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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

The Multifaceted Role of Plaster Casts in Contemporary Museums

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Art History

by

Alissa Ann Moyeda

Thesis Committee:
Professor Margaret M. Miles, Chair
Professor Cecile Whiting
Associate Professor Lyle Massey

2017

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DEDICATION

To

James and my sister Christina,

who gave me endless support and love this past year at times when my anxieties and stress got the better of me.

I could not have done this without you.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Multifaceted Role of Plaster Casts in Contemporary Museums

By

Alissa Ann Moyeda

Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Margaret M. Miles, Chair

Plaster casts typically based on well known artworks were displayed in European and American museums and galleries prior to the twentieth century. Though popular, these plaster casts were never seen to be equivalent in value to the original, authentic pieces. In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in plaster casts and many museums collections have been pulling casts out of storage to put on display. Current usage of casts in European and American museums is overwhelmingly for educational use, as they allow the public to view art from all around the world. However, it is clear from the way that they are presented that casts are not seen as art. The Akropolis Museum in Athens, Greece may be taken as an exception to this way of thinking as the museum and its curators have placed plaster casts of the Parthenon sculptures alongside the authentic marble sculptures. The integration of casts alongside original sculptures in their Parthenon exhibit works as an educational and political tool. This choice of positioning allows them to be misinterpreted by visitors who are ignorant of the Parthenon's history; under the gaze of these visitors, the status of these casts has been elevated to that of art. While casts are still viewed as a form of replication, the Akropolis stands as an exception that begs the question of how casts may be used in the future and what this means for their status as art.

INTRODUCTION

Plaster casts have existed for centuries in artist workshops, museums, and storage rooms, often existing as copies of other artwork. In some cases, plaster casts were used to help finalize the design of a stone artwork, and in others, these casts were the artwork themselves. In modern times casts were once seen as a way to spread knowledge of the masters and of ancient sculpture, valued for their affordability and how they could easily be made accessible to the local public and artists. In the nineteenth century opinions started to change, and casts were no longer seen as beautiful replications of sculptures from centuries past, but ugly imitations. Plaster casts were thrown out of the modern museum or hidden away in storage rooms. In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in casts and people have started respecting casts for what they can provide the viewer. The question now is about the role of casts in the contemporary museum and what value they hold; to understand how casts are currently appreciated, it is necessary to look at how their role has evolved over time.

Casts in Antiquity

Plaster casts are not a contemporary creation, as they have been around for millennia. As Rune Frederiksen shows in *Plaster Casts in Antiquity*, they existed as early as the fourteenth century BCE and had many uses, including moving three-dimensional images from one location to another, assisting in the production of sculpture, and existing as an artwork.¹ In his examination of the role of casts in Roman society, Frederiksen suggests that the existence of casts allowed the Roman artists to produce hundreds of Roman emulations of Greek sculpture, as these plaster casts were more accessible and easily moved than marble sculptures; but what is most important about Roman sculptures that were based on Greek sculptures is how they were perceived in society for years and how this shaped the connotation of “copies” today.²

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, scholars looked at Roman sculptures for traces of a Greek original, hoping to find a hint of a long lost masterpiece. Ancient Greek sculpture was seen as the pinnacle of art and scholars believed no one could perfect marble as they did. Roman sculptures were considered derivative and were studied in order to find Greek-style and masterworks mentioned by ancient authors, especially Pliny the Elder. This idea of “copies” are not as good as “originals” is a judgment that still exists today and has made it impossible for casts to ever be taken seriously. More recently, it has been argued by authors such as Brunilde Ridgway, Miranda Marvin, and Ellen Perry, that instead of looking at Roman sculptures as “copies” of lost masterpieces, they should be viewed as emulations; Roman sculpture was chosen and created for the needs of the people that commissioned them, so while they might have been inspired by

¹ Rune Frederiksen, *Plaster Casts: Making, Collecting and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Rune Frederiksen and Eckart Marchand (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 15.

² Frederiksen, *Plaster Casts*, 21.

Greek sculptures, they were not “copies.”³ This is a recent way of thinking, however, and by looking at the reception of casts over hundreds of years, it is clear that they are never respected on the same level as the artwork they are based on, even when some people see the casts as capturing the essence of the original piece. Art from Greek and Roman antiquity, such as *Laocoön and His Sons* or the many sculptures of the Parthenon, prove to be the most popular genre for plaster casts in the Renaissance. This interest in ancient art persists through the creation of cast courts and cast museums, where the galleries focus on casts of ancient art, but include casts of the Renaissance masters as well.

