

Fixed Expression

A BUST CONJURES UP AN ENTIRE WORLD OF
CULTURE, HISTORY, AND CIVILITY.

BY AIMEE LEE BALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY DON FREEMAN

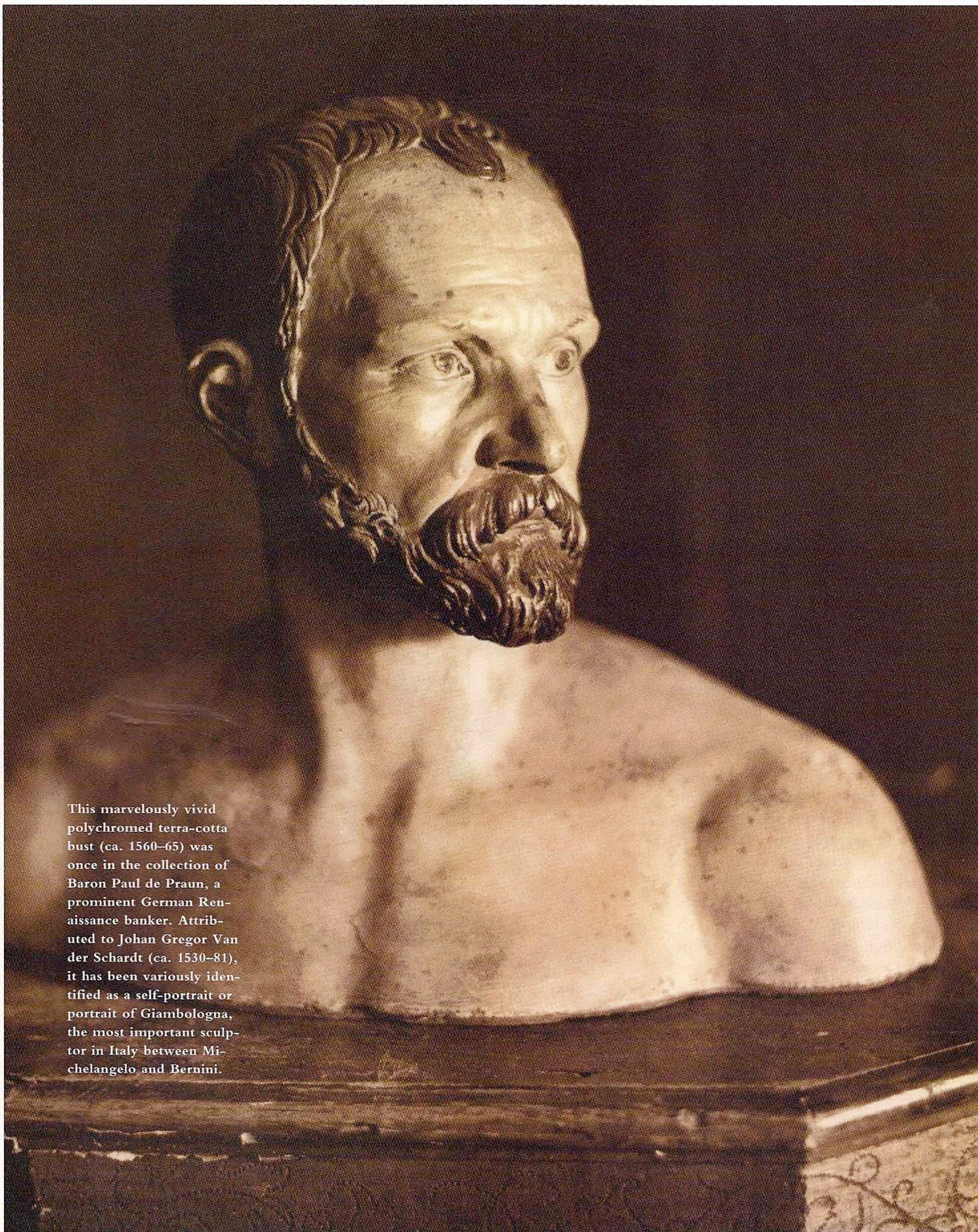
If you were an aristocrat in 18th-century France, one of two fates was likely to befall your lovely head: Either it was immortalized as a bust, or it was lopped off at the guillotine.

