

The Plaster Cast Collection of the Glasgow School of Art: History, Aura and Experience

Thea Stevens

The plaster cast collection of the Glasgow School of Art (GSA) has formed a key part of the institution's history and experience ever since the School was founded in 1845. Inevitably, in the aftermath of the first Mackintosh Building fire of 2014, the impact of the plaster casts was transformed. After that fire, of course, the immediate question was: 'What have we lost?' Yet for the plaster casts, it became quickly apparent that this represented an opportunity to 'find' new knowledge, and to reflect on what makes any artefact, place or space an active agent in both tangible and intangible heritage.

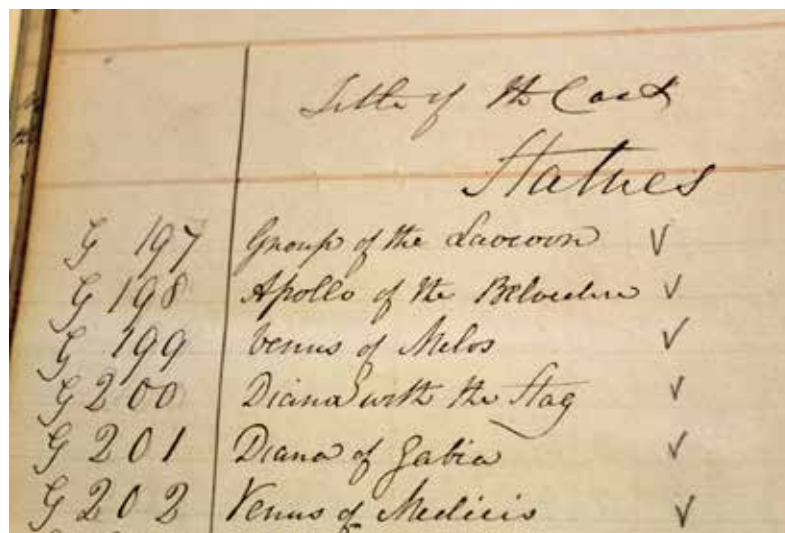
Since this research was first presented, an even more devastating blaze has impacted the fabric and structure of the Mackintosh Building. Fortunately, many plaster casts that survived the initial conflagration were being held off site, with only a minority remaining within the Mackintosh Building, which was necessary due to their fragility. However, as I will highlight at the end of this paper, when we consider the notions of aura and intangible heritage, this challenging period for the School might amount to a new phase in the plaster casts' lifespan, and in some cases, their afterlife. What the plaster casts represent is, to all intents and purposes, a continuity of meaning: a collection where past, present and future intersect in terms of creative and pedagogical practice. Here, then, the notion of 'loss' has already become the catalyst for a strikingly new experience, and arguably now more so than ever before.

With this in mind, this present discussion will unfold in a sequence of phases that connect to the collection's past, as well as its current and future status. First, I will draw upon archival materials held at the GSA Archives and Collections to unpack patterns of acquisition and provenance. Then, I will outline some of the key drivers for the use of the casts in teaching, focusing on the period of Francis Newbery's directorship. Next, I will draw insights from the conservation project that rescued some of the damaged casts after the fire of 2014, with discussion of their appearance and impact. Finally, I will

briefly consider ideas of value, reproduction and aura, arguing that the GSA's plaster cast collection has acquired, and will continue to acquire, new ecologies of meaning in terms of both tangible and intangible heritage, with their agency as non-human actors remaining a powerful force within the School's continuing narrative.

1. Catalogue of Books, Casts etc. of the School of Ornamental Art, 1849. GSA Archives & Collections GSAA/GOV/7/1.

Author's photograph, with kind permission of GSA Archives & Collections



The first major catalogue of the School's acquisitions dates to 1849 (Fig.1). It contains over 300 entries, with a key example, and indeed the very first item, being the 'Group of the Laocoön' that we see in a slightly later photograph taken by janitor Duncan Brown, which clearly shows the full grouping of the Trojan priest with his sons alongside him (Fig.2). Adhering to the account of Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*, the rest of its catalogue entry identifies the makers of the original sculpture as 'Agesander & His Sons', dating it to 'AD 69' under Emperor Titus. It also gives the location of the original as the Vatican Museums. In fact, it is of little surprise that a copy of the *Laocoön* was at the top of the list of the new School's plaster casts: it hardly needs underlining that the original marble work, when excavated in Rome in the early 16th century, went on to provoke generations of creative response and connoisseurial adulation, not least because of perceptions of its anatomical and artistic excellence.

