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CASTS & PLASTER CAST COLLECTIONS  
IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

# SEKTION

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# THE MAKING AND MEANING OF PLASTER CASTS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY THEIR FUTURE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

SOON AFTER THE CAST COURTS (then the Architectural Courts) opened in October 1873, a contemporary noted that “there are some impressions that can scarcely be effaced. Innumerable ‘things of beauty’ may be seen in the course of a lifetime ... There are some experiences... however ... which ... are so striking, it may be unique... and the impression they make is indelible ... the remembrance of the first visit to these new halls [the Architectural Courts][is] amongst the impressions likely to remain.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, this visitor—as well as countless others since then—experienced unique feelings of awe when they first saw the great Architectural Courts (now the Cast Courts) at South Kensington (the Victoria and Albert Museum). That emotional response is still felt by many today when they enter these galleries. These feelings exemplify the excitement a work of art can give us. But how should we as curators present the casts today? Can we use these galleries to give ourselves a glimpse of the



Figure 1

View of the Weston Gallery (the Eastern Cast Court), Victoria and Albert Museum, 2014

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Victorian age, a theatrical sensation, and yet at the same time evoke the original Renaissance and medieval objects which inspired these great Cast Courts **Figure 1** ?

The appearance past and present of the spaces themselves is fundamental to presenting an understanding of the casts. They indeed are the reason the V&A's cast collection survives, while other collections of reproductions in museums elsewhere have been dispersed, or even destroyed. The South Kensington galleries have only ever functioned as areas where mainly casts have been shown since they first opened in the 1870s.

### THE CAST COURTS AS THE EPITOME OF THE EDUCATIONAL AIMS OF THE SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

Without question the Cast Courts epitomised the aims of the South Kensington Museum as envisaged by Henry Cole: not only breath-taking, but educational in the broadest sense, and encyclopaedic in their scope, giving the public a taste of the great monuments of Europe and indeed monuments from India, whether through plaster reproductions, electrotypes, photographs, brass rubbings, drawings or paper mosaics. In the days before cheap international travel, and before the era of the well-illustrated art book, such reproductions were essential for those who wished to see or learn about great works of art elsewhere.

### PRESERVING THE VICTORIAN SPLENDOUR OF THE CAST COURTS AND MOVING FORWARD TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The recent and ongoing renovations in the Cast Courts have had to tread a delicate line between preserving, if not re-creating, the Victorian splendour of the Cast Courts, and moving forward to the 21st century, giving visitors information which is both comprehensible and enjoyable. The paradoxes of the Cast Courts (for example the inclusion of the cast of an antique, Trajan's Column, alongside medieval and Renaissance works) are in actuality part of the reason they are so beloved by visitors: they seem to overpower rational or museological justifications **Figure 2** .

**Figure 2** View of the West Cast Court with Trajan's Column, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2015.

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The paradoxes of the Cast Courts are part of the reason they are so beloved by visitors: they seem to overpower rational or museological justifications.

The renovations in the Italian Cast Court were completed in spring 2016, and the present and future plans include the refurbishment of the other Cast Court, housing not only Trajan's Column, but the monumental Pórtico de la Gloria from Santiago de Compostela, and numerous major German Renaissance sculptures by Peter Vischer, Tilman Riemenschneider and others. Between the Cast Courts will be a didactic gallery showing the history and process of the making of plaster casts and electrotypes, as well as groupings of architectural casts. This great project will come to completion in late 2018.

The Italian Cast Court, now known as the Weston Gallery, was renovated from 2010 to 2014, having last been refurbished in 1981. After the opening in 1873, the fortunes of the Courts waxed and waned over the decades. At the beginning many objects were housed there, jostling for attention. Not only reproductions, but 'real' objects were included, such as the rood loft from 's-Hertogensbosch in the Netherlands, now in the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries at the V&A. The enormous and indeed sometimes confusing range of material shown there in the Victorian era was one reason it was decided not to re-create the so-called original display.

Clarity of presentation and the comprehensible presentation of information were always issues, and caused the museum problems as the nineteenth century wore on. In contrast to the initial enthusiasm of the 1870s in response to the great spectacle of the Courts, in 1882 a contemporary commentator had noted in a letter to *The Times* "the most extraordinary jumble of works" at South Kensington, particularly in comparison with the displays of casts at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin.<sup>2</sup> The displays in Berlin were to be praised once more a few years later by a curator and future director of South Kensington, A.B. Skinner, in 1887. He noted that the "Collection of Renaissance Italian casts in the Royal Museum, Berlin, gathered together by Mr. W. Bode [Wilhelm Bode] ... is one of the most interesting collections which I visited in Germany. The casts are very carefully arranged ... The order is as far as possible chronological."<sup>3</sup> The casts in London were perceived as confusing and lacking in rigour, in contrast to the better ordered galleries on the Continent.



