

CASTING PRESENCE

THE DEATH MASK OF SIR THOMAS LAWRENCE

AS A SITE OF REMEMBRANCE

Emily Knight

Formerly University of Oxford, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT – When Sir Thomas Lawrence died in 1830, plaster casts were made of his face and right hand. The death mask was placed inside a wooden box with a lid that contained a mezzotint of the artist in life, his chalk, stubs, pencil, and a lock of his hair. This curious collection of objects formed a temporal bridge from past to present, operating as a site of remembrance that surpassed mere physical description. The experience of lifting a lid filled with traces of the artist's life to reveal the death mask concealed beneath, presented the viewer with the absolute and unalterable finality of death. The various elements that contribute to the presentation of Lawrence's death mask declare his existence through trace, touch and abject remains. They mark the point at which commemoration and deified celebration made way for a more encompassing and personal memorial on the brink of the Victorian Age. This article will discuss this key moment in early nineteenth-century visual culture, before photography emerged as the predominant mode of automatic reproduction. It will consider how this process of remembrance created an experience of death that was both haptic and optic, exact and emotional, thereby revealing the contemporary desire to be immersed in the contemplation of a life lived and a fascination with mankind's inevitable end.

INTRODUCTION

The death mask of Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830) moulded into the shape of his head (Fig. 1), rests on a pillow, his suggested body tucked beneath the covers revealing just a corner of his bed shirt to the viewer. With his lips slightly parted and his eyelids faintly creased, he has an expression of calm repose and appears as if peacefully sleeping. The nature of this display provides an intimate encounter with Lawrence's image. Forming a fragment of the imagined space of the artist's bedroom, it zooms-in on the moment of death itself. To the contemporary viewer an object of this kind was a way of holding onto the image of the deceased. As the body faded away, the trace of its presence remained, and thus it could be contemplated as a means of remembrance, simultaneously drawing attention to the moment of death and one's own finitude. Throughout the nineteenth century mourning practices shifted from the public sphere to the private domain and in this way, Lawrence's death mask and its mode of display demonstrate this change. This study will consider how death is represented in Lawrence's death mask and how its display affected the way in which contemporary viewers interpreted it, in turn revealing early nineteenth-century attitudes towards death and remembrance.



Fig. 1

Death mask of Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830)

1830

Plaster

44.5 x 31.5 cm

© National Portrait Gallery, London

During Lawrence's lifetime, the taking of death masks was a common practice. The vast majority of famous faces in Ernst Benckard's comprehensively illustrated 1929 book, *Undying Faces: A Collection of Death Masks*, preserve the images of a great many men born in the eighteenth and dying in the nineteenth century.¹ During this time, it was common for masks to be commissioned by families and admirers to commemorate the life of a particular person, as well as by artists to create posthumous portraits. Lawrence himself used the death mask of William Pitt the Younger, alongside a portrait bust by Joseph Nollekens in order to create his own posthumous portrait of the British Prime Minister.

The sudden rise in the production of death masks at this time was in part a symptom of the culture of cast-making in general, which was at its zenith during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Casts were used as a way of reproducing architectural elements and sculptural works, preserving and transporting the features of a particular object or building to another place and time. They eternalized the image of something and provided a visual point of reference for items out of sight, at a distance or no longer present. As a result, the plaster cast held a central position in the art education of the time with its emphasis on the copying and referencing of other works of art.² Could it be that the widespread interest in visual reproduction of this kind is indicative of the public being in some way ready for the repetitious visual process soon to be found in photography?³ It is apt therefore, to consider the death mask of an artist who was working in this particular cultural moment when the creation of death masks was at its most prevalent.

THE PRESENTATION OF LAWRENCE'S DEATH MASK

The National Portrait Gallery describes the maker of Lawrence's death mask as "unknown artist". According to Laurence Hutton, however, the mask was made by the sculptor Edward H. Baily.⁴ Richard Walker supports this assertion by noting the similarity between Baily's posthumous marble bust of Lawrence and the death mask, suggesting a clear familiarity with the painter's facial features.⁵

1 Ernst Benckard, *Undying Face: A Collection of Death Masks*, trans. Margaret M. Green (London: Leonard and Virginia Woolf, 1929).

