
RECREATING ROMAN WAX MASKS

BY C. BRIAN ROSE WITH MARIANNE LOVINK

When we think of the Roman aristocrats who lived 2,000 years ago, one of the most vivid traditions that comes to mind involves wax masks, or *imagines* in Latin, which were frequently mentioned by Latin authors in their accounts of Roman funerals. These are described as remarkably lifelike reproductions of a man's face that were worn in funeral processions by actors serving as surrogates for the family's male ancestors. The masks were normally kept in a wooden cupboard in the reception room or atrium of an elite Roman house and positioned next to labels that described the highest offices held by the man whose face had been immortalized by the mask.

Because the masks were worn during aristocratic funerals, they were often referred to as "death masks," but they were unquestionably created during one's life—generally between the ages of 35 and 40—when a man had attained the political office of *aedile* or city clerk. In other words, having a mask made of yourself was a sign of your status in Roman society, and it signaled that you were on the same path to political prominence as your ancestors. The new mask would join older ones in the atrium cupboard and would almost certainly have been shown to visitors, both clients and members of one's peer group, even though it would not be featured in public processions until after one's death. Situated next to the cupboard of masks was a genealogical chart of the family tree—not appreciably



The mask-making process is a messy one, so precautions were taken to protect the models' hair and clothing.

different from the charts we construct today—which included painted panel portraits of one’s ancestors.

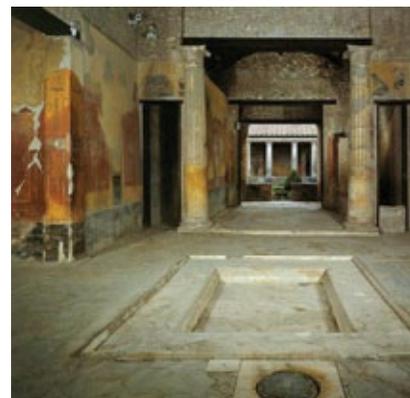
Around the main door leading into the atrium a visitor would also have found weapons and armor that the owner’s ancestors had captured from the enemy during earlier military campaigns, which meant that the entrance to your house would have functioned like a table of contents of your family’s achievements, with the masks, family charts, and military trophies serving as supporting evidence.

The date at which the masks were first introduced is difficult to determine, but they were already well established by the 2nd century BC, and they continued to be used into the 4th and perhaps as late as the 6th century AD.

Wax, of course, is a fragile material, and although one Roman wax bust was discovered in a 2nd century AD tomb near Naples, none of the wax masks have survived, nor have any ancient depictions of them in other media. Consequently, our knowledge of their appearance is based exclusively on ancient literary accounts, primarily those of the Greek historian Polybius, who clearly found them fascinating, and Pliny the Elder, whose life ended in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in AD 79.

During a graduate seminar in Roman topography at Penn in the spring of 2014, we decided to attempt the creation of several of these masks as a way of increasing our understanding of their appearance and production techniques. We were fortunate in securing the assistance of artist Marianne Lovink, whose enthusiasm for the Museum is as great as that of her husband, Julian Siggers, the Museum’s

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FROM TOP: Brian Rose holds his painted mask in the Rome Gallery; wax mask, now lost. Photo from Heinrich Drerup, "Totenmaske und Ahnenbild bei den Römern," pp. 81-129 (Tafel 49.1) in *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archaeologischen Instituts Roemische Abteilung*, Volume 87, 1980; masks were normally stored in Roman atriums, such as this atrium from the House of Meander at Pompeii (www.studyblue.com); Graduate student Jane Sancinito poses next to her finished mask.



LEFT: The heated wax is applied to the inside of the plaster mold.
 BELOW: Marianne Lovink works with graduate student Sam Holzman to apply linen strips across the face of a classmate.
 BOTTOM: Lovink ladles a small amount of wax into the plaster mold held by Holzman.



Williams Director. We decided to use only the materials that would have been available to the ancient Romans and to reproduce their techniques as accurately as we could. There was only one significant shift from ancient Roman procedure: although the masks were made only of men in ancient Rome, we accepted as models all volunteers who expressed an interest. Only four masks were completed, but their production enabled us to reconstruct the basic steps involved in their creation during antiquity, even if a few questions were left unanswered.

In light of the ancient comments on the fidelity of the mask to the features of the subject, the creation of a plaster mold would have been the first step, and would have involved strips of linen soaked in plaster that were carefully applied across the face, including the eyes and mouth, but not the nostrils. Prior to the application of the plaster, the face would have been coated in olive oil or fat to prevent the plaster from adhering to the skin, and facial hair such as a beard (but not eyebrows) would have been shaved in advance. It takes about 20 minutes for the plaster to harden to a point at which it will maintain its integrity when it is removed, after which it can be pulled easily from the face and the mold is ready for the wax.

Beeswax was easily available in antiquity and would probably have been heated to a liquid form as the plaster mold was being prepared. After coating the mold with fat

or oil, one could either apply the wax to the inside of the mold with a brush, or carefully pour a small quantity of wax into the mold while rolling and tipping it so that the wax would be more evenly distributed. After it hardened, this step was repeated until the wax had acquired a thickness of 6 mm. At that point the wax mask was easily pulled from the mold.

The actors who wore these masks during the funeral processions had to be able to see where they were going, and from time to time they had to be able to speak to the funeral attendees. Consequently, the eyes must have been cut out of the mask as well as a narrow strip between the lips, not

unlike Roman military parade helmets of the early Empire.

Whether they were painted is still debatable. Polybius seems to indicate that the coloring of the masks was similar to that of the model himself, and many of the ancient writers speak of the masks as smoke-stained, probably due to their periodic proximity to burning incense. This suggests that their appearance was lighter in color than the brownish hue of the wax, and therefore that the masks were painted. This is the approach that we followed, applying a coat of acrylic polymer paint which brings the color of the mask closer to that of skin, and providing a protective layer that increased the mask's stability, if only slightly. We may have deviated from the ancient Roman practice here, in that we used a brown microcrystalline wax rather than a more translucent natural shade, such as light yellow, although even a translucent shade would need to have been painted.

The entire procedure would have been rather messy, in that it involved plaster, water, and wax, used repeatedly, and access to heat and sunlight would have been desirable so that the plaster mold would have hardened more quickly. Moreover, since the masks were an integral part of the house—indeed, part of its identity—they were probably made there. Within any elite house, the peristyle garden would have been the most likely place of production, in that water and sunlight were readily available and there was an abundance of open space, making cleanup at the end of the process a relatively easy undertaking.

The plaster molds would have been carefully stored in the house, possibly in a family archive room, since new sets of masks would be created for the children once they reached adulthood and established their own homes. This could apply to both sons and daughters, especially if the family was particularly illustrious, so the molds would have been used continually over the course of many generations.

We tend to think of these masks primarily as inanimate objects sitting on a cupboard shelf, and for most of the year that was true; but during aristocratic funerals they were



Holzman holds two masks, each at a different stage of production: the plaster mold (in his right hand) and the wax mask (in his left hand).

brought to life by the actors who wore them. Each of the actors was reportedly chosen based on his resemblance to the stature of the deceased, and he wore a costume tied to the highest office that the deceased had reached. All of the achievements of that ancestor's

career would have been summarized in the funeral oration, which means that the masks were surrounded by visual and verbal narratives that celebrated the family's accomplishments from its origins to the present. The mask-making activity in which we participated during this year's seminar enabled us to gain a firmer understanding of the mechanics of these aristocratic Roman spectacles, and to project a part of ourselves into their world. ●

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FOR FURTHER READING

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