

Creating the Plaques

by Sarah Peters

The Summer Resort and the Saltworks plaques were the first bas reliefs I had ever made, and there was quite a learning curve. I had to learn how the materials behaved. I worked on these two at the same time, directly in plastilene, and later poured a plaster mold. Next, I “pulled a wax” from the plaster mold. It quickly became clear that there was too much corrective work to be done in the wax, and I was wasting a lot of time. On the rest of the plaques I carved directly in wax. Working this way certainly yielded the best results, but it is also very hard on the hands because the wax is very firm. The wax is a microcrystalline foundry wax. It is firm enough to retain strong edges, but also has added beeswax for elasticity so that it doesn't shatter. It can withstand a range of working temperatures, but is certainly more vulnerable to accidental scratches, particularly in the summer months. I prefer to work in dark wax because it's easier to see the play of light on the surface. Light colored wax is translucent, which can be very confusing to the eye. Another limitation I had was that I found I could only work in the daylight hours in my studio's north-facing window. This was a huge limitation, especially with two young children at home.

With bas relief, the goal is to create a feeling of distance and depth (perspective) without actually carving deeply into the wax. To get depth, you create layers of very slightly tilted planes. It is an optical trick. You can see it easily in the layers of vegetation in the background of some of the plaques, and where the sea meets the sand in Summer Resort. In bas relief, undercuts should be avoided. Traditional bas relief can be “struck” for reproduction (as a coin is struck at a mint – there can be no undercuts with this process.) I have taken a few liberties with a few minor undercuts for added depth on focal points because my pieces are cast using the lost wax process.

Once the wax is completed a rubber mold is made of the piece and the original is sent to the foundry in Chelsea, MA. The wax is then cast in bronze – an arduous process – and I check the raw casting for flaws. Occasionally there can be inclusions in the metal that need to be welded and chased with machining tools. At last the piece is ready for a chemical patina, for color, and a coat of butcher's wax, for protection.

With these first two plaques I did a lot of experimenting. One of the particularly happy results was pressing fabrics into the swimming costumes. That was how I decided to press grosgrain ribbon into the border, creating a frame around the image. This became a design element that remained consistent in all of the plaques.