2 See the "National Course of Instruction for Government Schools of Art in Britain", reproduced in Stuart Macdonald, *The History and Philosophy of Art Education* (London: University of London Press, 1970), Appendix C.

3 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1990), 26-27.

4 Laurence Hutton, *Portraits in Plaster from the Collection of Laurence Hutton* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894), 138-141. This is referenced in Richard Walker, *Regency Portraits* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1985), 311, which also mentions that there is no reference to the making of the death mask in D. E. William's detailed description of Lawrence's death in *The Life and Correspondence of Sir Thomas Lawrence* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831).

5 Walker, *Regency Portraits*, 311.

6 Ibid. 311. Walker suggests that Baily may well have consulted Lawrence's death mask in order to create his posthumous portrait.

7 Such as Sir Walter Scott's death mask at Abbotsford. Cast in bronze, it rests on a cushion with folds of fabric underneath his chin, likewise rendered in bronze. Though it is clear from the large scar across his skull that this can in no way be the kind of 'sleeping portrait' discussed with regards to Lawrence's death mask, it rests in a way that gives it an intimacy

Additionally, the toga-like cloak worn by Lawrence in Baily's portrait recalls the bedclothes draped across Lawrence's imagined shoulder in the sculpted addition to his death mask.⁶ The unusual presentation of the mask makes it a particularly intriguing example to consider with regards to the portrayal of death within this context. Though there are other examples in which a death mask has been placed on a sculpted pillow, when viewing the two largest collections of these objects at the Anatomical Museum at the University of Edinburgh and the Laurence Hutton Collection of Life and Death Masks at Princeton University, it is far more common to see the neck of a death mask shaped into a stand than it was to create an imagined real-world setting.⁷

In addition to the sculptural element of Lawrence's death mask, there was a further aspect to its presentation which distinguishes it as an object of note.

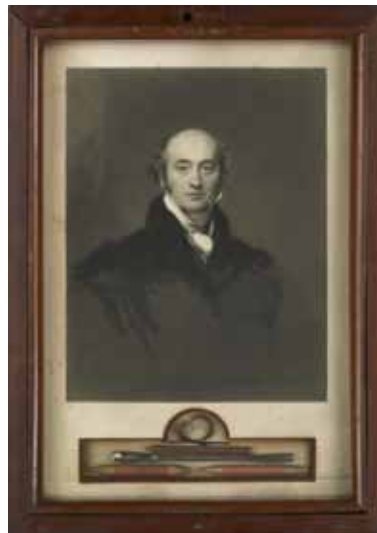


Fig. 2
Lid of the original box containing Sir Thomas Lawrence's death mask
Mezzotint by Samuel Cousins, published 22 April 1830
45.7 x 32.5 cm
© National Portrait Gallery, London



Fig. 3
Self-portrait
Sir Thomas Lawrence
c. 1825
Oil on canvas
91 x 71.4 cm
© Royal Academy of Arts, London

At the time of its donation to Britain's National Portrait Gallery in 1911, the death mask was kept within a wooden box with a glass lid (Fig. 2).⁸ Encased within the lid, there is a mezzotint of the artist in life by Samuel Cousins after Lawrence's final and unfinished self-portrait (Fig. 3). It is impossible to say what Lawrence intended to paint in the bottom half of his portrait but when Richard Evans made his copy of the work, he felt it necessary to include the artist's palette and brushes in the composition as an emblematic show of his artistic prowess (Fig. 4). Though Cousins's mezzotint closely follows Lawrence's original painting, it is interesting to see that the artist's tools were not forgotten and still found their place in the overall presentation of the death mask. Placed inside the lid in a visible compartment, Lawrence's actual chalk, stubs and pencil, along with a lock of his hair are displayed, thereby mirroring the religious practice of containing actual remnants of a person's body within a reliquary. Coupled with the fact that at the

and sensitivity that is lacking in the more commonly found medical/phrenological casts. Bearing this example in mind, the presentation of Lawrence's death mask is unusual, but by no means one of a kind.

