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FINE LIVING IN VENTURA COUNTY

monthly

MAKING HISTORY

G.S. STUART AND THE ART OF FINE DETAIL

FACTS AND FIGURES:

George Stuart breathes new life into history's most famous and infamous characters. Here, Gilles de Retz, heroic companion of Joan of Arc (and serial killer of boys). See page 32.

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Left: Stuart at work on "Regin," a Nordic Frost-Giant whose race is said to have started out as icicles and become a dominant force, opposed to the rule of the Gods.

Right: The process begins with meticulous research, utilizing everything from contemporary texts to autopsy reports. Modeling begins with an articulated skeleton of iron wire sized to the best anatomical data.

Below: Abe Lincoln is part of an eclectic group on display at Stuart's Gallery of Historical Figures® in Ojai.

Making History

Ojai-based artist George Stuart breathes new life into antiquity's most famous and infamous characters, creating astoundingly realistic portraits for his Gallery of Historical Figures®.

BY IVOR DAVIS
PHOTOS BY PETER D'APRIX

"The moment I saw him I realized he was a national treasure buried in Ventura County," recalls Leroy Becker, a former engineer and marketing maven who happened upon George Stuart—the genius behind a veritable army of Historical Figures—delivering one of his unique monologues more than a dozen years ago. Inspired by Stuart's skills, Becker made it almost a life's work to spread the word about this one-of-a-kind local artist.

Today, the eighty-something Stuart continues to craft his collection of remarkable likenesses, which includes more than two thousand of history's movers and shakers. Think Madame Tussaud's, but every one of them executed in quarter life-size. He is a master of detail: those famous faces, the bodies, the costumes, the jewelry and adornments.

Stuart's creations are a huge drawing card at the Museum of Ventura County. "They are so perfect and lifelike," notes the Museum's executive director, Tim Schiffer, "looking at them is like looking back into time, observing history through a keyhole." Kings, emperors, heroes, presidents... You name the icon and

