

How Do I Cast Thee For Profit

Part III, Heads

By David E. Parvin, A.L.I.



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4



Photo 5

In this article, I will explain the differences between a very simple face casting and something much more professional, in other words, casting 101 verses casting 499. Of the three body parts (faces, torsos, and hands/feet) that I am covering in this series of articles, faces are definitely the most challenging. Faces have more detail, ins and outs, and different structures which require special care. In addition, the subject must be able to breathe to prevent him/her from becoming a victim. Also, claustrophobia is a possibility whenever the face is covered. Lastly, when a person has to be still for even ten to twenty minutes, there is a chance of fainting which is most likely during a face casting.

Some of the techniques that I will encourage the use of in this article I have covered in detail in previous articles in *Sculpture Journal* which are listed at the end. Some others will be covered in the future such as eyes and hair.

Several years ago, there was a guy featured on a nationally televised show as an "expert" life caster. His faces were no more than from slightly above the forehead down to just below the chin. None had any more than part of the ears and the hair was mostly covered. All were in plaster though some had been painted. I could have taught someone in a morning how to cast such simple faces, definitely casting 101.

A few years ago, I was commissioned to cast fifty faces for a community art project for a suburb of Denver. The person in charge wanted only what "Mr. Expert" above was doing; in other words, just the front about 1/3 of the head in plaster. I felt like saying, "You ignoramus, I'm Dave Parvin, master life caster; don't you realize that this is like asking W. A. Mozart to compose 'Chop Sticks'?" But alas, when confronted with, "Here's what we want and here's the money," I decided that paying the rent and getting a few groceries was more important than my pride. From the time that I started a particular casting until I handed the finished "face" to the person was only about ten minutes. To do what I would much rather have done, what I will describe below, would have taken twelve to fifteen hours per face. But I still

regret that the persons who volunteered to be part of the project ended up with masks that really didn't look like themselves. I did get paid, but I doubt if I would have done very many face castings since then, if that had been the extent of my ability. In this article, I will describe some ways to make face casting more professional, to turn your subjects into works of art, and improve your bottom line along the way.

1. Use secondary molds.

I never use plaster or any similar gypsum material as a final casting medium. (3) Usually my initial castings in the alginate molds are made in a soft, easy to work with plaster such as Regular Dental Plaster or #1 Molding Plaster. This allows me to correct any flaws and rework the piece as necessary such as opening the eyes and/or reshaping the hair. Once I am satisfied, I make a secondary mold using silicone rubber. Not only do I produce a far more professional portrait, but I have the ability to make extra copies if the client wants them. (1) Photograph #12 is a head that was cast in oil based clay rather than plaster. This was done to allow for extensive reworking. Not only were the eyes opened but the hair was completely resculpted, the expression was changed, her nose was slightly straightened, and some very fine wrinkles were removed. The end result was that she looked about ten years younger. Remember, life castings do tend to make one look

Photo 1: A life casting of a face that doesn't capture enough to show what the person really looks like. Material - plaster:

Photo 2: The same face as in photo 1, but including hair, ears, and part of the upper- body. Material - Forton MIG with metal powders and a chemically applied patina (FMG., MP, CAP)

Photo 3: A young swimmer with goggles, swim cap, and a bathing suit. Material- FMG., MP, CAP.

Photo 4: A male who is bald. This is how much I typically cast a male below the neck. Material - FMG., MP, CAP.

Photo 5: The face of a nine year old girl. For this age, I keep the casting very simple in order to make the process as short as possible. Material - FMG, MP, CAP.



Photo 6



Photo 7

a little older, much like a driver's license photograph. Being able to enhance a casting can make for a more satisfied client.

2. More is better.

The number one important thing for any portrait, whether in two or three dimensions, is that the subject be recognizable. My contention is that in order to accomplish this, more than just the front of the face must be included. The problem is that if the casting includes only from the chin to the hairline, since the forehead isn't the widest part of the head, the casting looks like an egg small end up with eyes, nose, and a mouth! (See photograph #1.)

What I consider to be a face includes from the top of the head to at least most of the neck, and as far back as behind the ears. Hair is always included unless covered by something essential for the portrait such as a swim cap or the person is bald. (See photographs #2, #3, and #4.) For a male subject, I usually include the full width of the shoulders and down several more inches as in photograph #4. For females, I generally cast down below the breasts. Not only do females usually request this but it also allows for some creative and artistic ways of



Photo 8

covering (or not) the breasts. Very often one or both arms are included. With small children, boys or girls, I usually keep the casting simple to shorten the casting process (photograph # 5).

3. Different materials.

In last month's SJ, I encouraged the use of different materials for hands and feet. While plain plaster, or some other gypsum product, is OK and faux or painted patinas are better (3), using other materials such as resins and especially Forton MG can produce much more professional results. There is one advantage to using paint-on finishes, they are very simple to do. The two disadvantages are that they can hide some of the surface or skin detail and since they only cover the surface, a chip or scratch will expose the plaster underneath. With resin or Forton MG, metal powders are through out at least the surface coat and no detail is lost. Also, the castings are more durable because the materials are much stronger and the color is in the material and not just on it. The additional strength and durability allows for castings that can be thinner and lighter. Forton MG can be cast directly in alginate molds and is almost as easy as plaster to use. (4) Resins by themselves are not compatible with the water in alginate and release CO2 causing bubbles. The addition of "Watertrap" allows polyurethane to cast cleanly in alginate but is ineffective with polyester resin. (5)

While Forton MG is my usual first choice, I also use polyurethane and polyester resins. Photograph #7 is of a head in the round (8) in clear polyester resin and crushed limestone called "Pool Mix" which makes a pretty convincing cast marble. Photograph #10 shows ahead that was cast in clear polyurethane



Photo 9

resin. In order to take advantage of the effect that a clear casting can produce, the back is flat. When seen from the back, the image reverses from a negative to a positive. (6)

Open The Eyes.

