

Sculpting Hair in Life Casting,

Part 2

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

Last month, July 2006, I explained how easy it is to cast hair so that the finished mask becomes a much more recognizable portrait than without hair. But there are some limitations. For example, because the hair must be coated with a thick conditioner, it will have a “wet” look as if the person had just come from a pool or shower. The amount of detail that can be captured is directly proportional to the thickness or body of the hair. Photograph #1 shows a young lady whose hair was ideal for casting and required no enhancement. But what about when the subject has very thin hair or you just want to add hair for some special effect. For example, I have had women whose hair wasn’t long enough request what I call mermaid hair as in photo #2, i.e. that their breasts be at least partially covered by their hair. A simple solution is to have the person wear a wig. It doesn’t even have to be a good wig, a cheap costume wig will do nicely. (Photograph #3) But it’s pretty easy to sculpt on additional hair. The procedure is to make an alginate impression of the model, cast a plaster positive, sculpt the hair on to the plaster, make a rubber mold of the repaired mask, and cast the improved version. I realize that is about the same degree of over simplification as explaining that to carve a horse from marble, just cut away everything that doesn’t look like horse. I’ll give you better directions but first let me explain a few things about hair, especially sculpted hair whether on life castings or more traditional sculptures.

The first and most important thing to understand is that in life, hair usually has volume and takes up space but has almost no weight. Imagine someone with long hair on a windy day; the hair can be blown straight out to the side without unbalancing the person. But hair made of bronze, marble, plaster, wood, Forton MG, etc. has both

volume and weight. The same image sculpted has to be done just right or the piece will appear to be unbalanced. I said “usually has volume and... almost no weight” since if hair is compacted into a bun, braid, or, to some extent, a pony tail, it can seem to be more substantial and is easier to capture than loose hair. If the hair and its volume versus weight isn’t quite clear, consider something similar, smoke and clouds. All three of these are no problem for a painter. Half way between a painting and a sculpture, a bas relief, works pretty well too. But a three dimensional, in the round sculpture is a little trickier to pull off and be convincing. There is a Latin phrase by Catullus that is a favorite of mine that **almost** fits here, “Sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti in ventro et rapida scribere oportet aqua.” For those who have forgotten their Latin, or more sadly, never learned Latin, “What a woman says to her lusty lover is best written on the wind or rapidly moving water.”

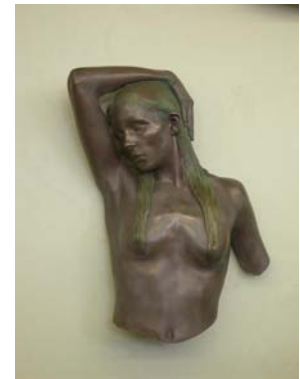
I distinctly remember when I realized the second point I want to emphasize.

I was in Scottsdale, AZ and was going from gallery to gallery enjoying the art. I came across a bronze pheasant taking flight as if escaping an enemy. The artist had meticulously sculpted in every detail of each feather. I have always been a fan of detail and accuracy and I am confident that I have seen far more work that was under finished than overworked. But in this case, the pheasant had no life whatsoever, it looked like a bronze stuffed bird; it just wasn’t believable. At that moment I had an “ah ha” experience and understood something that I should have figured out much sooner, sometimes it looks more real to sculpt (or paint) the way the eye sees it rather than the way it actually is.

Had the artist loosened up a little, he or she would have made a more believable pheasant in flight. Since then I have seen this same mistake



Photograph #1



Photograph #2



Photograph #3

Photo 1: Young lady with great hair for casting, required no additional sculpting.

Photo 2: Mermaid hair which covers enough of the breast to be respectable

Photo 3: An example of casting someone in a wig.



Photograph #4

over and over not only with feathers but also with fur on animals and hair on humans. Judy Collins was on the right track when she sang, “It’s clouds illusions I recall...” It is the illusions of hair we want to capture.

Photograph #4 shows hair sculpted the wrong way, a heavy glob with lines indicating that it is supposed to be hair. I would like to be able to blame this on somebody else but, in fact, this was my very first bronze figure. If I skip foreword to something more recent, see the difference in photograph #5 which shows much more credible hair. This head began as a life casting of a young lady with very fine blond hair. Her hair was so fine in fact that the rough casting made her look like Tweedy Bird, i.e. almost bald. I sculpted on the additional hair.

There is another reason for keeping hair in the impressionistic range. Remember that anything in style will eventually be out of style. Jean Cocteau said, “Art produces ugly things that frequently become beautiful in time. Fashion, on the other hand, produces beautiful things that always become ugly in time.” Generally, I try to make something that is not only beautiful now but will continue to be beautiful as long as possible into the future. The more exacting one is with hair, the more likely it is to depict a particular style and unless one is striving for historical accuracy, I have always felt that it is better to loosen up and generalize a little. Also, certain configurations are more timeless than others such as braids, pony tails, or just simply naturally flowing hair. There is a story told about a French woman who willed enough money so that the wig on a commemorative bust of herself be replaced periodically with one then in style so that she would always look her best.

In this article, I have tried to explain why sculpting hair whether on a life casting or a piece of more traditional sculpture, while not terribly difficult, does require one’s attention to be credible. Next month I will go into some detail on just how to accomplish this as on the life size bronze figure in photo #6. I have been accused in this photo of using a really cool line like, “Been naked long?” But I can assure you that I was really saying, “Nice hair!”



Photograph #5



Photograph #6

Photograph #4: Really badly sculpted hair.

Photograph #5: Hair on a portrait bust that is completely sculpted on because the actual hair of the model was too short and fine to cast with any detail.

Photograph #6: Hair on a life size figure with sculpted hair,

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