³ Ellen Perry, *The Aesthetics of Emulation in the Visual Arts of Ancient Rome*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Casts in the Renaissance

During the Renaissance plaster was used for a variety of things, whether it was a crucial support for egg-tempera or fresco painting, plaster was often used by artists.⁴ It is believed that plaster casts were also used by artists during the fifteenth century, based on surviving drawings from artists' workshops that appear to represent casts as well as Leon Battista Alberti's treatise, *On Painting*, in which he tells artists to use three-dimensional models; Eckart Marchand mentions that casts would have been used in workshops due to their availability and accessibility.⁵ Francesco Squarcione had a cast collection that featured works from Greek and Roman antiquity, and made it available to aspiring artists who could visit the collection to draw inspiration. Italy's cast workshops rose in number during the fifteenth century, and their popularity did not waiver as these workshops became a practice that continued for centuries.⁶

In the sixteenth century the production of plaster casts in Italy increased greatly, as artists realized they could not only use casts to help them work, but create casts of their work as well.⁷ While many of these works were direct copies of the original, Marchand points out that quite a few were variants on the original piece, which were changed to either fit a certain size or maintain the original piece while reworking some of the details.⁸ While casts were often based on of a prototype or marble original, some were made with the intention of being reproduced, such as Donatello's *Verona Madonna*, which has no marble original, leading historians to believe that the original was made of clay, which in turn could possibly mean that this relief was

⁴ Eckart Marchand, *Plaster Casts*, 60.

⁵ L. B. Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De Picture and De Statua*, ed. And transl. by C. Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸ Marchand, *Plaster Casts*, 64.

meant to be reproduced.⁹ Some of these reproductions, such as the *Verona Madonna*, had a religious context to them in which the buyer could use for devotional purchases. The Medici family owned a series of casts, according to their records; the 1492 inventory list of the family's assets included casts, but gave no information on who created it or where they came from, only how much money they were worth.¹⁰ This is contrasted with their inventory of original pieces of marble artwork, which included the authorship and detailed account of the pieces, showing that not only were they worth more than the plaster casts by monetary value, but that originals had a higher overall value while casts were not seen as artworks, but rather tools for artists or devotees; although they may have not had the same value as artworks, the spread of casts can be traced to their wealthy owners and their cast collections.¹¹

As wealthy royalty and affluent aristocrats could afford original artworks, they did not purchase many of the cheaper casts which could not only break more easily, but required less skill than marble did to create a piece.¹² Francesco Primaticcio created molds of original pieces that had such accuracy, and contained all the detail from the original, that his casts were not considered cheap reproductions, but were seen as “copies of antiquities;” while this could be viewed as another way casts were not considered artworks or on par with originals, this can be related to a time when Roman statues were viewed as copies of Greek sculpture.¹³ Beautiful, nonetheless, and prized, but still not as great as the original.¹⁴ Mary of Hungary, who was the Governor of Habsburg Netherlands, commissioned these plaster casts from Primaticcio in the

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹² Walter Cupperi, *Plaster Casts*, 84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

sixteenth century for her palaces, leading Walter Cupperi to believe that they were not requested for their value but for their accuracy to ancient sculpture.¹⁵

Imperial Minister Mons. Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle, in Brussels also had plaster casts made by Primaticcio, allowing him to fill his space with statues of ancient sculpture. He was quoted in 1568: “he would rather have a perfect modern sculpture copied from the antique than an imperfect ancient one.”¹⁶ This not only shows the changing attitude to casts at the time, in which aristocracy believed that perfection was more important than broken originals, but that people were beginning to see casts as having their own unique value; rather than focusing on what they were not, there was a shifting focus on what they provided. There is evidence of plaster casts shipping to customers across Europe during the sixteenth century, including places like Brussels and Spain.¹⁷ This shows that aristocracy were able to readily procure plaster casts for their collection, whether by having them shipped in or by having connections use their molds to make casts especially for them, as Mary of Hungary allowed others.¹⁸ As wealthy people were able to acquire their own collection of casts and opened up their molds for others to use, collecting casts from antique sculpture became more common; this made it easier to obtain casts, as interested collectors no longer had to commission casts after the original sculpture, as they experienced an influx of molds and availability of casts to draw from.¹⁹ Casts became easily collectable and available to anyone that could afford them, allowing museums and collectors to amass large collections of plaster casts.

¹⁵ Cupperi, *Plaster Casts*, 85.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

Casts in Nineteenth Century Europe

As casts became easily attainable in Europe, museums began buying casts of masters and antiquity to supplement their growing collections. In the nineteenth century, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London had various casts of sculpture, architecture, and architecture ornamentation in their in their museum, with two rooms dedicated to casts, known today as the cast courts. At the time the museum was known as the South Kensington Museum and the cast courts, which were known as Architectural Courts, opened in 1873 and featured other types of reproductions alongside plaster casts; alongside Michelangelo's *David* one could view Raphael's paintings and a Roman mosaic, all reproductions of different mediums. However, while Raphael's paintings were able to escape the Architectural Courts and go into a gallery in the museum, the plaster casts stayed in the room that clearly designated them not as art, but reproductions.²⁰

In 1859, Messrs. Penrose, Donaldson, and Godwin commented on the plaster casts in the South Kensington Museum, hoping that the various plaster casts in the museum, such as *Trajan's Column* and the *Puerta de la Gloria* of Santiago de Compostela Cathedral, would help create a "national museum of architecture and architectural decoration which could scarcely fail to be of the greatest service in an educational point of view, whether as affecting the progress of art in its noblest works or the improvement of tastes in the application of art to the production of our manufacturers."²¹ The original intent of placing the casts in the museum was to be educational, whether it was for artists or the public. As the cast collection grew numerous in number, the South Kensington Museum placed the casts in the small cast courts, overcrowding the room and giving no sense of direction to the curation of the casts. Casts were put right next to one another,

²⁰ Malcolm Baker, "The History of the Cast Courts," *Victoria and Albert Museum*, 1987, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-cast-courts/>.

