

# WAXing Eloquent

BY ROBERT KLARA



## Behind the scenes at Madame Tussauds

Jennifer Lopez has never felt so terrible in her life.

It's a beautiful night for a cocktail party on the terrace. Clad in a red gown with a dangerously low decollete, Lopez stands beside the gurgling fountain while Lou Reed and Lenny Kravitz hobnob nearby. His signature horn-rims perched on his nose, Woody Allen muses in the corner by himself, while Robin Williams and Elton John match toothy grins as they relax by the potted palms. But Lopez looks awful. In fact, nobody has ever seen her in such a bad state. Is it a cold? A hangover? No — it's a malady far more serious than that. J-Lo's entire head is missing.

"Ah, Ms. Lopez," sighs wax artist Morfy Gikas. "Her head is upstairs right now." Gikas, a diminutive woman whose native Greek lends her speech an exotic lilt, turns and smiles reassuringly. "By ten o'clock, she'll look like she just came out of the salon."

If this scene feels like something out of a bad horror flick, perhaps a few more details will help. The cocktail party isn't going on in the



Johnny Depp gets a touch-up from Chris Gargiulo and (opposite page) Alicia Keys poses and J-Lo shines

ALICIA KEYS PHOTO COURTESY MADAME TUSSAUDS; J-LO AND JOHNNY DEPP PHOTOS BY STACEY VAN BEEKEL-HAINES

balmy breezes of the Hollywood Hills; it's on the fourth floor of a building in Times Square. The night sky overhead is a black ceiling — and it's eight o'clock in the morning. So who are the glitterati who've turned out at this unholy hour for drinks? Well, they're not exactly real. In fact, they're composites of metal, fiberglass, and beeswax. The setting is the Manhattan outpost of the world-famous Madame Tussauds, and its

doors open in two hours.

Which is why Morfy Gikas is here and J-Lo's head is not. During this critical time window, Gikas and her staff artists (armed with everything from sculpting knives to press-on nails) scour the five floors of the museum, probing for anything amiss with the 200 celebrities and historical notables residing here.

The staff's unusual jobs stem from Tussauds breaking a hallowed rule

among museums. Most museums have a strict hands-off policy when it comes to their exhibits. At Tussauds, visitors don't just get to stare at the lifelike figures; they can touch, hug, and even kiss them. "A traditional museum would have ropes up," explains Bret Pidgeon, general manager at Tussauds. "But this is the closest a lot of people are going to get to an actual celebrity. We allow our guests to get up close and personal."





Clockwise from left: Oprah Winfrey, "Opening Night Party," Gargiulo with Woody Allen, Ozzy Osbourne's hand



Trouble is, when those guests number over one million a year, up close and personal takes its toll. Figures end up scratched, smudged, dirty — and sometimes far worse. It's up to Gikas's artistic team to achieve every sort of anatomical and cosmetic repair imaginable. And fast. "By the time we open," she says, "everything must be perfect."

"You see these?" asks Chris Gargiulo, a wax artist whose practiced eye scans the figures and fixes on Salma Hayek. "There's a gouge on her forehead, slices on her cheeks, and scratches on her chest." Gargiulo shakes his head as he mixes oil paints on the palette he carries. Dipping the brush, he sweeps paint across the tiny ridges on Hayek's cheek. The flaws vanish in seconds.

Moments later, Gargiulo's brow furrows as he inspects the back of Robin Williams's neck, sporting some nasty-looking fingernail trenches. It's a deep repair, so he produces a scalpel-like tool and a glob of Tussauds' signature, flesh-colored

beeswax from his pocket (only the figures' exposed parts — heads and hands, usually — are made of wax;



everything beneath their clothing is fiberglass).

Gargiulo has performed surgeries like these thousands of times, often to the same figures. At Tussauds, the damage inflicted by fans is roughly proportionate to the sex ap-

peal of a given celebrity: The more people who wish they could put their hands all over a star's bod in real life, the more hands will end up on the corresponding wax figure. Lost in adoration, most visitors probably don't know how much they're damaging the figures, each of which is made in London and can cost up to \$200,000.

Because female fans come armed with beeswax's two most fearsome foes — lipstick and fingernails — it's the pretty boys who suffer the most. "Women dig their nails in," Gargiulo says, adding that with "Johnny Depp, Will Smith, and Brad Pitt, we have to take lipstick off with soap and water." Gargiulo finishes with Robin Williams's neck and moves on. "That was a quick fix," he says. "If it's a cracked head, we'll bring it upstairs."

Unfortunately, Lindsay Lohan suffered a cracked head after a visitor knocked her over. Lohan was taken upstairs. Then there was a visitor who decided to sock Dwayne

"The Rock" Johnson in the jaw. The real Rock probably would have landed that guest in intensive care, but Tussauds' Rock fell and broke into a thousand pieces. He was gathered together and taken upstairs, too.

