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Abstract
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PLASTER CAST WORKSHOPS

THEIR IMPORTANCE FOR THE
EMERGENCE OF AN INTERNATIONAL
NETWORK FOR THE EXCHANGE OF
REPRODUCTIONS OF ART

PLASTER CAST WORKSHOPS AND THEIR CRUCIAL ROLE FOR ACADEMIES OF ARTS

When the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando was created in 1752, a plaster cast workshop was already considered to be of the utmost importance in the city of Madrid. A couple of years earlier, in 1744, the quality and quantity of casts supplied by local producers had already been regarded as insufficient.¹ A request was therefore sent to the Spanish ambassador in Rome to purchase moulds of statues which should be reproduced in Spain. Even though these moulds never arrived, the link between the San Fernando Academy's growing importance and its role as a supplier of casts is evident Figure 1. This is already apparent in the fact that it supplied casts to numerous newly

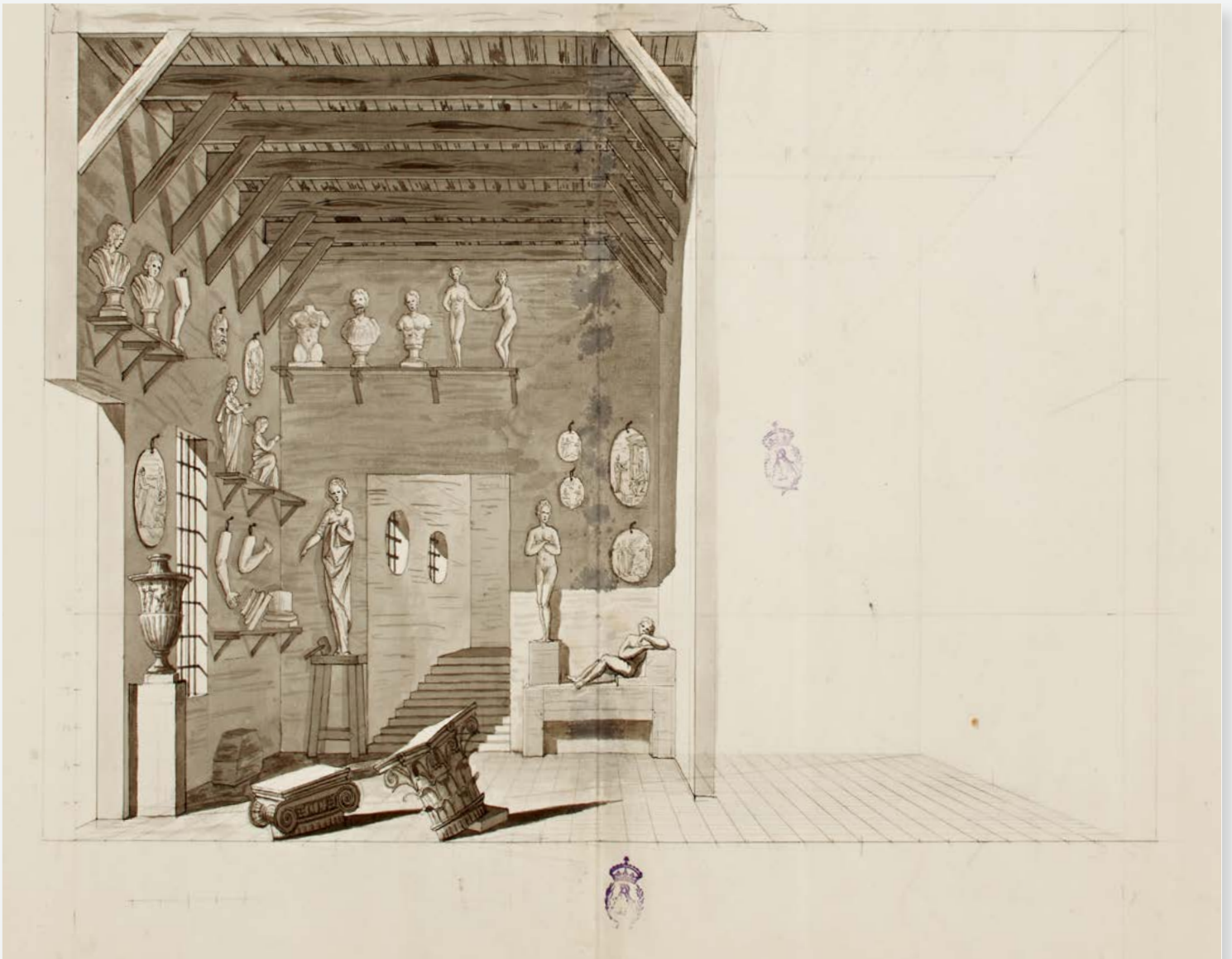


Figure 1 Dámaso Santos Martínez, Taller de vaciados, 1804, pencil, ink & grey wash on dark yellow paper, Museo de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid

founded academies and art schools: Valencia in 1753, Seville in 1771, Barcelona in 1775, and Zaragoza in 1792.²

In fact, Spain seems to have been the first country to understand that establishing a state-run workshop was the most effective way to address the needs of the general public and, in particular, those of public art schools and institutions. The Spanish government paved the way for a supply system of casts not only within Europe, but also in South America. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the San Fernando Royal Academy of Madrid provided an extensive cast collection to the San Carlos Academy in México in 1791, followed 80 years later by the offer of an equally important collection which was originally destined for a Portuguese museum.³

Italy's dominance as a supplier of casts was disrupted when the French forces looted the Papal States in 1798.

Frankfurt was an early example of transnational circulation of casts.

NAPOLEONIC LOOTING AS A DRIVING FORCE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLASTER CAST PRODUCTION

Italy's dominance as a supplier of casts was disrupted when the French forces looted the Papal States in 1798. On the one hand, moulds of statues were made to provide replacement copies of the originals, which were taken to Paris, and on the other Napoleon suspended private ownership rights and laws that had previously granted owners the option of refusing to have casts of their sculptures made, which had restrained the diversity and quality of casts on the market.⁴ The casts taken from these moulds were systematically offered as compensation for the loss of works of art that had been taken to the Musée Napoléon in Paris.