²¹ Baker, "The History of the Cast Courts."

leaving no personal space for each object, as is usually done for original artworks. Although the casts were admired for the knowledge they could bring of foreign objects, they were not respected in the same way that original art works were, as the space was not curated in such a way that allowed easy access or a space for contemplation and admiration. The cast courts at the South Kensington Museum were seen as gaudy by some, as an anonymous writer remarked around 1894, when commenting on how the museum could improve, that:

“the worthless, the casts executed at great cost of second-rate originals, and the indifferent, should be rooted out and destroyed; this being the greatest reform of all, and equivalent to the dethroning of false gods from their altars, since there is no principle so harmful in art as the setting up of debased standards.”²²

In the last few decades of the nineteenth century dissenting opinions began to emerge as a debate on the role of casts became one of the most important questions in museum discourse. As a 1905 report composed by The Art Gallery Committee of the City of Manchester shows, there was belief that “casts realize the form, outline, and modelling of the originals,” and that their “importance educationally is great, as they are the only fairly adequate means of realizing the originals.”²³ Although some of the museum’s board members were in support of the cast collection, as the museum entered the twentieth century, not only did its name change, but so did the status of its collection.

In 1908 the Board of Education produced a Report of the Committee of Re-Arrangement, which examined the Victoria and Albert Museum’s cast collection. The report stated that there should be no more purchase of casts and that “the space at present allocated to the collection of

²² Diane Bilbey and Marjorie Trusted, *Plaster Casts*, 468.

²³ *Ibid.*, 469.

casts may ultimately be more worthily filled by originals.”²⁴ It was clear that interest in casts was fading fast and casts were removed from the Victoria and Albert Museum; even when a portion of these casts were transferred to the British Museum, they were kept in storage and never displayed.²⁵ Opinions of casts shifted as cast courts were seen as overbearing, unruly, and overall ineffective in achieving the same standard that original pieces could provide. As emphasis was placed on filling the gallery space with authentic originals, interest in casts dwindled; it was not until the late twentieth century, when there was a resurgence of interest in casts and the services they could provide, were the cast courts refurbished.

No longer was it vital to establish oneself as a reputable institution by eliminating casts from the collection, allowing museums to share their cast collections in hopes of providing the public with information on foreign pieces. As the Victoria and Albert Museum does not just focus on casts of sculpture, like other museums, but places a large emphasis on plaster casts of architecture, it has become one of the largest and best collections for information pertaining to architecture that may have been eroded, damaged, or destroyed over time. Not only can the casts be used as a link to the past, but they can also be an educational tool for students to practice their artistic skills while sketching the casts or for visitors to visit and learn about foreign architecture that is otherwise out of reach for them. The museum still puts an emphasis on the educational aspect of the cast courts today, creating a space in which a visitor can encounter the world. For museums in Europe like the Victoria and Albert Museum, plaster casts of fine art were used to supplement their collection of original artwork in order to provide public access to works of the masters, enticing visitors by providing a “worldwide” collection; however, while institutions in

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 471.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 472.

Europe may have had rooms dedicated to casts, the United States had full buildings of casts, which grew and waned in popularity at about the same time as they did in Europe.

Casts in the United States

In the United States, casts gained popularity during the nineteenth century when they were imported from Europe. They were seen as a cheaper and better alternative to original works of the “old masters,” which were not only quite costly but difficult to come by. When casts first entered America they were believed to preserve, in the eyes of people such as Charles Callahan Perkins, founder of Massachusetts Normal Art School and trustee of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the perfection of originals and serve as a “means of culture to the public, of education to artists and artisans, and of elevated enjoyment to all.”²⁶ Museums went from commissioning a dozen casts for their collection to hundreds, as seen by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which spent \$80,000 on casts in 1890 and had a collection of over 2,000 casts by 1894.²⁷ Although many museums in America collected casts, it was only a few years later in the twentieth century when they started to be discarded or put into storage rooms out of view of the public eye.

The disappearance of casts from American museums is described by Pamela Born as a result of a few different factors, including the wealth that the United States had accumulated and wealthy benefactors and trustees such as J.P. Morgan who wanted to buy original pieces of art. In addition, private collections in Europe were selling their Renaissance sculpture, paintings, and Greek and Roman pieces.²⁸ With the increased American funds and availability of European art, museums were able to purchase works that were previously unavailable. Americans had avoided trying to procure these works of art earlier as there had been very little available to buyers, increasing the chances that a purchase of European art could result in forgery; thus, they had

²⁶ Pamela Born, "The Canon Is Cast: Plaster Casts in American Museum and University Collections," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 21, no. 2 (2002): 8-13, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27949200>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

focused on casts.²⁹ With these new opportunities presented, American museums moved casts out of their gallery space to make room for the original, authentic art.