⁸ The brass handles that were originally affixed to the box arrived at the Gallery a few days later. The Heinz Archive and Library, National Portrait Gallery, London, NPG46/17/35.



Fig. 4
Richard Evans after Sir Thomas Lawrence
 Sir Thomas Lawrence
 c.1825
 Oil on canvas
 92.1 x 71.1 cm
 © National Portrait Gallery, London

time of its donation, the box was accompanied by a cast of Lawrence's right hand (Fig. 5), the outlet for his creativity, the collection of objects work as a descriptive and literal substitution, "a comprehensive sign", to use Richard Brilliant's phrase, of the artist's mind and body.⁹ The addition of this box with its various paraphernalia, therefore, sets Lawrence's death mask apart. The entire display, then, proffers a unique glimpse of how people viewed death and commemorated life at the beginning of the nineteenth century.



Fig. 5
Cast of Sir Thomas Lawrence's right hand
Unknown artist
1820
Plaster
© National Portrait Gallery, London

THE AURA OF AUTHENTICITY

⁹ Richard Brilliant "Portraiture," in *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). *Oxford Art Online*: <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0413> [accessed 15 August 2013].

Though Brilliant is discussing portraits in general, I find this a fitting statement for my argument, which I will go on to discuss in greater detail.

¹⁰ Joseph Farington, *The Farington Diary, Vol. VII (June 10, 1811, to December 18, 1814)* ed. James Greig (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923), 84.
¹¹ *The Scott exhibition*,

To the present-day Western viewer, the experience of viewing death masks is unsettling. Death does not have a prominent presence in the visual fabric of our society; largely reserved to scorn wrongdoers or excite pathos is tragic humanitarian crises. The image of death rarely features in funerary rites or mourning practices and has thus come to be considered macabre. To the early nineteenth-century viewer, however, images of the dead and death masks specifically, were far more common and thus interpreted in a wholly different way. They were not considered to be shocking, but rather a means by which the viewers could enact their mourning and reflect on a life passed. In his diary entry dated 23 May 1812, Joseph Farington recorded the great number of people who visited the death mask of the recently assassinated Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval (1762-1812). He described how "many are much affected when viewing [the death mask]".¹⁰ A few years later in the centenary exhibition of Sir Walter Scott, an account of the reaction to the author's death mask was included in the

accompanying catalogue: “there was perhaps nothing in the whole Exhibition of greater interest than the original Mask”.¹¹ These objects possessed a kind of agency that stirred rather than shocked the nineteenth-century viewer. Unlike artistically rendered portraits, the mould from which the cast had been taken had touched Scott’s face and thus the death mask possessed something of the man that no other portrait could hope to achieve. It was the coming-into-contact that was important to the viewer; it somehow imbued the cast with an aura of authenticity, forging a direct connection with the deceased.

It is important to note at this point, that the exact meaning of the term ‘death mask’ has shifted over time and did not in fact, come into its present day usage until fairly recently.¹² In the first half of the nineteenth century, these objects were more likely to be described as “a cast taken after death”.¹³ When Lawrence’s death mask was donated to the National Portrait Gallery at the beginning of the twentieth century, the accompanying note describes it as a “Plaster cast from a death-mask”.¹⁴ So whereas we now attribute the term ‘death mask’ to the cast itself, at this time, it stood for the mould, the negative, the material that had masked the face. The fuller description given in this note, as well as the aforementioned example, seems to emphasize this direct contact beyond our present day usage of the term; it is not simply an image of the dead, but one made directly from the dead. In this way, these objects fall into Charles Sanders Peirce’s sign category of ‘index’, that is, “a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object”.¹⁵ So whereas artistically rendered portraiture implies a distancing between the sitter and the artist, the death mask provides us with a solid, indexical image of a person, warts and all. It carries a kind of truthfulness impossible to achieve in a painted or sculpted portrait. As Benkard wrote in his book on death masks, they are, “works of art from Nature’s own workshop”.¹⁶