It is the happier of those two destinies that we will be addressing here.

In our culture of built-in obsolescence, it's hard to remember a time when the word *portrait* connoted something in marble or bronze and not an 8-by-10 glossy. But the bust was a customary form of portraiture in many civilizations before the dawn of Eastman Kodak, arguably reaching its apogee in prerevolutionary France (with an honorable mention to a couple of Italians: Bernini and Canova). Its subjects have constituted a litany of movers and shakers, assorted swells, and high pooh-bahs: rulers and ecclesiastics, actors and poets, robber barons and industrialists, university presidents and bankers—plus the pooh-bahs' spouses and children.

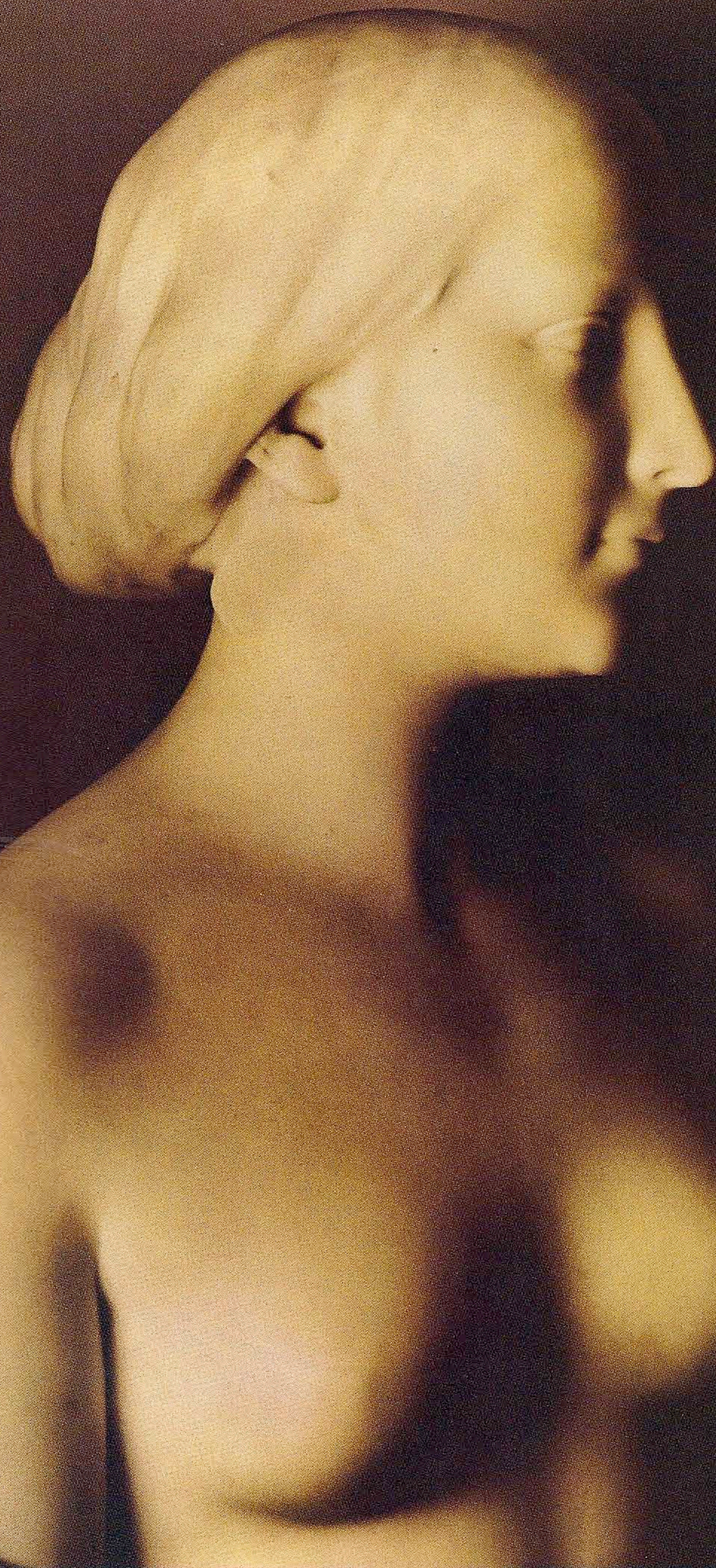
The tradition of portrait busts is historic and myriad, rendered in the limestone of Pharaonic Egypt, the bronze of 12th-century West Africa, the alabaster of post-medieval Europe, the glazed earthenware of imperial China (although in truth the bust is relatively scarce in Asian art). Even the most primitive of examples—a tiny ivory head of a woman from Stone Age France, carved with who-knows-what kind of implement—can seem miraculous. The early Greeks idealized the human face, as if influenced by some nascent form of spin-control, but the Romans were realists.



