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

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Conclusion

The knowledge of moulding and casting techniques was widespread in the ancient world and dates back not only as far as the Pharaonic period in Egypt but even to prehistoric times. In classical antiquity this technique was utilized by different artisans like metalworkers, jewellers, potters, coroplasts and stucco workers. Sculptors also applied this method for copying statues and other pieces of sculpture. Plaster proved to be the perfect material to make copies of existing sculpture, plastercasts were an indispensable aid in the copying process. Moulds were made of different materials, the hard ones that were made of terracotta or plaster, the flexible ones of pitch or wax. Accounts of ancient classical writers also prove that there was a common practise to collect plaster statues as pieces of interior decoration, like busts of poets or philosophers in private libraries. In some cases such casts were used as a substitute for sculptures executed in bronze or marble to complete a private collection. Moreover ancient literary sources also testify that plaster statues were used as ephemeral statues at festivals or other festive occasions. It was the Romans who brought this technique to perfection.

During the Hellenistic period the shift in aesthetic theory changed the way art was perceived, for it was no longer regarded as merely a craft or specialised skill. As a result of this the status of the artist was upgraded, he was no longer regarded as just an artisan but brought on an equal plain with the poets, who were traditionally regarded as endowed with divine inspiration. New concepts were formulated by Cicero, it was he who assigned a special sense to the spectator to evaluate art and beauty, which implies a psychological aspect in the active process between artist and beholder. Other developments like the emphasis on logical thought, the growing tendency towards individualism and subjectivism and the attribution of an intrinsic value to art, decreased the importance of the metaphysical. It lead, among others, to a new phenomenon in sculpture: the honorary statue. This marks a change in the tradition of the votive- and hero statues that previously only existed in a religious context. Although in general the effect of aesthetic philosophy on art is in most cases indirect and limited, these developments also affected the status that was attributed to copies, including the ones in plaster. Moreover it gave a particularly strong impulse to the Roman copy industry.

The continuation of ancient classical art during the medieval period is hallmarked by symbiosis and controversy. Despite the antithesis between pagan antiquity and Christian church dogma's, in practise there was an interdependence. An illustration is found with the ancient gemstones and cameos. They were very much sought after and incorporated in liturgical objects like reliquaries and secular objects that were gathered in the church treasuries. Such a symbiosis of antiquity and Christianity was not a problem as long as the stones (or other pagan objects) were properly exorcised. Small additions or changes were made to Christianize the ancient art objects into a new setting (Interpretatio christiana), others were copied. Large freestanding classical antique sculpture was the focal point of a comprehensive controversy. Religious superstition and the fear of magic caused a lot of destruction. Many antique statues were deliberately damaged for the purpose of church propaganda. During the early 12th century attempts were made to restore the former glory of the ancient city of Rome, but because of reasons rooted in medieval aesthetic theory the restoration of ancient ruins was prevented. Plaster copies were rarely found in this time period, but stucco plaster was applied to make ornamental decorations in medieval churches. In some cases stucco plaster was used to make free standing statues. Only very occasionally moulds were applied, decorations were incised directly into the stucco with modelling tools. During the 14th century large collections were set up at the courts of French kings. Such collections were composed according to early
humanist guidelines which included the exploration of the material world. Some of the objects in these collections, like carved stones and ancient coins were a means through which the styles of the art of antiquity lived on, to benefit and inspire artists. Thus the beginning of the 15th-century collections of ancient classical works of art were of great importance to Italian Renaissance art. Classical art was the main source that provided artists with prototypes for their work in the prevailing fashion of the antique. Many were cast in plaster as aid for artists to work from. A important event took place in 1471, when Pope Sixtus IV had the ancient bronze statues from the Lateran moved to the Capitoline Hill in Rome. This act heralded a change of attitude towards ancient sculpture. Until then antique sculptures were regarded as ‘idols’ to be demolished or at best used as propaganda for the ‘victorious’ Christian faith. Despite the aversion of several popes towards ‘pagan’ humanism, which almost lead to the expulsion of all the Classical statues from the Vatican, the papal collection of Classical sculpture set up in the Belvedere gardens revealed not only a new secular interest in history, but also pointed to a new attitude toward aesthetics that set the mode for European taste as a whole. It was one of the incentives for collectors to start to collect original antique sculptures. Those who were not able to obtain originals had to content themselves with copies including casts in plaster. It became fashionable to set up a collection. This was done according to humanistic classification principles that were based on guidelines given by ancient writers like Pliny the Elder. By the beginning of the 16th-century collecting had become an integral part of European civilisation. Sculptures and other remains of classical antiquity made up a substantial, or even single part of most collections. The use of plaster for small-scale statuettes, patinated or gilded, was more common than is often appreciated. They were not only used to augment sculpture collections, but also as objects of interior decoration. The admiration for the antique had never totally ceased through the ages. What was new, however, was the secular context in which this process of change in taste evolved.