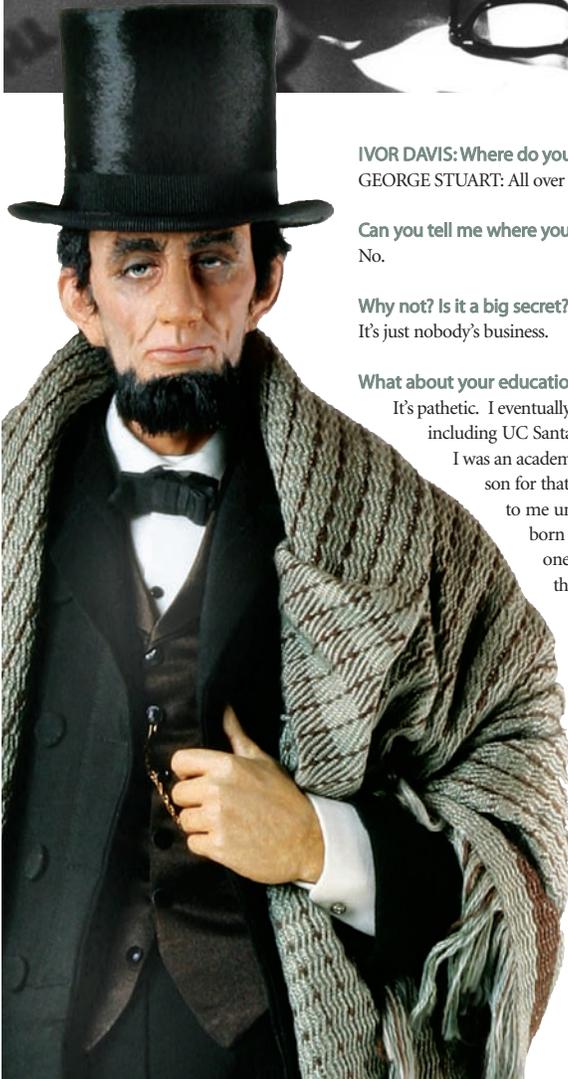
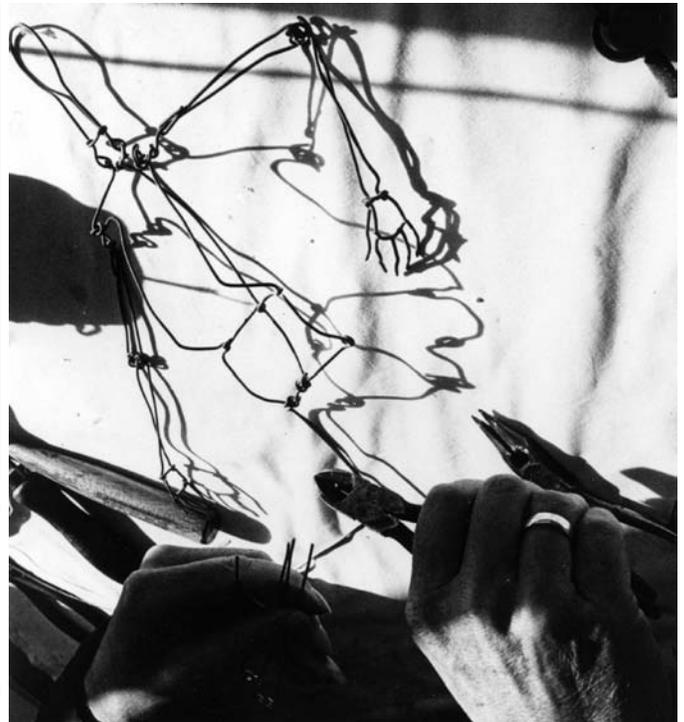
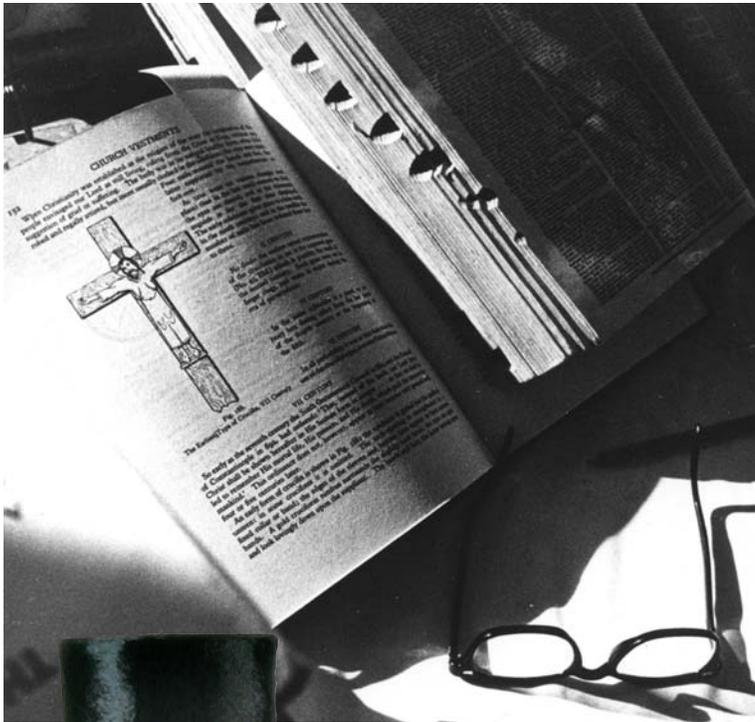
Stuart has likely put blood, sweat, and painstaking detail into bringing it to life in miniature.

Most days, the still sprightly Stuart toils happily in his Ojai studio, which houses his workshop and a small museum of selected pieces that includes his very earliest works, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, first created in the fifties. This exhibition—the Gallery of Historical Figures®—comprises an eclectic group; in one viewing box, Lincoln and his wife, Mary Todd, share space with Vlado Tepes, popularly known as Vlad the Impaler.

