

Madame Recamier and the Making of a Natural Light Box

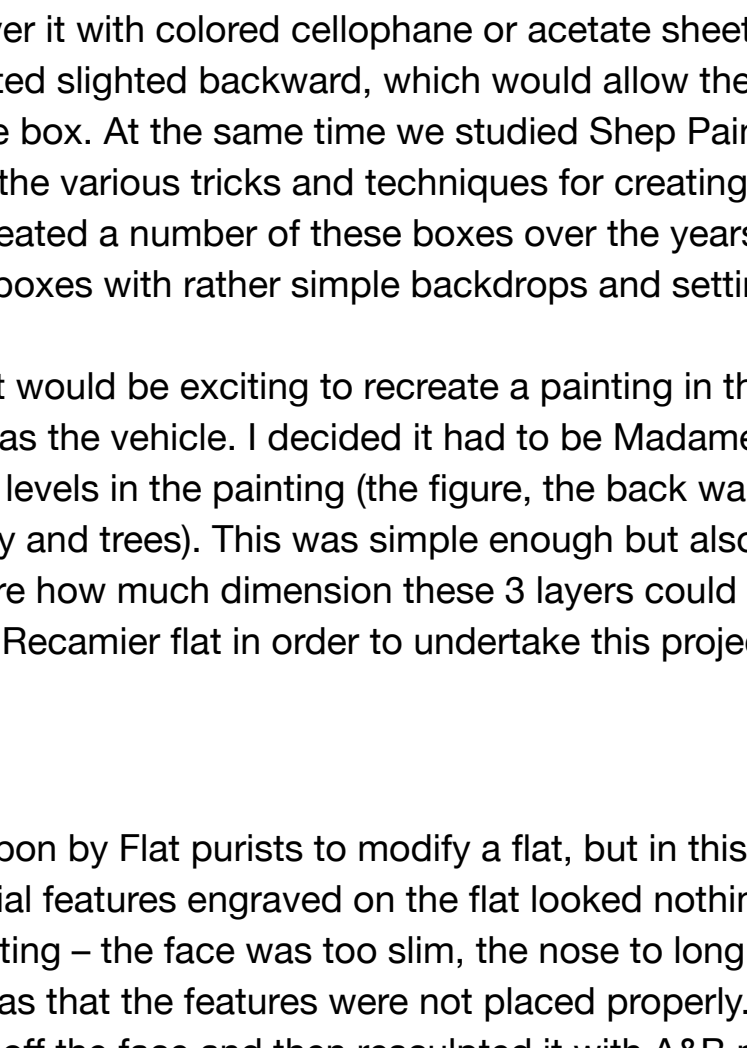
By Greg DiFranco



(Above: The original painting by Gerard.)

Madame and the Flat

The painting of Madame Recamier (actually Jeanne Françoise Julie Adélaïde Récamier) by Gerard has enthralled and intrigued me for years. I think it may be the quietly reposed, but beautiful face, that never fails to amaze me. I also love the style of painting from the Romantic period, the tight and realistic representational painting of people set in slightly unrealistic but romantic settings. Once I read more about her, I realized that Madame Recamier was someone to be reckoned with, a fascinating and interesting woman of her times. At one point she was at odds with Napoleon, even intriguing with Murat against him – she certainly had guts. She is mostly remembered by the paintings, but she was renowned in her time and considered a leader of the literary and political circles of the early 19th century France. The portrait by François Pascal Simon, Baron Gérard, was painted in 1802 when she was only twenty-five. I purchased the flat many years ago, and was actually very disappointed by it and put it aside. The design, engraving and casting of the flat has many flaws to it. It was doubtful that I would ever paint it.



Natural Light Box

It has been over 20 years since I first created a natural light box to display a flat figure. That first instance was Napoleon Crossing the Alps. At that time, a number of us in the Long Island club had created enclosed box dioramas for displaying flats. But we soon realized that an enclosed box needed light inside it to add to the dimension. At a show in the late 1980s I noticed that Jerry Hutter had placed a flat in a small box, but with the classic box diorama frame and reveal that Shep Paine pioneered with his boxes. The question then came up, how would one light such a small box without turning it into a big piece of furniture – what about natural light??? Of course some of us thought to create dioramas with light fixtures inside. Some of us decided that a natural light would be interesting to experiment with.

