

The Faces of a Generation

BY AUDREY J. WOLFE

IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY, FEW ART VENUES PORTRAYED PEOPLE REALISTICALLY. JOHN HENRI ISAAC BROWERE, ARMED WITH PLASTER, CHISEL, AND MALLET, SOUGHT TO CORRECT THAT AND IMMORTALIZE THE FACES THAT INSPIRED AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE.

In this digital age we take for granted the instant satisfaction and the uncompromising realism of photography. Our ancestors, however, had to patiently wait until painters or sculptors finished their portraits, often months after the initial sitting—and the resulting “likenesses” weren’t necessarily so.

Our quest for digitally enhanced photographic perfection stands in stark contrast to the image-recording desires of America’s founding generation. Although mass

demands for the portraits of such popular figures as George Washington or Thomas Jefferson led to images that varied in accuracy, a perfect likeness was never the intent.

“The goal was not simply to represent the sitter, but rather to depict that person as he or she wanted to be represented,” wrote T. H. Breen in *The Portrait in Eighteenth Century America*. Achieving a suitable likeness depended upon the artist’s skill, perception, and interpretation.

Thomas Jefferson, for example, complained in a letter to his daughter,

Martha Jefferson Randolph, that shops were selling prints bearing his image and that the likeness was a “miserable caricature.”

Although painted portraits were the most common means of immortalizing faces, some artists used sculpture. Thought to be more realistic, busts and masks still suffered the same pitfalls as paintings or engravings—artistic license coupled with limited talent and imperfect procedures rendered the majority of busts flat and lifeless despite their three dimensions. But one man would change that.



GLENN LINSENBARDT/COURTESY OF THE FENIMORE ART MUSEUM, COOPERSTOWN, NEW YORK



Bust of the Marquis de Lafayette, by John H. I. Browere, cast in July 1825 while the 68-year-old general was visiting Philadelphia. Rembrandt Peale, who had painted Lafayette's portrait, praised Browere's work, noting, "The accuracy with which he has moulded the entire head, neck, and shoulders from life, and his skill in finishing, render this bust superior to any we have seen. It is in truth 'a faithful and living likeness.'" Another contemporary, artist Samuel F. B. Morse, commented, "I feel no hesitation in saying it appears to me to be a perfect facsimile of the general's face."

General Marie Joseph du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, by Matthew Harris Jouett. In 1825, Jouett painted the Frenchman's portrait at the request of the Kentucky legislature. During a 14-month period during 1824-25, at the invitation of Congress and President James Monroe, Lafayette visited all 24 states. Americans greeted him enthusiastically as a Revolutionary War hero everywhere he went.



A BOLD EXPERIMENT

"In my opinion," John Henri Isaac Browere wrote, "ideal likenesses ought not to be palmed on a generous public for real ones." Following that philosophy, Browere experimented with life masks made with a new plaster composition to create realistic three-dimensional portraits.

Browere, born in New York City in 1790, briefly attended Columbia College before leaving to study with Scottish-born miniaturist Archibald Robertson. After two years under Robertson's careful in-

struction, Browere ventured out to test his artistic talents. Although he painted portraits primarily, he also dabbled in sculpture.

He had barely begun his career before he stopped working to accept an impulsive offer from his brother to travel to Europe. In a two-year whirlwind trip, Browere studied art across the continent. The trip likely heightened his interest in the life masks, as well as the more popular death masks, which had been made by European artists for centuries. Seeing the masks of Europe's artists, kings, and national heroes likely inspired Browere's future work.

Browere returned home to New York City in 1820 to set up his own workshop. There he perfected his methods and material. As he experimented, he found he preferred

taking the living likeness of a subject rather than modeling one by hand or waiting for the subject to die so he could make a death mask. He also created a new plaster composition that helped him better capture the features of a human face.

Traditionally, sculptors like Frenchman Jean Antoine Houdon used plaster of Paris to form molds to render a truer likeness. Although widely used, the method was not always comfortable—the plaster restricts movement, dries the skin, and heats as it cures. A heavy mass of plaster of Paris can get hot, indeed. Jefferson, who sat for Houdon, called his method "most revolting."

Eleanor Custis, George Washington's granddaughter, recounted how unpleasant her grandfather found Houdon's method. "I went

OPPOSITE Bronze busts made from John Browere's plaster casts are shown at the Fenimore Art Museum's exhibition *A Bold Experiment: John Henri Isaac Browere's Life Masks of Prominent Americans*. The museum owns the entire body of Browere's work.

in and found the General extended on his back on a large table, a sheet over him, except his face, on which Houdon was engaged in putting on plaster to form the cast. Quills were in his nostrils."

Browere's technique differed by using what Jefferson described as "successive coats of thin grout plastered on the naked head." Paul D'Ambrosio, vice president and chief curator at the Fenimore Art Museum and The Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown, New York, which owns Browere's work, offered this description: "As each coat hardened, a fresh coat was added. When the plaster was nearly dry, it was removed in pieces with a chisel and mallet. Browere reassembled the pieces of the negative mask (the mold) and poured a plaster positive mask (the cast)."