“They come for what we have collected ourselves, not the trite reproductions such as is the stock in trade of every ready-made museum of art,” noted Matthew Prichard in 1904, who spoke on the presence of casts in museums.³⁰ He believed that the “galleries should be freed of casts, and that the museum should become... a museum of works of art.”³¹ It was this type of opinion on casts and what the museum should stand for that helped shape the modern art museum. Prichard believed that putting casts in museums “would be to put them on a level with works of art,” which they were not, as it was believed their beauty could not match that of the original.³² Plaster casts were hustled off to back rooms, but through the early twentieth century they could not find any place in a museum, even if it was a storage room. Born notes that for the Museum of Fine Art, Boston, any casts that were not accepted by local schools were destroyed, showing their perceived uselessness and fall from grace.³³

The rise of casts in nineteenth century America was mostly based on their affordability, accessibility, and what they provided for their buyers. Museums and schools were able to display hundreds of artworks that they would not have been able to acquire or financially afford otherwise. It allowed the United States to educate their population, and provide a cultural history for a place that did not have one, having been made an official nation less than a hundred years earlier. The casts allowed for the Western canon of art to prevail, where European art and art from European antiquity were prominent and pushed non-Western art to the background of the museum. As American art started to rise during the twentieth century and gain momentum in the

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

art market, no longer making it necessary to fill the walls with purely European artworks. Even though the American museums were based on a Western European model, they sought to educate their communities by providing original pieces; perhaps this is a reason why casts are still mainly absent in American culture today.³⁴

Casts are almost entirely absent from American museums in contemporary times, save for a few. The Minneapolis Institute of Art keeps the remainder of their cast collection in storage, but has brought it out for exhibitions such as “Marks of Genius” in 2014, where “100 Extraordinary Drawings” were displayed,³⁵ A practical drawing room accompanied this exhibition, in which guests could look at drawing aids and try their hand at creating something new. Casts were employed in this room, not displayed as an artwork with the rest of the collection but rather as an educational tool to help people learn and perhaps try something new. The George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum in Illinois hosted a similar series of events in 2016, where an anatomy drawing class was held a few times throughout the year, using casts as their visual aid.³⁶ This class was meant to teach drawing techniques and be educational; the only difference here is that instead of having to pull their casts out of storage like the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum currently has a plaster cast collection on display at all times.³⁷ Like other museums, they acquired their collection in the nineteenth century and then put their casts into storage once their popularity dwindled. After restoring the collection in 1978, the George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum redisplayed the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵ “Marks of Genius: 100 Extraordinary Drawings from the Minneapolis Institute of Art — Minneapolis Institute of Art,” *Minneapolis Institute of Art*, accessed 1 May 2017, <https://new.artsmia.org/press/marks-of-genius-100-extraordinary-drawings-from-the-minneapolis-institute-of-arts-2/>.

³⁶ “Anatomy: Drawing from the Classics,” *Springfield Museums*, accessed 1 May 2017, <https://springfieldmuseums.org/program/anatomy-drawing-from-the-classics/2016-04-26/>.

³⁷ G. W. V. Smith Art Museum, “Plaster Cast Collection,” *Springfield Museums*, accessed 29 Apr. 2017, <https://springfieldmuseums.org/about/smith-art-museum/plaster-cast-collection/>.

casts alongside pieces of art such as American Paintings and Japanese Arms, hoping to curate itself as an educational space of many cultures. Although four of the six permanent exhibitions in the museum today are made for Western art, the plasters nonetheless help assist in creating a space where the public can view casts of art that they may never get to see and where nearby art students can gain inspiration and practice their skills.³⁸

In 2004 the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York donated 120 plaster casts to the Institute of Classical Architecture and Art (ICAA).³⁹ This donation provides the ICAA with an opportunity to use these as a teaching tool, while they had previously sat untouched in the Met's storage room, where the museum struggled to find someone to take them.⁴⁰ The Met also donated some casts to the Fairfield University Plaster Cast Collection at Fairfield University Art Museum in Connecticut during 2004 and 2009, allowing the museum to provide "essential academic and cultural" resources to their community.⁴¹ The donations that the Met has made to these museums and others allow these institutions to provide educational opportunities to their communities and expose them to various Western cultures, like the museums had previously done in the nineteenth century. Although plaster casts may be taken out of their basements and put on display like they once were in the nineteenth century, they are still not accepted as actual artworks in the United States, serving merely as educational tools. Like most of the museums in Europe, American institutions now place their plaster casts in rooms, separated from original artworks; this shows that they are respectable enough to reserve a space in contemporary museums, but they are still not on the same level as authentic originals. This arrangement seems

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Douglas C. McGill, "Plaster Casts of Statues From Storage to Vogue," *The New York Times*, 1 Jan. 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/01/01/arts/plaster-casts-of-statues-from-storage-into-vogue.html>.

⁴¹ "About Us," *Fairfield University Art Museum*, accessed 29 Apr. 2017, <https://www.fairfield.edu/museum/about-us/>.

to be the norm, the accepted way to display casts, which makes it even more curious when one museum in Athens defies this logic, placing plaster casts among the original sculpture.

