Wax

MARINA WARNER

The Sicilian artist and abbot Giulio Gaetano Zumbo (1655-1701) was a hell-fire preacher such as later tormented James Joyce, and to communicate his dire warnings, he made finely crafted, morbid miniatures tableaux of death and doom, dwelling on ‘The Judgement of the Damned’ and ‘Time and Death’, depicting souls in torment, screaming as the red-painted wax flames burn them.

His favoured medium was wax and implied vanity, transitoryness and mortality. Zumbo is a typical example of an early modeller in wax (a ‘ceroplast’), not only because he indulged a taste for queasy Catholic symbolism, but because he simultaneously worked in Italy and France as a model-maker. In Bologna and Florence, two of Zumbo’s staging posts, medical museums still display the remarkably accurate figurines made for the study of the body and its organs. Waxwork makers in the formative era of the medium’s secular history, working towards other ends – commemorative portraiture or edifying monuments – were following in the immediate footsteps of forensic science even while obeying broad principles of sacred representation. Paradoxically, the more scientific the approach, the deeper the marvellous character of the work becomes, synthesising sacred and profane bodily image-making.

Wax takes such an exact impression that it has been used as a stamp of authenticity since the beginning of written documents; set to a personal sign in the form of a seal, or a thumbprint or a hair, it hardens, and cannot be undone; it can only be broken, and then reveal tampering. This binds it to testimony and to truth, and, as with a life-mask or a death-mask; it fortifies conviction as well as faith. It belongs in the embalmer’s pharmacopoeia; working with wax is a forensic skill.

Waxen artefacts even when removed from the practical ground or their origin and their legal and medical uses are no longer apparent; retain their challenges to the stuff of life, their authentical connection with bodies and embodiment. Wax has been used for ex voto plaques reproducing limbs and organs from Neolithic times to the present day – excavating at the shrine of a goddess in Cyprus, for example, yielded miniatures of breast and bones alongside votive statuettes to entreat her help or to give thanks for help received. In Portugal recently, in a shop selling religious articles, I saw wax emblems for sale – babies, breasts, limbs, lungs and eyes – to
offer at the shrine of the appropriate local Madonna or Saint. At the same
time however, wax gives rise to thoughts of mortality: it burns, it melts
down, it suggests the vanity of the world, the weak candle-flame of hope,
the deliquescence of flesh. The material implies organic change. Like
many symbols it packs and binds different meanings within its range. The
folk etymology given for the word 'sincere', that it comes from 'sine cera' –
without wax – and alludes to potters' practice of filling flaws in their
handwork with wax, is not historically correct, but it does reveal the
paradoxical properties of the stuff. Wax cheats death; it simulates life; it
proves true and false.

The word 'mummy', applied to bodies embalmed according to Egyptian
burial rites, derives from 'moum', the word for wax or tallow; since those
remote times, wax has been the principal material used in preserving the
dead so as to make them look as though they are still alive. Wax was also
mixed with pigment to form 'encaustic', and laid on to the cartonnage or
mummy mask to give the painted face the semblance of real flesh and skin.
Organic, malleable, and animal, this unique storage and building material
of the bees has the added property of soaking up light, like alabaster,
rather than reflecting it, and in consequence it glintens as well as glows subtly as
if from within. The resemblance of its surface appearance to skin,
especially to a fair, luminous, warm, and slightly moist complexion, lent it
to the simulation of flesh, and a market in waxen erotica flourished. Marie
Tussaud's teacher – and official uncle – Philippe Curtius, furnished private
clients with curiosities in this tradition.

Death masks, and their popular offshoots, waxworks, keep active the
metaphor Aristotle used in relation to a person's unique body-soul
compact: the essential distinctiveness of feature moulds the generic
enfleshed body that one particular subject shares with other humans and
makes the mask unique. Death masks do not incorporate the corpse
itself into the matter of the representation or effigy, as in the case of a
mummy or incorrupt catholic saint, but they do derive their potency
from their contact with the actual deceased, with his or her flesh. The
important difference between a portrait painted in life and a mask
moulded in death is not the difference in reliable resemblance – in this a
painting can be the better portrait, and many artists have pointed out
that the stilTed moment when the mould is taken and in the case of a life
mask the necessary stiffness and closed eyes of the subject make for an
inert, blank, unspeaking likeness.