A polychromed terra-cotta bust of a man with a beard, likely a self-portrait or portrait of Giambologna. The bust is shown in profile, facing right, and is set against a dark background. The man has a full, dark beard and mustache, and his hair is styled in a short, wavy cut. The bust is mounted on a dark, rectangular base. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the terra-cotta and the details of the man's face and beard.

This marvelously vivid polychromed terra-cotta bust (ca. 1560–65) was once in the collection of Baron Paul de Praun, a prominent German Renaissance banker. Attributed to Johan Gregor Van der Schardt (ca. 1530–81), it has been variously identified as a self-portrait or portrait of Giambologna, the most important sculptor in Italy between Michelangelo and Bernini.

The strong profile of *Resignation* (1871; this page), a white Carrara marble bust by the totally self-taught American sculptor Erastus Dow Palmer (1817–1904), perhaps betrays the fact that he was a cameo carver by trade. There is an earlier version of this bust in the Albany Institute of History & Art, and Palmer is also responsible for a bust of Washington Irving in The New-York Historical Society. The hand-modeled terra-cotta bust of the great opera composer Christoph Willibald Gluck (ca. 1775; opposite page) by Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828), the premier sculptor of 18th-century France, is generally believed to be the first realistic depiction of the ravages of smallpox.



“They showed every bump, wrinkle, and wart,” says David Dearing, chief curator of the National Academy Museum in New York City. “But portraiture was practically dead from the lapse of the Roman Empire until the Renaissance. There was nobody to do it and nobody to pay for it. It was the influence of the Church. A portrait was an expression of self-interest, and the Church was de-emphasizing the individual.” One slightly grisly exception to all this was the medieval custom of honoring a dead saint with a reliquary bust—containing a glass-cased fragment of the dearly departed’s bone—as the centerpiece of a chapel dedicated to the holy personage.

