Antiquity in plaster: production, reception and destruction of plaster copies from the Athenian Agora to Felix Meritis in Amsterdam

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Preface

The roots of this dissertation go back to 1987 when I worked as an undergraduate student at the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam. During this period I did some research there on a small and almost forgotten 19th-century collection of gem impressions in plaster and seal-wax. Impressions of gemstones once were very collectable memorabilia, objects like that were usually taken back home as souvenirs from Italy by Grand Tour travelers in the 18th- and 19th-centuries. The sheer delicacy of the plaster impressions that were exhibited in attractive display cases prompted my enthusiasm and spurred on further research. The subject proved to be very appropriate for an art-history student specializing in Classical archaeology. Throughout history, gemstones have been very sought after \textit{objets d'art}; already in antiquity they were much sought after, although originally they had a practical function as seals. The majority of the images on these stones represent mythological themes. My preliminary research at the time led to a small exhibition in the entrance hall of the museum.

This inquiry marked the beginning of a wider interest in plaster, in particular collections of plaster statues that were cast from renowned sculptures of Classical antiquity. During my inquiries more and more questions surfaced and made me realize how wide and multi faceted this phenomenon had spread throughout European culture. For example questions relating to the artistic function of plaster statues, what motivated people to collect them and their importance in an art historical perspective. But also more elusive aspects: what determined the fascination of these objects that seemed to have such a compelling attraction.

In this context, the Allard Pierson Museum was a fertile environment since the attic houses a most prominent collection of plaster statues that provides a survey of ancient Classical sculpture (ill.1a, b). The curator in those days was Robert Lunsingh Scheurleer, who was later appointed director of the museum. He encouraged my work and ultimately became the first academic advisor for my thesis. During the early 1920’s his grandfather Constant Willem Lunsingh Scheurleer, a banker, antiquarian and honorary doctor, set up the Museum van Reproducties van Beeldhouwkunst (Museum of reproductions of sculpture) in The Hague. The aim of this museum was to exhibit the highlights of sculpture and architectural design cast in plaster, a task in which it succeeded very well indeed.

I would like to pay my respects to my academic supervisor prof. dr. Bram Kempers whose constructive criticism increased my insight. I am also much obliged to my co-advisor prof. dr. Robert Lunsingh Scheurleer. His continuous interest and never failing support was a stimulus to further this research. Many thanks are due to dr. Mat Immerzeel, whose comments were an indispensable aid to bring this dissertation to an end. I also want to mention Mrs. Shirley Lanser-Connor who revised the English language. The completion of this study is in no small degree due to the help by the staff of the Royal Library in The Hague.