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The Institute of Classical Architecture & Art

The Plaster Cast Gallery at the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art

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Installation view, Cast Hall at the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art (photograph © 2016; provided by ICAA)

The Institute of Classical Architecture and Art (ICAA), a nonprofit institution located in midtown Manhattan that is devoted to “advancing the practice and appreciation of the classical tradition in architecture, urbanism, and the allied arts,” has recently opened a plaster-cast gallery. A selection of highlights from 120 plaster casts donated by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as casts and wood moldings from the ICAA’s Dick Reid Teaching Collection, are on display in a single room on the building’s top floor. The casts re-create freestanding sculptures, reliefs, and architectural elements that date from the fifth century BCE through the twentieth century CE. The casts and models are installed on and along the walls, with tables and chairs in the center of the room. Painted creamy yellow and lit by ample windows and skylights, it is a warm, bright space.

“Plaster Cast Gallery” is a slight misnomer for the ICAA’s exhibition room, because it does not fully describe the space’s many functions. The gallery, designed to allow students and visitors to draw and sculpt in front of the objects, also operates as a classroom and can feel like a workshop. The plaster casts themselves are atypical museum objects, in that most of them show signs of wear and neglect, such as discoloration or jagged breaks. The ICAA, however, is to be commended for not undertaking overly aggressive restoration; additions like paint could obscure important details. The traces of disrepair also call attention to the objects’ own materiality and to their status not only as copies, but as artifacts in their own right.

Perhaps unintentionally, the organization of the display reinforces this impression. It is difficult to pinpoint a specific logic behind the objects’ arrangement, though there seems to be a loose notion of a classical (lowercase “c”) style at work. Freestanding sculptures appear next to architectural fragments, ancient Greek statues stand alongside Florentine Renaissance reliefs, figural pieces are installed near ornamental ones. The effect can be jarring. The Discobolus looks well enough centered below a decorative torch sconce, framed by a pair of Gothic altarpiece spandrels and a set of coffers from the Erechtheum, but these objects have little to do with one another. In many cases, the stylistic differences among the objects are pronounced. In formal terms, an object in the Early Classical style, such as the head of Athena that sits in one corner, is a far remove from the Aphrodite in an Early Hellenistic style that crouches on a podium near the door.

Art historians have obsessed over identifying, describing, and explaining such changes in style, and casts have played a critical role in their investigations. Many cast collections are organized by chronology or type, in order to facilitate formal comparisons and the perception of stylistic difference. The gallery’s presentation instead recalls Renaissance sculpture collections, which were created before scholars began to distinguish Greek from Roman works.

The gallery thus recovers and revives a particular view of antiquity, one without regard to an object's original physical setting, social context, or chronology (cf. Sir John Soane's Museum in London, a nineteenth-century house museum that includes casts in its period collections, or the Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine in Paris, which presents the history of French architecture through plaster casts and models). The display reminds us, in a striking way, that this is how objects like these have been treated in the past. This reception is part of the history of casts and, for better or worse, part of the history of scholarship.

The labels and literature that accompany the display do not always participate in this historical performance, but instead gesture toward the modern desire for contextualization by providing some information on the pieces displayed. Yet the information is uneven and thus the gesture unconvincing. Some pieces, such as the sima from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, have no identifying information at all. Other objects are mislabeled: for example, the Diadoumenos is a cast of an object in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, not the British Museum.

There is also little information about the history of the individual casts themselves. This is unfortunate, given what the very practice of casting reveals about the reception of certain art and architectural works and about evolving attitudes toward the classical tradition more broadly. Once casts like these were used not only as models for artists, but to recover an original object—or to get as close to an idea of the original as possible. Through formal analysis and a process dubbed *Kopienkritik*, often aided by casts, Classical archaeologists sought to identify works by masters known from literary sources. Plaster was even used, on some occasions, to create composites of hypothetical originals. Scholars today are more prepared to see copying as a widespread and complex process of intrinsic interest, and to engage with casts, ancient and modern, as a multivalent dimension of that phenomenon—see, for example, the wide range of topics discussed in *Plaster Casts: Making, Collecting, and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, edited by Rune Frederiksen and Eckhart Marchand (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).

