

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #066

The Weird History of Madame Tussauds

26 June, 2020

[00:00:05] Hello hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about Madame Tussauds.

[00:00:28] Now, this was a request from one of our members, a lovely lady called Isabel, and I had to [confess](#)¹ that when she asked me to make this, I wasn't sure that there was all that much to say.

¹ to admit that you have done something wrong or something that you feel guilty or bad about

The Weird History of Madame Tussauds

[00:00:43] But it [turns out](#)² that Madame Tussauds has a fascinating [back story](#)³, that takes us to the French Revolution, to the [guillotine](#)⁴, before arriving in London.

[00:00:54] It is quite a [ride](#)⁵, so I hope you enjoy this episode.

[00:01:01] Before we get right into it though, I just wanted to remind those of you listening to this episode on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, iVoox, or whatever podcast app you might be listening to it on, that you can get all of the bonus episodes, subtitles, transcripts, and key vocabulary, over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:24] If you are looking for a more interesting way to improve your English, then I'd definitely recommend checking that out - you can also find out how to become a member of Leonardo English, which means you don't only get access to all the bonus materials, but it also means you can do stuff like request episodes.

[00:01:45] And as this one shows, we do actually make them.

[00:01:50] Ok then, let's get started.

² to happen in a particular way or to have a particular result, especially an unexpected one

³ the things that have happened to someone before you first see or read about that person in a film or story

⁴ a device, invented in France, consisting of a sharp blade in a tall frame, used in the past for killing criminals by cutting off their heads

⁵ exciting journey

The Weird History of Madame Tussauds

[00:01:53] Madame Tussauds, in case you have never heard of it, is a famous [waxworks](#)⁶ museum - a museum with sculptures of famous people.

[00:02:04] It is now a global [brand](#)⁷ with museums across Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia.

[00:02:13] And the story of how it started is pretty interesting.

[00:02:19] I should add that the story of the Madame Tussaud, the woman behind the museum is only really known through her own [memoirs](#)⁸, her own accounts. A lot of it can't really be verified elsewhere.

[00:02:35] And some of it is a little [far fetched](#)⁹, a little bit difficult to believe

[00:02:42] Just in case you don't know what I mean by [waxworking](#)¹⁰, it is the process of creating a sculpture, which is then [coated](#)¹¹, covered, in wax and painted.

⁶ a wax model of a person

⁷ a type of product made by a particular company

⁸ a book or other piece of writing based on the writer's personal knowledge of famous people, places, or events

⁹ very unlikely to be TRUE, and difficult to believe

¹⁰ the process of making a waxwork

¹¹ thickly covered

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[00:02:56] The final result, if you are trying to reproduce someone's **features**¹² and you are a good artist, is that you have a sculpture that looks exactly like, or at least it should look exactly like, its **subject**¹³ - the same height, same hairstyle, the same everything.

[00:03:17] It's as if that person were right there with you.

[00:03:22] So the story of Madame Tussauds, the most famous **waxworks** in the world, starts in Strasbourg, France, in 1761, with the birth of Marie Grosholtz. Six years after Marie was born, her mother moved to Bern, Switzerland, to be the **housekeeper**¹⁴ of an **anatomist**¹⁵ and **waxmaker**¹⁶, a man called Phillippe Curtius.

[00:03:53] The young Marie was very interested in the work of her mother's boss, and she showed an early talent for **sculpture**¹⁷.

[00:04:04] Curtius was only too happy to have an **eager**¹⁸ student, and he taught her everything about **waxworking**.

¹² a typical quality or an important part of something

¹³ the thing that is being discussed, considered, or studied

¹⁴ a person whose job is to organise another person's house and deal with cooking, cleaning, etc.

¹⁵ an expert in anatomy (= the study of the structure of the body and its parts)

¹⁶ someone who makes waxworks

¹⁷ the art of forming solid objects that represent a thing, person, idea, etc. out of a material such as wood, clay, metal, or stone, or an object made in this way

¹⁸ wanting very much to do or have something, especially something interesting or enjoyable

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[00:04:13] But the [prospects](#)¹⁹ for someone involved with [waxworks](#) weren't all that great in Bern, and so Curtius decided to go to Paris to [seek his fortune](#)²⁰, as was quite common back then.

[00:04:28] He left his young [apprentice](#)²¹, Marie, and her mother in Bern. And they joined him a year later.

[00:04:36] After Curtius [switched](#)²² from doing [waxworks](#) of people's [anatomy](#)²³, of body parts, to doing [waxworks](#) of actual people, he started seeing a lot more interest.

[00:04:49] Curtius's work was soon noticed by Paris [high society](#)²⁴ and his [waxworks](#) [drew](#)²⁵ huge crowds, they attracted a lot of people.

