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Three-Dimensional Portraits Humanize History: George Stuart Historical Figures®



Madame de Pompadour, the King's Mistress.

Diplomat, artist, and actor, George Stuart began traveling throughout the United States in the 1950s, presenting entertaining and irreverent monologues rich with history's drama. Creating historical figures started as a sideline, not as a grand artistic plan.

"I am a monologist by profession," Mr. Stuart said in a recent interview. "Over a half-century ago, I began building historical figures to accompany the performances. Each season I presented eight to twelve figures to audiences, which is how the collection developed over a thirty-five-year period." Mr. Stuart first constructed the figure of Louis XVI. Marie Antoinette followed. Other early efforts included Napoleon, Ivan the Terrible, and Catherine the Great. The relatively rough figures that took one day to complete then, might now take six months.

Making history continues to occupy Mr. Stuart, although he is "staying put and still working" in Ojai, California. As for new creations, "Something will come along that looks like it might have audience appeal, and I add that figure."

Figuratively Speaking: George Stuart's Methods

With no special training when he started, George Stuart experimented with techniques to mold faces and build bodies. "I had enough clumsy tools and enough raw materials to start hammering out an iron-wire skeleton with articulated main joints that move. And I built up the body around it with paper, cotton, and rags—crude sorts of materials." He added a felt outer layer and one of polymer clay painted with acrylics to simulate skin. Trial and error proved blown-glass eyes looked most realistic, as did hair made of Icelandic sheepskin.

Accessories were improvised at first. "I found trinkets that looked like a button or brooch or necklace, and I would reconfigure them, fiddle them up, and put them on the figures." Mr. Stuart learned along the way to make patterns, style distinctive costumes, dress hair, craft leather, work with metals, and fashion jewelry.

All elements the historical figures wear come from the hands of the artist, with few exceptions. "I've had weaving done to one-quarter scale for fabrics that can't be bought off the shelf." He employed a woman to embroider the robe of China's Emperor Chin Lung that took three years to complete. When chosen fabric is the right quality but the color is not, he sends it elsewhere to be dyed. While Mr. Stuart sews the garments, he emphasized, "I spend most of my time with metal work and torches, shaping iron, steel, brass, silver and gold into helmets, shields, swords and so on." By his exacting standards, authentic armor, weapons, and complicated jewelry are the hardest to produce.

Most clothing is not particularly challenging for him to make, unless the item happens to be a contemporary suit. "The suits I made for President Ronald Reagan were extremely

difficult, because the fitting was very complicated. I had the advantage of good information from his tailor who was also my tailor, and many photographs sent to me by the Reagans showed how the clothing looked."

Mr. Stuart views his accomplishments as the result of necessity rather than talent. "You can't just wave your hand and get things done, you have to do it. Of course, how you do it makes the difference," he said. "I haven't mastered any of my skills, so I have to deal with them all if I'm going to do what I set out to do."

But to the beholder, George Stuart Historical Figures® are absolute perfection. "We're trying for perfection," he agreed, amused. "It's a futile activity, but it's one of those not particularly dangerous obsessions, to try to perfect what you do. Everybody does that, don't they?"

Art Imitates Lifestyle

Describing six of his works, Mr. Stuart himself detailed how history influenced his portrayal of each personality at certain moments in time:

Henry VIII: Bursting at the Seams. In his forties, Henry was very uncomfortable physically, and his legs were bandaged and run-



Henry VIII



Doomsday for Anne Boleyn

ning with open sores, causing him absolute torment. He was full of frustrations, overweight, and likely had very high blood pressure.

Doomsday for Anne Boleyn. Pursued by Henry VIII until she succumbed to him, when she couldn't bear him a son, he got rid of her on trumped-up charges. Her outfit replicates what she wore on her execution day. Dismayed Anne holds her hood in hand so that her hair will not be disarranged during beheading.

Majestic Queen Elizabeth I Hides Her Age. As she grew older, the Queen's clothing



Queen Elizabeth I

became more expansive and elaborate. Seen from a distance in public, she looked phenomenal. Originally built in the '60s, this figure decayed due to improper fabrics and the effects of time. "I understood the design, but how to get it to stand up and withstand the ages was an engineering problem. Dozens of bows, brooches, pearls, stones: all those had to be built." The models for these were made in wax, cast in silver, refinished and set with stones, gold-plated, and mounted on the garment. "That took forever."

Courtly Marie Antoinette at the Height of Fashion. Rouged and heavily powdered, the unpopular foreign queen turned out in her most formal attire for state occasions. She wears a bouffant gown, and a ship decorates her hair to honor the French fleet. "This is the seventh version I completed over fifty years to get it anything like the intention of the original creator, painter Vigee Le Brun. I did it over until I felt I'd gotten it nearly right. That happened with most figures early on."

Short-lived King Louis XVI. A charming saying about him states, "He was like a pillow: the last person that sat on him made an impression." A good man who preferred working with his hands as a craftsman, Louis inherited the crown by default, along with the economic disasters France faced. He was a heavy drinker and prodigious eater who found respite in sleep.

Madame de Pompadour, the King's Mistress. Hated by the court and ill with tuberculosis, the frail beauty reclines on her chaise in the elaborate, private apartment she shared with Louis XV. His dependence upon her grew, and they remained together until her death at age 43.

The exhibition [All that Glitters: 250 years at the French Court](#) is on view at the Museum of Ventura County, 100 E. Main Street, Ventura, California, May 1 through August 26, 2007. For more information go to www.venturamuseum.org.

Photos by Peter D'Aprix, courtesy of the Ventura County Museum.

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