"Upstairs," or as Tussauds' artists call it, "the studio," refers to a room on the tenth floor, accessed by a freight elevator and guarded by a heavy steel door. Another good name would be Dr. Frankenstein's lab. It's a massive room, filled with the smells of oil paint and hair spray, and bathed in blue-gray light from skylights overhead. Workbenches form a grid on the paint-dappled floor, holding a strewn assemblage of detached legs, rags, wax chunks, and jars of alcohol. Wooden heads wearing wigs in curlers have queued up near a sink against the far wall. To the left, a plywood box brims with tools — staple guns, saws, C-clamps, and a cheese grater. Floor-to-ceiling shelves of spare hands stretch along the far-right wall. Organized in defiance of history and social order,

the hands line up alphabetically: Johnny Cash, Fidel Castro, Charlie Chaplin....

*At Tussauds, the damage inflicted by fans is roughly proportionate to the sex appeal of a given celebrity.*

The studio is Tussauds' inner sanctum. Here, the artists scour gossip magazines for the latest paparazzi shots so they can keep the figures' outfits, hair, and tattoos up to date. "This is Ozzy's arm — isn't it beautiful?" Gikas asks. Hanging on the wall over her shoulder is a gold-framed portrait of Madame Tussaud herself, her eyes narrowed to an

inspective gaze.

Madame has plenty to guard, for the studio is a repository of secrets. But a visitor expecting some sort of magic will be disappointed; the magic is in the minds and hands of the artists, who are just as indispensable to Tussauds as the figures themselves. "This really is an art form, and not everyone can do it," Pidgeon says.

Gargiulo can take a chunk of beeswax and within minutes sculpt it into a human ear. Not just any ear, either, but the uniquely shaped ear belonging to the celeb who lost it. "We have tons of reference photos," he says, motioning toward a file cabinet in the corner that contains all the pictures taken of every famous individual who has posed for Tussauds. After nearly ten years in his position, Gargiulo says, "I can do it without looking."

For more extensive repairs — such as the cranial rescue of Lindsay Lohan — the artists need melted wax to serve as mortar. An ordinary

PHOTOS BY STACEY VAN BERKEL-HAINES



# [Madame Tussauds]

Justin Bieber



tablespoon, held over a flame and applied to the wax, is all that's required. If a fan pulls a figure's hair out, the studio team reinserts it strand by

strand using a sewing needle. In an age increasingly defined by digital technology, what goes on at Tussauds' studio is wholly analog — if not outright archaic.

And that's exactly how the company wants it. Within days of hiring artists, Tussauds dispatches them to London, where they're tutored in the wax techniques that remain almost completely unchanged since Madame Tussaud created her first figures in Paris some 230 years ago.

Born in Strasbourg in 1761, Marie Tussaud (nee Grosholtz) was the daughter of a housekeeper employed by Dr. Philippe Curtius, who operated a popular emporium of life-size wax figures inside the Palais-Royal. Apprenticed to the doctor, Marie grew so accomplished at creating exact likenesses of popular figures (Benjamin Franklin was among her first) that Louis XVI added her to his royal court at Versailles. After marrying Francois Tussaud, Marie took her wax figures on the road, finally settling in London, where her waxworks won fans including Charles Dickens. Madame Tussauds has been doing business at its current home on Marylebone Road since 1884.

"I have two art degrees — print that," laughs Amy Finkbeiner, who stands at one of the studio sinks, surrounded by the tools of her trade: brushes, eyelashes, scissors, glue, and countless bottles of Paul Mitchell mousse and hair spray. "In art school," she says, "I had no idea that this kind of work was available. Only in New York, I guess."

Finkbeiner is a painter and sculptor, but her specialty is hair. For figures like Lenny Kravitz or Biggie Smalls, whose buzz cuts scarcely require a daily dusting, there's little demand for her expertise. But when it comes to the elaborately coiffed — say, Bette Midler — Finkbeiner becomes the most important employee

in the house. "The divas require the most attention," she says.

Finkbeiner's wrists snap expertly as she teases some ruddy brown locks into a signature pile of waves and tendrils. "I grew up watching my mother fixing my aunts' hair in the kitchen," she explains. "I can do looks from the 1930s and '40s — pin curls, finger waves, all that." Such knowledge comes in handy when it's time to style Lucille Ball or Marilyn Monroe, which is a favorite coif of Finkbeiner's.

As she steps aside, the object of her labors comes into full view. It's J-Lo's head — looking quite fabulous for just a head. Turns out, Lopez's location near the front doors exposes her to New York's often humid atmosphere. "Her hair goes flat really quickly," Finkbeiner says.

Without further ado, Finkbeiner picks up J-Lo's head and heads for the elevator. Minutes from now, it'll be back on the star's curvaceous body, ready for another day's worth of adoring fans.



Lady Gaga

## WANT TO GO?

**Madame Tussauds New York** is located in Times Square at 234 West 42nd St., between 7th and 8th avenues. The museum is open 365 days a year from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Latest additions include Alicia Keys, Captain Jack Sparrow, Justin Bieber, and Kelly Ripa.

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