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

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Introduction

The prime research topic concerns the significance of plaster casts as a phenomenon in European art and culture. The attention is on casts taken from renowned sculptures of Classical antiquity. In particular the cast as a representation of an idea, not only the ideal of classical beauty, which helped to spread a concept of art (especially during the 18th- and 19th-century), but also as a paradigm of culture. Although this subject has been highlighted in several publications, a wider history concerning this subject was so far lacking. Another research topic, though incorporated in the research as a whole, is a case-history of the plaster collection of the 18th-century society Felix Meritis in Amsterdam. The aim is to integrate one particular phenomenon, namely that of plaster sculptures, into a larger context by turning from one significant development to another. Moreover I take an interest in cultural history which entails a wider orientation on the study of history and searches to understand the coherence between different periods and cultures in an effort to reach for more integrated meaning. Besides Art is not an isolated thing, since it is involved with the total life of a people.

The German historian Theodor Mommsen (1905) once stated: Der Geschichtsschreiber gehört vielleicht mehr zu den Künstlern als zu den Gelehrten. This observation covers a lot of ground, since both the artist as well as the historian are explicitly involved with human activity; they are both composers who have to select facts and arrange and interpret these facts from their own individual perspective. Whereas the artist refers to a reality beyond, the historian is confined to a more concrete reality, for he is left with no other option than to deal with the facts as they present themselves. But no matter how complete the gathering of evidence, there is always a certain degree of judgment involved in deciding what to include in one’s narrative. For it is the individual perspective of the historian that determines to what extent he is able to bring a useful coherence in the chaos of historical events. In this sense he is not only restricted by the topic that he describes, but also by the particular circumstances of his existence that provided him with a perspective to consider his subject-matter. In the history of art there is an additional peculiarity that presents itself because, contrary to other sciences and technology, knowledge does not accumulate. The historian also has limitations, inevitably he can only reflect from his own particular position in history. Or to paraphrase it: he is governed by the spirit of the time, what the Germans call Zeitgeist, the latter is not chosen but encountered.

The overall aim is to bring out different relationships, and not only giving an analysis but also telling a story, because this is what a historian also should do. The research method of the survey is for the larger part made up of comparative study of existing literature, occasionally supplemented by research of prime sources.

Another component involves a case-history study. It strives to analyze the evolution of one particular plaster collection, namely that of the 18th-century learned society Felix Meritis, that once existed in Amsterdam. Although it is integrated in the survey as a whole, it differs in the adopted research method. The fact that no extensive research had ever been carried out on the history of this plaster collection, made it a proper subject for further investigation in an effort to bring new facts to light. The research is mainly based on prime source material, supplemented by an analysis of visual sources, like paintings, drawings, and the plaster statues themselves.

The first archaeologist who studied copies from the Hellenistic period was Adolf Furtwängler (1853-1907). The main scope of his studies was the then recently recovered sculptures from Pergamon, which gave proof for the existence of real copies (Wirkliche Kopien).
Furtwängler's criterion was the likeness of the copy to the original. He regarded the Pergamon copies as a ‘Preliminary phase (..) of simple and true copying’, and continues without elaborating more in detail on this subject.²

An important contribution after Furtwängler was Georg Lippold's book (1923). In it he aimed to give a complete survey of the phenomenon of copies and also attempted to establish more uniformity in the terminology. Whereas he, like Furtwängler, was aware of variations in Hellenistic copies, his main criterion was still the exactness of the copy versus the original. His definition of a copy is: ‘the imitation of a work of art (of any period) which has to reproduce the original as a whole, as in every detail, regardless whether this intention has to be deemed successful or not’.³

Since Furtwängler, all literature on this subject adheres to the theory that Hellenistic copies are the forerunners of the Roman copies. According to this theory there is a development from freely made copies to exact and correct copies. A comprehensive dissertation on the subject has been written by Jörg Niemeier (1985).⁴ He places the subject in a wider context and shows that the Hellenistic attitude towards copies is more complicated and cannot be viewed as merely a preliminary phase of the Roman copy techniques. An important contribution to our understanding of the copying technique employed by the Romans was the discovery in 1952 of the debris of a copy-workshop in Baiae, a luxurious bathing resort at the Bay of Naples in the 2nd century A.D. Here hundreds of fragments of plaster casts taken from renowned sculptures were found.⁵