Back at his studio, Browere would then finish the piece by adding the cast to an armature before carving out the subject's eyes, hair, and clothing.

The secret to Browere's success lay in that thin paste, "probably similar to modern-day moulage," wrote the late David Meschutt, author of *A Bold Experiment: John Henri Isaac Browere's Life Masks of Prominent Americans*.

Browere prepared the subject's

body by dousing it in oil and worked quickly in applying the coats of paste, which rendered the process relatively comfortable. He also allowed his subjects to sit or recline in a chair rather than lie down. They could even get up and walk around with the lightweight, thin plaster on for ten-minute intervals. Commodore David Porter, a U. S. Navy hero, proclaimed the process "harmless and agreeable," not unlike the "pleasant glow or heat somewhat similar to that which is felt on entering a warm bath."

Browere's paste was such a closely and jealously guarded secret that no one except his son, Alburdis D. O. Browere, also an artist, knew its composition. When Alburdis died, so did the family secret.

A LIFE-LONG PURSUIT

Browere succeeded in his early attempts to make life masks of his closest family and friends, but his method surged in popularity after he captured the likeness of Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, better known by his title, Marquis de Lafayette, in 1825.

During his farewell tour of the nation he had fought to free from Britain's grasp, Lafayette agreed to allow the State of New York to commemorate him with a living

likeness. Browere, tapped for the task, had Lafayette come to his studio. The artist so impressed the Frenchman that Lafayette declared "that it was the only good bust ever made" of him.

Artist Rembrandt Peale, who had painted Lafayette, immediately endorsed Browere, suggesting that "the singular excellence" he showed in his new method entitled him to the "applause and patronage of his countrymen."

The praise he earned for Lafayette's likeness inspired Browere to create other living masks of the rapidly aging Revolutionary generation. His ardent desire, which he pursued until his death, was to use his molds to cast busts in bronze for a national gallery. But he found only bitter disappointment when Congress repeatedly denied or ignored his pleas for such a project. Knowing that time was working against him, he raced to capture the essences of some of America's better- and lesser-known men in plaster.

Tensions rife within the ranks of America's most prominent artists, including both artistic schools, the American and National Academies, hindered Browere's plan. Many of his contemporaries, such as Colonel John Trumbull and William Dunlap, thought that the realism gained



JOHN ADAMS



THOMAS JEFFERSON



JAMES MADISON



GENERAL ALEXANDER MACOMB



HENRY CLAY



COMMODORE DAVID PORTER

by his process stifled any artistic value his busts might have held—that Browere was simply churning out plaster.

His most damaging setback—spread and blown out of proportion by newspapers, which were in turn goaded by Browere's artistic rivals—occurred when they claimed he almost killed Thomas Jefferson.

Confident after his success with Lafayette's mask, Browere rode with eager anticipation to Monticello on October 15, 1825, hoping to entice the eighty-two-year-old former president to consent to adding his likeness to Browere's collection. Browere brought letters of endorsement from his past subjects, including one from Jefferson's close friend James Madison.

Acquiescing to Browere's request, Jefferson—whom the sculptor assured would be captive for only twenty minutes—was plastered down to the waist in a procedure that ended up taking ninety minutes.

George Randolph, spying on his grandfather from an outside window, mistook the pounding of Browere's chisel on Jefferson's body as an assassination attempt. He alerted his kinsmen, and family members and a troop of servants stormed into the room, disrupting Browere's work. The plaster,

already left on longer than Browere should have allowed, gripped more tenaciously to Jefferson's skin.

After regaining his composure, Browere quickly chiseled the plaster from Jefferson's head with such force that Jefferson recounted, "These thumps of the mallet would have been sensible almost to a loggerhead." Although Jefferson found the chiseling unpleasant and felt faint from the lengthy process, his primary worry was feeling a "real danger that the ears would separate from the head sooner than from the plaster."

Although the sculptor remained a guest at Monticello for the next three days, Jefferson's angry relatives retold the tale and fully endorsed the newspapers' unfavorable descriptions of Browere. Jefferson's granddaughter, Virginia Randolph Trist, branded Browere the "vile plaisterer," and Joseph Coolidge, Jefferson's grandson by marriage, said, "That rascal Browere deserves castigation."

Jefferson himself, although appreciative of Browere's work and on good terms with the sculptor until he died, confided to Madison that he had been "taken in by Mr. Browere."

Despite such setbacks the sculptor pursued other subjects, arriving at the door of ninety-year-old John Adams to record the second president's facial features. Adams,

although initially reserved about possibly suffering the same fate as Jefferson, was nonetheless pleased with the procedure.

Adams wrote Browere a letter of endorsement attesting to the realistic likeness and the painless process that created it. Browere captured not only the former president's likeness but that of the current president, John Quincy Adams, and his son, Charles Francis.

