



Making a Life Casting Mermaid Portrait

By David E. Parvin A.L.I.

In the Spring issue of *Faerie Magazine*, I described life casting a young lady and transforming her into a three dimensional faerie portrait. Here I'm going to do another transformation but this time my model gets to become a mermaid. While the result is different, the process is the same. I assume that most readers of course have stored their back issues in leather bindings for continual reviewing and to save them for posterity. Since there is no need to repeat myself, I can shorten this narrative. After all, saving a page of print will reduce the number of trees that have to be harvested for paper preserving some of the wild places for the fanciful creatures. For those who had not yet discovered the publication or didn't keep their Spring issues, a copy is available from the publisher with just a phone call.

The Concept

Once I sculpted a small bronze statue of a adolescent mermaid trying on shells for the first time. (Photograph #1) Her left hand held a shell covering her left breast with another shell positioned in her right hand to cover her right breast. For this article, I wanted to tell the same story but there was a problem. While it is perfectly acceptable to sculpt a 1/4 life size adolescent mermaid with one breast exposed, a life casting is more like a photograph. Since it wouldn't have been proper to expose the model's breast that wasn't covered with a shell, I would need a model with hair long enough to preserve her modesty and reputation.

Choosing the Model

In the faerie article, the model looked so much like a faerie that she inspired the piece. But in this case, I had the mermaid idea first and then chose the model. It just so

happened that I knew a young lady, Laura, who met my criteria. #1. She looked like a mermaid. #2. She was the right age, 13. #3. Her hair was long enough. #4. She and her mother, Leslie, loved to visit my studio and play "let's make art history." I had already done several casts of her and she was excited to be part of the project, perfect.

Making a Life Casting

One of my assistants and I made an impression of Laura using a harmless molding material called alginate. Alginate was especially appropriate in this case since its main ingredient is made from seaweed. A plaster positive cast of Laura was made from the alginate mold. (See photograph #2.)

Becoming a Mermaid

After repairing a few minor imperfections, I attached the plaster cast to a 24 inch in diameter piece of fiberboard. I love the line from the old song "The Streets of Laredo" that goes, "I can tell by your outfit that you are a cowboy." So all that is needed to make someone into a cowboy or a mermaid is the right outfit. Add a few sea critters and a tail and presto, one mermaid. The sea critters are no problem; shells and starfish are available from any craft store. I would sculpt the tail in oil based clay. But first, I had to figure out something.

Just what does a mermaid's tail look like? Recently, I had read a hopeful sounding book titled *A Mermaid's Tale*. (1.) Unfortunately, it was "tale" and not "tail" and the book while well worth reading wasn't much help. Amazingly, no one has ever photographed a mermaid and the next best reference had been paintings and drawings which offer lots of choices. There isn't even agreement as to how many tails.

While most mermaids are depicted with one, some have two as if each leg became a separate tail. Further confusion comes from the fact that mermaids are usually covered with scales on their lower half. Fish have scales but sea mammals don't. Scales or not, I have to think of mermaids as warm blooded mammals and not cold blooded fish. I have never seen a mermaid depicted with gills and have to assume that mermaids are air breathing. All this leads me to suspect that mermaids may have scales for some unknown reason, but are more likely to have tails that are mammalian.

Unfortunately, there are three very different types of sea mammals: sea otters; whales, porpoises, and dolphins; and seals and sea lions. For my first mermaid, in photo #1, I chose a porpoise style tail and still think that it is the more attractive. So in this case, I decided to do the same. I'm safe unless someone actually takes a photograph of a mermaid and proves me wrong. I'll take my chances.

Since I intended this mermaid portrait to be a companion piece to the faerie portrait, I wanted both to be the same size. Since I was definitely short on space, I could only show the upper part of the top half of the mermaid. The tail, which I sculpted out of clay, would have to come up behind the head. I was unable to find the right size small starfish for Laura's hair, so I sculpted one. Shells, both clam and snail, were easier to come by and I added some around the edge of the fiberboard circle. In photo #3, one of my assistants, Melissa, is doing some last minute tweaking last before we made a mold of modified Laura.

Casting the Final Portrait

I made a mold of the modified Laura in silicone rubber which consisted of a soft inner layer of silicone rubber and a hard supporting outer layer called the "mother mold" made of Forton MG. The final portrait was cast in Forton MG using various additives and dyes for the different parts of the portrait. Photograph #4 shows me painting in the Forton MG. The finished portrait is in photograph #5.

1. *A Mermaid's Tail*, by Amanda Adams, Graystone Books, 2006, ISBN-13: 978-1-55365-117-8.



Photo #2



Photo#3



Photo #4



Photo #1



Photo #5