The Akropolis Museum and Its Casts

The Parthenon has had its beauty and detail valued for centuries, receiving attention in a way that few other buildings experience; because its architectural sculpture has been removed, partly by foreigners who wanted the sculptures for their own and in part by the Greek government who has removed some of the sculpture as they work to restore the building, the Parthenon stands today as a mixture of the original marble sculpture with some casts of the removed sculpture. As the Parthenon is seen as the height of sculpture from antiquity, it comes as no surprise that it is one of the most popular subjects for plaster casts. Casts of Parthenon sculpture are spread throughout the world, allowing artists and the public to learn from antiquity and for all to experience the famous building, even if they were thousands of miles away. The Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, still has its Greek Courtyard on display, featuring friezes and sculptures from the Parthenon as well as other sculpture from the akropolis.⁴² As perhaps the most casted building in history, how does the context of the Parthenon casts change when they are not in a foreign city, but reside in Athens, Greece? The newly refurbished Akropolis Museum provides a new and interesting context for its plaster casts as they are placed alongside their original marble counterparts; looking at the timeline of casts during the past couple of centuries, why has the space been curated in manner that is different from the past and what does this mean for the modern cast?

The Akropolis Museum in Athens, Greece, was built in 2009 to house Parthenon sculptures as well as other finds from the Akropolis, such as architectural casts from the Propylaia and Erechtheion; the museum also contains Roman emulations of Greek sculpture and older Greek sculpture from the seventh century BCE to the Roman period.⁴³ The museum itself

⁴² Tobias Burg, *Plaster Casts*, 541.

⁴³ *Acropolis Museum*, accessed 1 October 2016, <http://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en>.

is located close to the akropolis, positioned in such a way that visitors at the museum can look into the distance and see the columns of the Parthenon. This new museum not only highlights Greek art history but is centered in one of Greece's most famous cities near its most recognizable monument, standing as a triumph of Greek culture and highlighting the history that lies inside; that being said, it can come as a surprise to learn that the Akropolis Museum houses not only quite a few plaster casts, but places them alongside sculptures from the fifth century BCE.

The top floor of the Akropolis Museum is home to the sculptures from the Parthenon, and displays pieces from the frieze, metopes, and pediments. Among the collections are plaster casts of the originals, which are currently housed in museums around the world. The question here is why the Akropolis Museum decided to use casts rather than leaving these spaces blank, which is often done in museums when they do not have the full piece.

The placement of casts in the Akropolis Museum may be interpreted as a response to the British Museum's holding of Parthenon sculptures, which includes 247 feet of the 524 feet long frieze, fifteen of ninety-two metopes, and seventeen pedimental figures. The British Museum holds other pieces from the Akropolis as well, including one of the Karyatids from the Erechtheum, and about half of the frieze of the Temple of Athena Nike and its sculptured parapet, one entire Doric capital from the Parthenon, and many other pieces. This sculpture and architecture were pried and sawn off the temples and taken by Lord Thomas Bruce, seventh earl of Elgin, in 1801-1803. For years Greece has requested that the British Museum return the sculpture taken down from the Parthenon, since the Greeks believe they were unlawfully acquired, while the British Museum's rebuttal is that they are the lawful owners. The presence of casts in the Akropolis Museum bring up questions of cultural heritage, specifically concerning the Parthenon sculptures that have not returned to Greece since Lord Elgin removed them in the

early nineteenth century. The new casts intermingled with originals in the Akropolis Museum raise questions of cultural heritage and patrimony; do the Parthenon sculptures belong to Greek heritage or are they a part of world culture?

Lord Elgin's Actions in Greece

Lord Elgin exploited his role as British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, which was in control of Greece at the time, to gain access to the Parthenon and remove sculptures for use in his Scottish mansion. Lord Elgin received a firman from the Ottoman Empire in 1801 and the intent of the firman is still under scrutiny today, as there is only one surviving copy of the document written in Italian; some say that the firman was, in fact, a forgery, so the sculptures should never have been removed in the first place. On the assumption that the surviving document is authentic, William St. Clair has translated the document and said that “the firman confers no authority to remove sculptures from the building or to damage them in any way.”⁴⁴ Whatever the original intentions of the firman were did not matter, as Lord Elgin had his men begin to remove various sculptures from the Parthenon in 1802.

After the sculpture was removed and sent across the sea to England in 1803, Lord Elgin had quite a few difficulties. One of the ships ferrying sculptures to England sunk (although the sculpture was recovered by divers), and then Lord Elgin was imprisoned when he was in France as an enemy national when the Napoleonic War resumed after the Peace of Amiens. After he was released from custody in 1806, Lord Elgin started to have another set of Parthenon sculptures shipped over to him from Greece, but it took three years for them to arrive. But, instead of keeping the sculptures for his own use, Lord Elgin felt forced to sell them, because he was nearly bankrupt. In 1812 Lord Elgin began trying to sell the sculpture and architecture he had acquired to the British government for £74,000, but his attempts had come at a bad time: his petition to the House of Commons with an offer was sent June 15, just days before the Battle of Waterloo on June 18, 1815.⁴⁵ Because of the national preoccupation with the battle and its aftermath, it

⁴⁴ William Saint Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 89.