A DREAM FULLFILLED

Browere's pursuit led him to cast the likenesses of some of America's most compelling figures: John Paulding, Isaac Van Wart, and David Williams, the captors of British spy Major John André; consummate New York politician DeWitt Clinton; Martin Van Buren; James and Dolley Madison (hers is the only woman's visage Browere cast); James Monroe (Browere's only known death mask); Charles Carroll, the last signer of the Declaration of Independence; Jacob Jennings Brown, General in Chief of the U. S. Army; General Alexander Macomb; politicians Philip Van Cortlandt and Henry Clay; young actor Edwin Forrest; and Gilbert Stuart, America's most celebrated colonial artist.

Browere spent seventeen years immortalizing America's founding



Portrait of Gilbert Stuart, c. 1825, by an unidentified artist, after Anson Dickinson. Because he portrayed virtually all the notable men and women of the Federal period in the United States, Stuart was called the "Father of American Portraiture" by his contemporaries. Born in Rhode Island, the artist trained and worked in London, England, and Dublin, Ireland, from 1775 to 1793. He then returned to America with the specific intention of painting President Washington's portrait. He also painted the Gibbs-Coolidge Set, the only surviving depiction of all five first presidents. Before his death at 72, Stuart also taught many followers.



Bust of painter Gilbert Stuart, by John H. I. Browere, from a life mask made November 29, 1825, in Boston, Massachusetts, when the artist was 69. Stuart wrote, "Mr. Browere, of the city of New York, has this day made a portrait bust of me from life with which I am perfectly satisfied and which I hope will remove any illiberal misrepresentations that may deprive the nation from possessing like records of more important men."

generation before succumbing to cholera in 1834. Although research suggests that he created at least forty-four life masks before his death, only twenty-two renditions remain—eighteen figures in bronze cast from Browere's molds in 1940 and four original plaster casts.

Browere feared that his dream of a national gallery would die with him, so he instructed his son to store his molds for forty years. Time, Browere believed, would vindicate him.

For decades, the busts sat in a relative's barn layered in thin coats of dust and time. Once in a while, some of them would be taken out for various events, such as the 1933-34 World's Fair in Chicago, but they were never treated as more than a sideshow.

Charles Henry Hart, author of the 1899 book *Browere's Life Masks of Great Americans*, and a handful of other Browere enthusiasts finally made the American people aware of the striking realism and unparalleled details of his work. Stephen C. Clark bought the collection in 1940 and twenty years later donated it to the New York State Historical Association, which today owns the entire body of Browere's work.

Browere's busts show us the Revolutionary generation not as artists felt they should look, but as they were. Each captures every wrinkle and pockmark, from John Adams' toothless visage to Henry Clay's swan neck.

A Browere bust is not just a representation of a person—it shows

the essence, spirit, and character of that person. As Wayne Craven asserted in *Sculpture in America*, "To deny Browere a place in the history of American sculpture would be like denying that the photograph has any validity as an artistic medium because of the technical process involved." *

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On view for thirty years, the busts and casts made by John H. I. Browere went off display in 2007 so the Fenimore Art Museum could prepare them as a traveling exhibition. Interested sites should call the museum at 888.547.1450.

GIFT OF STEPHEN C. CLARK, COLLECTION OF THE FENIMORE ART MUSEUM, COOPERSTOWN, NEW YORK



FROM THE COLLECTION OF MACCULLOCH HALL, HISTORICAL MUSEUM, MORRISTOWN, NEW JERSEY

Bust of Dolley Madison at age 57, by John H. I. Browere, left, taken from a life mask cast at Montpelier on October 19, 1825. The sculptor wrote to the First Lady, "Mask has been neatly attached to the original bust of her and appears to a better advantage. The artist hopes to have the pleasure of soon submitting it to the inspection of her family. The costume I can insure is beautiful."

Miniature of Dolley Madison, by George Catlin, c. 1829-30, above, watercolor on ivory. W. Parsons Todd, the founder of Macculloch Hall in Morristown, New Jersey, was Mrs. Madison's great-grand-nephew through her first husband, John Todd. Parsons Todd purchased this painting at auction in 1939.

GIFT OF STEPHEN C. CLARK, COLLECTION OF THE FENIMORE ART MUSEUM, COOPERSTOWN, NEW YORK



NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION/ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK

John Browere's bust of young thespian Edwin Forrest (1806-72), left, who became one of the first great actors of the American theater. The portrait, c. 1832, painted by Frederick Styles Agate, shows Forrest in the role of *Metamora*, "an original of this country," the Indian hero of a play commissioned by Forrest himself. The actor became a symbol of American nationalism in the ethnically charged atmosphere of the 1830s and 1840s. In 1849 a nativist mob of his supporters attacked New York's Astor Place Theater, where the English actor William Macready was performing. A panicked police force could not control the riot, and 22 people were killed.