

## Donation of the Month

Object: "Coin" Harvey Death Mask  
Catalog #: 1975.166.1  
Donor: Carl McKinney



Primary cause of death: broncho pneumonia  
Secondary cause of death: influenza  
Date of death: February 11, 1936  
Age: 84 years, 5 months, and 25 days

So notes the death certificate of the Honorable William Hope "Coin" Harvey. He led a varied and colorful life as a lawyer, silver miner, author, promoter, resort-builder, and politician. An advocate of William Jennings Bryan and the Free Silver movement in the late 1800s, Harvey built the resort town of Monte Ne southeast of Rogers in the early 1900s and was a presidential candidate for the Liberty Party in 1932.

Like many heads of state, great personages, and notorious notables before him — Abraham Lincoln, Isaac Newton, Napoleon Bonaparte, Thomas Edison — a death mask was made to capture Harvey's countenance for posterity.

A death mask offers a unique glimpse of an individual long gone. While a formal portrait painted in oils or captured by photography usually gives us a two-dimensional image of how a person wished to be remembered, a death mask provides us with a three-dimensional record of what their face looked like at the time of their death, warts and all.

Although many early cultures fashioned idealized "death masks" in gold or other precious materials (think King Tutankhamen), true death masks and effigies made from the deceased's actual features were first made out of wax in medieval Europe. The process was expensive and only practiced on high-ranking members of the royalty and church, whose wax counterparts were suitably attired and paraded around during their state funerals.

In the 18th century Frenchwoman Marie Grosholtz, a.k.a. Madame Tussaud, built her reputation on exquisite, lifelike wax figures which she toured around Europe. They were made from masks taken both from live models, including Francois Voltaire and Benjamin Franklin, and, in the case of Marie Antoinette and other members of the nobility guillotined during the French Revolution, from the deceased.

During the 19th century the pseudoscience of phrenology (from the Greek root "phren," or mind) took hold amongst Western scientists. Phrenologists believed that the different areas of the brain reflected various character traits such as fidelity, ambition, wit, and the "impulse to propagate." These traits physically shaped the brain, which in turn shaped the skull.

By taking complex measurements of the skull one could accurately determine a person's psychological attributes and tendencies. During the 19th and early 20th centuries this dubious "data" helped Europeans to quantify their belief that their race was superior.

As a result of the interest in phrenology and the affordability of casting materials, the making of life and death masks grew in popularity. The following description of creating a life mask comes from the June-November 1892 issue of *Harper's Monthly*. A similar technique would have been used on a corpse.

*The person was made to recline on his back at an angle of about thirty-five degrees, and upon a seat ingeniously adapted for the purpose. The hair and face being anointed with a little pure scented oil, the plaster was laid carefully upon the nose, mouth, eyes, and forehead in such a way as to avoid disturbing the features; and this being set, the head was pressed into a flat dish containing plaster, where it continued to recline, as on a pillow. The plaster was then applied to the parts of the head still uncovered, and soon afterwards the mould was hard enough to be removed in three pieces, one of which, covering the occiput, was bounded anteriorly by a vertical section immediately behind the ears, and the other two, which covered the rest of the head, were divided from each other by pulling up a strong silken thread previously so disposed upon the face on one side of the nose. [When making a life mask, small hollow reeds or tubes were inserted into the subject's nostrils to facilitate breathing.]*

By the time "Coin" Harvey died in 1936, the heyday of death masks had pretty much ended. Otis McKinney, manager of the Callison Funeral Home in Rogers, was the funeral director for Harvey's burial. It was bitterly cold when Harvey died, making it difficult to prepare his grave. While the embalmed body waited entombment, McKinney made a death mask of the great man, believing that Harvey's features should be preserved. He kept the mask at the funeral home, showing it to friends but never putting it on display.

Harvey's death mask is a remarkable work. Made of plaster of Paris and painted bronze, it captures every wrinkle, every vein, and every hair of a man in his final slumber. In later years Otis McKinney's brother Carl — a funeral director in his own right and the donor of the mask — gave an oral history interview with the Museum. He noted that at the time the mask was made, kits to do such work were available to morticians. First a cream was used to cover the face to make the completed mask easy to remove. Then

a rubbery substance was smeared on and allowed to harden. After it was cut from the face in two slightly flexible pieces, plaster was poured into the molds and the pieces joined. While Carl McKinney believes his brother likely tinkered with mask-making from time to time, Harvey's death mask was the only one he is known to have created. Their manufacture was certainly never common practice in Northwest Arkansas

We'll never know if "Coin" Harvey would have appreciated having his death mask made and eventually placed in a museum. Given his many years on the public stage as lawyer, entrepreneur, and presidential candidate, we believe this type of eternal tribute in keeping with Harvey's tireless promotion of his thoughts and enterprises. We hope he's pleased.

CREDITS: Ruth Muse's article, "Harvey's 'Death Mask' in Museum," *Weekly Vista* (January 18, 1977); RHM's oral history interview with Carl McKinney (May 19, 1990); Royal London Wax Museum's article "The History of Wax Sculpture" ([www.waxworld.com/sculptur.html](http://www.waxworld.com/sculptur.html)); Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum's article "Madame Tussaud's Exhibition" (<http://www.dimkin.df.ru/mt/>); and Hunterian Museum & Art Gallery's article "Last Impressions" ([www.hunterian.gla.ac.uk/Archives/deathmask/intro.html](http://www.hunterian.gla.ac.uk/Archives/deathmask/intro.html)).