

# The beginning of Madame Tussaud

Autor(en): **Latt, A.**

Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): **- (1948)**

Heft 1097

PDF erstellt am: **27.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-694172>

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## THE BEGINNING OF MADAME TUSSAUD

By Dr. A. LATT.

Madame Tussaud was born at Berne on December 7th, 1760, as the only child of *Joseph* and *Marie Grossholtz*. Her mother, née Kurtz, was the daughter of a Bernese clergymen. Grossholtz was her second husband. Of the first we only know that his name was *Walter* and that he left his widow with seven sons and no money. All these boys were grown up when the widow Walter became Mrs. Grossholtz in 1750. We are told that she still looked pretty on the wedding day, and that many members of the aristocracy were present at the ceremony. The husband was a professional soldier, like so many of his contemporaries. During the seven year's war he was aide-de-camps of General Wurmser. He must have looked a fit ancestor of a museum of oddities, "covered with wounds, his forehead bare to the bone, his lower jaw shot away, but replaced by a silver plate." — When his daughter was born, her mother had for the second time become a widow. Her brother, *Johann Christow Kurtz*, who latinised his name to Curtius, at once took his sister and his little niece under his special protection. The writer of the "*Basler National Zeitung*" mentions two brothers of Curtius and three brothers of Madame Tussaud's as soldiers of the Swiss Guards at the Court of France. We do not know what authority he quotes from, but "*The Romance of Madame Tussaud's*" (published in 1920 by Odham's Ltd.) knows nothing of any of them. The brothers might have been of the Walter family, i.e., half brothers of Marie's.

Uncle Curtius was a medical practitioner at Berne. In the pursuit of his anatomical studies he took to modelling in wax the limbs and organs of the human body, and probably as a hobby he executed his first miniature portraits in wax. He seems to have done much better in his new art than in his old profession. Persons of rank sat to have their likeness taken in wax, so that the little studio soon became a private museum and a curiosity of Berne, which foreign visitors could not pass by. The Prince de Conti, a cousin of King Louis XV. of France, happened to pass through Berne some time in 1762. He made the acquaintance of Curtius, and was so pleased with the doctor-artist's skill that he invited him to come to Paris, where he would procure him "as many commissions as he might feel disposed to execute."

The Prince de Conti's offer had not been lightly made as a mere compliment, for when Curtius, a few months later, left Berne for Paris, his protector assigned him a handsome suite of apartments at the Hôtel d'Aligre, Rue St. Honoré. Clients were numerous and paid well. In 1766, Curtius went in person to Berne to fetch his sister (and niece) who took charge of his household. Some time about 1776 Curtius, who, so far, had confined his art to the making of miniature portraits, began to strike out a new line, for which he had served his apprenticeship as a doctor at Berne. He took to the modelling of *life-size portraits of well-known persons*, King Louis XVI, the Duke of Orleans, Voltaire, and Benjamin Franklin, the last two from life. An exhibition of these busts was arranged at the Palais Royal in 1780. One day the King's sister, *Madame Elizabeth de France*, entered the studio and had a look round. She soon fell to talking with the artist's pretty young collaborator, our Madame Tussaud, then a girl of twenty. As a consequence of

this chance meeting, Marie Grossholtz was offered a post in the suite of the princess, who seems herself to have practised the art of wax modelling. Thus Madame Tussaud went to live at Versailles for the next nine years, whilst her uncle again took larger premises on the Boulevard du Temple. He now added to his "Cabinet de Cire" a new attraction, "*La Caverne des Grands Coleurs*," which, of course, is the beginning of the "Chamber of Horrors."

Soon after the outbreak of the French Revolution, when Versailles was no longer a place of safety for royalties and their servants, Curtius called his niece back to Paris. He was mistaken, however, in his hope that the modesty of his character in the middle of a crowded city would be a protection against the perils of the period. Fate had destined him and his niece to play a prominent part even in the very first days of the "Reign of Terror." On Sunday, July 2nd, 1789, a mutiny broke out in Paris, when the news was spread that the King had dismissed the very popular minister of finance, *Necker* (a Genevese, as you know), and that the new Assemblée Constituante was to be dissolved by force. Troops, mostly foreigners (many Swiss), were kept in readiness on the outskirts of Paris to defend monarchist rule if need should arise. Meetings were held in the clubs and public places to discuss the situation and to protest against the military measures. Then it was that *Camille Desmoulins* (a Genevese again) sprang on a table outside the Café Foy near the Palais Royal, and, brandishing a drawn sword and a pistol, shouted his famous "*Aux armes, Citoyens!*" — a call which was immediately taken up by hundreds.