Ritual use of death masks began at least in the Middle Ages, when the
kings and queens of England were paraded in effigy at their funerals: the
figures were composed of jointed limbs, and a groove on their brows
allowed the crowns to fit snugly and stay on. Facial idiosyncrasies were cast and reproduced faithfully: the results of a stroke – the drooping mouth and flattened left cheek – have been rendered in the case of Edward III, who died in 1377; Anne of Denmark, James I’s queen, has a large mole on her left cheek. The eyes were painted and the figures or busts were fully dressed in wigs and robes of state and regalia, and were carried with the bier or set up beside it.

After 1660, the chosen medium of the royal effigies was wax, and the surviving statues of Charles II and his mistress, the powerful and clever duchess of Richmond and Lennox, belie their sacred function, looking just like the gaudiest waxworks in a hall of fame. They are both dressed in the clothes they actually wore – the oldest surviving set of robes of the Order of the Garter, with a fantastic lace jabot and prodigious lace cuffs in the King’s case; in her case, she wears the full dress robes in which she attended the coronation of Queen Anne, and carries her pet parrot – the oldest stuffed bird in the British Isles.

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The above text is taken from ‘Phantasmagoria’ Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors and Media (Oxford University Press, 2006). Used by kind permission.

Painting with Wax by JOSÉ MARIA CANO

“Happy he who crew you, and happy this wax that let itself be vanquished by your beauty. If only I could be transformed into a maggot or a crawling worm, that I might devour that wood!”

The Greek Anthology, XII, 90, copiar poema Antologia Griega XII, 90

The semi-transparency of wax allows pigments to be appreciated without being exposed to the air. It’s interesting that the media originally used to draw the line between life and death, matter and spirit, and I am influenced by this use. Skin is semi-transparent as well. When painting with wax one has the feeling of breaking into another dimension.

In ancient Egypt people were mummified due to a belief that to access a life beyond this life the soul would not leave the body immediately. For a period the soul of the recently dead person would depart gradually from the body toward the new ‘spiritual state’. For the soul to be able to recognize the body that previously housed it, the body...
should stay uncorrupted. Next to the mummified bodies some food would be left to keep the soul nourished. In the beginning, only kings and important people were mummified; the only ones believed to deserve a spiritual life. Expensive masks and sarcophagus were made.

After the Roman Empire spread to Egypt, whole families were mummified for the different members to be able to wait for the others in their tombs. Around this time – 300bc – masks began to be substituted by portraits of the buried people made with encaustic on thin panels of wood. The durability of the encaustic media added to the preserved situation of the tombs joined to the very early archaeological interest about Egypt under-land has kept many of these paintings and brought several of them not only to our days but to the British Museum in London.

In cooking something dead comes back to live inside another body which eats it.

SISTER MARIE GABRIEL

On July 19, 1993 after receiving a “vision of the madonna” in her north London tower-block, Sister Marie Gabriel aka Sofia Richmond (or Sister Marie Paproski) announced to the world her prophecy that a comet would hit Jupiter or before July 25, 1994, causing the “biggest cosmic explosion in the history of mankind” and bringing on the end of the world. A comet did hit Jupiter on July 16, 1994. However, her announcement was made nearly two months after astronomer Brian Marsden discovered that Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 would hit Jupiter. (Skinner p.116, Levy p.207).

Sister Marie went on to take out full page advertising in the Times, Guardian, Telegraph etc under the dramatic heading WORLD NEWS FLASH announcing among other things that the “Third Secret of Fatima” had been divulged to her by the Virgin Mary along with a command that the Pope fly in to meet with her immediately – as in that day – by 3pm (“Subito!”). Her 800-odd page self-published, self-designed tome and masterwork Supernatural Visions Of The Madonna (1981-1991) is available via Ave Maria Books (1993)
Hysteria

In the 1990s Louise Bourgeois combined her themes of confinement, sexuality and power in a series of cages or ‘cells’, “The cells represent different types of pain”, she wrote in 1990, “the physical, the emotional and psychological, the mental and intellectual”. Some referred specifically to the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot and his clinic for hysterics at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris in the 1880s.

