

# Death Masks Give Birth to Lifecasting

A message from Ed McCormick, ALI

Several weeks ago I received an anxious call from a man in the Los Angeles area that was in an immediate need of a lifecasting artist. He found our number on the Internet at the Association of Lifecasters International site. As he explained his need, I went was a bit taken a back. He told me that he wanted someone to make a casting of his brother who died in an auto accident. It was impossible, I thought. I explained that ALI members worked with living models and besides he only had several hours before his brother was to be interned.

But, with so much grief apparent in his voice I reached out across the country (ALI is headquartered in Summit, NJ) to ALI member Julie Carlson. To my surprise she was amenable. Latter she would contact me to tell of the success of the assignment casting the body while in the casket with the help of family members and informing me that the model was a ten-year old boy. It was a bittersweet story. I was happy that we could help. The family will use the face cast to commission a bronze sculpture later. However, the story was a reminder that life casting had its beginnings in the making of death masks.

Traditionally, a death mask is an exact replica of the face of the deceased, cast in plaster, wax, or metal from a mold taken from the

dead. The masks were used throughout the ancient world. They provided an important part in funerary beliefs and practices. They covered the face of the corpse to protect the body from evil spirits while it is laid to rest. Later the mask was placed in the atrium of the family's house, where



Death Mask of the beautiful Mary Queen of Scots taken in 1587 after her execution.

it was crowned with laurel on feast days. The mask reminds the family members of what the deceased looked like and reminds them of their life with them. The mask would then be carried in the funeral processions of this descendent.

Since the 13th century, death masks have aided the sculptors of tomb effigies, but in medieval France and England actual death masks were used for the royal funeral effigies that lay in state.

Only English examples exist, however; those in France were destroyed during the French Revolution. The mask of Henry VII is probably the finest in existence, and that of Edward III is the earliest European example; the latter records the facial distortion due to his fatal stroke. Other well-known masks are those of Isaac Newton, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Napoleon Bonaparte.

Death masks are true portraits, although changes are occasionally made in the eyes of the mask to make it appear as though the subject were alive. From the time of ancient Egypt they have served as aids to portrait sculptors, and for the last few centuries they have been kept as mementos of the dead.

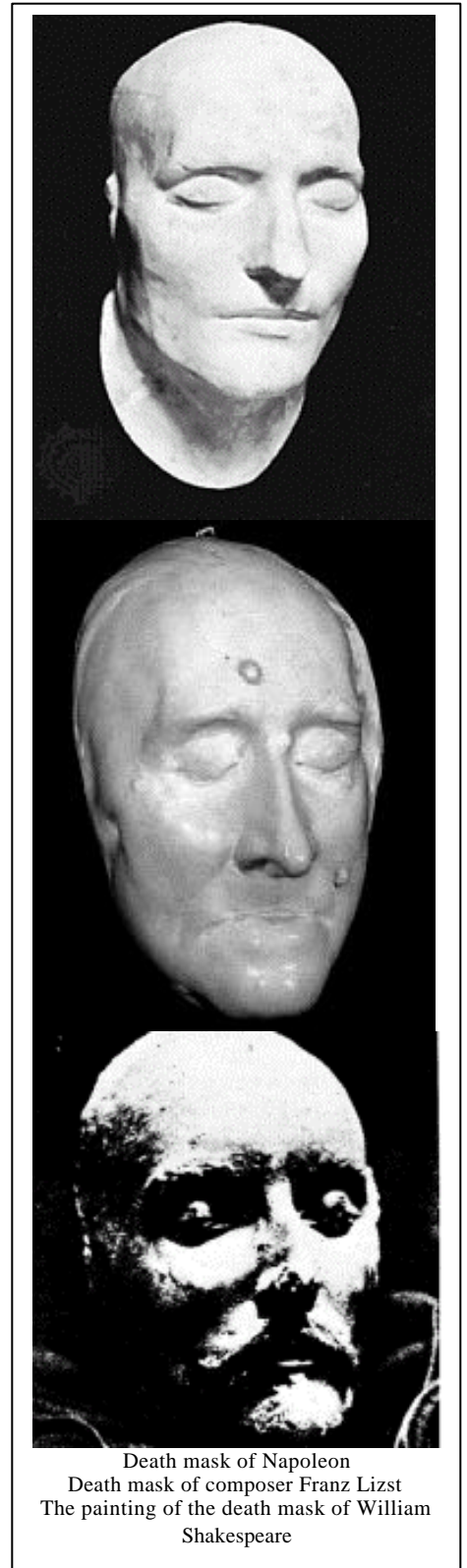
The earliest effigy remaining is that of Edward III, buried in 1377. The face appears to be the earliest death mask in Europe. Originally, it was given a beard and wig of real hair, with eyebrows made of the hair of a small dog. The example of Mary Queen of Scots has a similar treatment. This mask was taken after her execution.

Because of death masks we know what a many historical figures actually looked like including Napoleon, General Grant, George Washington, Franz List, James Joyce and there are numerous others throughout history.

Once photography become popular in the early 1900's, death masks gave way to life masks in turn, popularizing the art of lifecasting.

*I did the most bizarre thing in my "body-casting career" last week...I was referred to a family who lost their 10-yr. old boy in a sudden tragic accident, to make a life-cast (really a "death-mask") of his face and also hand!! It was an Armenian family and they were in such shock that this was a VERY last-minute decision because he was going to be buried in a few hours...he was already in the CHURCH for viewing in-casket and there was only a window of about ONE HOUR from when they got in-touch with me!! I never moved so fast! I threw all my supplies (which I luckily had on-hand) in the car and drove to Hollywood to the church. They interrupted his "viewing" and wheeled out the coffin to a private hallway with a table where I quickly set up all my materials.*

**TALK ABOUT PRESSURE!!**  
*Then about 8-9 of the Armenian family men watched and helped me as I literally worked in the coffin to make the casting! I had to cover everything with plastic sheets and miraculously, everything went perfectly! I felt like a surgeon in the E.R. with no time to think about anything but the job at hand and to work as quickly and carefully as possible. The boy was so beautiful. I ran home with the mold and poured it and worked on it for the next 5 hours or so until I was exhausted. It turned out beautiful and they came to see in on Saturday to decide what they want done next (mounting a base, etc.) Anyway, isn't that a trip?? Some people think it is creepy but it actually didn't bother me at all. I felt like I was doing something so special and wonderful for the family that it made me feel really good. They literally held up the Memorial Service while I finished the project at the church and when I left there were about 300 in the filled church! It was all quite amazing! – Julie Carlson, ALI*



Death mask of Napoleon  
Death mask of composer Franz Lizst  
The painting of the death mask of William Shakespeare