2: Duncan Brown, photograph of group of the *Laocoön*, 1853, GSA Archives & Collections DB/71.

Image courtesy of GSA Archives & Collections



In fact, the meticulous record keeping in the 1849 catalogue reflects notions of tacit and explicit value, particularly in terms of financial worth, provenance and manufacture. The entry for the *Laocoön* group states that it cost 400 francs, roughly £4000 in today's money, and that it was made by Jacquet in Paris, a specialist firm of *formatori*, or plaster cast makers, closely associated with museum collections. The catalogue also tells us that the *Laocoön* was brought to Glasgow by Baron Marochetti, the prolific Victorian sculptor who executed the equestrian statue of Queen Victoria in the City's George Square, amongst many others.¹ However, the entries for other casts in the catalogue show that most specimens were acquired directly from D. Brucciani & Co., a

London company which cast objects held in a variety of collections, including the British Museum and the South Kensington Museum, later the V&A. As well as fuelling the fashion for plaster casts in the domestic context, Brucciani also commercially supplied items to museums. Their business with the new Governmental Schools of Art and Design was equally prolific.²

Indeed, it is crucial to underline that the nature of the School's early acquisitions sits firmly within the rhetoric of the 19th-century boom in plaster casts, which promoted their ability to give an 'impression' of the impact of the original to those who might not be able to access that original. Recently, although specifically in relation to architectural casts, Mari Lending has highlighted

that such reproductions were regarded not as imitations, but instead as agents of active democratisation.³ It is interesting however, that the catalogue entries give implications of perceived value as well as actual cost. Unlike others immediately below it in the list, which are stated as being from 'moulds made from Casts far removed from the Original Mould', the *Laocoön* group amounts to 'Very Good Casts', which suggests that some casts were considered further down the quality chain than others in terms of their proximity to the original work. As such, the experience and consumption of the plaster casts, if democratic, contained an implicit hierarchy.

It is also clear that as in other Government Schools, acquiring multiple versions of one 'iconic' work was important to pedagogical practice. For example, the catalogued 'Group of Laocoön' does not appear to be the version conserved following the 2014 fire: this *Laocoön* (Fig.3) does not have his doomed sons alongside him, and conservation work indicated that this version is very unlikely to be the larger grouping cut down. However, further down the same catalogue page, there is an entry for 'the central figure of Laocoön'. Moreover, in a photograph of an inventory of December 1900, a studio grouping includes a reduced version of the torso (Fig. 4).⁴ In a 1901 listing of new acquisitions later in the same volume, we find yet another 'Central Figure Laocoön', this time supplied by Brucciani: in fact, this may be 'our' conserved item, given that its relatively high cost might indicate large scale, and that it does not appear in the inventory photographs of the year before.⁵ Clearly, for the *Laocoön*, its reproduced presence existed variously, illustrating just how deeply the form may have been embedded within teaching over a considerable time frame.

Since range and multiplicity were important factors, it is not surprising that donations and loans also figure large within acquisition patterns. The Society for Dilettanti made contributions to the plaster casts collection, for instance, although at least in one instance, the circumstances were fairly fractious. In 1870, the Board of Governors minuted the demand of the Philosophical Society to their neighbours, the Glasgow Architectural Society, 'to remove the plaster casts from the Corridor of their rooms, with the least possible delay' given the 'lack of room for books'.⁶ Fortunately, the agreed action was to make the casts available to the GSA, which accepted them 'with sincere thanks'. And in a letter of 1901 to Francis

Newbery, Auguste Rodin requests feedback on the 'impact' (*impression*) of casts he had sent to Glasgow – probably as a temporary loan to the Glasgow International Exhibition,



which ran from May to November that year – thus highlighting a sense of the experience that plaster casts were expected to provoke.⁷

Plaster casts continued to be a key feature within acquisitions at the GSA well beyond Newbery's directorship. For instance, in a commercial catalogue dating to 1922 – after Brucciani & Co. was taken over by the V&A to operate as the Department for the Sale of Casts – we see the listing for the individual features of Michelangelo's David, and we find records of these 'detail' items in later archival holdings too.⁸ The Barnes papers of the 1950s contain a list of casts for Room 24, for example, with the 'Sundry' category itemising: 'Hands (three copies), Feet (10), David's Eyes, Nose, Mouth & Ear (1 each)'.⁹ This gives a representative picture of perceptions of pedagogical value: smaller casts

3. *Laocoön*, Mackintosh Building.

