king, as the supine form was out of fashion. Thus, on October 7, 1702, the duchess ordered in her will: 'To have my Effigie as well done in Wax as can bee and set up... put in a presse by itselfe distinct from the other with clear

crowne glasse before it and dressed in my Coronation Robes and coronette.'²⁵

In this particular case, we can see how the attitude to funeral effigies had changed among contemporaries:

First: it was the duchess who commissioned her own portrait and not the family or executors of the will after death. Second: the executors were told to "... secure the services of Mrs. Goldsmith, arguably the best wax modeller of those days, for a fee of £ 260."²⁶

It should be noted that Mrs. Goldsmith, owner of a wax museum and precursor of Madame Tussaud by at least a century, took almost a year to make the effigy, which was installed in the Abbey on August 4, 1703. Apparently it was exhibited in her museum first.²⁷ '*La Belle Stuart*' has nothing to do with the typical funeral effigies of the past and it is rather the desire of the deceased to live forever in memory through a portrait to be remembered as she was in life, and in the case of the Duchess, in all her beauty. The wax modellers were often real artists, and the use of the death mask, taken directly from the face of the deceased, allowed fidelity of detail and meticulous realism.

We could see how a death mask was used in the likeness of the noble Prince Edmund Duke of Buckingham, who died in 1735 at the young age of 19. Because of his frail health his mother sent him to Rome, where he died of tuberculosis on 30 October 1735. The magnificent funeral was held in London on January 31 of the following year. Obviously in this case the effigy was necessary because of the elapsed time between the death and the funeral. The work is very unusual in that period because the duke was shown lying supine with closed eyes and his effigy was kept in the same position even after the ceremony. We can consider this as the last genuine funeral effigy.²⁸ The effigy is incredibly realistic and the sunken cheeks, as reproduced from the death mask, showed the Duke to be in poor health at the time of his death. Additionally, thanks to the casting of the hands, we can also deduce that the young man was in the habit of nail biting.²⁹

The mother, Catherine, Duchess of Buckingham held a grand ceremony for her child as she did for her husband earlier. Later she personally oversaw the production of her own funeral effigy during the winter of 1735/6. After her death in 1743, the effigy was placed near her tomb, previously prepared in a glass case, along with that of her first child, Marquis of Normanby, who died in 1715, age three.³⁰ These effigies marked the definitive end of the funeral tradition.

From the 17th to the early 19th century, sacristans and minor canons began to take small tips from visitors to the Abbey and so they increased the business by commissioning other effigies (such as King William III, Queen Mary II, Queen Anne's sister, William Pitt Earl of Chatham, Horatio, Viscount Nelson, also the effigy of Queen Elisabeth was remade in 1760). The waxwork of Nelson was the last to be placed in the Abbey. Again, tradition became business as had previously happened in Florence during the 15th-16th century. In fact, at that time, the friars at the Basilica were much criticized as they encouraged this behavior in the faithful, which tended more towards superstition than to religion. However, in Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, Friar Timothy, alluding to the 'bóti' in the Santissima Annunziata, maintains how inadequate the attempts made by the friars were to persuade the people to continue to bring their votive offerings:

Then they wonder that devotion is lacking. As I recall there were five hundred images and today there are only twenty. The fault is ours, we have not been capable of maintaining our reputation. Habitually after vespers we used to form a procession in that place and sing praises. There were always new votive offerings present; during confessions we comforted the men and women and urged them to make votive offerings. These practices are no longer carried out and we ask ourselves why things have changed?"³¹

With regards to the Westminster Abbey in London, the funeral effigy had ceased to be a component of the royal funeral and finally the decision to exhibit monarchs was taken by the Abbey authori-

ties rather than the court. The creation of the later waxworks "was an ingenious move on the part of the Abbey: they were valuable tourist attractions and a source of income for the lay vicars".³² Slowly the concept of funeral effigies of the English royalty faded and merged into a business, anticipating the great success of waxwork museums that continue to this day with famous names such as Madame Tussaud.

Notes

¹ 'The Undercroft Museum and the Treasures Exhibition', *Westminster Occasional Paper*, December 1973, 14, in Harvey A, Mortimer R, *The Funeral Effigies of Westminster Abbey*, Woodbridge, The Bodydell Press, 1994, 21.

² Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturalis*, XXXV, LXIV, Venice, Domenichi L., 1603.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lombardi Satriani LM, "Ex-voto di cera in Calabria", in *La ceroplastica nella scienza e nell'arte*, Atti del Primo Congresso Internazionale, Florence, Olschki, 1977, 533.

⁵ AA.VV., *Le Cere Anatomiche della Specola*, Florence, Arnaud, 1979, 15.

⁶ Schlosser J von, *History of portraiture in wax*, 1911, in Panzanelli R. (editor), *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2008, 177.

⁷ Monaco D, *Guida novissima del Museo nazionale di Napoli: secondo l'ultimo ordinamento*, Naples, Vincenzo Morano, 1876, 66.

⁸ Antoine E, *Ex voto*, In *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* (ed. Andre' Vauchez), Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. (e-reference edition) 2001. Distributed by Oxford University Press. Open University. (Accessed 25 July 2009). Available at: <http://www.oxfordreference.com>.

⁹ Lanza B, Azzaroli Puccetti ML, Poggesi M, et al., *Le Cere Anatomiche della Specola*, Florence, Arnaud, 1979.

¹⁰ Ariés P, *L'uomo e la morte dal Medioevo a oggi*, (1977), It. transl. M Garin, Trento, Mondadori, 1992, 194

¹¹ Vasari G., *Vita di Andrea Verrocchio*, in *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti*, Florence, 1568, publication of 1991, Roma, Newton, 506.

¹² Schlosser J von, *History of portraiture in wax*, 1911, in Panzanelli R. (editor), *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2008, 201.

¹³ Ricci G, *Masks of power*, in Daninos A, (editor), *Waxing eloquent, Italian portraits in wax*, Eng. transl., Bolton C, Milan, Officina Libraria, 2012, p. 61.

¹⁴ Ibid., 62.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 65.

¹⁷ Ibid., 65.

¹⁸ Cecchetti B., *Il Doge di Venezia*, Venice, P. Naratovich, 1864, p. 286, in Schlosser J von, *History of portraiture in wax*, 1911, 201.

¹⁹ Molmenti P., *La storia di Venezia nella vita privata dalle origini alla caduta della repubblica*, Turin, Roux & Favale, 1885, 395, in Schlosser J von, *History of portraiture in wax*, 1911, 201.

²⁰ Molmenti P., *La storia di Venezia nella vita privata dalle origini alla caduta della repubblica*, Turin, Roux & Favale, 1885, 395, in Carobbi G., *Arte Ceroplastica*, manuscript inedited, realized in Florence in 1929, 52.

²¹ Daninos A, (editor), *Waxing eloquent, Italian portraits in wax*, Eng. transl., Bolton C, Milan, Officina Libraria, 2012, p. 83, 84.

²² Harvey A., Mortimer R., *The Funeral Effigies of Westminster Abbey*, Woodbridge, The Bodydell Press, 1994, 3.

²³ Schlosser J von, *History of portraiture in wax*, 1911, in Panzanelli R. (editor), *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2008, 204.

²⁴ Harvey A., Mortimer R., *The Funeral Effigies of Westminster Abbey*, Woodbridge, The Bodley Press, 1994, 56.

²⁵ Ibid., 14.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 133.

²⁹ Ibid., 15.

³⁰ Ibid., 14-15.

³¹ N. Machiavelli, “*Mandragola*”, act V, scene I, in *Opere minori* of N.M., Florence, Le Monnier, 1852, 292.

³² Harvey A., Mortimer R., *The Funeral Effigies of Westminster Abbey*, Woodbridge, The Bodley Press, 1994, 19.

Roberta Ballestriero is an associate lecturer in History of Art for the Open University, in U.K. She graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts of Venice, Italy in 1998 and will obtain a European doctorate for the Complutense University of Madrid, Spain in March 2013. Her research concerns the history of Ceroplastics and wax figures throughout the centuries, (with emphasis on the ‘body of wax’), including funeral masks and effigies, anatomical figures, portraits, ex-voto, wax sketches and contemporary art. She started her research on the art of ceroplastics in 1995 and since 2004 she has presented at numerous conferences on her thesis subjects in Europe and has published several articles on the same topics. She is also passionate about photography and with her partner has published images and exhibited in Italy and the U.K.