Approaching the death mask as an exact and unalterable image, however, is highly problematic and was certainly considered as such during the early nineteenth century. Teetering on the boundary of impression and exactitude,

MDCCLXXI: Catalogue of the Exhibition held at Edinburgh, in July and August 1871, on occasion of the commemoration of the centenary of the birth of Sir Walter Scott (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1872), 196.

¹² It is hard to provide a specific time in which the term gained its present day usage. Certainly by 1988 the cast of the mould from the face had started to be called a death mask, evidenced by the title of the exhibition of that year in Edinburgh: “Death Masks and Life Masks of the Famous and Infamous from the Collection in the University of Edinburgh’s Department of Anatomy”, the Tron Kirk, Edinburgh.

¹³ George Jones, *Sir Francis Chantrey, R.A.: Recollections of his Life, Practice and Opinions* (London: E. Moxon, 1849), 276.

¹⁴ The Heinz Archive and Library, National Portrait Gallery, London, NPG46/17/35.

¹⁵ Charles Sanders Peirce, “Logic as Semiotic: the Theory of Signs,” in *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*. ed. Robert E. Innis (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985), 8.

¹⁶ Benkard, *Undying Face*, 17.

¹⁷ Georg Kolbe, “How death

it is an extreme likeness in the sense that it goes beyond our normative sense of portraiture having come into direct contact with the face of a person. It adopts, in fact, a liminal position between Peirce's 'icon' and 'index', in that it both represents and has been directly 'affected' by Lawrence's face. Certain choices, however, could be made within the casting process that prevent this type of image-making from being wholly automatic and exact, and in numerous cases, aesthetic alterations were made in order to render the final object more pleasing to the eye or descriptive of the sitter's status. Lawrence's death mask for example, was augmented after the casting process in order to enhance its function as a memorial. After the cast had set, it was painted with a cream varnish, thereby smoothing the surface and giving the plaster a marble-like appearance. By mimicking the material of commemorative portrait busts, the role of the death mask as an object of remembrance was thus exaggerated.

Aside from a superficial and intended adaption such as this, if numerous casts were taken from the original mould, the detail in the resultant object would be increasingly diminished. If additional moulds were made from these later casts, further softening of the image would occur, which would occasionally necessitate re-working in order to preserve the likeness of the sitter. Furthermore, the very nature of human flesh affected the final mould. As Georg Kolbe (1877-1947) writes in his description of the casting process, "only if the dead are already cold, do they offer an immovable, unchangeable image for our operators".¹⁷ So before the mould was even made, a delay in proceedings could also have an effect on the appearance of the final cast. Of course, the main purpose of the death mask at this time was to preserve the face of the dead at the moment in which likeness-to-life starts to disappear, in much the same way that a photograph freezes a fleeting moment on to paper. Both types of image remain present as the original fades away. The power of the death mask for the nineteenth-century viewer, therefore, lay not in the object's seeming exactitude but in its ability to hold on to the image of a person at a particular moment in time. As the plaster cast dried within the mould, the moment of transition between presence and absence was solidified; it was a filling-out of a person's absence.

masks are taken," in *Ibid.* 44.

In his book *The Ground of the Image*, Jean-Luc Nancy takes this idea of a presence slipping into absence a step further by saying that the death mask does not capture nor represent the face of the departed, but causes the viewer to contemplate death.¹⁸ It is the contemplative element of this proposition that is particularly apt for the discussion of nineteenth-century attitudes towards death masks, in the way that these objects affected the viewer and aroused a heightened awareness of personal mortality. In artistically rendered portraiture, the viewer experiences a kind of self-reflexive similitude but when viewing an image of death, this process is disrupted; the image forces the viewer to contemplate one's own demise. As Marcia Pointon has described, there is a 'pull towards death' in bodily casts, which underline the fact that life and death cannot be mutually exclusive states.¹⁹ Death is an inherent part of life and during the early nineteenth century, masks like Lawrence's would have demonstrated this fact to the viewers.

