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Highlights from the Plaster Cast Collection

Katherine Schwab

Fairfield University, kaschwab@fairfield.edu

Jill J. Deupi

Fairfield University, jdeupi@fairfield.edu

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Highlights *from the*
Plaster Cast Collection



Fairfield University

THE BELLARMINI MUSEUM OF ART

Plaster Casts

Technical Notes

Plaster casts are replicas of other works of art. While the methods used to create casts vary, most commonly a mould is created by applying plaster of Paris, gelatin, silicone rubber or polyurethane to the original artifact. After the mould dries, it is removed, retaining an impression of the source object on its interior surfaces. Wet plaster is then poured into the resulting cavity. When this is dry, the mould is removed and the new cast is revealed.

Parting lines, the meeting point between two pieces from the traditional piece-mould process, indicate much about the age, quality and history of a cast. A thin parting line shows that the cast came from a high-quality, new mould. Over time, these mould sections break down, resulting in larger parting lines. The collection of plaster casts in the Bellarmine Museum reflects visible, but very clean and neat, parting lines. From this we are able to observe the care, impressive craftsmanship, and attention to detail the artists utilized both in the mould-making process and resulting plaster casts.

Historical Overview

The practice of creating plaster casts dates to antiquity. According to Pliny the Elder (*N.H.* 35.153), Lystratos, brother of the Greek sculptor Lysippos, was the first artist to create “an image of a man in plaster taken from the surface [of the body] itself.”¹ As early as the fourth century BCE, artists began using plaster to make realistic copies of the human body, and often to reproduce famous sculptures. By the 15th century, artists were using casts in their studios, not only as sources of inspiration but also as important pedagogical tools. Students training in these *ateliers* were thus able to study canonical masterworks from antiquity and, later, the “Old Masters” first-hand; even if, as some might argue, these casts were at one remove from the original and, therefore, somehow inferior.

Beginning in the 16th century, European Crowns began adding casts to their royal collections. Not surprisingly, plaster casts also grew in popularity amongst aristocrats and society’s elite who, wanting to emulate wealthy heads of state, favored them as souvenirs from their travels abroad. By the 18th century, casts were increasingly common; a reflection of the raging “*antico*-mania” as well as the growing taste for these objects both in European museums and university collections, and, later, the United States, where institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art (founded in 1870) began collecting them almost immediately for educational purposes.

In the first half of the 20th century, however, the tradition of displaying casts started to change in the America, and casts were no longer as popular as they had once been: many were relegated to warehouses or simply discarded as relics of a passing fad. Now, at the close of the first decade of the 21st century, the popularity of casts is once again ascendant, with older collections being re-evaluated in a fresh light and new collections being formed.

The renowned collection of historic casts from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA) has, over the years, been largely dispersed among university collections both in the U.S. and in Europe. Fairfield is among the recipients of the MMA’s largesse, beginning in 1991 when the University

¹ K.A. Schwab, *Casting the Past: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Cast Collection at Fairfield University* (1994), 4, quoting J.J. Pollitt, *The Art of Ancient Greece: Sources and Documents* (Cambridge, 1990), 104.

received a number of casts from the museum on long-term renewable loan. Subsequent gifts from the MMA to Fairfield University were made in 2004 and 2009.

The Nature and Import of Casts

Casts are repositories of critical information. Not only is the individual “history,” or provenance, of each cast often compelling in and of itself, but they also frequently preserve details from original works that may otherwise have been irretrievably lost through corrosive air pollution or the vicissitudes of history (including looting, warfare, or insensitive cleaning and conservation techniques). In spite of this, the meaning and value of casts is frequently subjected to intense scrutiny: Casts may have been returned to the spotlight, but are their functions still the same? Are they still educational tools or merely commercial souvenirs? Are they works of art in their own right, or are they derivative imitations? The answer is one that is still being puzzled out and articulated today.

Marguerite Yourcenar, in *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, wrote: “[O]n the day when a statue is finished, its life, in a certain sense, begins.”² The true history of sculpture, and indeed that of casts, is therefore of a piece with life and, inevitably, decay. In this sense, it seems clear that casts, with their remarkable pedigrees and private histories, have taken on lives of their own, establishing themselves securely in the firmaments of art and cultural history.

-Mara Giarratana Young '11, with Drs. Katherine Schwab and Jill Deupi, and Michael Keropian

A BRIEF HISTORY OF GREEK SCULPTURE

Greek Archaic Sculpture

The Archaic Period in Greek Art (600-480 BCE) emerged out of the Geometric and Orientalizing Periods. Thus the patterns and abstract forms of earlier ages were abandoned in favor of more individualized styles. Culturally, growing personal and state wealth – and a concomitant rise in civic pride – led to the commissioning of grand temples, with sculptural programs as well as individual dedications (including metalwork, sculptures, ivories, and textiles) becoming more and more common in sanctuaries and cemeteries. New explorations of anatomy led to an increased mastery of the human form; an evolution that would peak in the High Classical period. Subject matter was expanded throughout the Archaic period, with a clear interest in mythology, lore, and legend.

