



INSTITUTE OF CLASSICAL
ARCHITECTURE
& ART

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CAST COLLECTION

The collection and exhibition of plaster casts was considered an integral component of museums and educational institutions in the second half of the 19th century. Prominently displayed, they offered access to the full range of three-dimensional Western European art, from architecture to sculpture to the decorative arts. No stigma was attached to reproductions. Plaster casts were considered an excellent means of study, offering a convenient means of close-up analysis and a sense of original scale. Generations of schoolchildren, members of the public, art historians and artists took advantage of these collections at a time when travel to see the originals was more difficult than today.

It is not surprising that at its outset The Metropolitan Museum of Art sought to assemble a comprehensive collection of plaster casts. The Museum's Constitution, written in 1870, gave as a primary objective the formation of "a more or less complete collection of objects illustrative of the History of Art from the earliest beginnings to the present time." A collection of plaster casts — "objects of the highest beauty and of inestimable value toward the formation of sound taste in Art" — was considered the most reasonable way to achieve this goal in a short time.

The cast collection was formed over a twelve year period, from 1883 to 1895. In 1883, a New York businessman, Levi Hale Willard, bequeathed \$100,000 to the Museum for the acquisition of a collection of architectural casts to be selected by a commission appointed by the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Casts would be chosen to show the development of architecture from the earliest period to the Renaissance. The first casts were exhibited in 1889. The collection included architectural elements of the Parthenon, the Erechtheion, the Lysikrates Monument, and the temple of Vespasian, all done to full-scale, as well as models of the Hypostyle Hall at Karnak, the Parthenon, the Pantheon, and the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. The models were commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum and constructed in Paris by A. Joly under the direction of the art historian Charles Chipiez.

In 1886 Henry G. Marquand gave \$10,000 for the acquisition of sculpture casts, and in 1891 he became chairman of a special Committee on Casts, created for the purpose of raising funds and overseeing the formation of a collection of casts, "historically arranged so as to illustrate the progress and development of plastic art in all epochs and mainly in those which have influenced our own civilization." The committee, which included Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Louis Comfort Tiffany and Stanford White, was active until 1895. As purchasing agent, the committee appointed Edward Robinson, curator of classical antiquities at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Robinson, together with other experts, drew up an extensive list of desired objects that would illustrate the entire history of art and proceeded to negotiate purchases and make special arrangements with most of the great museums of Europe. The Italians agreed to have Donatello's Judith and Holofernes as well as certain Della Robbias and Rossolinis cast for the first time. New molds were taken of famous Greek works in Athens. The British Museum offered the Metropolitan the opportunity to

participate in an expedition to Persepolis to cast reliefs from the Great Staircase and other sites. Robinson also worked on the design of the installation, which was located in what is now the Medieval Hall and its two adjacent wings, dedicated primarily to European period rooms. In 1908 a catalogue of the cast collection — with 2,607 works — was published. By 1902, the Museum was finally in a position to purchase original works of the highest quality. Interest in the cast collection subsided. Nevertheless, for close to forty years the installation remained, essentially unchanged, delighting school groups, artists, teachers and the public at large. By the early 1950s nearly all the casts had been moved to a storage area in upper Manhattan. In 1985 the collection was transferred to a warehouse in the Bronx. Since then, thanks to a long-term loan program, and more recently through gifts, these casts have been lent or given to universities, art schools and museums, where they are being restored and once again offer the opportunity to study and enjoy great works of art in full-scale replica.

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