⁵ As a result, the Louvre increased its moulds collection very rapidly and, at the same time, established itself as an important supplier of casts all over the world. The museum established a new concept in the supply chain of casts that relied on a mix of casts from France and from abroad, whilst up until the 18th century Italy was a highly regionalized exporter of casts. In Germany, copies of the finest statues were given to institutions, such as the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, in 1806,⁶ as well as to private collectors, such as Simon Moritz von Bethmann, banker of Frankfurt and Consul General of Russia in 1801 who later exhibited the casts in his private museum Ariadneum (1816)⁷. Interestingly, the nearby Städelsches Kunstinstitut was one of the earliest institutions to obtain casts from the Parthenon and Bassae friezes, which the British government made available in 1819. As these examples show, Frankfurt was an early example of transnational circulation of casts.

Whilst dispersal of Italian sculpture collections across Europe had started in the 16th century, the French invasions encouraged institutions as well as private collectors to acquire fresh casts of the most important collections not only from all over Italy (Vatican States, Sicily), but also from Spain, Prussia, Austria, Poland, etc. A private figure maker in Italy could never aspire to have the same wealth of moulds and resources as the Atelier de moulage at the Louvre. Furthermore, the quality of the casts provided by local formatori in Italy was not always particularly good.

That is why the French were the first to establish high quality standards in cast production, as certified by inlaid stamps.



Figure 2

Unknown producer
Aphrodite of Milos, 1856,
plaster cast, Faculdade
de Belas-Artes da
Universidade de Lisboa,
Lisbon

At this time, casts were often used for teaching purposes, to improve the quality of instruction provided by art institutions in the newly occupied countries, for example at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan in 1806⁸ or at the Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten at The Hague in 1807.⁹ The wider importance that Paris had acquired as an international centre for the production of plaster models during this period is reflected in the shipment of a considerable collection in 1806 to the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts in the United States of America, which hence became the first transcontinental destination for a cast collection produced in France, amidst the turmoil of war.

To sum up, the French invasions led to an even greater increase in the production of plaster casts.

As a result, in some institutions, such as the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan, probably more plaster models were acquired in this period than ever before.¹⁰ In fact, it is worth mentioning that the flow of Italian *formatori* moving to other European countries increased even further after the collapse of the French Empire.