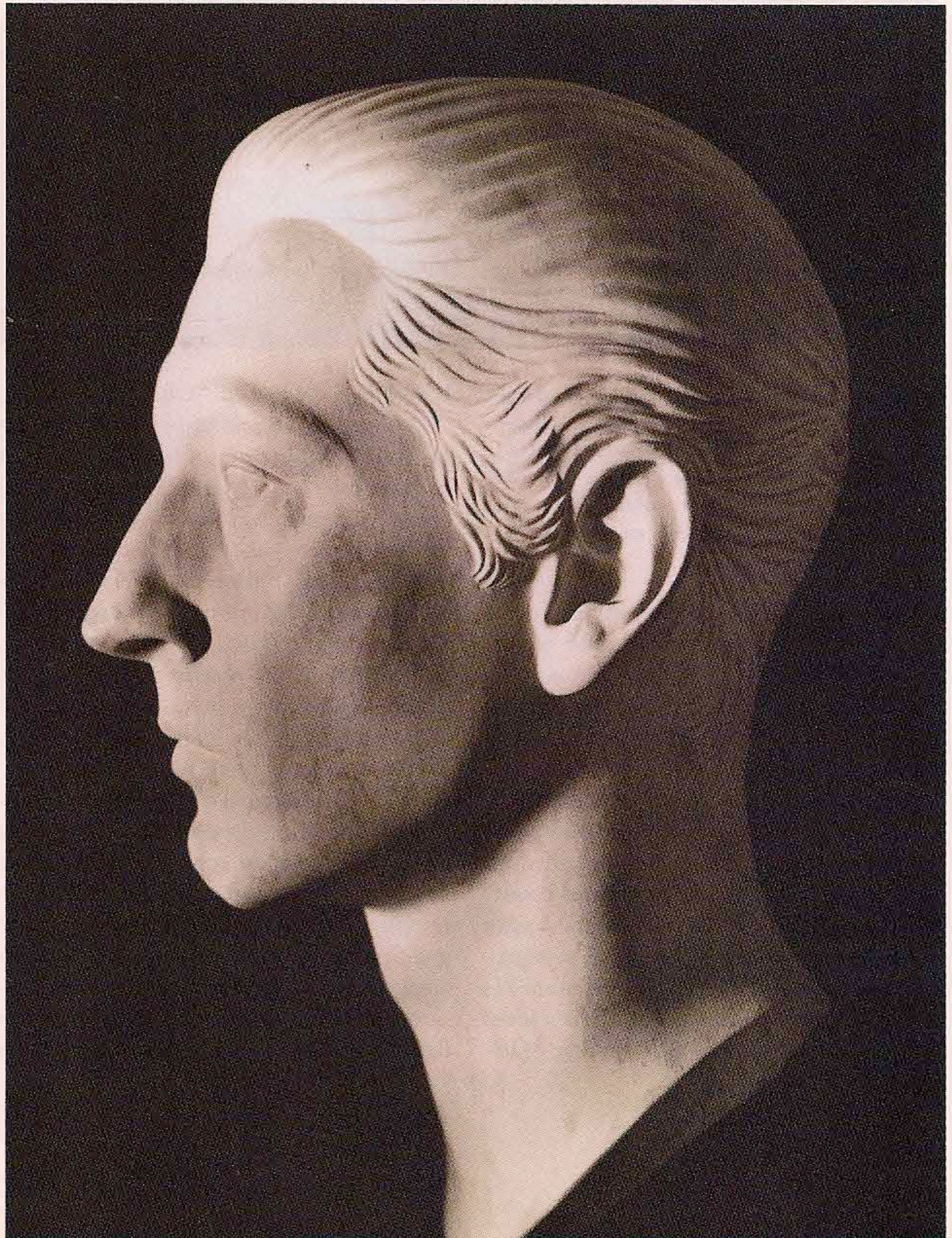
Brazen realism marked the work of Jean-Antoine Houdon, the premiere sculptor of 18th-century France, when almost nobody escaped the scars of smallpox. The fashionable members of French society hid their pockmarks with patches in the form of stars or crescent moons, and artists did

similar cover-up work in their portraits. Houdon’s bust of the composer Christoph Willibald Gluck was the first to show such scars with a brutal honesty. At one time Gluck was employed at Versailles as private composer to Marie-Antoinette, one of the few untouched by the pox. Because she liked to play at being a farmer’s daughter in her own private cowsheds and dairies away from the court, she unwittingly inoculated herself against the disease. Despite her fine “milkmaid’s complexion,” Marie

refused to sit for Houdon, knowing that his work would not flatter.

It’s a pity she lacked a head by the time Houdon embraced a more worshipful neo-classic style. (The discovery of the ruins at Pompeii and other archeological digs revived interest in all things classical.) The latter-day Houdon often depicted his subjects as gods—Catherine the Great of Russia made a particularly fetching, if ironic, Diana, goddess of chastity. Even Americans were glorified: Houdon sculpted our am-

Busts need not be enormous. Here are two examples less than seven inches high: *Medusa* (ca. 1906–7; top left) by Elie Nadelman (1882–1946), a Polish-American who also created the enormous marble statues in the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center; and a tiny bronze self-portrait (ca. 1599; bottom left) by the Italian master and sculptor-to-the-Medicis, Giambologna (1529–1608), which he made at the apex of his fame when he was elevated to the Papal Order of the Knights of Christ. Although this bust of John Barrymore (below)—who was known appropriately as “the Great Profile”—is signed and dated Paul Manship 1920, that doesn’t tell the full story. Manship (1885–1966), who did the gilded *Prometheus* at Rockefeller Center, was no stone carver and originally worked in clay. He then commissioned the French-American sculptor Gaston Lachaise (1882–1935) to re-create the head in stone, a joint creative effort they had already used on a famous bust of the elderly John D. Rockefeller (in which the eyes are tinted blue).