[00:05:02] This was before the invention of the camera, but after the [boom](#)²⁶ in newspaper circulation. These [waxworks](#) must have been fascinating - a way to see people in real life, the people who you had perhaps read about in the news.

¹⁹ the possibility that something good might happen in the future

²⁰ look for success

²¹ someone who has agreed to work for a skilled person for a particular period of time and often for low payment, in order to learn that person's skills

²² changed

²³ the scientific study of the body and how its parts are arranged

²⁴ rich, powerful, and fashionable people

²⁵ attracted

²⁶ an increase in something, or a time when something becomes more popular

The Weird History of Madame Tussauds

[00:05:19] It was almost as if you were right there [in the flesh](#)²⁷ with them.

[00:05:28] But it wasn't just Curtius that was becoming famous.

[00:05:32] His young [apprentice](#), Marie, was getting noticed as well.

[00:05:38] So much so that around 1780, when she was not even 20 years old, she was invited to join the Royal Court at Versailles to teach art to King Louis XVI's sister.

[00:05:53] She started to [get a name for herself](#)²⁸, and reportedly created perfect [waxworks](#) of some of the most famous people in 18th century Paris - Voltaire, and even Benjamin Franklin, who was the American ambassador to France at the time.

[00:06:14] However, this was just before the French revolution, a dangerous time to be friendly with the French [monarchy](#)²⁹.

[00:06:23] You had to be very careful who you were seen to be [socialising](#)³⁰ with, otherwise you could find your head separated from the rest of your body.

²⁷ in real life, and not on TV, in a film, in a picture, etc.

²⁸ became known for a particular thing

²⁹ a country that has a king or queen

³⁰ to spend time when you are not working with friends or with other people in order to enjoy yourself

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[00:06:34] As it was clear what direction public opinion was heading in, her boss and [mentor](#)³¹, Curtius, realised that he needed to adapt to [the times](#)³².

[00:06:48] It would no longer be acceptable to make [celebratory](#)³³ [waxworks](#) of people who might be considered politically sensitive, and he needed to make some changes to stay alive.

[00:07:02] So, in what seems like quite a clever move, he changed the business to creating [waxworks](#) of recently [executed](#)³⁴ people, politicians and [aristocrats](#)³⁵ who had their heads cut off at the [guillotine](#).

[00:07:18] People could now come to his museum and [marvel](#)³⁶ at the [waxworks](#) of others who had recently been killed.

[00:07:28] They could stand right there in front of the heads of famous people who had been [executed](#) at the [guillotine](#) just weeks before.

³¹ a person who gives a younger or less experienced person help and advice over a period of time, especially at work or school

³² the current environment

³³ celebrating the importance of something or someone

³⁴ to kill someone as a legal punishment

³⁵ people of high social rank who belongs to the aristocracy

³⁶ to show or experience great surprise or admiration

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[00:07:38] But the danger still hadn't lifted for Marie Grosholtz, and according to her [memoirs](#), she almost met the same [fate](#)³⁷ as Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, of having her head separated from her body.

[00:07:56] Remember, she had spent several years socialising at Versailles, and so it was difficult for her to suddenly claim she was pro-revolution and anti-[monarchy](#).

[00:08:11] In the '[reign](#)³⁸ of terror' which went on from 1793-1794, she was arrested, along with Josephine de Beauharnais, the future wife of Napoleon.

[00:08:25] The revolutionaries were looking to [execute](#) anyone who they thought had [sympathies](#) towards the monarchy.

[00:08:34] And Marie looked like she was heading for the [guillotine](#).

[00:08:39] They even went so far as to shave her head, preparing her for the cold [steel](#)³⁹ of the [guillotine](#).

[00:08:48] However, she made a deal at the last minute.

³⁷ what happens to a particular person or thing, especially something final or negative, such as death or defeat

³⁸ to be the main feeling or quality in a situation or person

³⁹ a strong metal that is a mixture of iron and carbon, used for making things that need a strong structure, especially vehicles and buildings

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[00:08:54] She agreed to make death [masks](#)⁴⁰ of everyone who was executed, [masks](#) to preserve the features of these people, so that [waxworks](#) could be created, and their images displayed for the people to see.

[00:09:11] Curtius, her boss, had been making models, but Marie was to make death [masks](#) - real [waxworks](#) of the dead people, using their real heads.

[00:09:24] The revolutionaries agreed, and Marie's life was [spared](#)⁴¹.

[00:09:29] She was safe, finally, although this sounds like a pretty [gruesome](#)⁴² task - waiting for a head to arrive, then preparing a death mask for it.

[00:09:43] Shortly after this, her boss and [mentor](#), Curtius, died.

[00:09:50] He left everything to Marie, who was only in her early thirties.