ART AND IMPRINT

In the case of Lawrence's death mask, the physical proximity of the mezzotint with his death mask brought the peculiarity between art and imprint into sharp focus. By attaching a portrait of Lawrence in life, the viewer, as it was originally intended, could absorb an image of the artist in his prime before lifting the lid and crossing the boundary between past and present, life and death, to witness the uncanny image of Lawrence's dead face. The process of accessing the death mask in this way is lost in its current display within a plastic box but imagining the act as it was originally conceived provides a potent insight into the ceremonial contact that this kind of display engendered during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The close positioning of these binary modes of representation highlighted the separation between life and death. The first image is a self-portrait, a subjective representation from the artist's own perspective. He meets the viewer head-on with the intense stare of a man who has spent his life looking. Significantly, it is the only portrait of the artist in his later years and possesses an appropriate self-

18 Jean-Luc Nancy, "Masked Imagination," in *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 99.

19 Marcia Pointon, "Inversions: Casts, Masks and Mortality" (paper presented at the Materials of Mourning Conference, University of York, December 3, 2011).

confident composure. In contrast, the death mask beneath is a passive image, in that it lacks animation and expression with its white, hard flesh and closed eyes, preventing direct engagement with the viewer. It represents the absolute finality of death that cannot be avoided or altered in anyway.

20 Deborah Lutz, "The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture," in *Victorian Literature Culture* 39 (Cambridge, 2011) 128. Lutz's article provides a concise history of secular relic culture in Europe, highlighting the similarities with holy relics.

21 Ibid. 128

22 I have been unable to uncover who commissioned the death mask and the presentation box (there are no records which attest to this at the National Portrait Gallery, London nor the Royal Academy of Art in which Lawrence's papers are kept). I can only be certain that Keightley had the mask in his possession at the time of his death as it was passed onto his daughters, who subsequently donated the object to the Gallery in 1911.

23 Georges Didi-Huberman and Thomas Repensek, "The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)," *October* 29 (1984): 63-81.

24 Peter Geimer has discussed

The relationship between the elements of this display had further implications with regard to its interpretation. Unlike the instances whereby death masks were displayed much like their painted or sculpted counterparts, Lawrence's cast and the small container in which it was housed converted the image of the artist from commemorative monument to personal memorial. The mask was encountered on a more intimate level and fitted more closely with the Victorian culture of mourning by way of the material artefact that became increasingly pronounced as the century progressed. Deborah Lutz discusses this revival of relic culture during the nineteenth century, which she argues, developed into a more secular and intimate form of remembrance.²⁰ She proposes that this was the result of a twofold drive to retain proof that the deceased still existed in some way and to focus one's attention on the moment of loss at the point of death.²¹ Viewed in these terms, the death mask forced the viewer into an almost liminal position; it was life-affirming whilst also acknowledging the loss of that life. Lawrence's death mask and its display case thus acted as a personal tie to the loss of a loved one, exhibiting traces, remnants and artefacts associated with the artist at the point of his death. Archibald Keightley, friend and executor of Lawrence's estate, originally owned the death mask and so it is likely that he created the box and made the decision to include the other objects as well as the mezzotint.²² Assuming that this is the case, the care and time that it must have taken to create the final presentation box is testament to the high esteem in which he held Lawrence and suggests a keen desire to memorialize the artist and his life's work. By adding objects that Lawrence touched on a daily basis and an actual remnant of his body, Keightley's commemorative gesture epitomizes Lutz's assertion as to the process of mourning that she discusses in her article.