Stuart, a tall, lugubrious man, dresses in what has become his uniform: a black, collarless shirt with a red handkerchief in the breast pocket, black pants, and dark shoes. Sporting a now silver moustache, he carefully pours morning tea and, in a conversation heavily laced with self-deprecating wit about his extraordinary skills, lovingly describes the personalities that over the past half-century have been admired across the country.

There is something of the man of mystery about G.S. Stuart, which is exactly how he likes it—and how he plans to keep it.





IVOR DAVIS: Where do your Historical Figures live?
GEORGE STUART: All over ... wherever they're stored.

Can you tell me where you were born?
 No.

Why not? Is it a big secret?
 It's just nobody's business.

What about your education?

It's pathetic. I eventually attended three universities, including UC Santa Barbara and Georgetown. I was an academic disaster. There was a reason for that, one that didn't come clear to me until I was an old man: I was born dyslexic, and of course no one had ever heard of that in those days. It's not an excuse, because other people have surmounted much greater hazards and succeeded academically.

Was it hard to overcome?

My parents thought I was just stupid. When I first went to university I couldn't read. So I had to get a fellow student to write my first school papers.

Tells us about your upbringing.

I came from a privileged home, as an only child, and that makes you somewhat self-centered. I was always selfish. My mother, Catherine, should never have married, but that's what women did in those days. She wrote novels that didn't sell and was a semi-invalid with tuberculosis. She was strong willed like me—that's why we never got along. When I look in the mirror every morning I see my mother with a moustache.

And your father?

He was also George. His family came from Germany. He flew planes, raced cars and motorcycles. He came from a prosperous Colorado ranching family but lost a fortune in the Depression.

Did you show early artistic promise as a child?

When I was around 11 or 12 I was fascinated by architecture and decided to do a model of the Palace of Versailles. I built it in concrete, wood, and marble over the next five or six years, with a lot of help from a wonderful family member.

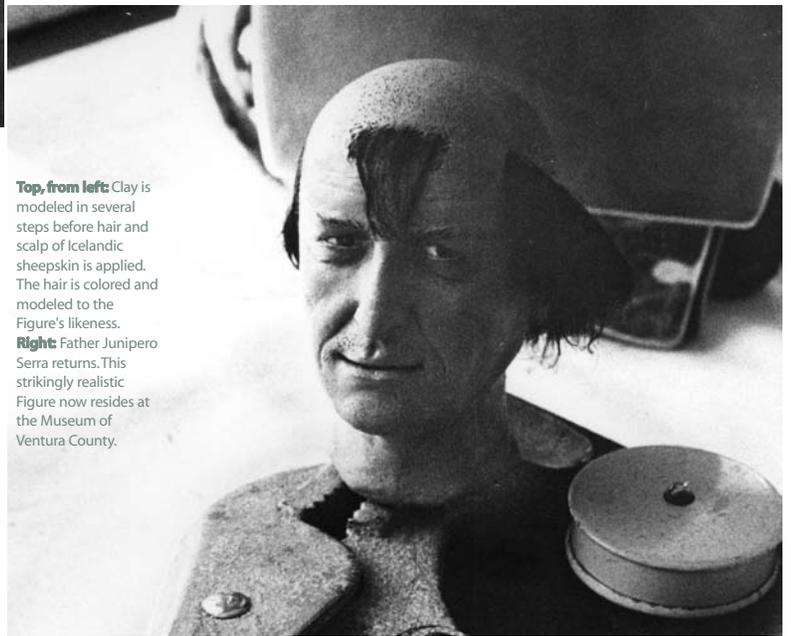
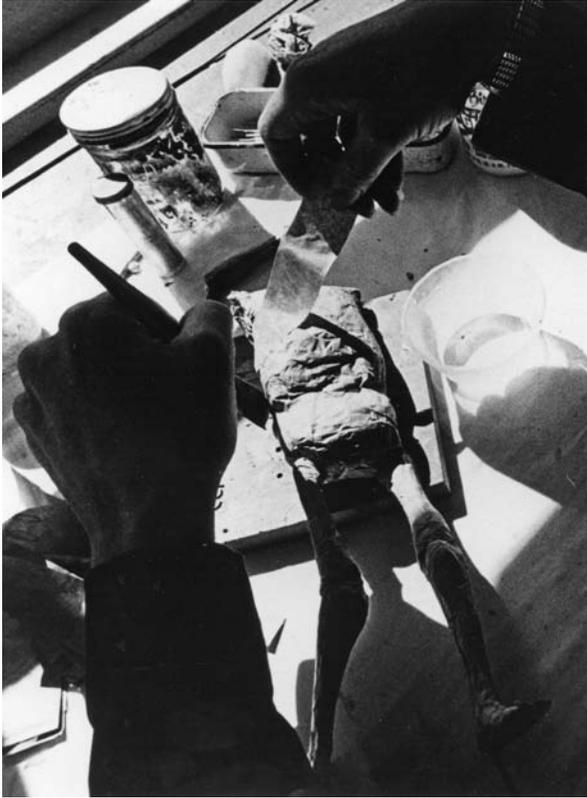
Did you ever think of pursuing a different career?