[00:09:56] She then married a man called Francois Tussaud, changed her name to Marie Tussaud, and had two sons.

[00:10:05] But her husband was, [by all accounts](#)⁴³, a bit hopeless, and it wasn't a happy marriage.

⁴⁰ a covering for all or part of the face that protects, hides, or decorates the person wearing it

⁴¹ (of a person) saved their life

⁴² extremely unpleasant and shocking, and usually dealing with death or injury

⁴³ as said by most people

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[00:10:13] A relationship that did have a big impact on Marie though, and one that changed the course of her [destiny⁴⁴](#), was a relationship with a German [illusionist⁴⁵](#) called Paul Philidor.

[00:10:20] He was a magician, and he created amazing shows which used lights and projections to make it seem like there were ghosts and spirits.

[00:10:40] He persuaded Marie to do a show together in London, which they did, in 1802.

[00:10:48] But according to her records, Tussaud didn't do very well out of it, she didn't make much money, and [broke ties⁴⁶](#) with Philidor, the magician.

[00:11:00] But she couldn't go back to France - the Napoleonic War had started in 1803, and there was no way to return.

[00:11:08] Instead she travelled around the UK with her [waxwork](#) collection for almost 30 years.

[00:11:17] The British public loved it.

[00:11:20] Her show combined a lot of things that immediately attracted the attention of the British people.

⁴⁴ the things that will happen in the future

⁴⁵ an entertainer who performs tricks where objects seem to appear and then disappear

⁴⁶ cut off relations

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[00:11:28] Firstly, there was this French revolution that had been going on in our nearest neighbour in Europe.

[00:11:36] Members of the royal family and several [prominent](#)⁴⁷ politicians had lost their heads.

[00:11:42] Tussaud's exhibition offered a way to see these unfortunate people, [up close and personal](#)⁴⁸, by someone who had literally created their death masks, according to her at least.

[00:11:56] Secondly, there were very few public [executions](#) in the UK by that time, and so Tussaud's show offered the public a way to see some of the blood and [gore](#)⁴⁹ that they couldn't see in real life.

[00:12:13] There was nothing else like it, and the show was met with crowds and paying customers everywhere she went.

[00:12:21] So almost from [the outset](#)⁵⁰, almost from right at the start, it was a very [profitable](#)⁵¹ business.

⁴⁷ very well known and important

⁴⁸ (colloquial) to be very close to

⁴⁹ blood that has come from an injury and become thick

⁵⁰ the beginning

⁵¹ making or likely to make a profit, make money

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[00:12:30] But after almost 30 years on the road around the UK, she settled on a location in London, where customers could come and see these [waxworks](#).

[00:12:43] Her sons came over from Paris and joined the family business, so it became Madame Tussaud & Sons.

[00:12:52] Her sons proved to be [worthy](#)⁵² additions to the business, carving arms and legs to go with their mothers [eerily](#)⁵³ realistic faces.

[00:13:05] After [outgrowing](#)⁵⁴ its original location, the museum moved to its current location in Baker Street, in central London.

[00:13:15] If you have ever been there, you will know that there are queues that go around the block almost every single day.

[00:13:23] The rest is, as they say, history.

[00:13:28] The museum attracts around 2.5 million people every year, and is said to have welcomed over 500 million visitors since it opened.

⁵² deserving respect, admiration, or support

⁵³ in a strange, frightening, and mysterious way

⁵⁴ to grow bigger than or too big for something

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[00:13:41] There is evidently something quite [timeless](#)⁵⁵ about [waxworks](#) - whether that's seeing the [likeness](#)⁵⁶ of a French revolutionary back in 1810, or it's in 2020 and going to take a selfie with a [waxwork](#) of David Beckham or The Queen.

[00:14:02] Madame Tussauds has [tapped into](#)⁵⁷ something [inherently](#)⁵⁸ human it would seem, and I'm sure they're [banking on](#)⁵⁹ 500 million more people visiting it before people get bored.

[00:14:17] If you go there today, you won't immediately notice any sign of the original Tussaud, Marie.

[00:14:25] The museum was bought by a huge entertainment group for £1 billion back in 2007, and it is now a [well-oiled](#)⁶⁰, commercial enterprise.

[00:14:39] Some of the original, Madame Tussaud [waxworks](#) are still there, but the most important thing that she left behind, and the thing that no one can ever take away, is this fantastic story.

⁵⁵ Something that is timeless does not change as the years go past

⁵⁶ the fact of being similar in appearance

⁵⁷ to manage to use something in a way that brings good results

⁵⁸ in a way that exists as a natural or basic part of something

⁵⁹ to expect something or depend on something happening

⁶⁰ working easily and effectively

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[00:14:54] Yes, the story comes from her own [memoirs](#), and there is a little bit of debate about how much is actually true, and how much is slightly [elaborated](#)⁶¹, but if there's anyone who knew how thin the line is between reality and fantasy, between life and death, it is Madame Tussaud.