In the French tradition, hysteria had long been regarded by artists as a state of the creative process, and artists, writers and actors flocked to Charcot’s Tuesday Public Lectures at the Salpêtrière where he exhibited hysterical patients including many men. He described male hysterical attacks as being caused by fear, but used a different vocabulary to the one he applied to the histrionic, spiritual women, calling some male movements ‘clownisme’ and praising the athleticism of his subject’s seizures” Elaine Showalter (TateEtc, February 2007)

SERGEI RACHMANINOV

Piano Concerto #3 in D minor, Op 30, 1909

There’s a point in Rachmaninov’s third piano concerto (third movement 13 minutes in) when, after the composer’s usual rhapsodic statement and development – Rachmaninov setting out his stall while gradually intensifying both harmony and rhythm – he seems to let go the reins. As if two like-minds decided to separate in different directions, not travelling in straight lines but spiralling off like two spinning-tops towards the stars. As ‘something else’ takes over, the music takes off, unravels, appearing to move inwards and outwards, forwards and backwards at the same time.

Although Rachmaninov’s harmony is chromatically dense – at the limit of ‘correctly harmonic’ as anything could be for its time – the music stretches and compresses, zooming in and out like a movie flashback. With its elegant accelerandos, glissandos and diminuendi, its overall technical dexterity, and the sweep of imagination in its development of at first sight rather slight or ‘snatched’ material the whole achieves an overwhelmingly luxurious and glamorous ‘perfection’. Not ‘perfect’ as in Stravinsky, where the orchestral technique becomes part of the actual composition – see Debussy La Mer – and where invention is housed within a polished ‘technical perfection’ but perfect in terms of a difficult but nonetheless apparently ‘divine’ birth.
Voodoo

An introduction by TOT TAYLOR

As a teenager I spent long hours poring over the piano. Self-taught and becoming more proficient and ‘knowing’ about the basics of finding my way around, it would take roughly twenty minutes at the keyboard for me to ‘lose’ myself or... find myself; or rid myself of the instinctive understanding that had enabled me to get to the point of being able to play in the first place. That ‘knowing’ from which, some years later, it became impossible to escape.

Though I couldn’t say I ever felt possessed, I did feel lost; enough to let my musical self, my real self, operate outside of that ‘knowing’ I been so keen to acquire. By this, I don’t mean improvisation, that is another thing entirely, I’m talking about absolute creation. Something which emated from me, through me or out of me, but must have been a product, amalgam and most likely a mish-mash of every song, hymn, concerto, birdsong, beat, riff or footstep that ever floated by.

Friends would comment that the music I ‘composed’ during that period – piano interludes, bi-tonal vamps and tangos – was introspective, or more particularly, ‘sad’ (no, not in a modern sense) but to me it simply reflected my personality; upbeat, nervy, sometimes inspired, yes, in the main, unfathomably ‘happy’.

So was this lost-ness some kind of ‘trance’? Did it cloud my mental vison or clear it? Was it akin to being drunk or stoned? Did it activate my Mojo? Was it anything at all to do with a ‘spell’ or a mood, hoochie-coochie, ‘possession’ or... well... Voodoo?

I don’t believe it was. It had more to do with what I heard both Leonard Bernstein and Carole King talk about in one evening during those 1970s TV-educational years. The singer-songwriter spoke not about ‘writing’ her songs but receiving them. She thought of herself as some kind of channel or conduit through which music was coming to her. Bernstein spoke about trying to remove himself while ‘waiting for something to come’.

So why am I so interested in Voodoo? Whatever it is that seductive word actually means. It’s not the voodoo act or that which is created from it which interests me but the process of creation itself. Not the ‘spark’ of
creation but the fire. The preparation for the delivery of the product to
the creator to be passed on to the receiver. For myself, this exhibition or
theme is not about possession. It is about transformation, transfiguration
and transmission. Something is being transmitted to someone, and that
someone tries to remove themselves – what they know – their experience,
their understanding, inherent and presumably inherited 'knowing', in
order to receive it wholesale. We spend a lifetime learning, in order to
know... nothing. In later life our creations somehow become simpler,
more direct; Beethoven’s late quartets, Picasso’s 60s and 70s canvases,
(his oft stated ambition was to be able to “paint like a child”), William
Burroughs late novels, Hitchcock’s crude, and therefore all the more
chilling, final films, Miles Davis’s last gasp minimalist hip-hop.

There is a tradition within literary thought and practise of ‘mirror image’,
from Alice stepping through the glass to the reflective vision of
Shakespeare’s The Tempest. My mirror image has another dimension and
angle. It is the reflection of that which is created onto the person who
receives. No ‘appreciator’ or third party will ever stand before a canvas
and look so hard for so long as the artist who painted it, no ‘hearer’ will
ever lead their psyche through the incremental timeframes that exist
within the space in which a musical composition is rolled out in anything
like as much detail or carrying as much anxiety as its composer. That
which is received is a very different item to what was released by its
creator. How convenient it would be if the originator could view the
work as the receiver does. The third eye, the objective mind, the reflective
spirit either endorsing or maybe somehow converting the content.