⁴⁵ Christopher Hitchens, *The Elgin Marbles*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987), 63.

was not until 1816 when Parliament finally agreed to buy the marbles, and only after reducing the price to £35,000. During those years, Lord Elgin refused offers from other governments for the sculptures, saying that it would “add luster to Britain’s imperial image.”⁴⁶ Lord Elgin was correct about that much at least, as today the Parthenon marbles still sit in the British Museum, as representatives of the British Empire.

⁴⁶ Juan Pablo Sánchez, “How the Parthenon Lost Its Marbles,” *National Geographic*, accessed 1 Mar. 2017, <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/archaeology-and-history/magazine/2017/03-04/parthenon-sculptures-british-museum-controversy/>.

Attitudes in New Greece and Britain

After Greece regained independence in 1830, the Greek Government made many requests for the Parthenon marbles to be returned to Greece. In the late twentieth century, there were especially vehement and publicized requests from Greece, as Melina Mercouri, the Greek minister of culture from 1981 to 1989, started a campaign to see them returned. Many arguments have sprung up over the years in defense of both sides, causing the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum to become one of the most well-known feuds in the art world.

One such argument was that Lord Elgin actually saved some of the Parthenon sculptures from the destructive atmosphere in Athens, where the marbles could have been destroyed or harmed by war and pollution. This ignores, of course, the damage that occurred after some sculptures sat at the bottom of the ocean for two years after the ship sank on the way to England, or the 1938 cleaning of the Parthenon sculptures by F.N. Pryce in which irrevocable damage occurred as the sculptures were “cleaned” with copper chisels and carborundum.⁴⁷ Rather than speaking about any mistakes made, the British Museum chooses to push the blame onto individuals, absolving the museum from any responsibility. Whether they agree that Pryce’s actions were wrong or that perhaps Lord Elgin should not have removed the sculptures from the Parthenon in the first place, the British Museum still declare themselves as rightful owners of the Parthenon marbles in their museum and resolve to question the credibility of others.

The year before he stepped down, Neil MacGregor, former Director of the British Museum, gave an interview in 2014 to the *Sunday Times* in which he talked about the Parthenon sculptures, saying that “the trustees [of the British Museum] have always been ready for any discussions. The complication is that the Greek government will not recognize the trustees as the

⁴⁷ “The Parthenon Sculptures: Facts and Figures,” *The British Museum*, accessed 10 Oct. 2016, http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/statements/parthenon_sculptures/facts_and_figures.aspx

legal owners, so conversations are difficult.”⁴⁸ This statement is mirrored almost exactly on the British Museum’s webpage today, where it states that the Greek government has refused to “acknowledge the Trustees ownership of the Parthenon sculptures in their care,” thereby making “any meaningful discussion on the issue virtually impossible.”⁴⁹ The British Museum and its trustees continually work to absolve themselves of any blame, choosing instead to portray others, such as the Greek government, as the reason why these issues cannot be solved.

The British Museum’s defensive stance to rid themselves of any wrongdoing is telling; by pushing the blame upon others, it shifts the focus of the problem there so that the British Museum does not have to deal with it. The British Museum had said repeatedly in the past that Greece was not well-equipped to handle the storing and preservation of the Parthenon’s sculptures. This no doubt influenced Greece’s decision to revamp their small and antiquated Akropolis Museum into the modern, multi-story building that was finished in 2009. Not only did this provide a larger space to highlight sculptures from the acropolis and Greek history, but it directly challenged the British Museum’s claim that Greece had no place for the marbles. Yet even after fixing the problems that the British Museum cited as their reason for keeping the sculptures, the British Museum still shows no sign of returning the marbles, which is why only casts of half the existing sculpture from the temple are exhibited in the Akropolis Museum.

The top floor of the museum holds various sculpture from the Parthenon, but it can be shocking to realize that so many plaster casts are used instead of the original marble sculptures.

As previously described, much of the missing original sculpture is housed in the British

⁴⁸ Richard Morrison, “Neil MacGregor: ‘There is no possibility of putting the Elgin Marbles back,’” *The Sunday Times*, accessed 20 May 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/neil-macgregor-there-is-no-possibility-of-putting-the-elgin-marbles-back-0j2lpv5mff5>

⁴⁹ “The Parthenon Sculptures: The Position of the Trustees of the British Museum,” *The British Museum*, accessed 10 Oct. 2016, http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/statements/parthenon_sculptures/trustees_statement.aspx.

