

How Do I Cast Thee for Profit

Part II

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A bronze hand held by sculptor and friend Bill Hueg which I had size sculpted twice life size from a casting of a hand of the gentleman who ordered a number of copies as attaching points for awnings for a building. This is an example of using a life casting as a model rather

In the first in this series of articles, I explained that the three most common parts of the body that are cast for remuneration are hands/feet, faces, and torsos. (See "How do I cast Thee for Profit, Let Me Count the Ways: Sculpture Journal, December, 2005.) At the end of the article, I quoted Moss Hart who said, "Writers, actors, and prostitutes have the same problem, competition from amateurs who are pretty good and who will work for free." Certainly artist in general, sculptors in particular, and especially life casters have the same problem. The question is how to rise above the amateurs and command reasonable pay. I will describe two strategies which will be appropriate whether life casting for portraits or as stand alone pieces of art.

At the risk of sounding cynical, if you can become a **celebrity** artist, you're home free. What I mean by "celebrity" is simply that you are **famous**, you don't even have to be any good, just famous or even infamous will do. Art history has lots of examples of well known persons whose work commanded high prices far beyond what the work itself should have. If you just happen to have achieved fame from some legitimately honorable accomplishments such as a couple of Olympic gold medals or Nobel Prizes, then who could blame you for cashing in. That's exactly why paintings by Winston Churchill are worth more than those equally good paintings by almost any artist whom no one has ever heard of. Perhaps an easier plan would be to follow the

Paris Hilton method. All you have to do is be born beautiful and stinking rich and then release a video of yourself engaging in some outrageously shocking activity and the public will love you. I have no doubt whatsoever that if Ms. Hilton decided to produce anything that could even remotely be called art, she and her, say, angles molded in clarified chicken fat would be featured in every vacuous publication and on similar television shows, Collectors would line up. Fortunately there is a more realistic and in some cases honorable path to follow. As Robert Frost said, "Some have relied on what they knew, others on being simply true, what worked for them might work for you."

I often have referred to life casting as three dimensional photography. What I mean by this is that just as anyone can snap a photo of something and capture its likeness very accurately without having to spend years practicing drawing and painting, so can one do the same thing three dimensionally without learning to sculpt. But there is also a historical similarity too. There was a time that photography was extremely difficult and only a few experts understood the process. Then in the first part of the twentieth century, Mr. Kodak came up with a process that allowed anyone to make photographs. In the same way, kits are now available that provide all the materials and instructions needed to make a life casting of any pan you want. But I often point out that it is very easy to make a simple life casting but it's not easy to do well. Just



Mother's hand holding infant's foot. Metallic Forton MG on green marble base.



Engaged couple's hands. Metallic Forton MG with green marble base.

owning a camera doesn't make you an Ansel Adams and just purchasing a few kits isn't going to make one into an expert life caster.

Whether we are considering hands/feet, faces, or torsos, most of the "standard" life castings made from kits will be in white plaster or hydrocal. A notch up in quality is the application of a faux patina for a stone or metal finish. There are even some advanced kits that provide the materials for cold cast bronze such as using Forton MG. The next step is to stop using kits and purchase the materials in bulk. This is the critical junction, the time and place where one remains an amateur or becomes a pro. If you want to be able to charge a reasonable amount, your work should be better than what is likely done by someone with limited experience. After all, if it looks as if the average Joe Customer could have done it her/himself, then why would she/he be willing to pay you to do it? Here are some ways to separate yourself from the "...amateurs who are pretty good and who will work for free."

The strategies that I am going to explain apply to hand/feet, heads, and torsos and are intended for the new life caster. In this article, I will give some examples of



Infants' hands and feet in clear polyester resin, clear polyurethane resin, metallic Forton MG, metallic polyurethane resin, and clear polyester resin with crushed marble

hand and feet done in more professional ways. Then in the next months, I will cover heads and torsos in detail.

1. Practice until your alginate impressions are consistently close to flawless, (While alginate isn't the only material that can be used to make life casting impressions, it is the most universally used.) There is a story told about a pottery teacher who divided a class into two sections. One was instructed to spend the semester working on only one pot but make it as perfect as possible. The other half was told to forget quality and just go for quantity, throw as many pots as possible. At the end of the semester, the most perfect pots had been made by the second group, "Repetitio mater studiorum est." "Repetition is the mother of learning." (When little tidbits of first year Latin some how pop up almost fifty years later, I'm sure old Father Riddlemoser ['Jumping Joe' to his students] probably smiles from on high.) The more flawless your impressions, not only will your work be more consistent, but you will not have to spend as much time correcting flaws.

2. As your skill improves as a result of #1, you will gain the confidence to attempt more complicated and innovative castings and ways of displaying them. One of the usual ways to display infants' hands and feet is to mount them in shadow boxes which can be easily constructed or just purchased from any craft store. I generally attach them to marble bases which, I feel enhances their appeal and value. The key thing is that you have the skill to provide whatever the customer wants.

3. Many times, I construct a secondary mold which allows me to make multiple copies which I can provide for an additional fee, of course. Another advantage is that if the rubber in the mold is properly de-aired, you will be able to cast under pressure for bubble free results. The secondary mold also makes it possible to utilize more materials as I explain below.

4. Use other more professional materials than just plaster or hydrocal. These include Forton MG, wax, and urethane and polyester resins. Forton MG and the resins allow for very effective cold cast bronze castings. Wax



Dancer's foot on pointe in metallic Forton MG, black patina, on a white marble base. This is a very common request.

castings can be taken to a foundry and cast by lost wax into actual bronze. Forton MG and wax can be poured directly into alginate molds. Urethane resins are not compatible with the moisture in alginate unless an ingredient called "Watertrap" is used. Polyester resins will not work with alginate. However, all work just fine in silicone rubber molds. Remember, if you are using clear urethane, always use a platinum cured silicone rubber and not tin cured. One of the advantages of these other materials is that they are stronger than plaster and hydrocal and will allow more difficult castings to be removed from the molds without breakage

For more information, please take out your leather bound annual collections of Sculpture Journal and look up the following articles all by yours truly:

- "It's Very Clear, One Sculptor's Experiences With Urethane and Acrylic," January 2002.
- "Forton MG Simplified," July 2003.
- "Using Vacuums and Pressure in Casting," October 2003.
- "Making a Vacuum Chamber," September 2003.
- "Making a Pressure Chamber," October 2003.
- "Putting Vacuum and Pressure Chambers to Practical Use," November 2003.
- "Watertrap, Testing a New Product," December 2003.
- "How to Make a Secondary Mold," July 2004.
- "How to Cast a Dancer's Foot on Pointe..... January 2005.
- "More Uses For Cheese Cloth in Life Casting," September 2005.
- "A Great New Gadget," January 2006.

If you are tired of reading, what I have to say and would prefer to listen as I demonstrate, I have two instructional DVDs available. One is on casting the female torso and the other covers hands and feet. You may be able to find them locally or by contacting me directly at parvinstudio@comcast.net or (303) 321-1074. Either will do but I much prefer to talk than type. Earlier I quoted Robert Frost about some honorable ways to succeed. As noble as his words were, he went on to say in the same poem that, "it's better to go down dignified with boughten friendship at your side than none at all. Provide, provide," That has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with casting around for fun and profit, it just seemed to me to be a good way to end the poem and also this article.



A physician's hand on someone's shoulder as if giving comfort. Metallic Forton MG on a wood base I have cast all sorts of things in people's hands.

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