The role the Louvre managed to maintain as a supplier of casts after the war can in part be explained by the fact that not all sculptures seized during the Napoleonic looting were returned at the end of the conflict. In fact, the exodus of sculptures from Italy had started long before this. One of the reasons for this was that classical antiquity began to play an important role in the establishment of public art museums in countries such as Spain, England, and Germany. This trend was further heightened by excavation campaigns in the course of the 19th century. In fact, the shift of interest towards Greek art fostered the success of reproductions that were made from the Parthenon frieze, which was taken to England in 1812, and from the Venus de Milo, which was brought to Paris in 1820 Figure 2. These bestsellers help explain the strong position

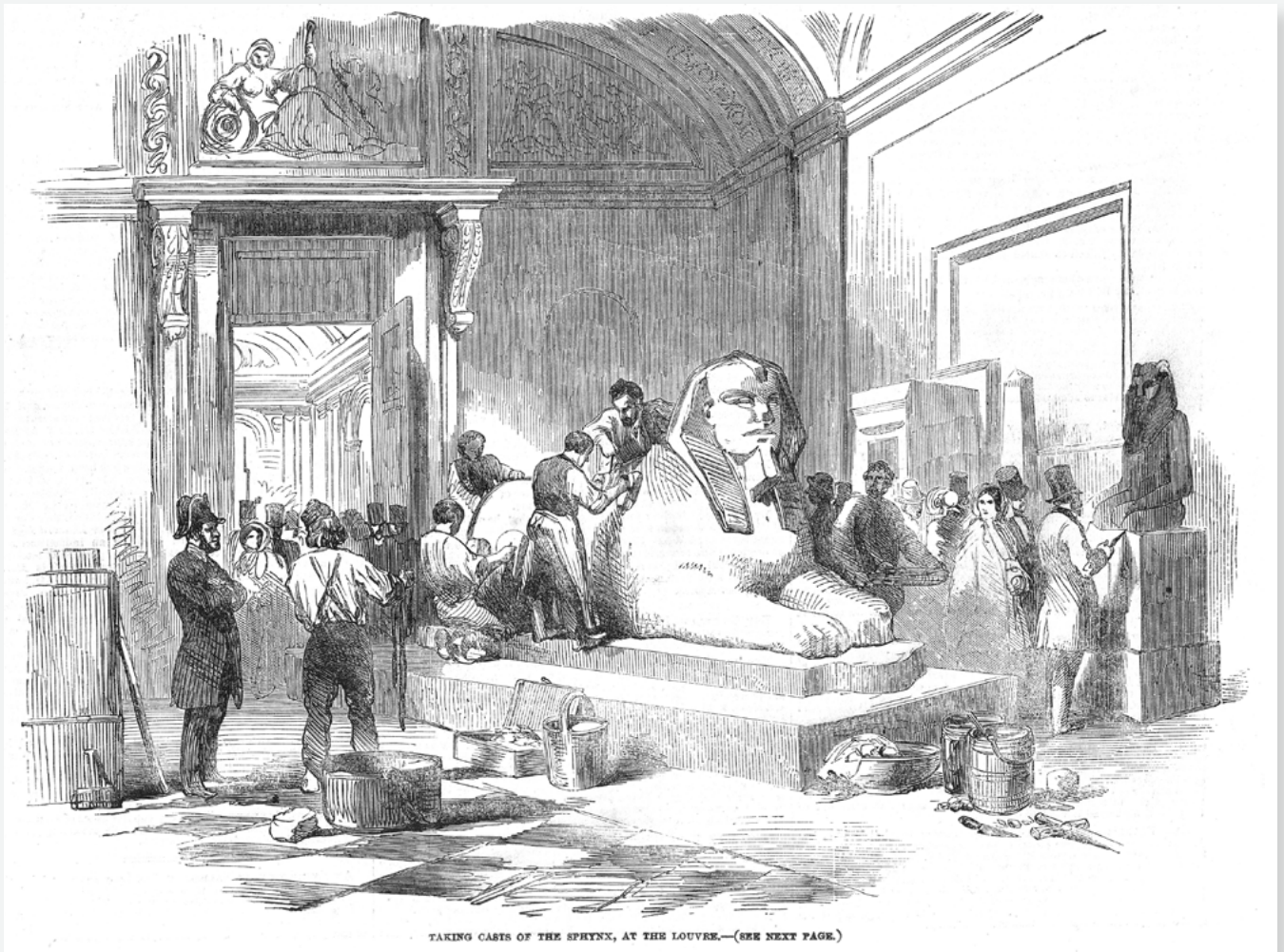


Figure 3 Unknown author,
Taking Casts of the
Sphinx, at the Louvre

maintained by the British Museum, the Louvre and other international institutions with replica workshops that sold copies of sculptures on display in their collections. As the example of the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence illustrates, the exchange of casts was at that time one of the most important ways to expand a collection.¹¹

THE NATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF PLASTER CAST COLLECTIONS

Furthermore, the intellectual movement that emerged from Romanticism at the beginning of the 19th century fostered the appreciation of other artistic styles that in the previous century had been regarded as barbarian and, in a way, not part of the canon. This new attitude towards culture equally favoured the acceptance of unknown repertoires, hence enabling an international market for reproductions to develop. Each country had its own unique range of replicas of sculptures and ornaments considered to be of national importance. These came from national



Exhibition of Ancient Mexico at the Egyptian-Hall, Piccadilly, 1824, and Painted by Agostino Aglio at American Art, London, 1824.

Figure 4 Agostino Aglio
Exhibition of Ancient
Mexico at the Egyptian-
Hall Piccadilly, 1824
print on paper

The emergence of an international exchange network for art reproductions grew out of the creation of institutionalised plaster cast workshops affiliated with academies of fine arts and museums.

monuments and from excavation campaigns conducted in archeological sites in Europe and beyond, for example in Egypt [Figure 3](#), India, Mexico [Figure 4](#), and Cambodia.