[00:15:19] Ok then, that is it for today's episode on Madame Tussauds.

[00:15:24] It is a pretty good story, and it is always amazing to see that there is such an interesting history to something that a lot of people, including myself until a few days ago, thought was just a normal museum.

[00:15:43] As a final reminder, if you are looking for the transcript, subtitles, key vocabulary, bonus episodes, and a load of other [goodies](#)⁶², then I'd recommend checking out our website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:15:58] It is full of loads of interesting resources about how to learn English in a more interesting way, especially if you don't live in an English-speaking country, so that is well worth checking out if you haven't done so already.

[00:16:14] And if you are listening to this on your favourite podcast app, and you want to do something very nice, then you can always hit subscribe, or perhaps even leave a review - I read every single one, and they all make my day.

⁶¹ containing a lot of careful detail or many detailed parts

⁶² an object that people want or enjoy, often something nice to eat

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The Weird History of Madame Tussauds

[00:16:28] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English

[00:16:34] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Confess	to admit that you have done something wrong or something that you feel guilty or bad about
Turns out	to happen in a particular way or to have a particular result, especially an unexpected one
Back story	the things that have happened to someone before you first see or read about that person in a film or story
Guillotine	a device, invented in France, consisting of a sharp blade in a tall frame, used in the past for killing criminals by cutting off their heads
Ride	exciting journey
Waxworks	a wax model of a person
Brand	a type of product made by a particular company
Memoirs	a book or other piece of writing based on the writer's personal knowledge of famous people, places, or events
Far-fetched	very unlikely to be TRUE, and difficult to believe
Waxworking	the process of making a waxwork

The Weird History of Madame Tussauds

Coated	thickly covered
Features	a typical quality or an important part of something
Subject	the thing that is being discussed, considered, or studied
Housekeeper	a person whose job is to organise another person's house and deal with cooking, cleaning, etc.
Anatomist	an expert in anatomy (= the study of the structure of the body and its parts)
Waxmaker	someone who makes waxworks
Sculpture	the art of forming solid objects that represent a thing, person, idea, etc. out of a material such as wood, clay, metal, or stone, or an object made in this way
Eager	wanting very much to do or have something, especially something interesting or enjoyable
Prospects	the possibility that something good might happen in the future
Seek his fortune	look for success
Apprentice	someone who has agreed to work for a skilled person for a particular period of time and often for low payment, in order to learn that person's skills

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Switched	changed
Anatomy	the scientific study of the body and how its parts are arranged
High society	rich, powerful, and fashionable people
Drew	attracted
Boom	an increase in something, or a time when something becomes more popular
In the flesh	in real life, and not on TV, in a film, in a picture, etc.
Get a name for herself	became known for a particular thing
Monarchy	a country that has a king or queen
Socialising	to spend time when you are not working with friends or with other people in order to enjoy yourself
Mentor	a person who gives a younger or less experienced person help and advice over a period of time, especially at work or school
The times	the current environment
Celebratory	celebrating the importance of something or someone
Executed	to kill someone as a legal punishment

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Aristocrats	people of high social rank who belongs to the aristocracy
Marvel	to show or experience great surprise or admiration
Fate	what happens to a particular person or thing, especially something final or negative, such as death or defeat
Reign	to be the main feeling or quality in a situation or person
Sympathies	support and agreement
Steel	a strong metal that is a mixture of iron and carbon, used for making things that need a strong structure, especially vehicles and buildings
Masks	a covering for all or part of the face that protects, hides, or decorates the person wearing it
Spared	(of a person) saved their life
Gruesome	extremely unpleasant and shocking, and usually dealing with death or injury
By all accounts	as said by most people
Destiny	the things that will happen in the future
Illusionist	an entertainer who performs tricks where objects seem to appear and then disappear

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Broke ties	cut off relations
Prominent	very well known and important
Up close and personal	(colloquial) to be very close to
Gore	blood that has come from an injury and become thick
The outset	the beginning
Profitable	making or likely to make a profit, make money
Worthy	deserving respect, admiration, or support
Eerily	in a strange, frightening, and mysterious way
Outgrowing	to grow bigger than or too big for something
Timeless	Something that is timeless does not change as the years go past
Likeness	the fact of being similar in appearance
Tapped into	to manage to use something in a way that brings good results
Inherently	in a way that exists as a natural or basic part of something
Banking on	to expect something or depend on something happening
Well-oiled	working easily and effectively

Elaborated

containing a lot of careful detail or many detailed parts

Goodies

an object that people want or enjoy, often something nice to eat

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What did you struggle to understand?

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