Casts and copies
Ancient and classical reproductions

Andrew Jamieson and Hannah Gwyther

Casts and copies is an exhibition of modern reproductions of ancient and classical sculptures and artefacts, drawn from the University of Melbourne's Classics and Archaeology Collection at the Ian Potter Museum of Art. The exhibition features significant plaster casts of original Near Eastern, Egyptian, Greek and Roman works that date from the 3rd millennium BCE to the 2nd century CE. The plaster reproductions featured in *Casts and copies* reflect the exactness and versatility of casting techniques. The exhibition also demonstrates the variety of roles that plaster casts can play within museums, investigating their use for the study and interpretation of languages, literary sources, cultural and religious practices, government and administrative systems, as well as artistic styles and techniques. Key works in the exhibition include Egyptian statuettes, Sumerian figurines, the Black obelisk of Shalmaneser, a painted Acropolis *kore*, and two bronze-like metal portraits, of Hadrian and Claudius, dating from the Roman period. A number of the casts are inscribed—many in cuneiform—such as a reproduction of a tablet with part of the Nabonidus chronicle, which summarises historical events from the time of the accession of the neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus in 556 BCE. The exhibition also includes a group of ancient Babylonian *kudurru*—commemorative stela—with cuneiform inscriptions and scenes in low relief. There is a replica of the tablet of Shamash (sun-god) describing the restoration of the sun-god's temple. A series of panels replicates, in plaster, sculptures which decorated the north palace at Nineveh (north Iraq) of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal; the originals are now in the British Museum.

The *Casts and copies* exhibition invites viewers to explore a range of questions on the relevance of facsimiles in the digital age. A useful function beyond just teaching and research is that these reproductions allow these antiquities to be appreciated in multiple places around the world. But one wonders: can these replicas evoke the same power and response as the genuine article?

The University of Melbourne cast collection

The University's collection of casts largely owes its existence to three staff members and a generous bequest. Jessie Webb (lecturer in ancient and British history and sometimes acting professor, 1908–1944),[1] and Cecil Scutt (professor of classical philology

Previous page: Reproduction of a gypsum votive statue of a woman (Mesopotamia [southern Iraq], early dynastic III period, c.2400–2000 BCE), plaster, height: 22.1 cm. Reg. no. 0000.0731, Middle Eastern Studies Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection. The original resides. in the British Museum, London.

Right: Reproduction of part of a base of a Pentelic marble funerary *kouros* with the 'dog versus cat' wall frieze (Greece, Athens, Kerameikos, late 6th century BCE), plaster, height: 29.0 cm. Reg. no. 0000.0912, Classics Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection. The original resides in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

from 1919 to 1955),[2] were the leading figures behind amassing the classical cast collection in the 1920s, 1930s and 1950s. Webb requested grants to purchase ancient coins and casts of statuary for teaching purposes. Scutt developed the collection using funds from the Sutton Bequest, which was in memory of Hugh Sutton, a promising young classics student tragically killed in a motoring accident in 1925. By 1929, Scutt had amassed a vast array of casts and artefacts. Though documentation is scant, it is possible to trace some acquisitions, such as the purchase of the Acropolis *kore* in December 1928 and the five crates of casts donated by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1930.

The Middle Eastern studies cast collection was largely established through the efforts of Professor John Bowman—appointed in 1959 to the chair of Semitic studies—who played a crucial role in promoting the study of the Middle East in Australia. He created an extensive collection of resources, including plaster casts, to enhance teaching and research.

Cast collections and Victorian taste

In the late 18th century, museums began to commission and collect plaster casts for educational purposes. By 1800, museums in Berlin, Paris, Vienna, Copenhagen, Munich and Cork had all established cast collections of famous and renowned statues from antiquity. The idea of a 'museum of enlightenment' became popular; to show accomplishments of humankind from around the world, not bound to one nation or civilisation.

The 1851 Great Exhibition in Hyde Park did much to promote the idea that a cast collection should form the basis and centre of all comprehensive museums of art. The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London followed this trend and created a great Cast Court for reproductions. The V&A was instrumental in promoting the production and international sharing of casts of antique sculpture. Its first director, Henry Cole, initiated the 'Convention for promoting universal reproductions of works of art' in 1867. Signed by the Prince of Wales and 15 other European princes, it had the grand aim of sharing each nation's prized artworks for the educational good of all.

In Australia, judge and philanthropist Sir Redmond Barry (1813–1880) was intent on promoting cultural advancement in the colonies. Between the years 1859 and 1862, Melbourne's Public Library, under Barry's trusteeship, managed to acquire a classically-based collection of casts, that he intended to display at a museum of casts (which was never realised).[3] The large collection of casts of well-known Graeco-Roman works displayed at Swanston Street produced puzzlement and frustration,[4] with Melbourne audiences preferring original works.

By the late 19th century, cast collections around the world had begun to fall from favour. Contemporary artists were attracting attention, and the focus of collectors and museums moved from the classical to the current. Many cast collections were relegated to storage or sold, and displays of casts in museums and galleries are now rare. In the case of Melbourne's Public Library collection, the casts were largely dispersed during the 20th century, to destinations including the Royal Exhibition Building, the Working Men's College (now RMIT University), several regional art galleries and sale by public auction.[5]

The technical process of casting

A plaster cast is an exact replica taken from another object through the use of a mould. Various items can be cast including sculpture, architectural elements, fossils or even a living

person. The art of plaster casting is generally believed to have spread from the East, and was used by the ancient Greeks and Romans.