At that time we developed the idea to cut and opening in the top of the wooden display box, and cover it with colored cellophane or acetate sheets. Also, we made the boxes so they tilted slightly backward, which would allow the natural light to fall along the back of the box. At the same time we studied Shep Paine's book on creating boxes, and the various tricks and techniques for creating the display and the illusion of depth. I created a number of these boxes over the years, but all of them were rather shallow boxes with rather simple backdrops and settings.

Last year I decided it would be exciting to recreate a painting in three dimension using the natural light box as the vehicle. I decided it had to be Madame Recamier, since there were 3 distinct levels in the painting (the figure, the back wall and curtain, and finally the outside sky and trees). This was simple enough but also offered the opportunity to explore how much dimension these 3 layers could create. I decided it was worth fixing the Recamier flat in order to undertake this project.

Updating the Flat

I know its frowned upon by Flat purists to modify a flat, but in this case I had no choice. First, the facial features engraved on the flat looked nothing like the Madame Recamier in the painting – the face was too slim, the nose too long and the mouth too big. Added to that was that the features were not placed properly. For this reason I sanded all the detail off the face and then resculpted it with A&B putty. I added subtlety by painting on modeling putty thinned out with Lacquer thinner. I also widened the face a bit to make it fuller, and resculpted some of the curls of the hair to make them more like the painting. Next I needed to fix her shoulders, for some reason the designer chose to make her left shoulder higher than her right – but looking at the painting and the way in which she is slouching, the right shoulder should actually be higher. I corrected this by a combination of cutting away some of the left shoulder (her left shoulder) and building up her right with putty.

The next modification (and one that is well known in flat circles!) is to fix the right arm, since it does not have the correct muscle curves and is cut off by the body at too low a point. This was resculpted with putty. The final change was to the chair legs. Since I was planning to foreshorten the items on the inside of the box, to make it look deeper than it really is, I had to modify the rear legs of the chair to make them higher than the front. This was done to make it match the floor that rises as it goes towards the rear – the floor is in forced perspective. This was accomplished later, as I sculpted the floor.



Creating the Box

The first step in creating this box was to mock it up with cardboard and construction paper. This is an important step, especially with a multi level box and one that will have forced perspective. This gives me the opportunity to test the size of the box and major props and also their placement and distance from each other. I was able to cut and glue and then reshape all the components a number to times until they best matched the painting. Also I needed to cut and recut patterns to get the proper foreshortening of the props. These cardboard components became the “design drawing”.

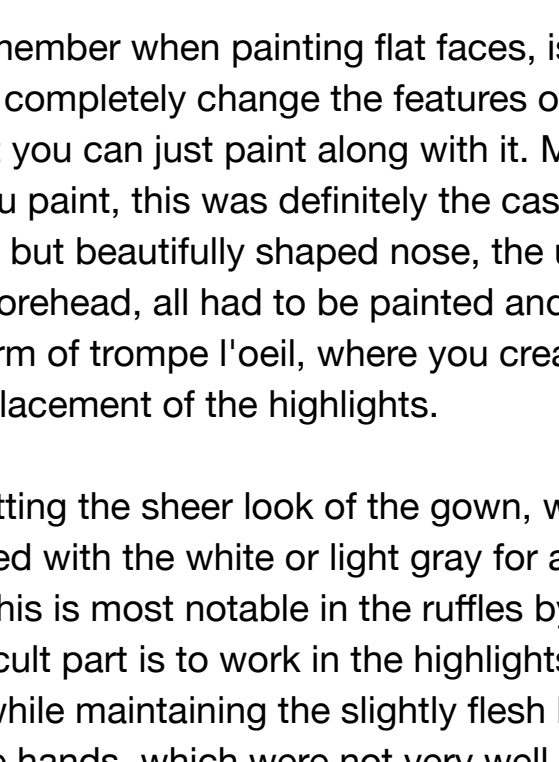
The depth of the box is one of the most important first decisions to make when designing such a box. In some cases a shallow box can work, but in this case I wanted to create the illusion of distance between Madame and the Curtain, and then I needed more depth for the space between the Curtain and the background outside painting. The dimensions of this box are 3” deep, 4” wide and 5” high. The middle backdrop is approximately 1 ½ “ back from the front. I made the box out of thin base wood, glued and nailed together and finally spray painted with black semi-gloss paint. Note that there is no top to the box since in this case I wanted light flooding into the entire box. However, in many other boxes, especially with only one background, I would add a top with a cut out in the shape of a half moon (see diagram 1). This half moon shape is needed to insure the light is thrown onto the curved backdrop without throwing shadows that would otherwise be created from a right angle opening.