Photograph courtesy of Graciela Ainsworth Conservation and GSA Archives & Collections

were just as important as monumental works like the *Laocoön*, arguably even more so. In fact, the photographs of the 1900 inventory give a very visual sense of this multiplicity, with architectural and decorative examples vying for space with anatomical and sculptural specimens, even down to plaster fruit and vegetables.

While external companies such as Brucciani were key suppliers for the GSA, acquisitions also happened on a local basis. Throughout the 20th century, the Glasgow firm Giusti & Co. dealt with the GSA to make new casts, as well to replace damaged pieces and to acquire multiple copies of in-demand items. In one of many generous donations after the Mackintosh Building fire of 2014, a descendent of the family who had taken over the firm, offered the GSA a selection of formerly unknown Giusti casts. One of these is the ear of Michelangelo's *David*, with traces of its protective shellac coating indicating its use as a direct mould for other casts. In fact, this reminds us that the process of casting could cause damage to any 'original'. As Lending points out, by the end of the 19th century, the inherent dangers within the process were finally acknowledged.¹⁰ It is clear, therefore, that there could be a fractious element to the dialogue between original and copy, and that this could be physical, as well as philosophical.

Despite any such reservations, it is manifest that plaster casts were seen as essential, and indeed central, to teaching and practice. 'Drawing from the antique' was a vital component of the structured programme

of art education known as the South Kensington system, which was promoted by Henry Cole.¹¹ Furthermore, drawing from objects continued as a key component of teaching at the GSA when it moved to a new curriculum in 1901, under Newbery's directorate, and overseen by the Scotch Education Department. Overall, and generally speaking, the use of plaster casts was embedded within all courses, from metalwork to architecture. For instance, some prospectuses inform us that before students could move on to Elementary Design and Applied Design, they had to work through a series of modules to perfect drawing, then painting, then modelling from the flat, the round, the cast and only finally from life. One core entry examination was 'A Drawing in Light and Shade of a Piece of Ornament for the Cast'; and if successful in gaining a place, some students' progression requirements included a suitably challenging test in which plaster casts of the antique had to be drawn from memory.¹²

To more clearly visualise the plaster casts' presence, we can look again at the photographs within the 1900 inventory. Here, it seems that larger or freestanding casts had been gathered into studios, perhaps simply for the purposes of documentation (Fig.4). On the other hand, the images give us an idea of more permanent disposition, too, with smaller casts attached to metal grilles on the corridor walls, and others still contained in cabinets. However, a 1909 document reveals that the organisation of the casts was somewhat debated



4. Photograph within the 1900 inventory. GSAA/GOV/7/2.

Author's photograph, with kind permission of GSA Archives & Collections

within the School, further testifying to their pedagogical emphasis. Here, ruminations appear to have included whether the casts should observe a chronological ordering, or thematic groupings such as 'romantic'.¹³ While the chosen rationale for the placement decisions remains slightly opaque, it is certainly significant that such deliberations took place precisely as the second phase of the Mackintosh Building campaign



was completed. Moreover, the pedagogical importance of the collection had a wider remit. As well as being used within studio teaching, items from the collection were loaned out to local schools and other institutions. For example, a letter of April 1913 from Newbery to Percival Bourne Esquire, the Art Master at Paisley Academy, suggests that if Paisley had no casts of its own, Bourne was welcome 'to come here and choose something'. Newbery goes on to cite the value of 'drawing from the cast in light and shade of either ornament or the antique', and in a confident testimonial to learner journeys, he states that the students' inexperience 'would not trouble', since 'they are usually strong enough to take care of themselves'.¹⁴

Of course, the first fire of 2014 showed both the resilience and the vulnerability of

the Mackintosh Building and its contents. Out of the remaining collection of 220 plaster casts, some were completely destroyed by the blaze, with others substantially or lightly affected. The damage ranged from the effects of fire and water, and heat and cooling, to general grubbiness from the toxic fumes and particles that circulated within the building.