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Someone suggested that the models of Necker and the Duke of Orleans, the people's idols, should be obtained from Curtius' museum near by, to be carried in front of the demonstration. "You will break them," objected the surprised Curtius, when his door was forced open and the busts were simply carried off. He was, however, wise enough to offer no resistance to the rabble, who soon moved away in the direction of the Place Vendôme. Even *Carlyle* considers this little incident as the real beginning of the revolution, which on the 14th led to the taking of the Bastille. He relates it as follows in Chapter IV of his "French Revolution":—

"To arms! Sunday, July 12th, 1789. — France, so long shaken and wind-parched, is probably at the right inflammable point. As for poor Curtius, who, one grieves to think, might be but imperfectly paid, he cannot make two words about his images. The wax bust of Necker, the wax-bust of D'Orleans, helpers of France: these, covered with crêpe, as in funeral procession, or after the manner of suppliants appealing to Heaven, To Earth, and tartarus itself, a mixed multitude bears off. For a sign! As indeed man, with his singular imaginative faculties, can do little or nothing without signs: thus Turks look to their Prophet's Banner, also Osier Manikins have been burnt, and Necker's portrait has erewhile figured, aloft on its perch (a reference to former demonstrations).

In this manner march they, a mixed, continually increasing multitude; armed with axes, staves, and miscellanea; grim, many-sounding through the streets. Be all theatres shut; let all dancing on planked floor, or on the natural greensward, cease! Instead of a Christian Sabbath, and feast of guigitte tabernacles, it shall be a Sorcerer's Sabbath; and Paris, gone rabid, dance — with the Fiend for piper!

However, Benenval (a Soleurois, commander of the Swiss guards), with horse and foot, is in the Place Louis Quinze. Mortals, promenading homewards, in the fall of the day, saunter by, from Chaillot or Passy, from flirtation and a little thin wine; with sadder step than usual. Will the bust-procession pass the way? Behold it! Behold also Prince Lambesc dash forth on it, with his Royal-Allemands! Shots fall, and sabre-strokes; busts are hewed asunder, and, alas, also head of men. A sabred procession has nothing for it but to explode, along what streets, alleys or avenues it finds; and disappear. One unarmed man lies hewed down; a Garde-Française by his uniform; bear him (or bear even the report of him) dead and gory to his Barracks; — where he has comrades still alive! . . . . ."

Thus the founder of Madame Tussaud's saw the beginning of the French Revolution, and thus fell two of his most famous busts as the first victims of the "Reign of Terror."

Curtius, as a born Republican, had from the first espoused the cause of the people, and he even played a conspicuous part on some of the revolutionary committees and tribunals. In 1793, he was entrusted with a diplomatic mission abroad, which kept him away from Paris for more than a year at a time. He is described under the high-sounding name of "Envoy Extraordinary of the Republic and War Commissioner at Mayence." The administration of the two exhibitions was entirely left to the care of Marie, whom he had adopted as a daughter, probably after the death of his sister, and in order to provide for her in view of whatever might happen in those stormy days, when no one knew when his head might be struck off; for those of the best and those of the worst were falling fast.

Madame Tussaud saw Marie Antoinette pass in the tumbrel to the place of execution, and she swooned. She did not swoon, however, on many still more dreadful occasions which she was compelled to witness under threat of the guillotine. Naturally she never liked to talk much about it, but to her sons and to her "Memoirs" she confessed that she had often been forced to make moulds of the newly severed heads of the victims. She performed this gruesome task on the features of Foulon, the minister, of the Princess de Lamballe, of Louis XVI, and Marie Antoinette, who had all been kind to her. The task was no less shocking, however, when, on the turn of the tide, she was compelled to make moulds of the heads of the Terrorists themselves. "On the 13th July, 1793," she relates, "they came for me to go to Marat's house at once, and to take with me what appliances I needed to make an impression of his features. The cadaverous aspect of the fiend made me feel desperately ill, but they stood over me and forced me to perform the task." Visitors to Madame Tussaud's may remember the ghastly figure of Marat in the small bath-tub (but let us forget that the fellow was of Swiss origin, from Boudry, Neuchâtel). The next face to be modelled after execution was that of Charlotte Corday, the peasant girl who had stabbed Marat. Robespierre, who had come to see the likeness of his friend at the exhibition, highly praised the accuracy of Madame Tussaud's workmanship. A few days later she was called up again, Robespierre's own turn having come. His head was the last of a dreadful series of casts made at the foot of the Guillotine.

