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January 2008

In Our Own Backyard

Rubbing (Wax) Shoulders With Celebrities at Madame Tussauds

by Gina Hagler

Once I saw that Whoopi Goldberg was having a photo session in the lobby, I knew we were in for a great time. Of course, the photographers were the only ones who were smiling. Whoopi was made of wax. But I was right about having a great time at Madame Tussauds. In fact, my kids and I had a blast. The entire museum is set up to accommodate families. From the snack machines in the lower lobby (snack before you tour!) to the immaculate bathrooms just across the hall, the layout is designed to ensure that kids are comfortable as they meet and greet life-size figures right out of the history books. While doing so, kids are encouraged to pose with, and touch, the figures. I had my doubts about whether or not my kids would want to do this, but I soon realized that was precisely what they wanted. They shared a table with Robert E. Lee, chatted with Thomas Jefferson, joined Abraham Lincoln in the Presidential Box at Ford's Theatre, glared back at J. Edgar Hoover during an interrogation, and sat on the piano bench beside Duke Ellington.

In between, the quizzes on the touchscreen video consoles in each room had my 11-year-old so enthralled that he tried every one. My 7-year-old discovered the dress-up clothes and made sure she wore them all - especially those in the Jackie Kennedy collection. And, cool though he may be, my 16-year-old loved standing in the footprints painted in a circle on the floor beside figures like Bob Dylan and Ella Fitzgerald and hearing them sing.

For my part, I hadn't expected the figures to be so recognizable - or to evoke a sense of familiarity. But there was something about each of them, perhaps the way they were posed to capture the personality of the subject, that really made the figures feel warm and welcoming rather than phony or off-putting. In fact, my 7-year-old peeked into the room with Civil Rights figures, yelled, "Rosa Parks!" and ran right over to meet her hero. In the Oval Office, the kids each took a turn addressing the nation before heading for a stint at the desk. When my 11-year-old son decided to put up his feet, I was sure we'd be making a hasty exit, but it wasn't a problem. Nor was it a problem when my oldest sat on Bob Woodward's desk and had a look at his notepad.

We spent more than an hour exploring every nook and cranny. From political figures to contemporary entertainers to sports figures like Babe Ruth and Tiger Woods, each room had something as wonderful as the one before. And there was an entire room devoted to the process of creating the wax figures. To be more specific, the bodies are made of fiberglass and the heads are made of wax. In the "process" room, there's a metal figure that you can trace around with a metal handle to simulate the coordination needed to carve a bust. Let's just say it's not as easy as you might think. There's also the interesting fact that Madame Tussaud personally did the wax cast of Benjamin Franklin - while he was alive - so it's an accurate portrayal.

Fittingly, as we exited the museum, Katie Couric conducted an interview with each of my kids. Ready for something more than another snack, we headed across the street to Potbelly Sandwich Works on 13th and E streets for sandwiches and shakes before taking the Metro home.

Madame Tussaud started sculpting wax figures in the late 1700s, creating her first professional

figure - of Voltaire - more than 200 years ago. There were no photographs at that time to capture an enduring image of someone famous or beloved. Instead castings were made of the person's face - usually at death - and a sculptor or artist would use it to create a statue or image. Madame Tussaud was one of the most sought-after death mask artists of her time. In fact, she made masks of many of the most famous people executed by guillotine during the French Revolution.

Even today, it requires a great deal of time and precision to create a wax figure. Part of the time goes to taking the 250 precise measurements of the body, hands and face. Photographs are taken of the subject's head and body from multiple angles. The artist also studies the subject's personality and mannerisms. During this process, celebrities donate their own clothes and accessories or have their tailors or preferred designers work with the wardrobe manager at Madame Tussauds to create precise copies of their favorite outfits.

Once all the measurements are taken, the sculptor creates a clay figure, which is then molded in plaster. From there the body is cast in fiberglass and the head in wax. Matching skin, hair and eye color is a painstaking process. And then there's hair texture and tooth color to consider. The end result is a figure that looks like the real person. But the goal is not just to make a fancy mannequin. These artists are creating a figure that conveys a sense of that person - something that makes the subject almost as recognizable from the pose as from the face. Having seen it for myself, I can only say they are incredibly successful!

Gina Hagler is a writer in Rockville and a frequent contributor to Washington Parent.

Website: www.madametussaudsdc.com.

Hours: Open daily, 10 a.m. - 6 p.m. (Sometimes stays open later and will open early to accommodate groups with advance arrangements).

Address: 1025 F Street, NW. The entrance is on 10th Street.

Cost: \$25 adults, \$18 children, \$74.25 family of four package (2 adults / 2 children).

Metro accessible: Yes. Metro Center or Gallery Place/Chinatown.

Wheelchairs welcome: Yes. Use elevator to go downstairs.

Strollers welcome: Yes. Use elevator to go downstairs.

Snacks available: Yes. Vending machines in lower lobby. Snack before you tour.

Restrooms: Lower lobby.

Gift Shop: As you exit.

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