Although casts were displayed in public in nearly every European capital, there is no reason to conclude that this was the result of an organized process; instead, it was a manifestation of converging interest in the fine and applied arts, archaeology, heritage, ethnography, etcetera. Each country defined its own priorities in accordance with its own political and social agenda. In this respect, cultural relationships with foreign states and overseas colonies were of the utmost importance.

To sum up, in my view the emergence of an international exchange network for art reproductions grew out of the creation of institutionalised plaster cast workshops affiliated with academies of fine arts and museums. Their role and importance cannot be overestimated. Firstly, the supply of casts was seen as a service provided to society. Secondly, these replica workshops had become essential instruments to make art institutions more sustainable, as the supply of casts provided a steady income and served as a form of exchange currency for acquisition of further plaster models from abroad.¹² Furthermore these workshops raised quality standards in local markets by issuing stamps to certify the origin of specific casts.



Figure 5

Gipsformerei, Königliche Museen zu Berlin, Tomb of Cardinal Girolamo Basso della Rovere, ca. 1882, plaster cast

casts between European countries.¹³ This agreement allowed other smaller countries that did not previously participate in such networks, such as Portugal, to become part of this cooperation system and to increase investment in collections now intended for museums. As observed in Paris in 1867 and in Antwerp in 1885, world fairs were of vital importance in stimulating agreements for exchanges of plaster casts. Furthermore these large public events where reproductions of works of art were continuously on display paved the way for the establishment and development of exhibition halls, such as the South Kensington Cast Courts, which were first opened in 1873, with the impetus coming from the 1867 *International Convention of promoting universally Reproductions of Works of Art*; the Musée de Sculpture Comparée in Paris, founded in 1879 and opened in 1882 in the galleries of the Palais du Trocadéro, which had been built for the 1878 World

It was through a network of European suppliers, encompassing institutions such as the Gipsformerei of the Berliner Museen Figure 5 and the plaster cast workshops of the British Museum and the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid, that Italy lost the monopoly in marketing these objects.

WORLD FAIRS AS LAUNCH-PADS FOR MUSEUMS OF CASTS

However, the key event that fostered an international cooperation system did not occur until the Paris World Fair in 1867, when Henry Cole, director of the South Kensington Museum, succeeded in establishing a convention for the exchange of



Figure 6

Gipsformerei, Königliche Museen zu Berlin, Ornamental plaster casts

World fairs were of vital importance in stimulating agreements for exchanges of plaster casts.

