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LIFE MASKS OF FAMOUS AMERICANS



EXHIBITED IN
HALL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE
A CENTURY OF PROGRESS

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THIS collection of 14 masks was made by John Henri Isaac Browere during the early years of the 19th Century. They are not sculptures, but plaster casts made from the impressions which Browere took of the eminent Americans whose names they bear. All except the mask of James Monroe are life masks, that is, the impressions were taken from the living features.

Fragile yet enduring, inanimate yet brilliantly expressive and true, this collection of masks has assumed an importance which can only be expressed by the profound emotion they inspire in every American who knows of the meteoric rise of American civilization and of the men who gave that civilization form.

For these 14 masks, never before on public exhibition, are the only casts from the molds made by Browere's secret, lost process. They are truly unique.

The story of these remarkable historical records is second in interest only to the personages whom they portray with such vivid realism. Indeed, the story of the creation of these masks, as far as it has been unearthed, often sheds important light upon the biographies of the subjects.

The creator of the masks, J. H. I. Browere, was born in New York City on November 18, 1792, and died in the same city on September 10, 1834. He entered the study of art early in his life, working first under the miniature painter, Alexander Robertson, in this country, and later travelling and studying in the great capitals of Europe where his interest turned to sculpture.

It was during Browere's experiments with sculpturing materials that he developed his extraordinary technique for taking life masks. The details of the process have been lost. The testimony of those whose likenesses were taken, as well as the testimony of their acquaintances, indicates that the process was rapid, not unduly arduous, and marvelously faithful in reproducing the likeness and expression of the original. It is apparent that Browere concentrated upon the perfection of the likeness, without any attempt to produce "works of art," which is exactly the reason that the masks are now so valuable.

Browere's first satisfactory achievement was a mask of his former teacher, Robertson. This was followed by a number of others, but his first important work, which gave him public prominence, was the mask taken in 1817 of John Paulding, one of the three captors of the spy Andre during the Revolution. In 1825, at the request of New York City authorities, the Marquis de La Fayette permitted Browere to make his mask and it was this work which decided Browere on his course of attempting to secure the likenesses of noted characters with the purpose of forming a national gallery.

On July 11, 1825, General La Fayette, then on his third and last visit to the United States, visited Browere's studio in the rear of 315 Broadway. Browere applied the composition and it was allowed to set. As the time for taking it off approached, La Fayette was reminded that he was late for a banquet being given in his honor. La Fayette started up,

causing a piece to fall out of the material. This mishap necessitated another sitting which was made in Philadelphia on July 19, 1825, resulting in the perfect mask which is on display here.

The mask of Charles Carroll, of Carrollton, Maryland, was taken sometime after July, 1825. Carroll, who was the last of the signers of the Declaration of Independence to be gathered to his fathers, commented as follows on the mask:

"The resemblance is most striking. The operation from its commencement to its completion was performed in two hours, with very little inconvenience and no pain to myself."

On October 15, 1825, Thomas Jefferson sat for the mask which is exhibited here. This was little less than a year before Jefferson's death at the age of 83. In spite of specific denials by the distinguished former president and founder of our nation, stories were circulated that Jefferson was almost suffocated during the taking of the mold. These stories did Browere a great deal of harm and hampered him in his further attempts to secure masks of prominent citizens.

The masks of James Madison, fourth president of the United States, and his wife, "Dolly" Madison, who was celebrated for her charm as first lady of the land, were secured by Browere on October 19, 1825. Both of the Madisons testified that they were entirely satisfied with the finished masks, so that there can be no doubt that we can visualize perfectly the appearance of the distinguished couple from these original casts.

Browere's next achievement was the mask of John Quincy Adams, made on October 29, 1825, in Washington, D. C. The then president of the United States professed himself well pleased with the mask which is now on exhibit here. At the same time, Browere made a mask of his son, Charles Francis Adams, who was later to be distinguished as United States ambassador to England during the critical period of the Civil War.

One of the most interesting of the Browere masks is that of John Adams, father of John Quincy Adams. The mask of the elder Adams, who served his country as one of the drafters of the Declaration of Independence, as vice-president, president and in other positions of importance, was made on November 22, 1825. John Adams was then 90 years old. He died in the following year within a few hours of the death of his co-patriot Thomas Jefferson. Browere journeyed to Quincy, Mass., to take the mask, and Adams submitted to two casts, of which the best was finished and is shown here.

The mask of DeWitt Clinton, who is best remembered for his great work of carrying through the Erie Canal and opening up the midland of America for settlement, was

highly praised by his contemporaries for its fidelity. Clinton, who was at one time president of the American Academy of Arts, recommended Browere's work on other masks very highly.

Henry Clay, one of America's most noted statesmen and associated with Daniel Webster as a truly great orator, allowed Browere in 1825 to make the mask shown here. Clay was then 48 years old, and the remarkable personal magnetism of the man at the height of his public career is very forcefully preserved in the life mask.

There have been three officers of high rank in the United States Navy bearing the name of David Porter. The David Porter, whose life mask was made by Browere and is shown in this collection, is particularly well remembered as the commander of the U. S. S. Essex, whose career in the War of 1812 is familiar to every schoolboy. Porter was extremely appreciative of the merit of Browere's works, and certainly the animation in the Browere mask of the naval captain makes it one of the outstanding pieces from the standpoint of interest.

It is difficult to date exactly the life masks of Generals Jacob Brown and Alexander McComb. Brown was instrumental in securing an audience for Browere with James and "Dolly" Madison, and Brown's enthusiastic recommendations aided the artist no little in creating his collection of these life masks.

The last life mask made by John Browere was that of Martin Van Buren, who served with distinction in the United States Senate, and became president of our country in 1844. This cast was made in 1833, when Van Buren was 51 years old, a vigorous personality as revealed by the plastic and subtle process of the artist.

Quite distinct from these life masks is the death mask taken by John Browere of James Monroe, whose presidential career is particularly familiar through his announcement of the "Monroe Doctrine" concerning the two American continents, and the naming of his administration as "The Era of Good Feeling." Monroe died on July 4, 1831. The death mask, though not as interesting as the life masks of Browere, is unquestionably a valuable record of one of our most distinguished citizens.

These fourteen masks comprise the most important part of the collection made by John Browere. They have been preserved and recently gathered together by the heirs of the artist. This exhibit at A Century of Progress has been made possible through the generous cooperation of the family. The proposal has been made to fulfill the first intention of John Browere by making these masks a national collection to be suitably and permanently displayed to the public.