Francis Albert Sinatra rolls out the lyric to a couple of voodoo songs,
Witchcraft, Bewitched, That Old Black Magic or Luck Be A Lady with
the kind of attenton to detail with which a teenager boy might wrap a
gift for his sweetheart, or an undertaker might lay out a corpse,
depending on the listener’s interpretation. Sinatra’s ‘human connection’
is both extremely tender and unsettling, sometimes too emotional,
harrowing or all-round devastating to be appreciated or discussed in the
same way as other performers. His delivery, like that of Callas, Olivier,
Picasso, Garland, Astaire, Gainsbourgh, though appearing forward-
moving, positive and purposeful has, at its centre, a kind of nagging
misery. If one performer can be said to possess the elusive ‘charm’ it has
to be an obvious, i.e. popular one, one who is able to reach out to the
most people, and there is no more obvious than he. Such is Sinatra’s spell
that he transforms the average – Call Me Irresponsible, September of My
Years, into something potent and sophisticated, upgrading the material
from his first line, in the process turning a clinker such as My Way into
something more akin to a recitative or lament than just a plain bad song.

Partnered with a kindred spirit, Cole Porter (and Nelson Riddle), with
gifts equal to Sinatra’s, on It’s Alright With Me or You’re Sensational,
I’ve Got You Under My Skin*, the effect can only be described as
devastating.

During that adolescent pianism I was not ‘lost’ in the same way as the
great composer or astro-physicist. I was lost like the seamstress or
woodchopper, the sower or chanter, the glassblower or the knife-
thrower. Lost in creation, or more accurately ‘exploration’. Lost within
myself. Lost in... some kind of temporary fulfillment, or as the
Maharishi said, ‘bliss consciousness’. If only human beings could spend
more of their lives creating – something/anything. We might have so
much more chance of being so deliriously, unconditionally, but
hopefully, knowingly fulfilled or er, ‘happy’.

Presenter to Leonard Bernstein, being interviewed for his

“So, maestro... when this music you spoke of ‘comes to you’, as you put
it, what would you, what do you, then try to do with it ?”

Leonard Bernstein: composer, conductor, poet, priest, hoochie-
coochie man extraordinare. “As little as possible”

*Frank Sinatra: The Select Cole Porter is available on the Capitol label (CDP 7 966 112)
Symbols

The Vevers is the symbol which is created on the ground, a kind of ground altar, or magic pentacle which is made by dropping flour in shapes while a candle is placed at the foot of the centre-post to burn throughout the ceremony.

JULIUS KOLLER

Julius Koller was interested in the utopian possibilities inherent in art. In the 1970s, he founded the UFO Gallery on the Gánecke Peak of the Upper Tatra Mountains in Slovakia. Koller’s gallery was inaccessible to reach, so the gallery became a fictive reality and a shared dream amongst artists. Born in Piešťany, 85 kilometres from Bratislava, in 1939, Julius Koller studied painting at the conservative Bratislava Academy of Art from 1959 to 1965, a time of new political departure and the imminent Prague Spring. The sense of political upheaval inspired Koller to move away from the classical form of picture and to take up a position that was critical of modernism and influenced by the Situationist International and the deconstructivist impulses of Dadaism. In 1967/68 Koller painted a series of pictures using white latex paint, in order to be able to paint on a variety of surfaces, such as hardboard or cardboard. In their execution, these “Anti-Paintings” display numerous references to “Drip Paintings”, Abstract Expressionism and Tachism, although they nevertheless also tie in with Koller’s concept of “Anti-Happenings”, which had dominated a large part of his work ever since the mid-1960s.

Koller’s manifesto on the Anti-Happening, dating from 1965, is less concerned with translating an artistic action into reality than with creating scope for thought and thus placing the subject in a relationship to the real world. The use of everyday materials in Koller’s pictures testifies to the step which he took in the direction of anti-aestheticism, often also transporting the paintings into a three-dimensional form of assembly and using the installational moment in space to call into question conventional models of presentation. The blurred aspect of the apparently monochromatic white likewise counteracts the strivings of Minimal Art to place the form and materiality of art at the forefront of the (aesthetic) experience. It is in these pictures that a question mark appears for the first time, which from then on Koller employs as a constantly recurring element in textual works, conceptual photography and performances.