

# Liz Smith



WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2001

**R**ECENTLY I was in Madame Tussaud's wax emporium on the refurbished 42nd Street of Manhattan as guest host for the coming Metro Arts/Thirteen series on culture and art for PBS.

We taped in the hall of world leaders and inspirational creators of opinion and ideology. It was eerie sitting there, right next to FDR in his wheelchair. Nearby, stood George Washington (my personal hero) and a seated Abraham Lincoln (everybody's personal hero). There stood a spanking new **George W. Bush**, (his "portrait" is a masterpiece of realism), and also JFK (less successfully done) and Jackie as first lady (excellent). One felt a bit for **Al Gore**, who was in a basement somewhere.

Surrounding our TV operation stood Albert Einstein, Amelia Earhart, John D. Rockefeller, Henry Ford, the **Rev. Billy Graham**, **Gen. Colin Powell** (in uniform), **Rosa Parks**, Martin Luther King,

Malcolm X, Golda Meir, the **Dalai Lama**, **Pope John Paul II** and — **Yasser Arafat**.

In a remote corner stood a red-gowned Princess Diana cordoned off by a velvet rope. Every statue in Madame Tussaud's may be approached, touched, kissed even, but the princess — her death so recent and poignant — is off limits.

Diana's cohorts at the end of the room are an odd lot — Leonard Bernstein, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Dorothy Parker. A dancing Fred and Ginger tower over all. In a far away room, I even glimpsed Buffalo Bill Cody and Chief Sitting Bull.

I asked if management were afraid of damage or outrage perpetrated on these icons, some of whom are controversial? P.r. director, **Diane Blackman** said, "We have had unprecedented crowds since we opened. Attendance has been greater than we ever imagined. A crew goes through the museum each morning, wiping off smudges, straightening ties, removing lipstick, but nothing has ever been damaged beyond one broken finger.

"People do get emotional. They weep and kneel before the pope: Some pray. When the Dalai Lama came to see his portrait, he clapped his hands, laughed aloud and bowed to himself. He is intensely lifelike, especially his naked skin."

I am told **Larry King** stood beside his portrait and said, "It's not a likeness; it's an exactness."

One of the most realistic portraits is of Yasser Arafat, who is quite small. As I stood observing the Palestinian leader closely, I thought of the Op Ed piece I had read that morning in the N.Y. Times. It told of Arafat at the recent international meeting in Davos, Switzerland. He and **Shimon Peres** made speeches on the eve of the election of **Ariel Sharon** to be prime minister of Israel.

I had already heard that Perez had made a conciliatory speech extending an olive branch — a speech described to me by someone present as being "almost poetic." It was reported that Arafat's answer to Perez was shocking in its harsh and negative nature. He referred to the Israelis as "Fascists."

Perez rose to answer saying words to the effect that he had come to affect a marriage, but now there would be a divorce. What I didn't read anywhere and what shocked me was what nobody bothered to report. I am told that the general reaction of the largely European, not Arab, audience to Arafat's hard-line name-calling was *enthusiastic applause*. Such a thing is difficult for an American, especially a New Yorker, to understand.

As I stood looking at Arafat's face, I wondered: Would he be joined in this wax pantheon by Ariel Sharon or **Benjamin Netanyahu** or some other current Israel leader whose voice and influence will equal Arafat's Palestinian presence? Who will the next international VIP be? I suppose Madame Tussaud's gallery of Who's Who in Celebrity is as good an indication as any.