Some clients will tell you that closed eyes make a life casting look like a death mask. The solution is to open the eyes. (Photograph #9) Notice I didn't say "simply open the eyes." Opening the eyes in a realistic and accurate manner is probably the most difficult procedure in making a professional portrait casting. In my life casting workshops, I always give each person a casting of closed eyes and ask them to attempt to open one. Almost always the person, even some very experienced sculptors, have



Photo 10

Photo 6: *Dancer with head turned sideways to show hair in traditional bun. Leotard and overall position also show that she is a dancer. Material - FMG, MP, CAP.*

Photo 7: *Head in the round. Material - FMG, MP, CAP.*

Photo 8: *Nine year old twins cast together. Material - FMG, MP, CAP.*

Photo 9: *Face with eyes open. Material - FMG, MP, CAP.*

Photo 10: *Free standing head. Material - clear urethane.*

drawn a line from the inside of a closed eyelid up and out in the approximate shape of an open eyelid to the outside corner of the closed eye. Then he or she will scrape off the upper eyelid. It doesn't work. In the first place, I had presented an impossible task. In order to accurately open an eye, the model must be present for reference; eyes differ considerably. Secondly, scraping off the eyelid as described above does not accurately open the eye. Thirdly, material must be added as well as taken away because the area around the eye changes slightly when the eye is opened.



Photo 11

While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide adequate instructions for opening eyes, here is a brief explanation of how I do it. Since, as explained above, I make the original positive from the alginate mold in a soft plaster which is easy to work, I allow it to dry out for about a week so that wax or clay will stick to it. Then I have the model return to my studio and using him or her for reference, carve and fill in as necessary to accurately open one eye. This will take at least an hour. So as not to inconvenience the model more than necessary, I open the other eye after the model has left. While getting the first eye correct takes some practice, making the second a mirror image is just as challenging. I have yet to come across any really good instructions on opening the eyes of life castings. Since this is really sculpting and not casting, I would encourage anyone who wants to perfect the technique to study any of the better books for sculpting the head. (7) It is my intention, however to cover this subject in detail in a series of future articles.



Photo 12

4. Be Creative.

Be open to something different. I usually ask my clients how they would like to be "captured in time forever." While most rely on my judgment, occasionally someone comes up with an interesting idea. Recently, a young girl, 13 years old, wanted to be cast as a ballet dancer. Wearing a leotard got us about half way there. But to really look right, she needed her hair in a bun. Since we were planning on making her into a wall hanging rather than in the round, her head would have to be turned almost completely to the side for the bun to be visible. She had hair well below her shoulders and, at first, I was reluctant to not include it hanging down. But she was right, the finished mask really looked good (Photograph #6) compliments of nine year old brother and sister twins (Photograph #8). Doing two at once is also more complicated and I recommend having at least two assistants. (9)

Photograph # 13 is of a profile of a Native American young lady with her hair flying behind her as if running. In her hair is a wolf. To make this, I cut a mask in half and sculpted in the hair and the wolf. This is an example of taking a life casting and turning it into a piece of art with possible appeal beyond just a portrait.

Most portrait photographs only have meaning to the subject and family. I tell my clients that I intend to make them into nieces of art. My goal is that when someone comes into his/her home and sees the casting, his first thought is, "Great

artwork!" and not, "Is that you?" If you can accomplish this, not only will you get greater satisfaction but your work will be more marketable. My next article in this series will show some different and, I hope, exciting things that can be done with torso castings.



Photo 13

Information referenced here and except as noted are from previous editions of *Sculpture Journal* and written by yours truly:

- 1) "Secondary Molds in Life Casting," November and December 2004.
- 2) "Casting Perfect Ears," May 2004.
- 3) "Real Beginnings for Faux Metal Finishes" September 2003, Mark Fields.
- 4) "Mixing Forton MG Simplified," July 2003.
- 5) "Watertrap..." SJ, December 2003.
- 6) "It's Very Clear," SJ, January 2002.
- 7) *I feel that Portrait Sculpting by Philippe and Charisse Farut, ISBN 9-9755065-0-1, is probably the best reference for opening eyes.*
- 8) "Life Casting a Head in the Round, February and March 2005.
- 9) "When Two Heads Are Better Than One" June 2004

Photo 11: Head in the round with eyes open. Material - polyester resin with crushed limestone, makes a very effective fake marble.

Photo 12: Head in the round in clay which had been considerably reworked. Finished portrait was in FMG, MP, CAP.

Photo 13: Mask of Native American girl cut in half (the mask not the girl!) with sculpted hair and wolf. Material - FMG, MP, CAP.

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Sculpture Journal - May 2006