Museum, such as sculptures from the east pediment, which depict Athena's birth from the head of Zeus and other Olympic gods, such as Helios, who has his chariot drawn by two pairs of horses.⁵⁰ One on the pairs of horses resides in the Akropolis Museum, while almost all of the rest remains in the British Museum, which includes figures such as Helios, Aphrodite, Hestia, Dionysus and more.⁵¹ One of the most interesting aspects of the way the pediment has been displayed in the Akropolis Museum is that not only are casts included, but that these casts are curated in such a way that it puts them on level with the way original artworks are displayed. When other museums put casts in a room, they are often placed close together, only inches apart, not giving them the personal bubble that is given to original artworks, which allows for contemplation of the work and also respects the individuality of the original piece. The casts in the Akropolis Museum are given this same opportunity, where rather than being thrown together in a corner or room away from original art, they are on display among the original pieces in a way that mimics the way original artworks are curated. In order to understand why the casts were curated this way, it is also important to consider why the Akropolis Museum would include casts of the pediment in the first place rather than just leaving those spaces empty. This could perhaps be better answered by looking at the way in which the Parthenon frieze is displayed at the Akropolis Museum, as the frieze is more complete and has more existing pieces than the pediment.

The Parthenon frieze is 524 feet long and has been recreated by the Akropolis Museum in its full length, on a "rectangular cement core" that has the same measurements as the cella of the

⁵⁰ "Collection Online: The Parthenon Sculptures," *The British Museum*, accessed 10 Oct. 2016, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=196436001&objectId=461663&partId=1.

⁵¹ "Parthenon East Pediment," *Perseus Digital Library*, Tufts University, accessed 29 Mar. 2017, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/artifact?name=Parthenon%20East%20Pediment&object=Sculpture>.

Parthenon but is viewable at eyelevel.⁵² If any such parts of the frieze have been destroyed or no longer exist, then they are left out of the Akropolis Museum's reconstruction, with a blank space standing in its absence. For the remainder of the Parthenon frieze that is intact, some pieces remain in museums throughout the world, like the Louvre, but the biggest collection of the frieze exists in the British Museum, retaining 247 feet of the original frieze.⁵³ Plaster casts have been made of the frieze pieces that are on display in other countries and are fitted alongside the original pieces in the Akropolis Museum like puzzle pieces, contrasting the aged brown of the original marble with the stark white of plaster. Here, at the frieze, where marble and plaster are fitted side by side, it is clear that the presence of casts in this museum are accomplishing quite a few things.

Unlike other museums, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, casts here are not isolated in their own room, which many museums do so as to not confuse them with original art, which is perceived by the masses as the most important and worthy of attention. Also, as stated before, the casts in the Akropolis Museum are curated in a way that puts them on level with the original marbles, giving each of the casts their own space on display so they can be viewed on par with the other works. However, while they might be displayed with some of the original marbles, they are still not viewed as art pieces. The inclusion of plaster casts in the Akropolis Museum has been done for a few reasons, including using the presence of the casts as an educational tool. As previously acknowledged, casts can be used to preserve objects from history so if they are ever lost or destroyed, the original piece, or whatever existed, is preserved in plaster. While the original marbles have not been lost to history, they have been taken away from Greece, so casts allow the Akropolis to showcase all of their ancient history, not just what

⁵² "The Parthenon Gallery," *Acropolis Museum*, accessed 1 Oct. 2017, <http://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/content/parthenon-gallery>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

remains in Greece; showing the Parthenon marbles as part of Greek history is important, as it has become intertwined with Greek heritage and identity.

The use of casts in the Akropolis Museum differs from the use of casts in other museums as those of Greek ancestry are trying to present their own history, not trying to provide a space where casts of the masters and art that was made thousands of miles away can be seen like other museums. As the Parthenon is so close to the Akropolis Museum, this places the museum's casts in context, which is that they were made to be seen in Athens, so they belong there. Miriam Caskey believes that the museum, located so closely to the acropolis, becomes part of the acropolis itself, creating a continuous dialogue and image of reconstruction.⁵⁴ Yannis Hamilakis agrees that Athens needs to create their own dialogue in the debate about cultural heritage and who gets to create the narrative and believes this should be done by challenging the imperialist "official view of material history" that places such as the British Museum have created.⁵⁵

The casts are a small part in the larger role of the museum, which serves as a tool in the debate about the existence of the Parthenon marbles in London. The trustees of the British Museum often argue that the Parthenon marbles do no harm being in London, as they "are part of everyone's shared heritage and transcend cultural boundaries."⁵⁶ The museum also says that by keeping the marbles in London, they are "seen by a world audience."⁵⁷ This puts London and therefore the British Empire at the center of the modern world; this thinking reveals how the British Museum is still very much colonized today and that the British Museum still views art with an imperial attitude. The British Museum sees itself as rightful owners, saying that they are the rightful owners of the Parthenon marbles and the other art in their museum as they bought

⁵⁴ Miriam Caskey, "Perceptions of the New Acropolis Museum," *American Journal of Archaeology* Vol. 115, no. 3 (July 2011).

⁵⁵ Yannis Hamilakis, "Museums of Oblivion," *Antiquity* Vol. 85, no. 328 (2011): 625-629.

