



## “Talking Heads”: Puppets from the Past

by Elizabeth I. Johnson

For his first personal assignment, celebrity photographer and director Matthew Rolston shot portraits of a different breed of entertainers — ventriloquist dummies. In 2009 he read an article in the *New York Times* about the Vent Haven Museum, which houses retired ventriloquist puppets. Intrigued by the story, Rolston flew to Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, by way of Cincinnati, to visit the one-of-a-kind museum.



Matthew Rolston, *Uncle Eddie*, from the series “Talking Heads.”

The faces of the little figures fascinated Rolston. “I’m not a ventriloquism person,” Rolston said. But at the core of what he does with celebrity photography is the human face. And “these were the most fascinating faces.” The museum agreed to give him access to the figures, and his project began. With a crew of five people, a film generator truck driven all the way from New York, a backdrop, lighting and the help of the curators, the puppets’ photo shoot was ready to begin.

Based on his personal response to the puppets, Rolston selected 100 of the nearly 750 displayed, most from the 1820s to 1980s, he said.

Anyone handling the puppets had to wear cotton gloves to prevent damage. In much the same way that he would direct a Hollywood star, Rolston manipulated the miniature faces. Many of the figures' mouths, eyelids and eyebrows move; some have tear ducts for crying and holes in their lip for smoking; some can wiggle their ears.

But Rolston feels that the eyes make a soulful connection to the camera. "I was thrilled at the human energy coming off the objects," he said. "They're steeped in humanity."



Matthew Rolston, *Brooks Boy II*, from the series "Talking Heads."

The project freed Rolston to work without an agenda for the first time in his career.

Andy Warhol discovered him and hired him to shoot a portrait of the then relatively unknown film director Steven Spielberg for *Interview* magazine. Soon after, he began shooting for *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Since then, the highly renowned photographer has shot for the likes of big-name magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *W*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. He also has directed award-winning music videos for the likes of Madonna, Janet Jackson, Beyoncé and Marilyn Manson.

“This is my way of making a painting,” he said. In fact, the printed versions are 5-by-5 feet squares printed on cotton rag paper, giving the prints the appearance of “extremely vivid water colors.”

His portraits also grace the pages of his newest book, *Talking Heads: The Vent Haven Portraits*. “Their humanity is inherent in the pictures,” Rolston said, adding that the personality-filled figures are “priceless.”