There were many people who remembered Madame Tussaud's early connections with the royal court. This was sufficient reason for the Committee of Public

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Safety to have her arrested and thrown into prison. There Madame de Beauharnais, the lady who afterwards became the Empress Josephine, Napoleon's first wife, was her involuntary companion. To this acquaintance, perhaps, it was due that Madame Tussaud, a few years later, was sent for to model the features of Napoleon when he was Consul.

On October 29th, 1795, her uncle having died some time before, *Marie Grossholtz*, through adoption became *Marie Curtius*, once more changed her name on marrying one *François Tussaud*, a Burgundian. Little otherwise is known of the man. He seems to have been easy-going and unfit to be the husband of the energetic and self-reliant woman Madame Tussaud evidently was. She bore her husband two sons, and then she separated from him, and all traces of him were soon lost in complete obscurity.

After the long chain of sad experiences she had gone through in Paris, Madame Tussaud longed to get away from that place of torment. She seized the first favourable opportunity — the conclusion of the Peace of Amiens — to leave France for England, transporting with her the entire collection of the now historic wax-works. She arrived in London in May, 1802. Though very few records of that period are extant, it appears that the exhibits were first shown at the old Lyceum Theatre in the Strand, then at the Lowther Arcade, and in Fleet Street. Then she went on a series of tours through the three kingdoms. Wherever she appeared it was an event worth to be heralded by the press, and usually the exhibition was solemnly opened by the mayor of the place. On one occasion the exhibition was nearly destroyed whilst being transported across the Irish sea during a violent storm. In 1831 — Madame Tussaud was then over seventy — she may have been reminded of certain experiences of "olden times" when staying at Bristol during the so-called Bristol riots. There is a sketch by an artist of the time showing a wild scene of riot, fire and plundering in front of Madame Tussaud's temporary show rooms. Well-known figures of the collection are being carried across the street to a place of safety, whilst houses right and left are burning. For several years following, the exhibition was shown at Blackheath, on the south-eastern side of London, then at "The Great Assembly Room of the late Royal London Bazaar, Gray's Inn Road," where it remained till its definite transfer to its present home in Baker Street.

It is impossible to give a full list of the portraits which were taken from life by the old Lady herself.

Many of them were still on show immediately before the fire which occurred in April, 1925. Many of them were still on show immediately before the fire. King George III, and Queen Caroline sat to her in 1808 and 1809. So did Mrs. Siddons, the famous actress, the Duke of Yorks, 1812, Leopold (afterwards King of the Belgians) 1817, George II, 1821, George Canning, 1821, Sir Walter Scott, and the miscreant Burke (the latter was portrayed after execution) in 1828, Talleyrand, 1932, the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel, 1835, Lord Melbourne and the Duchess of Kent (mother of Queen Victoria) 1838, etc. Placards of the time illustrate Madame Tussaud's great abilities as a business woman and an expert advertiser. The sudden and tragic death of the popular singer, Madame Malibran, first gave Madame Tussaud the idea of keeping the exhibition continually up-to-date in a new sense, i.e., through the adding of portraits of people whose names were on everybody's lips. It was her own idea, too, to collect such relics as the real guillotine, with lunette and chopper, which she had so often seen used by Sanson, the executioner of Paris. The man might have lost his head for selling public property, had judgments not become milder after he had ceased to execute them. In 1842, Napoleon's military carriage was acquired, and shortly afterwards the baroque, which the Corsican had used during his exile at St. Helena, was added.

Able assisted by her two sons in the conduct of her ever-growing business, the old Lady carried on until she was more than ninety years old. She died peacefully on the 15th April, 1850. Her long life clearly proves that she was endowed with exceptional resources of energy and vitality. Old age had been unable to turn her brown hair white or to destroy her fresh complexion. Her eye was still alert and her speech lively whenever she took an interest in things. Many of our readers may have seen her effigy at Baker Street, where she was represented sitting on the turnstile as she had been used to doing for about eighty years, keeping up her truly Swiss habit of knitting incessantly. It allowed her to watch her world pass by in pursuit of the pleasure and instruction she had provided for all after a new method. "Madame Tussaud," says her great-grandson, "brought cheerfulness and geniality to bear upon her numerous tasks, and therein lay the secrets of her triumphs." She was ever brave and uncomplaining. Obstacles presented themselves only to be overcome. Convinced that she would eventually get the better of it, she struggled against adversity, and her efforts were crowned with success."

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