TOKENS OF REMEMBRANCE

Whereas the death mask is an imprint of the body, in contact with the person by second remove, Lawrence's pencil and chalk related to the artist by way of touch, adding another non-visual facet to the viewer's interpretation of the object. Just like the holy relics of Christian practice, these objects could be viewed as secondary relics, having been owned, used and touched by Lawrence himself. Much akin to a saintly shroud stained by the blood of Christ, the objects were imbued with a fascinating allure, just a small step away from the artist's body.²³ They did not resemble the artist nor were they part of him, but still they inhabited a kind of presence-as-absence, an intangible aura of authenticity, albeit in an entirely different way.²⁴ As Peirce's theory of indices makes clear, just as "A sundial or a clock *indicates* the time of day", so too did Lawrence's tools indicate his existence and artistic genius, in a sense keeping them alive in the present, and conversely, recognizing that the act of creation was now at an end.²⁵

The other significant addition to the lid of the container was the lock of Lawrence's hair. Like his tools, the hair was not a likeness, or a representation of the artist, but the abject remains of his body; it assumed "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite".²⁶ The hair had not merely come into contact with Lawrence but was actually part of him, which added another dimension to the presentation of his death mask. It proved that Lawrence had been there, that, as Roland Barthes writes, he had "been absolutely, irrefutably present".²⁷ Preserving hair in this manner was a way of literally holding on to the body – as well as the memory – of a person after death. Much has been written about the use of human hair in jewellery as a mode of remembrance, which is important to consider in light of the inclusion of Lawrence's hair.²⁸ According to Marcia Pointon, jewellery incorporating human hair started in the Middle Ages and was particularly prevalent in Christian practice, which, she goes on to suggest, is due to a passage from the book of Revelations in which a lock of hair can be taken as a sign of possible reunion with the deceased.²⁹

the special significance given holy relics which had come into direct contact with Christ's body. See Peter Geimer, "Image as Trace: Speculations about an Undead Paradigm," trans. Kata Gellen, in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18 (2007): 11.

25 Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic," 13.

26 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay in Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

27 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 77.

28 As well as Lutz, "The Dead Still Among Us", see Marcia Pointon, "Materializing Mourning: Hair Jewellery and the Body," in *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, ed. Marius Kwint et al. (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 39-57, and Christiane Holm, "Sentimental Cuts: Eighteenth-Century Mourning Jewelry with Hair," in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38 (2004).

Holding on to an actual body part was a way of bridging the divide between past and present, living and dead. By the nineteenth century, jewellery that incorporated locks of hair was commonplace, used as a synecdoche for the deceased. Thomas Laqueur explains that “it became the corporeal auto-icon par excellence [...] the real standing for the symbolic – perhaps not eternally incorruptible but long lasting enough, a bit of a person that lives eerily on as a souvenir.”³⁰

The use of Lawrence’s hair in this case, presented in conjunction with the death mask, is an interesting moment of a meeting between index and symbol, or the real as symbol, as an all-encompassing mode of remembrance. The imprint of Lawrence’s face cast in plaster was given a new and weightier significance by this actual vestige of the man. Geoffrey Batchen considers this meeting of signs in relation to various items of jewellery that combine a photograph and a lock of hair, providing a productive point of comparison for my present example.³¹ Pointing out the increase in the inclusion of photographs and hair in mourning jewellery during the nineteenth century, he questions if it was necessary to combine the two together, and if so, what the one did to the other under these circumstances. The photograph, he argues, is “present as a visual trace even when absent as a material thing”, so why interfere with an image that functions so well with a physical remnant that is so crude and carnal?³² The same, of course, can be said for the death mask. What did the lock of hair add to the experience of viewing Lawrence’s cast, which described his face as opposed to an abstract remnant of his body?

Batchen considers the relationship between the photograph and lock of hair as a way of memorializing the life of a loved one in relation to a commemorative locket in which a photograph has been placed in one side and a lock of hair encased in the other. In this way, the ‘unhindered immediacy of representation’ that characterizes photography is met face-to-face with the actual remnant of the person depicted.³³ The implication in this coupling, however, is that the one is not sufficient without the other. The photograph does not adequately represent the person depicted, and neither does the synecdochic lock of hair. Batchen’s assertion

29 Marcia Pointon, “These Fragments I have Shored against my Ruins,” in *The Story of Time* ed. Kristen Lippincott (London: Merrell Holberton and the National Maritime Museum, 1999), 198-201.

