TREASURE OF THE MONTH

Life Mask of John Keats by B.R. Haydon, 1816; and Death Mask of John Keats often Attributed to Gherardi, after 1821 original.

**The Life Mask**

The life mask of John Keats gives us an accurate idea of how he would have looked in 1816; there were many portraits painted of Keats but this mask is the closest we have to a photographic representation. Life masks are liable to distortion over the years, but Fanny Keats said this mask was ‘a perfect copy of the features of my dear brother… except for the mouth, the lips being rather thicker and somewhat compressed which renders the expression more severe than the sweet and mild original’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The mask was made by Keats’ friend Benjamin Robert Haydon, an artist he met in Leigh Hunt’s home in October 1816. Haydon was nine years older than Keats, but the two men quickly became friends, reading Shakespeare and Wordsworth and exchanging sonnets. On one of Keats’ visits to Haydon’s studio, the weekend of 14th and 15th December 1816, the artist convinced Keats to have the life mask made. Using the mask as a model, Haydon included Keats in his painting of *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem* (completed in 1819); this painting included portraits of what Haydon called his ‘contemporary apostles to High Art’ – Wordsworth and Hazlitt were among them, and now Keats, too.

The process of having one’s face cast was slow and laborious, requiring patience and stamina from the sitter. Haydon once described the preparations as ‘being something like those for cutting off a man’s head’. A cloth was wound around his head to protect his hair, which can be seen on the finished mask, and straws put up his nostrils to breathe through while the plaster hardened. Once the plaster was firm enough it was removed, and the end result was a near-perfect copy of the sitter’s face.

The whereabouts of the original life mask is unknown, but after Keats’ death a number of copies were made for Keats’ friends, including John Hamilton Reynolds, whose copy is now in the National Portrait Gallery. Our copy may be one of those made for Keats’ friends after his death, or a copy made later in the mid-1800s by Brucciani. It was presented to the museum in 1978 by Vera Cacciatore, Curator between 1933 and 1976.

**The Death Mask**

Plaster casts were made of Keats’ face, foot and hand on the morning after his death, the 24th February 1821, at the request of Keats’ doctor in Rome, Dr. James Clark. For decades scholars argued that the casts were probably made by Gherardi, Canova’s mask maker in Rome, and eventually sent to John Taylor, Keats’s publisher in London, by Joseph Severn, but the former piece of information has been recently questioned by Peter Malone.[[2]](#footnote-2) The mask we have in the museum is one of a series of white plaster casts made by Charles Smith between 1886 and 1891, of which there are five known remaining copies. Our death mask of Keats was donated by A. C. Bradley, an eminent Oxford Shakespearian scholar and an early subscriber to the appeals for funds to buy Piazza di Spagna 26.

Taking a plaster cast of a deceased person’s face may seem odd, but during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was quite common because photography only came to be used following the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839.. Death masks were used as mementos of the dead, or for the creation of portraits; indeed, Joseph Severn used the mask for his posthumous portrait of Keats reading at Wentworth Palace (1821-3). The original painting is in the National Portrait Gallery, but we have a copy of it above the fireplace in Keats’ room.

Because Keats died at such a young age, both his life mask and his death mask look almost exactly alike, although some differences can be observed. Keats’ facial features are more defined in death, partly because he was five years older but primarily because he had become so thin during his illness. There are new creases between the nostrils and mouth which are a mark of the pain he had endured from the ravages of tuberculosis. The jaw has dropped in death, giving the face a longer appearance, and the linen cloth tied around his face to keep it up can be seen as a faint line under the jaw and up his cheeks, then tied at the top of his head. However, the masks are unmistakably the same man and very similar. Indeed, Keats biographer Dorothy Hewlett observed that, ‘In comparing the masks, readers will notice that, although the face of the dead Keats is emaciated, marked with suffering, the strong mobile mouth has the same slight upward slant, the same hint of humor’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Perhaps this contented expression results from Keats’ welcoming attitude towards death after the painful years of illness, as related in Severn’s account of Keats’ final moments: "Severn-I--lift me up--I am dying--I shall die easy--don't be frightened--be firm, and thank God it has come!"

**Bibliography**

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1. Andrew Motion*, Keats* (Faber & Faber, 1997), caption under plate no. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See ‘Keats’s Posthumous Existence in Plaster’, in *The Keats-Shelley Review*, Vol. 26 No. 2, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dorothy Hewlett, ‘The Death Mask of John Keats’ in *Keats, Shelley & Rome: An Illustrated Miscellany*, ed. Stanley Plumly (C. Johnson: London, 1949), p.64. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)