Jean-Baptiste Pigalle (1714–85) hand-modeled this rather sensuous terra-cotta bust of Louis XV's mistress, Madame de Pompadour, in 1759. It's a highly flattering portrait: The lady was in fact no beauty—her considerable attractions were intellectual, social, and artistic.

bassador to France—a fellow by the name of Benjamin Franklin, whose bust is currently in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Franklin coaxed the Frenchman across the Atlantic to do George Washington at Mount Vernon. He made the founding father look regal, if not downright royal.

Hundreds of historic busts fill the New York townhouse of collector and art dealer Michael Hall—an accurate “head count” is impossible. (Hall is a former child actor whose appreciation of art began at a precocious age in a Kansas City museum: He asked his grandmother who'd done a lovely blue-and-white pottery Madonna. “Del-

la Robbia,” she replied. “Oh,” said the child, “I'd love to have one of her things.”) One of Hall's most important busts is a portrait of Saint Jerome by Pietro Torrigiano: “He broke Michelangelo's nose with a sculptor's mallet in a hissy-fit at the Medici academy and was banished from Florence.” Hall retains a sense of whimsy about even priceless antiquities: When a bone was missing in a small reliquary bust he inserted a piece of coarse salt from a pretzel—a perfect fit.

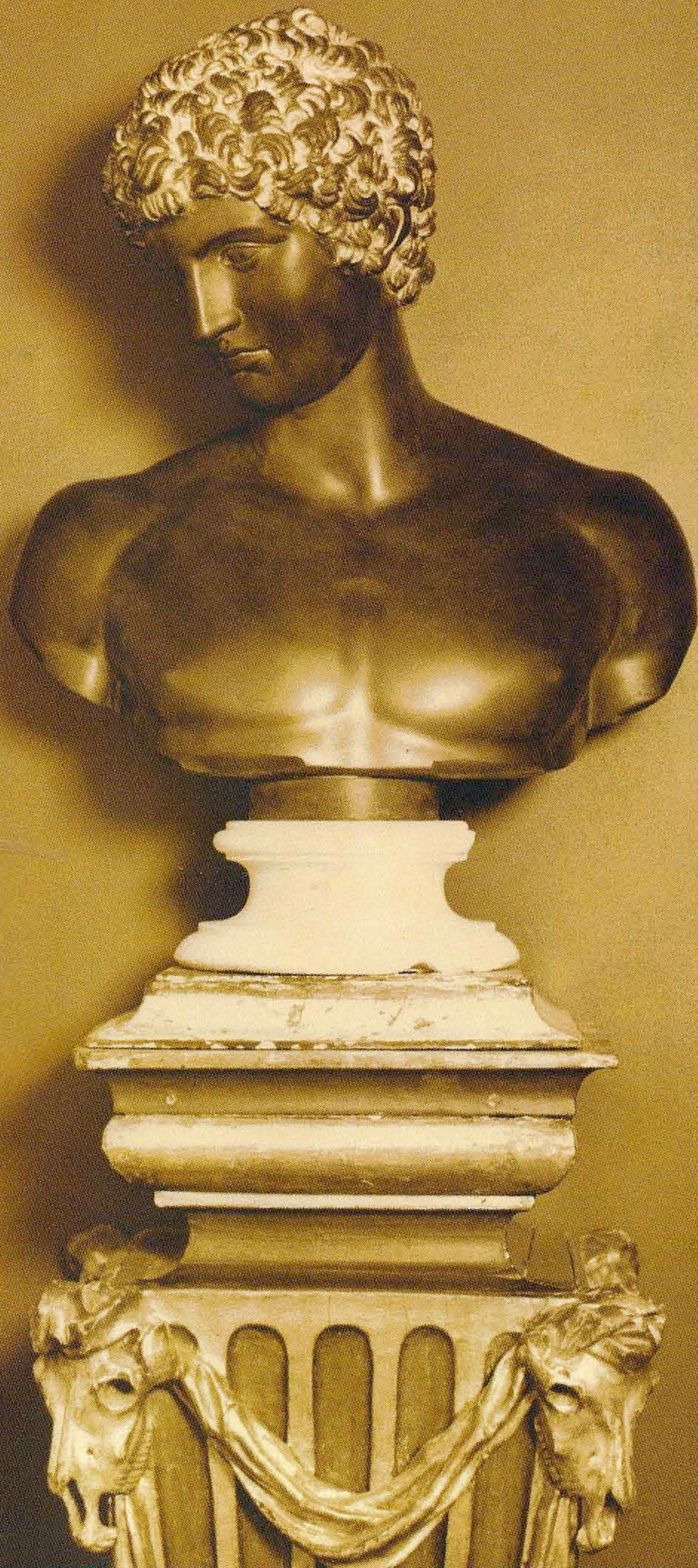
Be they saints or sinners, alive or dead, the bust elevated mere mortals—quite literally putting them on a pedestal, sometimes in public spaces, sometimes in their own homes. Often multiple copies were cast in plaster and given to friends and admirers: a nice bit of self-promotion and ego gratification, perhaps foreshadowing today's autographed photo. The bust's three dimensions were that much more vivid than the flatness of canvas—and the closest a sitter