The Frame, Matt and Reveal

This size of the frame is important in that the box needs to slide snugly into the frame opening. I kept the frame as simple as possible to avoid overwhelming the viewer – although I was very tempted to use a gold leaf frame with this type of subject. In this case I stuck with a simple wood frame and added a thin line of gold leaf in the middle. Next I cut out a simple piece of dark blue matt board to frame the “picture”. Finally I built a shallow reveal (see diagram 2) out of cardboard covered in black velvet. It's important to mock up the reveal first to insure it will tilt inward and also narrow the viewer's eye. Each piece of the reveal needs to be beveled and made the same size. I first tack it together with tape and finally glue the edges with white glue. You should refer Shep's “How to Build Dioramas” for more details on these and other aspects of box dioramas.

The Outside Backdrop

Usually if you are creating a box diorama with an outdoor setting the backdrop is curved around the corners and its important that the horizon rises on each side to trick the eye into thinking the horizon is level. This is a trick of the eye that creates the illusion of a continuous horizon going into the distance. (See the Historex catalogs for a great article on this topic). However, in this case since the outside would be viewed through a small window I did not have to worry about curving it or creating a sloped horizon. The backdrop was simply a piece of bristol paper (thick artists paper) painted with watercolor to match the outside look of the painting. I was able to get away with watercolor since the background is far in the distance and needed to be on the light side, i.e. I did not need an intensity of color (saturation). I was able to leave white paper showing through the thin watercolor. Since the outside is in the distance its important to keep the colors muted to help with the illusion of atmospheric distance. One finally “trick of the trade” is to add crushed aluminum foil into the space behind the wall. The aluminum foil reflects broken light back into the backdrop, which helps intensify the illumination.



The Backdrop Curtain and Wall

The Backdrop started as a piece of heavy cardboard pre soaked in water and then formed to a curved shape, which creates a solid backing for a final piece of painted bristol paper. I roughed out the window hole and then curved the edges. For this level, where the sides are seen by the viewer, I needed to curve the background edges to create the illusion of depth and hide the corners. Corners would ruin the effect, unless you are recreating a room with similar corner. I then created the actual backdrop from a piece of bristol paper. First I drew the details out in pencil, then carefully cut the opening with a small tip swivel Xacto blade. You can find these in art stores, basically a small X-acto blade that swivels around as you cut. I needed to be very careful as I cut around the column carvings. Finally I painted on a few layers of acrylic gesso to seal the paper – leaving the pencil to show through. The backdrop was painted in artist's gouache, which is basically thick poster paint. Gouache is nice for painting backdrops because it's easy to work with, soluble in water but opaque enough to allow for intensity of color. One issue with it is that it remains water-soluble until you spray a fixative over it. All the colors in the room backdrop were kept on the dark side to distinguish the inside of the room from the bright outside light.

A tricky aspect of this backdrop was trying to get straight edges for the library wall corners. I accomplished this by first putting down a sharp edge of Artists Masking or Frisket paper in order to insure the edges of the walls were straight – and used this as a guide. Then I painted few coats up to the edge of the Frisket paper, and the fixative was sprayed. Once I removed the Frisket a sharp straight edge was revealed.

The Column and Basket

The half wall that the column rested on presented a real challenge. I wanted to create a forced perspective look so this half wall needed to be mocked up a few times before I could get the various angles of perspective that were needed. It was carved out of a dense foam (Jiffy Foam), with a bass wood top. I created the column by cutting out a piece of plastic sheet. This needed to be painted, like a flat, to look round. The basket was created by simply sculpting the shape over a wooden form. The thin mess of the basket was painted on, I did not attempt to sculpt each piece.