The shift in aesthetic theory during the Hellenistic period had great impact for the way in which art was perceived. It also influenced the way that copies were valued, the Romans perfected copying techniques. Aesthetic theory in Classical Antiquity is a complex topic in Altertumswissenschaft. As today, in antiquity the aesthetic theories varied from period to period. Only a few scholars such as Bernard Schweitzer, Władysław Tatarkiewicz and Edgar De Bruyne addressed this and a lot of their hypotheses are based on subjective interpretations..

In antiquity, the interaction between the Roman- and Hellenic culture spurred on the evolution of a Roman copy industry. This phenomenon is closely linked to the very origins of the plaster statue. The admiration of the Romans for Greek culture was the incentive to collect Greek art, including original bronze statues or copies in marble. Although it was not uncommon to make ‘copies’ of sculptures during the Hellenistic period, it were the Romans who developed a system to make exact copies of existing sculpture. Plaster casts played an important role in this technical copy process to copies in marble. Moreover, plaster statues, which were made from moulds taken from originals, provided a cheap substitute for collectors who could not afford bronze or marble. The latter illustrates a tradition of collecting plaster statues as decorative art objects.

Ovid’s Tempus edax rerum (time the devourer of all things),⁶ contains a notion that in a way forms a backdrop of my thesis. For it expresses transience and change, which, after all, is what history, is all about. Moreover, it does not only touch upon man’s mortality, but also on his hope to surpass death. Which brings us to one of the main themes of this dissertation, because setting up a collection could be one of the means to gain immortality. A variety of objects have engaged and even obsessed collectors throughout time. There is a broad range,

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² Furtwängler 1896, 538. The original text reads: Vorstufe (..) zum einfachen treuen Kopieren.
³ Lippold 1923, 3. The original text reads: Nachbildung eines Werkes (gleich welcher Zeit) die im ganzen und in den Einzelzügen das Vorbild reproduzieren soll, einerlei ob diese Absicht als wirklich gelungen betrachtet werden darf.
⁴ Niemeier 1985, 10.
⁵ Landwehr 1985.
⁶ Ovid., Met., XV, 234.
people collected rare books, the relics of saints, art, exotic shells, precious gem stones, carpets, stuffed animals and plaster statues. Such objects were kept in private libraries, in treasure rooms at courts, in churches, in private museums, or in curiosity cabinets. In one way or another collecting seems to be an intrinsic part of man’s psychological make up. Although this does not diminish the fact that the incentive to collect can also be of a more mundane character, such as the accumulation of valuable objects for economical reasons as an investment of money, for political reasons in order to consolidate power, or even to enhance the status of the king or ruler. Closer observation reveals that this behavior is linked to far deeper roots, which are associated with a subsequent longing for substitution of underlying emotional conditions. The American psychoanalyst Werner Muensterberger (1994) emphasizes that collecting could be a means of self definition: ‘For a collector (..) ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have to objects, not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them’. He also points out that for the truly dedicated collector, the ‘things’ he searches to collect have a distinct meaning and even constitute a potentially captivating force. Collectors have indeed an unrelenting need for acquisitions. This ongoing search is a core element in their personalities. Without going too deep into the driving forces that motivate such behavior, for this is a subject for psychologists to further contemplate, it is a Leitmotiv in the research of this dissertation.

In the western tradition of collecting a prominent role in the catalogue of collectors’ objects has been set aside for plaster statues, in particular casts from renowned antique Classical sculpture. This brings us to the next subject of my research namely the lasting interest in Classical culture as an element of West-European civilization. In many ways and at different moments European man looked back on Classical Greek and Roman culture as a paradigm of civilization. Thus Classical antiquity continued to be an invigorating and inspiring force by means of myth, philosophy, politics and the arts. Whereas the christianization of culture since Constantine the Great did not abruptly end the idiom of classical artforms, for they survived in defiance of strong opposition by the Church Fathers. What from that moment on were considered pagan art forms lived on and were incorporated in a new Christian context. Medieval church ideology looked for new ways to claim the inheritance of antiquity. Intellectually this was accomplished by the Interpretatio Christiana, which incited scholars to give a new Christian meaning to ancient art, especially mythological subjects. In Renaissance art, mythology was given a place beside Christian subjects. A neo-Platonic ‘theology’ attempted to interpret the pagan gods and their histories allegorically.