Figure 3

View of the Eastern Cast Court shortly before it was completed, showing the Eastern Gateway of the Great Buddhist Stupa at Sanchi, in 1872

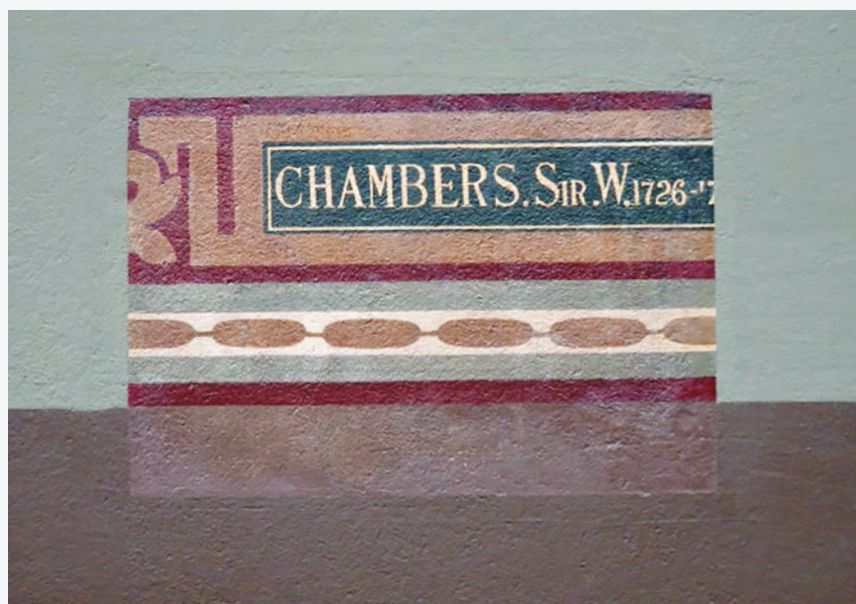
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However, the apparent “jumble” of the 1870s, to which the museum did not want to return in 2014, was compounded by the fact that we could not in effect go back to any notional original display. The arrangements at South Kensington changed constantly, every few years, from the start, because new objects were frequently entering the galleries, while others were dispatched elsewhere. The museum continued acquiring plaster casts up to the end of the nineteenth century and beyond, and these new acquisitions needed to be accommodated in the Cast Courts. Conversely the Indian plaster casts, acquired shortly before the Courts opened in the 1870s, were de-accessioned in the early twentieth century, and were sent to the Imperial Institute, now Imperial College, London University [Figure 3](#).<sup>4</sup> Again, South Kensington was unusual, and perhaps unique, in juxtaposing reproductions of European and Asian art within the same gallery. A contemporary commentator noted that it “is wonderful indeed that it should be left ... to England to appreciate the romance of the East ...”<sup>5</sup>

It was however not only the displays that were altered: the colour scheme of the Cast Courts changed constantly too, and in the twentieth century the once brilliant Victorian polychromy on the walls—with their friezes of gilded cartouches, giving names of famous artists and artistic cities of the past “from Ahmedabad to Zurich”<sup>6</sup>—was dulled down to neutral, modernist colours, literally grey, with no gilding or inscriptions, the cartouches having been obliterated. One inscription recording the British

**Figure 4** Inscription from the Eastern Cast Court, Victoria and Albert Museum, of circa 1873 recording the British architect Sir William Chambers

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eighteenth-century architect William Chambers and another commemorating a Spanish artist only survived because they were hidden behind casts. The Chambers inscription has now been revealed and restored as a lone surviving fragment of the original rich mural decoration [Figure 4](#) . However, the gilded cartouches on the walls were not similarly restored for two reasons: most importantly because they did not survive, and no photographic or other records had been kept. The actual names were lost and would have had to have been created through surmise. Secondly, these decorative friezes ran round the walls at different levels, meaning that the installation of casts on the walls would have been difficult, and would certainly have interrupted the friezes.



**Figure 5**

Ceramic floor tiles in the Eastern Cast Court, Victoria and Albert Museum

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When the last restoration programme was carried out in the early 1980s the walls were painted in sienna yellow, since there were insufficient funds to restore them to their original colours. However in the 2014 restoration the original mossy green colour of the walls below and the maroon purple above in the clerestory were carefully restored. Not only were the right hues chosen, but the texture of the paint was researched too. These

colours reflect the distemper finish given to the walls, a soft powdery surface, very different from the previous eggshell emulsion with its satiny sheen.