The Floor and Podium

Next I created a podium for the flat to sit on top of, and also one that could double as a painting stand since I wanted to sculpt the floor over the flat's metal base before I did any final painting. Also, I needed it to slide right into the box and be flush with the backdrop without any spacing. The floor needed to rise over the metal base of the flat and then rise to the backdrop, in order to create the illusion of the forced perspective. As you can see from the photo, I needed to work up the form around the flat in order to allow me to work on the back of the floor without the flat getting in the way. I first built it up with styrofoam, and then added coats of Durham's making Ground Rocks (any Putty would do but I like Durham's for making ground coverings). Once I was sure the edge of the podium fit flush against the backdrop, and that the floor rose up evenly, then I epoxied the Madame to the podium. Typically if you are creating an outdoor scene you would need to have a smooth transition from the ground into the background, i.e., no visible edge, but in this case I could get away with the floor touching the backdrop without having to sculpt a smooth transition.

Painting the Figure

The figure was first undercoated in Floquil Gray primer. Then using various washes of Humbrol White enamel paint, diluted to various intensities, I painted all of the areas that would be illuminated by the light, basically creating a gray and white under painting. I do this on all flats for a number of reasons, for one, the white undercoat adds brilliance to the colors in the illuminated areas of the figure, while the gray primer that remains in the shadow area helps to tone the colors down. Also, painting the white highlight and mid tone areas helps me plan out the final light and shadow scheme of the figure, sort of a value (value is the relative light and darkness of colors) sketch. Next, using plain craft acrylic paint (not Vallejos or Andréa since they are vinyl based and will not absorb oil) I wash in the colors as an additional undercoat, almost like a watercolor painting, purposely allowing some of the white undercoat to show through. This step is basically a color sketch. Finally I painted the figure using oils.

The general light scheme on this flat is that the light source is coming from Madame's upper left, so all the highlights are facing to her left, and all the reflected lights are coming from her right. The shadow parting line is the classic 75% around, i.e. the figure is 75% illuminated and 25% in shadow.

The first painting challenge on Madame was to get the face to look as much like the face in the painting as possible, after all, that's what inspired me in the first place.

One important thing to remember when painting flat faces, is that the slightest change in shadow or highlight will completely change the features of a face. Its rare where the engraving is so subtle that you can just paint along with it. Most of the time you need to draw the features as you paint, this was definitely the case this time. Such features as the large eyes, the long but beautifully shaped nose, the upturned lips and the beautiful highlight on her forehead, all had to be painted and reapplied until they looked right. Its really a form of trompe l'oeil, where you create shape by the careful use of shadow lines and placement of the highlights.

Another challenge was getting the sheer look of the gown, which was accomplished by adding some flesh mixed with the white or light gray for areas where the skin was close to the sheer cloth. This is most notable in the ruffles by the breasts and the lower legs. The most difficult part is to work in the highlights (usually of almost pure white) and the shadows, while maintaining the slightly flesh look of the area. Another painting challenge was the hands, which were not very well rendered on the engraved flat and looked lumpy. Unlike the face, I hadn't resculpted these so I needed to refine them with paint. This was accomplished by “redrawing the outlines of the hands by carefully bringing the surrounding colors in on the flesh, until eventually the hands looked somewhat more dainty.

Final Steps

To finish it off, I screwed a thin piece of clear plastic over the top of the box. Also, I added a combination of orange and blue acetates under the plastic covering the room area only. This mutes out the natural light flowing into the room and allows the intense light to be focused on the outside backdrop. I also added two hinges on each side of the box, screwed into the frame, which allows me to remove the frame for photography. On this particular box I built the podium so it could be removed.

Displaying Natural Light Boxes

The negative side of Natural Light Boxes is the obvious issue, their attractiveness is dependent on the light available in the room they are being displaying in. If you place a natural light box in a poorly lit competition room for instance, you may not get the full impact of the box (unless of course you bring a Goose Neck lamp and add more light).

Natural light boxes are best displayed slightly tilted, back lower than the front, this occurs naturally when the frame extends beyond the base of the box, thereby allowing the box to tilt backwards. This is very important to allow the natural room light to hit the main subject (in this case Madame) and also to flow into the backdrop in a controlled fashion. The control of light comes from the type of opening you place in the top, and the use of colored or clear acetate to modify the color and intensity of the light. Usually the opening is curved to match the curve of the backdrop, which allows the light to “feather” down the backdrop with minimal to no shadows.

I think Natural Light Boxes offer a nice alternative way of displaying flats without having to create more complex wiring, etc needed for boxes lit by bulbs.

Greg's finished piece.