17th century Classicism, most prominent during the reign of Louis XIV, introduced new attitudes towards to ancient Classical art and culture. Classicism was thought to combine well with rationalism and absolutism, and moreover it also had great impact on the educational system. The old concept of the academy, revived by the humanists of the Renaissance, changed the tradition of teaching. Students were no longer educated by the guilds in a master’s workshop but at an art-academy. The academic doctrine, influenced by platonic ideals, promoted the belief in the existence of absolute and perfect beauty. This was of course an abstraction, but so it was believed, it could be attained in art. The norm for perfect beauty was more and more determined by a derivative namely Classical sculpture. This also explains the belief, which lived on until 18th-century Neo-classicism, in the didactic value of drawing after plaster casts of renowned Classical statues from antiquity at art-academies and drawing societies. It also fitted in with the craze that began in the late 18th-century to collect anything related to antiquity, which has been labeled as ‘anticomania’. During all these processes and developments plaster collections, as well in antiquity as in later periods, reflect a true veneration of ancient Classical culture.

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One of the questions that come to mind when one considers the significance of plaster collections of ancient works of sculpture in our present day and age involves the purpose of such collections. What can be learned from a plaster cast that has not already been revealed by other modern means of reproduction? The answer has to incorporate both practical and aesthetic aspects. One of the main practical elements has to do with reconstruction. It could be the case that through time certain pieces of one particular sculpture or sculptural group got separated and ended up in different locations. When this is the case a plaster cast renders the possibility of reuniting the sculpture to its former aspect. Moreover, plaster casts are three-dimensional: therefore they reveal details that are impossible to capture in photographs. Another aspect is the reunification of statues that were intended as a whole group and for whatever reason got separated. It is important to realise that in antiquity marble statues were always painted in bright colors. Plaster casts present the opportunity for color experiments without the risk of damaging the original. In many cases original sculptures are incorporated in an architectural context, which often makes it difficult to study them in detail. A plaster cast taken from such a piece of sculpture is convenient because it can be studied from several angles with different angles of light. Finally, a plaster cast gains particular importance when the original is damaged, for instance, by air pollution or if it was destroyed by war activities or simply because it got lost.

To define the aesthetic value of a plaster cast involves controversial arguments. On the one hand there is the pretence of the reproduced original and on the other hand the fact remains that plaster is a cheap material which is neutral an can easily be applied in the same way as clay, cement or polyester. However, during the manufacturing process of a bronze statue a sculptor utilizes moulds in order to create the final statue. Here too the question presents itself of which has to be considered the original, is it the finished bronze or is it the model from which the bronze is cast? On an emotional level there is a compelling force at work when one is confronted with a plaster collection of renowned ancient works of sculpture, which is recognized by anyone who has an eye for art and aesthetics. This ‘magic’, for lack of a better word, was also observed by the art theorist, draughtsman and visionary architect Humbert de Superville (1770-1849). In preparation for his project involving a museum of plasters in Leyden, he left a manuscript in which he attempted to define such emotions. Here he expressed the belief that plaster statues, like the originals, were imbued with something of a dematerializing divine breath. No matter how intangible and individual such emotions might be, they have legitimacy and should be accounted for in a final analysis.

Finally, plaster statues played an important role in the very origins of the history of art as an academic discipline. It is because of the evolution of copy practices that an intellectual hypothetical genealogy of the history of art was at all made possible; it enhanced the insight of the evolvement of different styles and stimulated the comparative study of sculpture and art as a whole. As forerunners of modern means of reproduction such as photography, video, television and internet, plaster copies played a vital role in this process. All these aspects underline the overall importance of plaster casts transcending the fact that they are mere replicas.

Rotterdam, February 2009