The rise of 17th-century Classicism found its climax in France during the reign of Louis XIV. The developments there played an important role in the promotion of the formative language of Classical sculpture and subsequently the proliferation of copies and casts throughout Europe. Classical antique art became the paradigm for artists studying at an art academy. The Italian concept of an art academy was adopted in France, though in a more rationalistic manner. For it implied a rigid system of drawing and copying antique sculptures in which plaster casts, but also prints and drawings played an essential role. The continued interest in Classical antique sculptures was maintained by two groups of collectors: aristocrats and kings on the one hand, and artists and dealers on the other. Since the majority of the originals were tied up in the established Italian collections, most collectors had to do with casts and copies. The great length that collectors took to obtain moulds and casts is an indication of the popularity and fame that Classical sculpture had at the time.

There were several incentives to collect ancient sculpture, including plaster copies. Status and prestige played an important role, but also aesthetic and didactic motives were involved. It is striking that the tradition was just as alive in the Protestant North as in the Catholic South. The more so because of the religious differences that strongly affected the art styles in these regions. The artists as collectors held a special position because they acted as restorers and dealers of ancient sculpture.

Major excavations in the Italian towns of Herculaneum, Pompeii and Stabia stimulated the renewed interest in antiquity during the first half of the 18th-century. Not only did this inaugurate the era of scientific field archaeology, but also captured the imagination and interest of the educated amateur. Moreover the ‘Grand Tour’ phenomenon contributed to popularise archaeological interests. Different learned (archaeological) societies were founded, not only in Italy but also and especially in England. All these developments established the importance of plaster casts. Art academies and artists ordered plaster copies of ancient
sculpture for didactical purposes and they were eagerly sought after by private collectors. Contemporary sources like diaries reveal that great plaster collections invoked feelings of an almost religious pathos among visitors. Grand tourists took them home as souvenirs to decorate their mansions or augment their collections. A substantial industry of copying evolved, particularly in Italy. In this manufactory process plaster casts were needed in order to make copies or replicas in bronze or lead. Moreover, the popularity of gem collecting resulted in splendid collections of (plaster) impressions, for decorative purposes as well as for didactic use in schools.

18th-Century art reflected the new ideals of the Enlightenment, gradually art theorists throughout Europe provided new principles determined by reason, nature and morality. As a result the frivolous Rococo style was rejected and replaced by Neo-classicism, or the ‘true style’ as it was then called. This caused a revival of classical antiquity more consistent than earlier classicism’s. However the new concepts did not lead to a uniform art-style. Neo-classicism is a complicated style, it combined rigid formal classicistic ideals with romantic tendencies.

The 18th-century also saw the rise of the public museum as an instrument of the modern state. This tied in with the Enlightenment belief in the educational mission of artists on the one hand, and the greater emphasis on intellectual training of artists on the other. Art academies needed museums as a training ground for their students. Novel museological concepts determined the set up of new archaeological museums. Despite the rise of public museums, private encyclopaedic collections, as an instrument of self-education, remained popular. Archaeological objects, especially sculpture were very much sought after by amateur collectors and Grand Tour travellers alike.

The continuation of Classical art during the 19th-century is reflected in Neo-classicism, although there is overlap and cross-over influence with the two other prevailing styles during this period: Romanticism and Realism. In defiance of the revolutionary developments in art new attitudes and styles did away with the old paradigm of ancient Classical art and culture. However there were ways by which Classical values and ideals were continued. At art academies students still received a formal education where drawing plaster casts of Classical sculpture was more important that ever before. Traditionally the most promising students were granted a scholarship in Rome. There they were able to study the antiquities and High Renaissance paintings. It was just one of the ways by which Classical Antiquity maintained influential. The continuation of Classical values, be it on less grand scale, coexisted with modern expressions of art. 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 it could be attained in art. The norm for perfect beauty was more and more determined by a derivative, namely Classical sculpture. This explains the belief, during the eighteenth and 19th-century, in the didactic value of drawing after plaster casts of renowned ancient Classical statues at art academies and drawing societies. The plasters were often exhibited in an aesthetic way, at several art academies and universities large plaster halls were built that functioned as museums.

The rise of nationalism resulted in a growing awareness and identity in the countries of Europe which spurred on the creation of national museums that were set up as study centres of indigenous culture. All over Europe new museums were created, the Classical shape of their austere façades indicated the cultural paradigm of Classical culture. Despite the nostalgia for Classical antiquity there emerged also other tendencies. In Germany and France academic discussions took place on what the function and purpose of a museum should be. Some believed a museum should limit itself only to art, that is: the masterpieces of antiquity and of great European schools. Others defended the universality of the museum that in his eyes should present the culture and history of all people of all time. The 19th-century also saw the
invention of new reproduction techniques like photography, no artistic medium was so controversial, it was perceived as an object either of wonder or contempt and often both at once. Gradually it became clear that photography was taking over the documentary task which had previously been the domain of graphic art, whilst the graphic arts came to be regarded as an artistic medium. Before the invention of photography anyone searching for a good reproduction purchased an engraving or an etching in a print shop. But from the middle of the 1850s onward museums started to assemble books with photographic reproductions of the works of art in their collections. Thus photography played an essential role in the evolution of Art History as an academic discipline.

