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Casting Calls

A century-old collection of plaster casts of eons-old architecture and sculpture is being restored for contemporary classroom service.

By Eve M. Kahn



Crumbling fragments of Roman and Greek wonders are now scattered in artisans' studios from Baltimore to Brooklyn, and their travels are proving good for their health. The Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America (ICA&CA) is stewarding 125 of these fragments, actually late-19th-century plaster castings made directly from ancient monuments, and is having them lovingly restored. The ICA&CA, which borrowed the objects long-term from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2004, is re-utilizing them for their original purpose: giving architects and artists-in-training a chance for close scrutiny of aesthetic milestones. Seeing and handling the sculpted surfaces will ensure the perpetuation of Classical traditions.



"The casts are incredibly useful for our students," says Paul W. Gunther, president of the ICA&CA. At its headquarters on Manhattan's West 44th St., the Institute rotates the casts in classrooms for architects and designers as well as painters and sculptors enrolled at the two-year-old Grand Central Academy of Art. Sketchers, often in their twenties and sporting iPods, spend hours at ICA&CA easels, analyzing statues and reliefs copied from precedents as revered as the Parthenon and Florence's Santa Croce Basilica.



Architectural Explorers

The casts date back to the 1880s, when the Metropolitan Museum started sending out crews of cast-makers across Europe. The New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects gave the Met lists of buildings worth copying, "to show the development of architecture from the earliest period to the Renaissance," according to a history of the cast collection by Elizabeth J. Milleker, an associate curator of Greek and Roman art at the Met. The cast-makers would clamber up ropes or scaffolding, and then smear few-inch-square sheets of bitumen onto the desired architectural details. Once the molds hardened, the artisans would pour in gypsum, reinforced with burlap and wooden armatures.



Although the Met stopped commissioning casts in 1902 – by then the museum could afford genuine architectural antiques – it kept the collection on view into the 1950s, "delighting school groups, artists, teachers, and the public," Milleker writes. Once the casts were shifted into storage, they spent a few years in a viaduct under a riverfront highway, and then decades in a dusty Bronx warehouse.

"The care was not optimal, but the Met did not de-



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accession the casts, and I commend them for spending money keeping them safe," says Gunther. When the Met offered loans to the Institute, he brought in ICA&CA board members Richard Cameron and Peter Pennoyer to troll through the Bronx warehouse. They selected soot-blackened icons: the most significant early Ionic volutes, the deepest egg-and-dart moldings. (At a Sotheby's auction in 2006, the Met sold off nearly 200 of the less important casts that the Institute had left behind.)



The ICA&CA has already cleaned off all its trophies and sent out half for further restoration – mostly pro bono – to artisans in Baltimore (Kidd Studios) and New York: George Kelly, Treese Robb and [Foster Reeve](#). The damages to be undone, Reeve explains, have ranged from chips to crushed corners, missing heads and internal decay. "We've had to break and reset the bones on an Ionic capital from the Temple of Apollo at Bassae, and bathe it in bleach because the canvas was rotting," he says.



A bas relief depicting St. Francis amid a hilly landscape, molded from the 1470s pulpit at Santa Croce, "had been smashed into 12 pieces," Reeve adds. "St. Francis's head was missing. We knew, based on a monk's head that survived on the piece, that the sculptor had used dramatic foreshortening, so that both eyes on the faces would be visible from wherever you stood near the pulpit." Friends in Italy sent him close-up shots of the extant relief, and Reeve's staff recreated missing scenery details plus the saint's lost head. A new pin attaches his head to his robed, kneeling body, and new metal lath backing reinforces the whole tableau.



"We had three people working on this in their spare moments for four months, sometimes full on for a week at a time," says Reeve. The pro bono effort, he adds, "has been a wonderful opportunity for the staff to give back to the art form, and to learn about the history of sculpture, to get a physical experience of how great artists would come up with compositions and emphasize or de-emphasize particular details." At his 15,000-sq.ft. plaster-making facility, a converted warehouse on the Greenpoint, Brooklyn, waterfront, his workers have also set aside time for half a dozen other ICA&CA pieces, including a legless torqued torso from the Parthenon, a tabletop-sized scale model of the first-century-BCE triumphal Augustan arch in the Italian Alps town of Aosta, and cornice and pilaster sections from the circa-420-BCE Erechtheion on the Acropolis.

"It's been an honor to work on them, to help the Institute take up the educational torch from the Met," says Reeve. "For an artist or architect to learn to copy, that's crucial – all artists copy everything. Even the most cutting-edge ones shouldn't pretend otherwise. Nothing but their own artistic impetus is original."

Teaching Tools

Gunther loves to give visitors tours of the cast-riddled classrooms. Public school groups sometimes stop by for hours to handle and sketch the plaster chunks. Gunther also enjoys pointing out exactly where the casts have been invisibly patched, or given convincing new patinas. A handful of other American institutions, he explains, are now starting to put their long-forgotten casts back on display or in classrooms. The ICA&CA has already loaned a few of its treasures for exhibits at museums at Carnegie Mellon, Vassar College and Groton School.

"We have an open-door attitude about loans," he says.

"I've been so touched by, and grateful for, the care and exactitude, the passion and artistry, that the master craftspeople have shown for the pieces we've had restored. Everyone involved has been obsessed with accuracy, just as the cast-makers were obsessed in the 1880s and '90s. We honor these objects by using them. We handle them, which a museum wouldn't do. If something does happen to them, if one does get damaged again, we know it was meant as a teaching tool, and it's always de facto fixable."

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