

Standard Life Casting Compositions

#1 Praying Hands

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



Photo #1

I often refer to life casting as being analogous to three dimensional photography but photographers have an advantage over life casters besides not getting so messy. Go to the photography section of any book store and you will find books that give examples of different poses for portrait, glamour, wedding, baby, fashion, etc. photography to help a photographer at least have an idea about where to start. Sounding and acting confident and knowledgeable reassures the client or model. It is always better to say, "Just turn your body slightly to the left, drop your chin a little, give me just a hint of a smile as if you have a secret you know I would kill to learn but you're not going to tell me," than, "I haven't a clue of what to do." Regardless of whether the result is portrait, commercial, or fine art, positioning the person in a particular pose with the right props and lighting goes a long way in producing an acceptable photograph. But there are no books with similar information for life casters. Looking back at some of my early castings, most were pretty bad. While they looked like the subjects, they just weren't very artistic, almost the three dimensional equivalent of driver license mug shots. In the ensuing twenty years, however, I have learned some poses that are sure winners. This will be the first of a series of articles in which I share what I have learned, what works and, in some cases, what doesn't.

Whenever someone comes to me for a casting, I always spend some time getting to know the person. I want to determine if there is some specific aspect of the person that is so integral to him/her that it should be depicted in the life casting. I have cast hands holding all sorts of objects such as oar handles, baseballs, books, paint brushes, golf clubs, base



Photo #2

ball bats, soccer balls, fly rod handles, and so on and on. Likewise, some people have wanted their hand(s) to mean something in sign language. Every year, 20 helpers and myself cast about 650 hands as part of a community kids' arts day. The castees take their cast hands home and remove them from the alginate themselves later. Since there is no way to see what one does with his/her fingers once they are submerged into the alginate, I have often wondered how many make the "one finger salute" to the disappointment of their parents. It is not only hands that can be individualized but also heads and torsos. The Smothers Brothers parodied the the old song The Streets of Laredo by singing, "I can tell by your outfit that you are a cowboy. Get yourself an outfit and you can be a cowboy too!"

A leotard makes one into a dancer or gymnast and a Speedo, a swimmer. Pointed ears and you become a Vulcan, werewolf, or faerie. The possibilities are endless. The castings that I will describe here can be done with just the hands or as part of a portrait bust and are appropriate for almost anyone, praying hands. It is beyond the scope of this article to explain in complete detail the processes required to make these two versions. I'm assuming that the reader has some knowledge of life casting but I have listed some previous articles in *Sculpture Journal* for additional information and clarification.

Praying hands is one of the most enduring subjects in both two and three dimensions. It seems that every catalogue of decorative nick knacks has an example. Whether the hands are young, old, or in between, they still strike a pleasing chord. Most parents really like their children's hands this way. Perhaps we enjoy seeing our children in a way we imagine them rather than the way they really are!



Photo #3



Photo #6



Photo #7



Photo #4

lasting product as in photo #2. One other trick I used was to de-air the Forton MG in a "Whip Mixer" which resulted in an almost bubble free casting (2).

In photo #3, one of my assistants, Kelsey, was finishing preparing our nine year old model, who is appropriately name Faith, for the portrait casting. The main thing that Kelsey had done was apply a thick hair conditioner, Cholesterol, to prevent the alginate from bonding to her hair (3).

In the next photo, #4, Kelsey and some old fat guy who often shows up in my photographs in my place, were applying the first layer of alginate. The important thing here is that the alginate be just the right viscosity so that it will stay in place. Two areas of concern are the fingers and under the forearms. If the alginate is too runny, it will simply run off, too thick and not only will it be difficult to apply but the alginate will not go on smoothly and will trap bubbles on the skin's surface. In photo #5, Faith's dad, Pat, had joined in the



Photo #8



Photo #5



Photo #9

In photo #1, thirteen year old Laura has her hands in alginate. As soon as the alginate had setup, she removed her hands and I filled the void with Forton MG to which had been added copper powder. I could have used plaster or hydrocal and either left the hands white or painted on a faux patina (1). But the metallic Forton MG makes a better looking and longer



Photo #10

fun and was helping apply a second thin layer of alginate which was much more runny, about the same consistency as latex paint. Just as the first layer was starting to gel, we misted the surface with Algislo to assure bonding between the two alginates. Notice that the second layer is a different color than the first so that

we can see exactly what has been covered.

In photos #6, the same old mystery guy was covering Faith with a layer of cheesecloth which stuck to the still wet outer layer of alginate. Those who have read my articles in past issues of Sculpture Journal may recall that I am absolutely convinced that plaster bandages are a far distant second to using cheesecloth and fast setting plaster which is easier, faster, cheaper, and produces less imperfections. (4.&5.) Next, fast setting plaster, Impression Dental Plaster, was painted on the cheesecloth soaking it through to the alginate (Photo #7). Afterwards, a second layer of cheesecloth and plaster was applied and the outer mold was finished. (Photo #8.)

Of the photographs taken during a casting and given to the model, the one of removing the mold is always my favorite. I remind the model to smile so that when she shows the photographs to her friends, future casting prospects, they will think, "It must not have been too bad, she's smiling." (Photo #9.) By the way, from the time I started mixing the alginate to when the mold was removed was about twenty minutes. The inside of the mold is shown in Photo #10. I like to include this shot as well because the face looks convex rather than concave.

My next step was to make a plaster impression from the mold shown in Photo #11. This could have been the final product. The next higher level of professionalism would have been to apply a faux finish. However, what I did was make a silicone rubber mold of the plaster and cast the final portrait in Forton MG with copper powder for an even better look. A rubber mold has some other advantages as well such as allowing one to make multiple copies. Photo #12 shows the plaster with several layers of rubber; not shown is the mother mold which was also made of Forton MG. (6.) There were three reasons I used copper powder rather than bronze powder. First, the copper results in a more bronze looking finish than bronze which, I feel, is too dark. Second, the copper reacts more

intensely to patina solutions than the bronze. And third, copper powder just happens to be less expensive. To finish "Faith Praying," I applied a green patina to the hair and cloth, lightly went over the surface with 0000 grade steel wool, and took a cloth buffing wheel to the entire surface with Tripoli buffing compound. (Photo #13)

My goal is to make someone into a piece of art. Portrait photographers rarely produce something that has any value to anyone except the subject or the subject's family and friends. The measure of whether I have succeeded is if other people not connected to the castee respond favorably to it as in, "Wow, that's really neat piece of art, where can I get one?" That is expected with torso castings and I routinely make limited editions of beautiful bodies. But I have displayed examples of portrait castings and had people purchase the samples rather than have themselves or their loved ones cast. This is especially true of praying hands portraits.

1. "Real Beginnings for Faux Metal Finishes," *S.J.*, Sept. 2003, by Mark Fields.
2. "Putting Vacuum and Pressure Chambers to Practical Use," *S.J.*, Nov. 2003, by D.P.
3. "Techniques For Life Casting Hair," *S.J.*, Jul. 2006, by D.P.
4. "An Alternative to Using Plaster Bandages As the Supporting Mold For Alginate Life Casting," *S.J.*, Mar. 2004, by D.P.
5. "Another Use For Cheese Cloth in Life Casting," *S.J.*, Sept. 2005, by D.P.
6. "Secondary Molds in Life Casting," *S.J.*, Nov., and Dec. 2004, by D.P.



Photo #11



Photo #12



Photo #13