In the immediate aftermath of the fire, where possible, the first task was to move the casts to safety, and dry them out. Some of the smaller specimens located in the basement of the Mackintosh could be easily removed, and so made the short journey across Renfrew Street to the recently opened Reid Building, where they act as a pleasing and playful juxtaposition to a very contemporary space. Standing casts that were too large and fragile to remove without further risk of damage were assembled within the Mackintosh, and here, it was those that the fire thrust into the hinterland of damage and survival that immediately caught the imagination most vividly. The *Venus de Milo* was held together by straps and cautious hope; other casts, including the *Laocoön* (Fig.5), looked like they had been dip-dyed in darkness. The fire had travelled up and to the side, with the combination of heat and water damage intensifying towards the tops of the casts. This resulted in a blackening of their upper regions, and great streaks of weeping rivulets further down. For many within the GSA community, the damage felt like a palpable scar, and for the plaster casts, it transcended notions of value. Forty years before that fire, the Director of Fine Art, Bill Buchanan, wrote to Director Harry Barnes in a last ditch – and unsuccessful – case to have the casts repaired. He stated that they were 'priceless', and that 'any insurance claim, no matter how high, could not replace them'.¹⁵

The dramatic situation of 2014 had a happier outcome, with Graciela Ainsworth leading a monumental effort to conserve the casts. However, their injuries presented her team with real issues. In the casts' most damaged areas, the plaster had transformed into a blackened material that contained no water, rendering it highly brittle and very unstable. As such, Ainsworth had to develop and adapt existing plaster conservation methods, using metal detectors, endoscopes, thermo-electronic imaging and medical supplies, and IV rehydration drips. Ainsworth also had to conjure up completely new techniques, and while outwith the remit of this present discussion, this process and

5. *Laocoön*: detail of fire and water damage prior to conservation.

Photograph courtesy of Graciela Ainsworth Conservation and GSA Archives & Collections

6. *Laocoön* after conservation.

Photograph courtesy of Graciela Ainsworth Conservation



its discoveries will contribute significantly to the field of conservation studies.

The visual impact of the post-2014 conservation campaign was intensely striking, and it provoked interesting discussion in its own right; for instance, there have been pertinent responses to the focus on stabilising the casts and consolidating the burnt and blistered surfaces, rather than reverting them to 'white'. From the conservation point of view, it is reasonable to point

out that the plaster casts could not be taken back in time, because the plaster's chemical composition had changed irreversibly. From the pedagogical and creative side of the argument, it is equally salient to underline that a new aesthetic had been revealed, and that the plaster casts' presence and power was increased, not compromised (Fig.6). It might be overly romantic, but perhaps *Laocoön* sums this up the best: he has been described as the epitome of human suffering

and moreover we could say that the 2014 fire reverted this copy of an original to the copy of a copy of an original. After all, there has been discussion of the level to which some Greco-Roman works might also be modelled on further 'originals' back in time – and while the point can and should not be laboured, the dark patina of 'our' *Laocoön* did give us sublimated allusions to bronze as well as marble.¹⁶ Indeed, if a plaster cast is created within the pitch black of the enclosing mould, the GSA's *Laocoön* had brought his darkness back into the light.

At this juncture, it is vital to state that it was our plan to go into a newly restored Mackintosh Building in 2019, with the reinstalled selection of casts the only representation of the memory of the fire, and one, moreover, encased into anthropomorphic forms. Given the subsequent fire of 2018, this ambition is recalibrated, not diminished. We are indeed fortunate that the majority of the plaster casts were located elsewhere at the point of the second blaze, and as the Mackintosh Building is built again, so will be our collection, with notable survivors taking their place alongside those that have remained unscathed. Together, they will serve as a reminder that the learning process and the plaster casts remain intertwined, not only in pedagogy but also in the knowledge garnered and generated through adversity.

Here we can add a coda for a digital age. ISO Design and the GSA's School of Simulation and Visualisation are currently engaged in an AHRC project to visualise the *Laocoön* plaster cast, rendering it as a pedagogical and experiential object for a wider audience. Using scan data used to build virtual and augmented reality outputs, the visualisation will help to narrate our process of enquiry in the aftermath of the first fire and beyond. In fact, by representing the *Laocoön* as it was in its darkened state post-conservation, the visualisation will play resonantly on the aura and agency of a non-human actor. As Stuart Jeffrey has persuasively argued, this sort of process can amount to an 'intimate relationship between digital representation, aesthetics and the creative imagination'.¹⁷ In these terms, GSA's *Laocoön* will exist as an intangible point cloud that offers both tangible experience and a nuanced contribution to the live debate surrounding the value of the replica.