The floors of both Courts were covered in black linoleum at some point in the twentieth century, concealing the original tiles. These tiles were made by a ceramic company in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, and revealing them has made an enormous difference to the sense of light and colour in the gallery [Figure 5](#) .<sup>7</sup> However, even the story of the floor and its tiles changed as time went on. Three large areas of tiles, about a metre square, were installed probably in the late nineteenth century. Previously, coloured glass panels had been fitted into the floor through which the crypt beneath the gallery could be viewed. Whether for safety or aesthetic reasons these were sadly removed, and subsequently vanished.<sup>8</sup>

Everyone was most positive about the sense of drama and surprise in the Cast Courts, the feeling of the unexpected, and extraordinary apparent juxtapositions of monuments which are in reality hundreds of miles apart.

The glass roof and electric lighting system had to be overhauled. For that reason, scaffolding was erected throughout the gallery.<sup>9</sup> The new lighting system is a softer version of the electric lights we had during the 1980s and 1990s. Daylight plays a vital part, and most of the time the public is unaware of the source of light; it simply pervades the ambient space. The scaffolding enabled conservators to reach casts otherwise too high for cleaning, such as Ghiberti's *Doors of Paradise*.

The lay-out of the plaster casts and electrotypes has been re-done, again constantly bearing in mind the interplay between the wish to retain the sense of the authentic Victorian interior and a desire to show these works in ways in which today's visitors can understand them. When we commenced work on the Cast Courts we convened focus groups of members of the public, asking people what they most liked and what they most disliked about the Cast Courts as they then were, before the renovations. Everyone was most positive about the sense of drama and surprise in the Cast Courts, the feeling of the unexpected, and extraordinary apparent juxtapositions of monuments which are in reality hundreds of miles apart. When asked what they liked least, people said they disliked the sense of confusion, of not knowing how to navigate the spaces. In other words, what they liked most and what they disliked most was the same thing. We therefore wanted to hold on to the theatrical, extraordinary impact the Cast Courts have, whilst at the same time helping people comprehend the groupings, and conveying helpful information about these works. One of the most dramatic ways in which we did this was to move the cast of Michelangelo's *David* from one side of the gallery to the other. This sculpture now has a commanding presence at the south end of the gallery, and is grouped with other casts after Michelangelo. The electrotype copy by Giovanni Franchi of Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* from the Baptistry in Florence was also moved to be positioned behind the *David*, conveying a sense of the history of Florentine sculpture in the Renaissance.

Conservation was a fundamental aspect of the renovations. We opted to clean all the casts, though not to over-clean them. The surfaces of many of the plasters are

coloured to resemble the original material, whether marble or painted terracotta, and these surfaces clearly had to be retained. During this work research by the conservators took place, and they uncovered many interesting aspects of the production of the casts and their surface treatments.

Currently we are doing further work on the labels. One aspect of the Courts is that some visitors do not immediately realize these astounding objects are reproductions. People have been overheard saying they did not realize Michelangelo's *David* was in London, rather than in Florence. Naturally the fact that two marble copies of the *David* are also in Florence, while the original is in the Accademia is also potentially confusing. In fact, the V&A's plaster version was made in the 1850s, when the Florentines were making moulds of the original marble figure in order to produce the marble copies. The Italian government presented the plaster version to Queen Victoria in 1857; she immediately gave it to the South Kensington Museum, recognizing she had no space suitable for it. When it was first here it had to be displayed in parts. A plaster fig leaf was made for the figure at the same time, ostensibly so that it could be attached if royal ladies visited the museum; it was last used on the occasion of a visit from Queen Mary.

The labels needed to indicate both the importance of the original work, and to some extent the story of the actual nineteenth-century cast, since these plasters and electrotypes now have their own validity as objects from the early history of the museum and reflections of Victorian attitudes to art. This encompasses such concepts as the idea of the canon of art: specific works perceived as fundamental to the study of art history, such as Brunelleschi's and Ghiberti's competition reliefs for the Baptistry doors in Florence in the early quattrocento. However the casts can also illustrate how nineteenth-century decorative forms were influenced by Italian Renaissance architecture and sculpture. It is additionally fascinating to see how certain works, compelling and imposing as they are, such as Jacopo della Quercia's San Petronio doorway from Bologna, have

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not entered the canon in quite the same way Figure 6. Other works in the Italian Cast Court are still seen as fundamental, and are constantly being drawn or studied, notably works by Donatello and Michelangelo, or the Pisano pulpits from Pisa.

