

Information sheet no 046

Nelson's masks

Painted portraits are often inaccurate due to the subjectivity and style of the artist. During the early nineteenth century, life masks were a very fashionable style of portraiture, giving an accurate impression of the sitter's features. To make a life mask, the subject was strapped into a tilted chair with their eyes closed. Straws were placed in each nostril to enable the model to breathe whilst wet plaster was moulded over the face. The subject had to stay completely still until the plaster had set and then the mould was removed.

There are three Nelson masks in existence.

1. The Queen Mary mask. This was found by Queen Mary, the wife of King George V, in an antique shop on the Isle of Wight. It shows Nelson with his eyes closed. It is held at the NMRN.
2. The Nelson-Weekes mask. This is owned by the Weekes family, who are descendants of Nelson's daughter Horatia. It is also held at the NMRN.
3. The Nelson-Ward mask. This shows Nelson with his eyes open and is held at the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich.

The Queen Mary mask is thought to be the most lifelike since Nelson's eyes are closed. This indicates that it was an original mould of Nelson's face taken in Vienna on his way home from the Mediterranean in 1800. The Nelson-Ward mask has the eyes open and is a version touched up in the studio shortly afterwards, so the mould is not as accurate as the other one. The Nelson-Weekes mask was a cast from a marble bust. As the moulds are believed to be taken of Nelson when he was alive, it gives us accurate information to what he actually looked like.

The masks were originally believed to be death masks taken from Nelson's face two months after the battle of Trafalgar when HMS *Victory* arrived in Portsmouth in December 1805. There are no records to confirm this and research undertaken by morticians has proved that Nelson's face would have been too decomposed for such a mould to be taken.