

# DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

## QUARANTINE EDITION

MARCH 24, 2020:  
[MADAME TUSSAUD](#)

Today I'll ask you to pop over to [Atlas Obscura](#) to read an essay I wrote in 2017 about Marie Tussaud, a French sculptor whose wax museums are [still around today](#).

### THE STORY

Tussaud was born Marie Grosholz in 1761. Her mother, a widow, was housekeeper to a famous waxmaker who all but adopted Marie and taught her the craft from childhood. Wax sculpture had been around for a long time, but in the 18<sup>th</sup> century wax galleries became popular as a paid attraction: wax was an easy, inexpensive material to work with, the trade was [friendly to women](#), and it provided a socially acceptable mix of titillation, education and entertainment. Wax models allowed visitors to rub shoulders with royalty, to gasp at gory true-crime scenes, and to experience news in a personal way (Marie had made the death masks of many of the main players in the French Revolution, sitting with decapitated heads balanced on her knees).

Plus, it could let everyday folks see how the other half lived. Author Pamela Pilbeam writes: "A wax show gave the well off middle classes the chance to see the latest fashions, a function fulfilled today by Hello! magazine and the Oscar and other media award presentation ceremonies, where a high proportion of the television audience is reckoned to be more interested in the frocks than the films."

The magazine *Punch*, in 1849, described the Tussaud Test of Popularity: "In these days no one can be considered properly popular unless he is admitted into the company of Madame Tussaud's celebrities in Baker Street. The only way in which a powerful and lasting impression can be made on the public mind is through the medium of wax."

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

### DISCUSS:

Why are wax museums still popular today?

Tussaud was always careful to point out the educational value of her exhibits. Does it matter if they were more education or sensationalism?

Why are audiences (still) so delighted by gory entertainment?

What may have allowed women to thrive in waxworks at this time?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

**Questions? Comments? Say hello.**

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### READ MORE:

Betsy Golden Kellem, "[How the Real Madame Tussaud Built a Business Out of Beheadings](#)," *Atlas Obscura*

"[Wax Presidents Trailer](#)" (video), Last Week Tonight with John Oliver

"[Just How Does a Wax Museum Survive in a Digital Age?](#)," *Vanity Fair*

Pamela Pilbeam, [Madame Tussaud and the History of Waxworks](#)