could get to immortality. But that immortality does not necessarily extend into the realm of 20th-century interior design. When such an *ancient* form is used as a decorative object in a contemporary house, the result can be a bit funereal or museumlike, an effect that must be countered by clever placement and imaginative display.

In a private home that's not also an art gallery, the bust may forge a link with antiquity. “It's like having somebody from the past sitting there,” says Cuban-born designer Vicente Wolf, best known for modern luxe. “It can bring great drama, incredible detail, and a wonderful human scale to the space.” While Wolf acknowledges that any sculptor would want a bust displayed for maximum aesthetic impact (on a traditional pedestal, at eye level, perfectly lit), he nevertheless gravitates toward more irreverent placement: in a topiary garden wall, for instance, or above a bathroom cabinet. In his own home, a French terra-cotta bust sits atop a stack of books on the floor. “Busts are so formal,” says Wolf. “I like using them in an informal way, with a throwaway quality. All objects have their givens, their natural environment, whether it's a candlestick or sofa. I like to go against type. When something is put in an expected setting, it's not demanding anything of you, and you stop seeing it. You must allow a viewer to communicate with it.”

“Living with art is different from seeing it in a museum,” affirms interior designer Victoria Hagan. “A bust is obvious, and you have to be sure that it doesn't take over a room, even a grand hall. I've removed busts from pedestals, which are imposing and create distance. I've put them in niches, on tabletops, on library shelves where they add to the richness of the books and the atmosphere of learning. Basically, I view a bust as sculpture, and I may move it around the room. I don't think art should be stagnant. I like my rooms to speak, and a bust is one more voice.”

Alas, the bust is an endangered species. Its function as chronicler of the family has been largely superceded by the camcorder, and the pooh-bahs of the 20th century are more likely to pose for Bachrach Photographers or the camera of Annie Leibovitz. “It's a lost art, not popular anymore,” says Hall. “Rich folks have their portraits painted, with all-blond children, sometimes with their dogs. Busts are still being done, but they're often pretty (continued on page 172)



This striking bust of Antinous, the lover of Hadrian (16th century), is attributed to Francesco di Giovanni Ferrucci, called del Tadda (1497–1585). It's carved in black basalt, a rare and very hard stone that can be excavated only by using a painstaking drilling and chipping method. The elaborate painted and gilded carved-wood pedestal on which the bust stands was probably designed by Piranesi (1720–1778).