I always loved the theater, from my days at UC Santa Barbara. And there was talk about me becoming a Jesuit priest or working for the State Department. Fortunately, the nation was spared from me becoming a Foreign Service flunky forever.

You've done Historical Figures from around the world. Was it obvious you would turn your attention to American characters?

When my manager said to do U.S. history people I said, 'Nonsense, Americans don't want to know anything about that.' But he said they want to know what they already know about. So I did Lincoln and it turned out to be the most popular Figure I ever did. I've done five Lincolns so far. So I realized I'd better shut up and pay attention to him.

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Were you ever asked to do movie stars?

My manager suggested Marilyn Monroe, but if I did her it would be a failure because people have all seen Monroe in movies and my effort would not look like their mental image of her.

How do you begin to create?

I have had a researcher, and the most important thing is to get a great likeness. It can take months. Costumes are important, and so over the years I've found special places I can find material for their clothing. Hair was once a big problem, but now I use Icelandic sheepskin for their hair. Unlike, say, painters, I often rework and rework a Figure several times until I'm happy with it.

How did your "Really Awful People" collection come about?

As a pick-up group at the museum. I thought it might be amusing for an audience to select a group of those characters. It's very entertaining.

What do you do when you're not working in your studio?

Wouldn't you like to know!

Do you socialize in Ojai?

I enjoy dining out when I have guests. But I stay home a great deal, and any man who stays home and can't cook is a damned fool.

What would you like your obit to say, "George Stuart, the preeminent Historical Figure maker of the twentieth century"?

I'd be so embarrassed I'd get up out of the grave and mutilate the person who wrote that. ❑

Top, from left: Clay is modeled in several steps before hair and scalp of Icelandic sheepskin is applied. The hair is colored and modeled to the Figure's likeness.

Right: Father Junipero Serra returns. This strikingly realistic Figure now resides at the Museum of Ventura County.

Really Awful People: George Stuart will make three personal appearances, focusing on history's dark side, at the Museum of Ventura County adjunct: 89 S. California Street in Ventura. The monologues are scheduled for Oct. 12, 1:30 p.m.; Nov. 16, 1:30 p.m.; and Nov. 17, 7:30 p.m. "The story begins with a massacre and ends with a slaughter," Stuart wryly observes. "In between we have murder, rape, sex, violence, intrigue, and political chicanery. So of course you'll identify and love every minute of it." And indeed, you will. The nasty bunch includes many of the usual suspects: Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Attila the Hun, Nero (who fiddled while Rome burned), Ivan the Terrible, and the dreaded Borgias.

Understanding History Through Art: The nonprofit Historical Figures Foundation was established to preserve and promulgate the work of G.S. Stuart. Foundation activities are underwritten by grants and donations worldwide. You can view more images and learn how to participate by logging on to their website at Gallery-HistoricalFigures.com.