⁵⁶ "The Parthenon Sculptures," *The British Museum*, accessed 10 Oct. 2017, http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/statements/parthenon_sculptures.aspx.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

them, using the same logic from centuries ago and not bothering to look at whether or not things should be changed, allowing art to go back to the countries they were stolen from. British Parliament has even passed laws regarding objects in the museum, such as the British Museum Act of 1963, which keeps the entire collection of the British Museum in the country for “the benefit of the public,” and does not allow the Trustees to get rid of objects, only loan them to other institutions.⁵⁸ This overwrites any previous intentions that the museum may have had, such as the British Museum’s meeting in 1816, when the trustees justified their purchase of the Parthenon sculptures by saying that they would be held on behalf of Greece.⁵⁹ With recognition of the laws the British government has passed, it becomes important to stop viewing the British Museum as autonomous, but as an appendage of the British government, which is a reflection of its values and beliefs. It is in this sense that the controversy over the Parthenon marbles is not just about art, but concerns how prevalent imperialistic attitudes are today; this is why the marbles have not and will probably never be returned to Athens in the foreseeable future, leaving the casts to sit in the Akropolis Museum alongside some of the original sculptures.

The casts in the Akropolis Museum have been placed there to show what is missing in the museum; it is not just a call for the return of the Parthenon marbles from the British Museum, but from any country outside of Greece where Parthenon sculptures may reside. By including the casts, it is a hopeful message that one day the pedestals they rest on and the spots they fill on the wall will be replaced by the real thing, bringing all of the Parthenon marbles home in one united space. This also reveals how casts are still perceived today; although they may not be shoved in a storage room or off to the side, they are still not equal to art or even close to it. Not only are people hoping to replace these casts with the original pieces, but it is with hope that by placing

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ St. Clair 89.

these inferior and low-quality plaster casts next to the antiquated marble, the casts will show how necessary the original marbles are to understand and appreciate the full beauty of the Parthenon sculptures.

CONCLUSION

Plaster casts have been viewed in a number of ways in the past few centuries, from being perceived as close enough to the original artwork that they warranted their own museum, to being destroyed when they were viewed worthless. Now that casts have been taken out of storage rooms, dusted off, and put on display in various museums and institutions around the world, it is interesting to see the various ways in which they are used, whether it be admiration of its beauty or a political statement. The one common role that all casts have in modern museums today is that of an educator. Casts serve to educate and can accomplish this in a variety of ways, including the way they assist aspiring artists, allowing them to draw inspiration from the casts and practice their skill. They also allow the public to access works that they would not have been able to otherwise, whether the original piece is restricted or continents away. It is inevitable that over time original pieces will start to decay, especially when exposed to the elements; casts are a good source of what the original piece looked like, allowing their memory to be preserved in plaster. If human hand harms the original, it can often not be repaired or look the same again, but if the plaster is destroyed or falls to ruin in a storage room, a new one can be made if a mold exists. The Akropolis Museum uses casts to educate the public that visits the museum daily of the many Parthenon sculptures and the story that they tell. This museum is different in the way that they present the casts, which places them alongside the original marbles; by doing so, the museum also aims to educate the public about the marbles that were taken from them and are still missing, believing that their argument can be visibly seen in the plaster casts.

Casts are certainly gaining an increased presence in museums, even though they are not seen the same way as they were in the nineteenth century, where they viewed as separate but perhaps equal in aesthetic and usefulness as original art pieces; but the question for the

contemporary uses of casts is what they become when a person viewing a cast does not realize that they are not looking at an original artwork. Whether it is viewing *Trajan's Column* in London, Michelangelo's *Moses* in Springfield, Illinois, or the *Discobolus* in New York, it does not take an art historian to realize that these are not the original pieces; a person entering the institutions where these casts are held are likely to encounter a direct statement that the works they are about to see are plaster casts. The lines become more blurred, however, when they are placed among marble originals as they are in the Akropolis Museum. Historians, stoneworkers, or anyone with knowledge about the Parthenon marbles in London can easily tell that the casts are made of plaster, and that they are not the original. It can happen, though, when people are oblivious and believe that everything in the top floor of the Akropolis Museum is the original.

While cast museums were more common in the nineteenth century, surely people were able to know when they were visiting a museum of casts, art, or both; as the twentieth century came around, and people's opinions of art started to change and there was a demand for only authentic pieces, the basis of the modern museum was made. It began to be expected that museums displayed only original art, something other than a common plaster cast; with these connotations of museums, it is not surprising that some people, lacking in knowledge of either the Parthenon sculptures or stoneworking, do not realize that there are plaster casts in the Akropolis Museum. This does change their meaning, however, for those that are not aware; they are no longer a statement about the British Museum's holding of the Parthenon marbles or their inferiority to the original sculpture, but become admired as the artwork. The casts, to the unknowing viewer, are viewed as individual pieces, appreciated for their beauty and reflection of Greek history. In this sense the Parthenon casts have a duality, where they work to further the agenda of the Akropolis Museum, but at the same time they accomplish what the museum is so

desperately trying to achieve, which is having all of the Parthenon marbles together in one location. The Akropolis Museum's casts have already, in some visitor's eyes, fulfilled their goal in uniting the Parthenon marbles; although not the intent, plaster casts can now be elevated to the art itself, changing the preconceived notions of originals versus copies in the twentieth century.

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