Fixed Expression

(continued from page 154)

ghastly. We suffer a malaise of craft today.”

Some contemporary sculptors have considered portrait busts only as a means to an end. “There was nothing to do but make heads,” wrote Isamu Noguchi, who made improbably literal busts of Martha Graham and Buckminster Fuller before abstraction became lucrative. “It was a matter of eating, and this was the only way I knew of making money. I took the topmost studio in Carnegie Hall and started a quantity of portrait busts of customer friends and just friends.” But there’s a paucity of masters in the tradition of Bernini and Houdon. “I have stolen from both of those guys,” jokes George Lundeen, an artist who made a bust of Benjamin Franklin, now at the University of Southern California. “But we have less artistic license than other forms of portraiture. It’s always a compromise: I want

Head Hunters

All the busts shown in this story are courtesy of Michael Hall Fine Arts, Inc. By appointment only. New York; 212-249-5053.

The following artists do portrait busts on commission. Choose carefully. As Marian MacKinney, president of Portraits, Inc., warns: “This is going to last longer than you do.”

PORTRAITS, INC. This gallery represents 15–20 sculptors who do portrait busts. Prices start at about \$7,500 (in bronze). 985 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10028; 212-879-5560.

WILLIAM BEHRENDS Price is approximately \$30,000. Box 177, Tryon, NC 28782; 704-859-9010.

DOROTHY C. HAASE Artist’s fee is \$9,000 plus cost of casting. 156 Franklin Street, New York, NY 10013; 212-925-9253.

LAWRENCE M. LUDTKE Represented by Portraits, Inc. 212-879-5560.

GEORGE LUNDEEN Prices range from \$15,000 to \$30,000. 338 East Fourth Street, Loveland, CO 80537; 970-669-7176.

RICHARD MCDERMOTT MILLER Prices range from \$10,000 to \$20,000. 53 Mercer Street, New York, NY 10013; 212-966-2643.

to make it interesting and yet look like the person.” In an era of sound-bite celebrity, perhaps there’s also a dearth of true heroes deserving the gift of posterity. Does anyone really want to contemplate a marble bust of Kathie Lee Gifford?

For all its loftier aspirations, art follows fairly mundane and inflexible rules of supply and demand. “Figurative sculpture went out of favor,” says North Carolina sculptor William Behrends. “It’s thought of as a way of honoring somebody from another era, not as a modern medium. That has been the challenge: bringing it into modern times.” Talking about your basic challenge, Behrends recently worked on a bust of Spiro Agnew. A Senate ruling from 1886 states that a white marble bust be made of every vice president of the United States. With the ignominy surrounding Agnew’s resignation, it slipped everyone’s mind that his hadn’t been done.

Except for the use of photos, the process of making a bust is much the same today as it was during the Renaissance. Vanity remains a constant. Behrends sculpted one winner of the Indy 500 who, having taken a lot of ribbing about the size of his nose, requested that a bit of plastic surgery be done to the bust. Delicate decisions have to be made about capturing a moment in time. Behrends did a posthumous bust of Henry Ford II, working with photos spanning 40 years. “He may have looked better in 1945,” says Behrends, “but he was more vibrant and in his element when he was older and had long sideburns.” Behrends uses a time-lapse technique (incorporating bits of the subject at different ages) and ends up with something that looks more like the person than the person did at any single time in his life. “Getting the likeness is the easiest part,” he says. “The difficulty is in animating it, giving it subtlety. It’s harder to breathe life into white marble than canvas and paint. For a living person, a bust can be a funereal thing.”

New York sculptor Dorothy C. Haase notes one more atavism: “Men are different from women,” she says. “You don’t have to smooth the skin, and their beauty is not an issue. But *every* man I’ve done has had some comment or request about his hair. And I’ve *never* had a commission to do a woman over fifty.” ■

AIMEE LEE BALL WROTE ABOUT ORCHIDS IN THE MAY/JUNE ISSUE OF *DEPARTURES*.