Exhibition; and what was known as the Musée des échanges internationaux, in Brussels, which was created in 1880 at the Musées royaux des arts décoratifs et industriels and experienced significant growth as a result of the 1855 Convention on exchange of casts.

A TRANSNATIONAL FIELD OF ACTION

The important role of world fairs in the establishment of a cooperation system for exchanges of reproductions of art between European countries was augmented by the publicity garnered, thanks to prize awards, by the best plaster

cast workshops operating in Europe. Because governments felt moved by international competition to continuously upgrade these cast collections with a view to making the institutions holding them more efficient and advanced, many countries used these events to carry out surveys comparing teaching systems and to acquire catalogues from the plaster cast workshops in order to help improve teaching methods in arts and crafts schools.

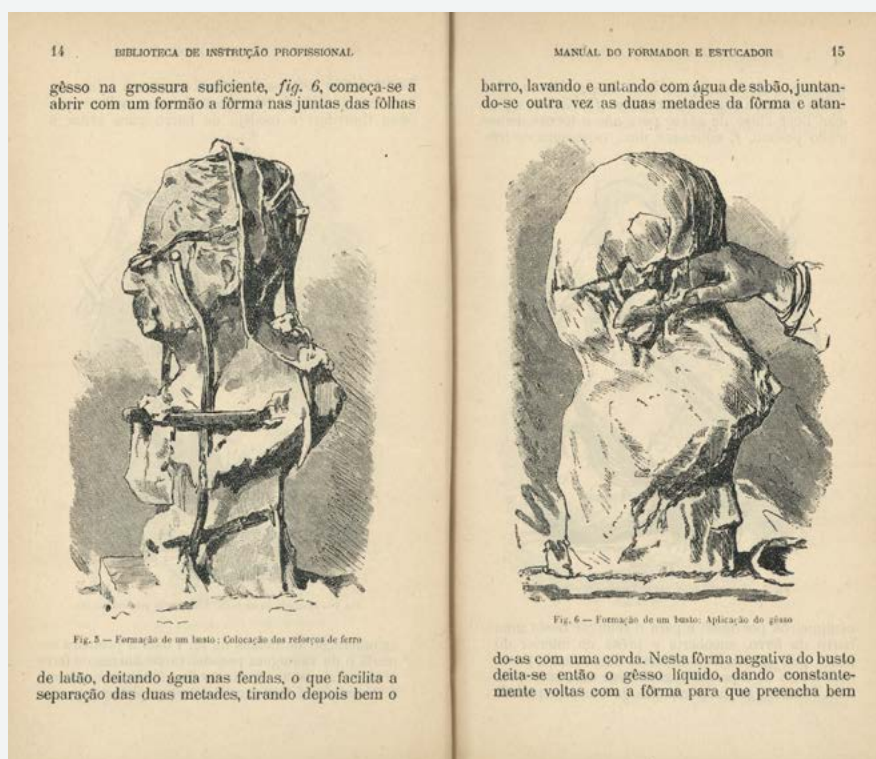



Figure 7

Josef Füller, *Manual do Formador e Estucador* Biblioteca de Instrução Profissional, Lisboa [n. d., ca. 1900]

Germany and Austria had achieved international recognition with ornamental casts (Figure 6). In Vienna, the Museum für Kunst und Industrie supplied casts, photographs and electrotypes to, among others, museums in Saint Petersburg, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Belgrade, and Basel.¹⁴ The workshop of the Württemberg government in Stuttgart established a strong reputation at the world fairs of 1867 and 1878 in Paris, and 1873 in Vienna.¹⁵ This workshop had also a significant impact on both the academies of fine arts and the applied arts schools in Portugal.¹⁶ Another example for the international standing of plaster casters in the German-speaking world is brought to

us by Thomas Füller, an Austrian craftsman and sculptor who had trained at the Museum für Kunst und Industrie in Vienna before moving to Portugal at the end of the 19th century where he published the first manual in Portuguese on casting and modelling plaster .¹⁷ As a professor in Portugal's arts and crafts schools, Thomas Füller not only participated in the casting campaigns of Portuguese monuments, but also educated new generations of plaster casters and modellers. His example shows how the plaster cast industry in Europe had been freed from dependence on Italy as a supplier as well as from Italian *formatori* who had long held the secrets of this craft.

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