For these reasons, the wording of the labels is in two halves: first we give information about the original work, and often how it relates to nineteenth-century perceptions, then further ‘tombstone’ information about how and when it was cast, as well as the name of the artist who made the cast. Many of these artists were Italian practitioners living in London though some were based in Florence or Milan. Visitors say they prefer reading traditional printed labels to seeing digital information on their mobile phones or on a screen in the gallery. The format and history of the Cast Court seems to predicate this printed form, rather than electronic data.

Some of our casts depict objects which were damaged in the Second World War, such as Francesco Laurana’s *Bust of a Woman*, perhaps Ippolita Sforza, wife of Alfonso II of Naples (inv. no. 1889-94). This cast was purchased from the Kaiser Friedrich Museum (now the Bode-Museum SMB) in Berlin in 1889, and the original is now in two halves, one in Berlin and the other in St Petersburg.<sup>10</sup>

We are currently also planning what to put in the corridor between the two Courts, as well as in the Court housing Trajan’s Column. One of the fundamental aspects of the Courts is the explanation of techniques. At the moment we have a display about casting which dates back to the early 1980s. Useful though this was, it is time to update it, and once again not necessarily using electronic methods, though we will install videos. Moulds and newly cast plasters will be displayed, along with discussions on surface finishes, in freestanding cases in the middle of this space. The process of electrotyping will additionally be shown, as well as the whole notion of reproduction in the nineteenth century. The walls however will be a dense forest of architectural details as seen through plaster casts: capitals, reliefs, and so on, divided by type, for instance Islamic casts, Romanesque, Gothic, as well as one wall of



**Figure 6** View of the Weston Gallery (the Eastern Cast Court), Victoria and Albert Museum, 2014

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inscriptions. These will only have summary labels; more information will be available on the website, since on the walls we wanted above all to mount the casts as a visual spectacle, rather than as a didactic display.

The other great Cast Court housing Trajan's Column is the next major phase of the project. Once again the original wall colours will be restored, the floor tiles revealed, and the lighting and labelling improved. Here however many of the casts will not be moved around, since they are simply too large. The biggest change to be made is to allow visitors to enter one half of Trajan's Column, and experience the space within: its extraordinary brick interior, red-olent of history both ancient and Victorian.

## CASTS AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

One aspect which has been fostered, in addition to the vital features mentioned above, is the idea of the contemporary. Casts inspire contemporary artists, both because of what they represent and because of their very technique: reproductions in plaster made from a mould. Rachel Whiteread and others have installed temporary works amongst the historic casts. If funds permit it is hoped to install a permanent contemporary plaster cast at the entrance to the Courts, but this is still to be confirmed. Any contemporary intervention must not mar the historic lay-out of the Courts.

## THE CAST COURTS AT THE VERY HEART OF THE V&A

Above all the Cast Courts remain an overwhelming and glorious aspect of the V&A, both Victorian and Renaissance, both nineteenth-century and medieval, all at the same time, and showing, through the museum displays, ways in which great monumental art can be celebrated, as well as the V&A's own history as an institution, reflecting the ideals of education and inspiration to artists, students, children and all visitors who come to South Kensington.

- 1\_ Anonymous article in *The Builder*, 4 October 1873, p. 789.
- 2\_ See M. Trusted, 'Reproduction as Spectacle, Education and Inspiration. The Cast Courts at the Victoria and Albert Museum: Past, Present and Future' in: C. Schreiter (ed.), *Gipsabgüsse und antike Skulpturen. Präsentation und Kontext*, Berlin 2012, p. 364.
- 3\_ A.B. Skinner Report, 17 November 1887.
- 4\_ See P. Mitter, 'The Imperial Collections: Indian Art', in: M. Baker and B. Richardson, *A Grand Design. The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, exh.cat., Victoria and Albert Museum/London and Baltimore Museum of Art 1997, p. 225.
- 5\_ *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- 6\_ *Building News*, 23 April 1873, p. 469.
- 7\_ [L. Jewitt], *Jewitt's Ceramic Art of Great Britain 1800-1900*, revised by G.A. Godden, London [1878], 1972, p. 36.
- 8\_ *Building News*, 23 April, 1873, p. 469.
- 9\_ *Ibid.*, p. 469.
- 10\_ See Julien Chapuis and Stephan Kemperdick, *The Lost Museum: The Berlin Painting and Sculpture Collections 70 Years after World War II*, exh. cat., Bode-Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin 2015, pp. 20-21.