The first half of the 19th-century was a favourable period for collectors, true amateurs or diletanti with good taste and a keen eye to commence substantial collections for comparatively little money. The obsessive interest that began in the late 18th-century to collect anything related to antiquity which has been described as ‘anticomania’ was continued until well into the 19th-century. An other way by which antiquity remained important is the tradition of the Grand Tour. More and more people were travelling to Italy with Rome as the highlight, for the ancient city had not lost its power to impress. The construction of the railroad network that covered much of northern Europe by the mid century, which opened the possibility of leisure travel for people of more modest means. What first was the elitish pleasure of the connoisseur had now become commonly accessible for the middle classes. During the first half of the 19th-century plaster collections became an international phenomenon, they were found in all major European cities. Not only were plaster collections set up by art academies or universities but also incorporated into museum collections. It is clear that imitation or mimesis as a concept was not something to be looked down upon, rather something to be aspired. The plaster cast was as it were transparent, the material was amorphous and therefore presented a direct access to the essence of an artwork, so it was thought. What contributed to a large extend to the popularity of plaster statues, especially those taken from sculptures from Classical antiquity, was the fact was that high schools (Gymnasiums) more and more incorporated them in their curriculum. Plaster statues had become widely available because special plaster workshops turned out casts on an industrial scale. Not only did the plaster casts find their way to art academies, artists’ studios and private homes of scholars, but also to the homes of a wider public who had an interest in antiquity. Apart from aesthetic appreciation they had scientific value and importance, for they were considered to be an indispensable means for archaeological research. Plaster casts grew into outstanding didactical instruments, and were attributed a central place in public art collections, it was not uncommon to display them alongside with original artworks. Soon they were not merely a selection of examples of renowned Classical sculpture but also represented a wider view on art and cultural history. What could never be established in reality now became true in a musée imaginaire of plaster casts. Because of the demand for plaster specialized firms producing plaster casts sprang up all over Europe.

Soon after the turn of the century more critical comments were heard in regard to the meaning and purpose of plaster collections. Especially archaeologists who at first had been keen on plaster casts of antique sculpture as an additional source for their research became more and more focussed on photographs. But not before long the shortcomings of this medium were realised, especially detailed photographs proved to be extremely subjective indeed. Critics saw in white plaster casts only dull mechanical products of reproduction. This had to do with concepts of reality and originality. By the end of the 19th-century, copying had become a mechanical task, due to improved pointing machines. This work that was previously done by artists was now performed by mechanical carving machines. Plaster casts were therefore no longer automatically regarded as a reflection of pure form which had a claim on real beauty. During the mid 20th-century plaster collections, especially those in art academies
were dissolved. Modernism had superseded the 19th-century heritage with devastating consequences for plaster statues, most of them were put in storage, or were even wilfully smashed or sold off. Yet, towards the end of the 20th-century a change of attitude emerges. This was due to a growing awareness of the importance of plaster casts for archaeology, conservation of monuments, and for museums. Plaster statues are, once again, valued as an additional means in scientific research, for their plastic qualities to capture surface details objectively. There is the recognition that they are an indispensable means to research iconographical problems and themes. They allow to interpret problems and questions through a direct visual analysis. The Internet offers still new possibilities. In Germany a virtual museum with more than 1700 plastercasts was created, by means of a computerized tour that involves 3D-scan technology, allowing internet visitors are able to view the plaster sculptures three dimensionally. But appealing as these casts of renowned antique sculptures are, they have stopped to be the pinnacles of taste and quality that they once were for artists, art lovers, collectors and theorists. Such plasters have become art in their own right, testimonies of an era.

As a final remark I would like to emphasize that at an emotional level there is evocative force at work when one is confronted with a plaster collection of renowned ancient works of sculpture. This ‘magic’ has been documented through time in letters, and other documents like diaries, tracts etc. A prominent example is the visionary architect, art theorist and draughtsman Humbert de Superville (1770-1849). In preparation for his project involving a museum of plasters, he left a manuscript in which he attempted to define such emotions. In line with ancient tradition he expressed the belief that plaster statues, like the originals, could carry over something of a dematerializing divine breath. No matter how intangible and subjective such emotions might be, they have legitimacy and should be accounted for in a final analysis that does justice to the meaning and content of plaster statues.

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889. Although this is also a reflection of contemporary art criticism, as Herbert van Rheeden (2004, 81ff) rightly pointed out. For 19th-century classicists imitation or mimesis was not something to be looked down upon but something to be aspired. This tied in with the concept of Le Beau idéal (ideal beauty). Copies in plaster were regarded as very suitable means to express these ideals.