In the traditional casting process, the original was given a protective coating (usually beeswax mixed with turpentine) and then plaster would be applied in sections or 'piece moulds', much like a jigsaw puzzle. When removed, a negative impression was formed. Plaster could then be pressed or poured in, and on removal of the moulds, a replica of the original was revealed.

Plaster in its basic form is made from mixing the powder created by roasting limestone with various binding materials such as sand, animal glue, hair and water. Traditionally, the hardest and whitest plaster used for sculpting and manufacturing copies was *stucco*, which is formed by mixing the lime obtained from burning marble or Roman travertine with pulverised marble and other ingredients. Another variation of plaster which is more liquid in form is *gesso*—also known as plaster of Paris. Gypsum is the main ingredient in *gesso* and was traditionally found in the Montmartre district of Paris. Though very fine and brilliantly white, it is extremely brittle and can splinter and break easily.

From the 16th century, plaster casts had become common on the art market, and as such the quality was not guaranteed. By the late 18th century, a thriving business had formed in Britain supplying casts of famous artefacts and sculptures to the wealthy nobility. It was only after the *Copyright Act* of 1798 that the business became regulated. Plaster casting continues in the modern era and is utilised by many museums around the world for producing copies of popular original works. The British Museum sells thousands of replicas of the Rosetta stone each year—in this context the cast acquires souvenir status.

The role of cast collections

Do replicas undermine the original? Questions such as this have plagued museums since they first began to use casts to complement their collections. Reproductions were originally collected by museums with the primary function of making artworks accessible to the whole world. With the affordability and possibility of travel so much greater in modern times and the global digitisation of collections, the relevance of casts has come under question.

Cast collections broke down the barriers of location and ownership, providing an opportunity for many to study and witness artistic achievements. Renaissance and later Victorian ideas gave rise to renewed interest in the classics. However, as quickly as cast collections came into vogue, they became obsolete. Casts were dismissed in favour of 'original' artworks. The question now remains: what is the function and relevance of a cast collection?

Along with representing great works of art, casts provide security. Ultimately no museum can guarantee the safety of its artworks absolutely. Threats of natural disaster, war and theft are very real problems that museums face. Casts provide security that the artwork will never be truly lost. The replica can be displayed in place of the original, serve as a representative object in another country, or act as a substitute during conservation. At the University of Melbourne our cast collection is studied by a diversity of students to enhance teaching and learning in a wide range of subjects including archaeology, art history, classics, conservation, education, history, languages, and media and communication. Casts have never been used by museums to intentionally deceive. They were manufactured to inform and enlighten, as much as they were a trend.

Reproduction of a stone Sumerian plaque with priest making offerings (Mesopotamia, Ur [southern Iraq], early dynastic III period, c.2500–2300 BCE), plaster, height: 22.0 cm. Reg. no. 0000.0671, Middle Eastern Studies Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection. The original resides in the British Museum, London.

Casts were designed to represent that which could not be obtained in its original form. The subsequent use of casts has generated a history that is interesting in its own right, and casts continue to be created, used and exhibited around the world. For example, the cast bronze reproduction of the statue of Artemision Zeus (or Poseidon) currently standing in the courtyard of the Elisabeth Murdoch Building was a gift to the University of Melbourne from the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne in commemoration of the 1956 Olympics. This rare replica is one of only two castings which were made with the permission of the Greek government; the first casting is located in the United Nations Building in New York.

Can a plaster cast replace the original?

Controversy surrounds the question of whether a reproduction can replace the 'real thing'. For those nations which have had their artefacts removed or stolen, a cast may be considered an unacceptable replacement, serving only as a reminder of what has been lost.

The great archaeological excavations of the 19th and 20th centuries saw many iconic objects removed from their places of origin. Museums in Europe and North America sponsored expeditions to Greece, Italy, Egypt and the Near East which resulted in their amassing vast collections of objects of cultural significance. Debate has raged for years over the repatriation of items such as the Rosetta stone and the Bust of Nefertiti, discovered in Egypt and held in London and Berlin respectively. Perhaps the most famous example is the request for the return of the Parthenon marbles (also known as the Elgin marbles) from the British Museum to Athens. Although casts have been made available to Greece, Greek officials continue to campaign for the return of the original sculptures. Issues regarding the safety, accessibility and patrimony of artefacts are central to these repatriation debates.

While the cast may not possess the same powerful aura as the original, it may provide an opportunity for information to be more widely disseminated. Plaster casts and copies, along with museum souvenirs, have allowed these objects to be viewed on a worldwide scale. By creating replicas which are held in a variety of institutions, museums ensure the object's survival, or at least the survival of much of the information held in the real object. A cast is an ambassador for the original, an insurance policy, and an effective marketing tool—much more than a replacement of the 'real thing'.

The exhibition *Casts and copies: Ancient and classical reproductions* is on display in the Classics and Archaeology Gallery, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, from 16 April to 16 October 2011.

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1 Kathleen Fitzpatrick, 'Webb, Jessie Stobo Watson (1880–1944)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 12, Melbourne University Press, 1990, pp. 427–428.
2 Diane Langmore, 'Scutt, Cecil Allison (1889–1961)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 11, Melbourne University Press, 1988, pp. 558–559.
3 Ann Galbally, 'Patron of the arts at the Antipodes', *La Trobe Journal*, no. 73, Autumn 2004, pp. 4–18 (10), http://nishi.slv.vic.gov.au/latrobejournal/issue/latrobe-73/t1-g-t2.html.
4 'The Victorian Sculpture Gallery', *Argus*, 7 January 1865, pp. 5–6, http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/5747317.
5 Ann Galbally, 'The lost museum: Redmond Barry and Melbourne's "Musée de Copies"', *Australian Journal of Art*, vol. 7, 1988, pp. 29–49.