



George II



George III



George IV



William IV



Victoria

Over 200 years' continuous production of bas-relief portrait medallions and plaques constitutes a unique 'Wedgwood Gallery', renowned for its artistry and historical value. The extent of subjects modelled for ceramic reproduction is almost limitless: ranging from Royalty to revolutionaries, scientists to statesmen.

The reproduction this year of bas-reliefs of Prince Albert (to mark an exhibition in tribute to his life and work) and of Joseph Priestley (to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the eminent scientist's birth) prompted us to look back at the origins of Wedgwood portraiture and the meticulous and intricate skills required in their design and manufacture.

Origination of bas-relief sculpture calls for great skill and experience. Just as the first Josiah Wedgwood engaged leading artists, as well as his own studio modellers, to create portraits in clay, so does the Wedgwood design studio today. Of this highly specialised art form, chief modeller Michael Dillon says:

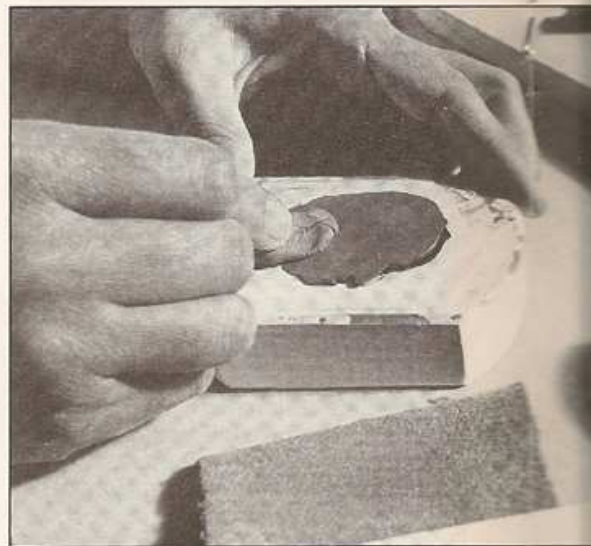
'Creating a profile or fuller face image in faithful likeness of the subject is one thing, but retaining all the vital features in very low relief is a special skill which some sculptors have – notably James Tassie and William Hackwood in the 18th century, and Arnold Machin today. The more skilled the artist in bas-relief work, the easier it is for the ceramic modeller to prepare the mould for a portrait. Wedgwood modellers, too, need special skills to convert, for example, an artist's three dimensional sculpture into a profile relief portrait.'

From the studio modeller's master mould in plaster are made working

moulds of fired clay known as 'pitcher'. From these are produced the portraits in soft clay by highly skilled figuremakers. They use the traditional techniques of pressing the clay into a mould, trimming away the surplus and 'teasing' the modelled clay out with a special steel spatula – and a lot of 'knack'!

Occasionally very large portrait plaques have been produced – some up to two feet in diameter, as memorials or commemorative plaques – and the portraits for these certainly require a good deal of expertise. At the same time, numerous medallions have been made in the form of very tiny images, some measuring only a quarter-inch in diameter and, naturally, these also require high degrees of skill. In the main, the vast majority of Wedgwood portrait medallions have been made in Jasper, some times in a combination of several colours, but principally in white on pale blue; and some have been made in Black Basalt.

While the average size portrait medallion (between four and six inches in height) is made by the traditional figuremaking process described earlier, the clay for the production of much larger sized portraits often requires special treatment to ensure that the fine details are maintained. To avoid any creasing of the clay for the larger portraits, it is often rolled with the use of a kitchen rolling pin to ensure that all the air is removed before it is pressed into the mould. Equally important is the reverse of the portrait which must be completely flat and smooth to ensure that it will fix firmly when moistened with water to the clay background.

American statesman,
Benjamin FranklinScottish poet,
Sir Walter ScottEnglish statesman,
William PittEnglish astronomer,
Sir William HerschelSwedish naturalist,
Doctor Daniel Charles Solander