Many pieces in the ICAA's gallery illuminate the long, intertwined history of casts and copies. The Erechtheum, represented in the collection by several objects, was copied already in the Roman period. The history of the Discobolus is still more complex. The fifth-century Greek bronze attributed to Myron is lost, but the statue was copied many times in many media in antiquity. The ICAA's cast was made from one of those copies, a marble statue excavated in 1791 from Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli and now in the British Museum. The marble head is ancient, but it does not belong with the torso, and it has been restored facing the wrong way. Other copies make it clear that the discus thrower should look back toward his discus, not straight ahead. The ICAA's cast obscures that repair and essentially creates a new work out of two. On the one hand, the cast is an archaeological and art-historical hybrid made permanent. On the other, it is a monument to a particular way of collecting and of casting, in which the ever-present copy has become an individual work in its own right.

The gallery does not present these histories, but it does allow visitors to interpret the casts. The selection of pieces and their willfully ahistoric arrangement provides plenty of material for making comparisons in both form and subject matter. Perhaps the most evident theme that emerges from this group of objects is the treatment of male and female bodies in Greek art. The male athletes attributed to Polykleitos put their hard, muscular bodies boldly on display, while the female Aphrodite covers herself up, her posture producing rolls of soft flesh. Sleeping Ariadne reveals herself unknowingly, her rich folds exposing as much as they conceal. In its layout, the gallery encourages visitors to make these kinds of connections; it also provides them a hospitable environment in which to work.

The gallery's location, however, begs the question of what an artist or architect who wants to study classical models gains from visiting a cast gallery rather than one of the world's greatest encyclopedic collections of art only a short walk away. The Metropolitan Museum of Art began acquiring some of these very casts in 1883, because at that time the museum did not rival the great collections of Europe. Architects and architectural historians helped guide the acquisitions at the Metropolitan, much as they provided impetus at the ICAA itself. Eventually several thousand casts were prominently displayed throughout the museum's main galleries. As the museum's collection of ancient bronzes, marbles, and other objects expanded, the

casts' stock depreciated, and by 1949 the last of them had been moved out of the galleries and into warehouses. There most of them remained until 2004, when the museum began to disperse them to schools, other museums, and institutions like the ICAA, and to sell some at auction. In the last half century, the Metropolitan's collections have continued to grow, so in some ways this new display of the old casts seems redundant.

The utility of the ICAA gallery is found in the presence of architectural copies not on display at the Metropolitan and in the breadth of models presented at close range. It offers a source of inspiration for artists and architects in search of formal models. In creating such a resource, the gallery implies formal continuity. Yet this formalist interpretation disregards history and does not, in the end, pay much attention to form, an attitude that is symptomatic of broader problems within the contemporary neoclassical enterprise. The ICAA itself can be categorized as proudly reactionary, and it is easy to dismiss its gallery as a throwback to an outdated mentality. Many who bring a critical acumen to bear on the casts and their display will leave disappointed. To focus on the lacunae, however, is to miss the rescue and restoration work that the ICAA and other receiving institutions have done for the casts, many of which might otherwise have been lost. Such a focus also rejects a potential point of engagement with a tradition that lies outside the purview of many scholars and designers. The gallery is intended above all for students, but it also offers to a possibly wider audience an encounter with the messiness of antiquity. Its display shows the problems in constructing narratives of form and the impossibility of divorcing forms from their histories; moreover, it underscores the ways in which our perceptions of the past have been shaped by the media we use to approach it. The gallery is, at its most basic level, an ongoing instantiation of a practice that has been occurring for thousands of years, one that has its own valence particular to this present moment.

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