30 Thomas Laqueur, “Clio Looks at Corporal Politics,” in *Corporal Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1992), 16-17; cited in Geoffrey Batchen, “Ere the Substance Fade,” in *Photographs Objects Histories* (London: Routledge, 2004), 37.

31 Batchen, “Ere the Substance Fade”, 32-47.

32 Ibid. 39.

33 Ibid. 39.

that in this juxtaposition the photograph emerges as an image that sacrifices its own materiality in favour of its referent (the person depicted) is similar to Louis Kaplan's argument about the photograph as an invisible, a 'transparent' gateway to the original referent.³⁴ Can Lawrence's death mask, though, be seen in these terms? Though it is a cast taken directly from his face and mirrors the mechanical nature of the photographic process in this way, its three-dimensionality imbues it with a sense of touch that is lacking in photography. The viewer, rather than having to visually transpose the photograph from image to reality, could absorb another sensory layer provided by the death mask. In this regard, it goes beyond Lawrence's own art by reaching out beyond the dimensional plane of painted portraiture as the eye is cast over its solid form. Interestingly, Batchen reflects on the lack of touch in photography, suggesting that the addition of hair helps to close the gap between the viewer and the viewed and between the image of the subject and their past physical existence.³⁵ Considering the Lawrence example in these terms shows how the death mask worked doubly to link the past with the present through the tactility of the cast as well as the small tuft of hair.

CONCLUSION

For the early nineteenth-century viewer, therefore, the remembrance of Lawrence provided by this object was both an optic and haptic experience that brought the viewer closer to the artist than was normally the case with death masks.³⁶ Lawrence's lock of hair and his artistic accoutrements, included with his death mask, presented the viewer with a combination of abject remains, associative markers and physical imprint, all of which worked together to create a more intense portrait experience with its own narrative arc. The 'talismanic' addition of Lawrence's hair furnished the death mask with a mysterious aura that reiterated its effect and in this way, as Batchen writes, "a secular object [was] given a potentially sacred aspect".³⁷ Even though the viewer encountered an image of death, Lawrence's existence was kept somehow present with the lock of hair, along with the tools he put down as his artistic career and indeed his

34 Ibid. 40.

35 Ibid. 41.

36 Ibid. 41. Batchen uses these terms to describe a daguerreotype encased with a patch of fabric from the clothes of the deceased.

37 Ibid. 41.

life came to an end. The multitude and variety of signs that were given in this example provided an all-encompassing image of Lawrence, acknowledging both his life and death, which acted as a highly effective memorial to the great artist. At the same time, the viewer was called upon to contemplate the moment of death itself, which for some would have led to a self-reflexive acknowledgement of their own mortality.

I do not, however, mean to suggest that the death mask itself was a purely emotional memorial. Even though, in the Lawrence example, the death mask was presented in a way that encouraged a more intimate encounter with the features of the deceased, it did not have the same portability that a piece of mourning jewellery had, and it could not be used in the same way. It could not be carried or worn close to the heart while going about daily activities, but had to be looked at from a static point of view in the way that the viewer would have experienced a commemorative sculpture. It was the pulling-together of Lawrence's death mask with other artefacts and bodily remnants that augmented the way the death mask was interpreted. Seen together, they became life affirming – he used this pencil, this piece of chalk – yet the intimate and theatrical act of lifting the lid of the box and revealing the death mask beneath, brutally reminded the viewer of the man's demise and by inference, their own.

Emily Knight studied History of Art and Visual Culture at the University of Oxford, where she completed her Master's degree in 2012. Her Master's dissertation focused on portraiture and death masks in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries in Britain. She is currently developing her ideas for a PhD project on portraiture in eighteenth-century British art.