This will be a contemporary take on a long-established discussion. After all, plaster casts have been, and will continue

to be, interrogated in terms of their auratic qualities, or rather the perceived lack of them, given their identity as products of the act of reproduction. As we saw above, even in the late 19th-century heyday of plaster casts perceptions of value were much discussed – and here it is interesting to set a few parameters. Famously, Walter Benjamin argued that the process of reproducing the work of art has the potential to damage aura, but he also recognised an intrinsic democratisation, an idea then developed by John Berger.¹⁸ More recently, Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe have mooted that for a 'work of art to survive', it needs 'an ecology just as complex as one needed to maintain the natural character of a natural park': in other words, a delta of meaning made up of narrative layers added by those who have consumed copies through time.¹⁹

At the GSA, then, one could argue that the patina of experience embodied by the damaged casts of 2014 adds new weight and impact to the idea of their object biography; and by 2018, this ecology of meaning had developed still further. For our plaster casts, these layers amount to more than the sum of their constituent parts, and arguably their 'lived' experience of both fires and their after-effects renders them almost unique within the canon of such reproductions. Reintegrated into the narrative of the GSA, physically and digitally, the plaster casts will resonate as objects of history, aura and experience. They will be present, perhaps, as never before.

Credits

For both this article and the Symposium paper on which it was based, I am indebted to many colleagues and critical friends. The GSA Archives & Collections team furnished invaluable documentary evidence and leads, with Polly Christie unstinting in her guidance, and Susannah Waters, Cat Doyle, Rachael Jones, Lucy Stock, and Michelle Kaye unfailingly generous with their expertise. I am deeply grateful to Peter Trowles for collaborating on the initial idea and proposal, and to Dr Robyne Calvert, Prof. Irene McAra-McWilliam and all members of our Mackintosh research cluster at the GSA, as well as to the SSAH team for their support. I dedicate the article to the memory of my father, Derek Stevens, a classicist and educator extraordinaire, with whom I was able to discuss the project in his final months.

NOTES

- 1 R. McKenzie, *Public Sculpture of Glasgow*, Liverpool, 2002.
- 2 For Brucciani and British plaster cast manufacture, see R. Wade, *Domenico Brucciani and the Formatori of 19th-Century Britain*, London 2018. For the wider context, see R. Frederiksen and E. Marchand, *Plaster Casts: Making, Collecting and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, Berlin 2010.
- 3 M. Lending, *Plaster Monuments: Architecture and the Power of Reproduction*, Princeton & Oxford 2017, p.21. Lending also discusses another note of value on plaster casts, namely their ability to present 'lost works' to a wider audience: *ibid.*, p.90.
- 4 1900 inventory with photographs. GSAA/GOV/7/2. GSA Archives & Collections.
- 5 'New Casts – added 1901.' List added to 1900 inventory. GSAA/GOV/7/2. GSA Archives & Collections.
- 6 GSAA GOV 2/1. GSA Archives & Collections.
- 7 GSAA/DIR/5/38/1/9. GSA Archives & Collections.
- 8 GSAA/ISE/5/8. GSA Archives & Collections.
- 9 H.J. Barnes, Box 63, 13/13. GSAA DIR 13. GSA Archives & Collections.
- 10 Lending (n.3), p.24.
- 11 For a useful outline of the South Kensington system, see J. Turpin, 'The South Kensington System and the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art 1877–1900', *Dublin Historical Record*, Vol.36, no. 2, March 1983, pp. 42-64.
- 12 For example, see the Prospectus for Session 1893–4. GSAA/REG/1, 1893–4. GSA Archives & Collections.
- 13 GOV 2/7. GSA Archives & Collections.
- 14 GSAA/DIR/5/13, 1913–15. GSA Archives & Collections.
- 15 GSAA/DIR/13/41, C1972–1979. GSA Archives & Collections.
- 16 G.E. Lessing cites Winckelmann's seminal description in his romantic appraisal *Laocoön. An essay upon the limits of painting and poetry. With remarks illustrative of various points in the history of ancient art*, 1767. This edition: Boston 1887, pp.1-2.
- 17 S. Jeffrey, 'Challenging Heritage Visualisation: Beauty, Aura and Democratisation', *Open Archaeology*, Vol.1, 2015, p.144.
- 18 W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 1936, in *Illuminations*, London 1999; J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London 1972.
- 19 B. Latour and A. Lowe, 'The migration of the aura or how to explore the original through its facsimiles', in T. Bartscherer (ed.), *Switching Codes*, Chicago 2011, p.283.