Greek Classical Sculpture

The Persian sack of Athens in 480 BCE marked a critical turning point in the political and cultural life of Greece. The art produced thereafter, during the Classical period (480-323 BCE), was characterized by restrained harmony, proportional beauty, and idealization. These qualities, remarkable given the relative brevity of the period, emerged as the bedrock of Western art’s canon in the ages that followed. The interest in mythology as a vehicle for memorializing historical events, glorification, and even underlying political themes also peaked at this time, as the sculptural program of the Parthenon makes clear.

² Marguerite Yourcenar, *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, trans. Walter Kaiser in collaboration with the author (New York: The Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), 57.

The Parthenon is a paradigmatic example of the art and architecture of the Athenian Golden Age. Dedicated to the goddess Athena, for whom the city of Athens is named, this renowned temple is prominently situated on the Acropolis, where it could have been seen from any point in the ancient city. Construction on the Parthenon, which was designed by the architect Iktinos with assistance from Kallikrates, began during the reign of Pericles in 447 BCE. The new temple's foundations were laid upon the site of an earlier temple (known as the Older Parthenon), which had been destroyed by the Persians in 480 BCE. The new temple was dedicated in 438 BCE.

Pheidias, famous in his own lifetime for his artistic achievements, was charged with overseeing the project's sculptural programs. This included creating a monumental statue of Athena in gold and ivory for the new Parthenon's interior, in addition to designing and supervising the sculptures that adorned its exterior. The new temple was remarkable for its architecture and sculpture; indeed, it had an unusually large amount of sculptural decoration, including ninety-two metopes showing four mythological battles, and an Ionic frieze surrounding the uppermost level of the cella's entire exterior. This Ionic frieze is unique in that it seems to represent the procession of the *Panathenaia*, an Athenian festival celebrating the victory over the Giants. The pedimental sculptures, on the other hand, celebrate Athena's birth as well as her victory in the contest for the land of Attica.

These idealized reliefs and sculptures embody an ideal of physical perfection and proportional harmonies that are now regarded as the hallmarks of Classical Greek art. Similarly the Parthenon itself encapsulates, in visual form, the remarkable time and place in Greek history that was 5th-century Athens.

Greek Hellenistic Sculpture

The Hellenistic period (323 BCE-31 BCE) was one of the most fertile in Greek history. Its canonical dates stretch from the death of Alexander the Great, under whose influence Greek culture and civilization spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Central Asia, to the decisive Battle of Actium.

The nearly two centuries that comprise this remarkable era were distinguished by new patterns of migration and settlement, as native Greeks relocated to the Empire's new strongholds in Alexandria and Antioch (Egypt and Syria). These population shifts catalyzed a fusion of foreign artistic representations and technique with indigenous traditions and practices both in Greece and abroad. It is for this reason that Hellenistic influences and vestiges of Greek culture could be found as far to the east as northern ancient India (Afghanistan and northern India today).

During the Hellenistic period, artists explored human emotions and states of consciousness, with works ranging from the starkly realistic to the grandly theatrical. Large dedications, often sponsored by individuals or kings, reflect these new trends, as do masterpieces such as the Lykosoura monument, the Great Altar at Pergamon, the Lesser Attalid Dedication, and the Nike of Samothrace; all of which are remarkable for their expressiveness and enduring fame.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE PLASTER CAST COLLECTION

Cast Gallery

Head of Athena, ca. 510 BCE

Plaster cast from marble original

Acropolis Museum, Athens

Lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art

This head is from a full-length marble original of Athena that was at the center of the East Pediment of the Old Athena Temple (Acropolis). The pedimental figures, depicting the Battle of Olympian Gods fighting Giants, showed Athena attacking a fallen giant.

The Rampin Master (attributed to)

(Greek, active 6th century BCE)

Discus-thrower, 550 BCE

Plaster cast from Pentelic marble original

National Archaeological Museum, Athens

Lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art

The original grave *stèle* fragment, from the Dipylon Cemetery, was found in 1873 near the Dipylon Gate. The discus forms a frame around the head of the athlete, setting off the youth's prominent profile and carefully bound hair.

Euthydikos' Kore (maiden), ca. 490 BCE

Plaster cast from marble original

Acropolis Museum, Athens

Gift of the First Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities—Acropolis Museum, Athens

Originally mounted on a single Doric column, this *Kore*, or “maiden,” bore the inscription: “Euthydikos, son of Thaliarchos, dedicated (me).” The upper part (represented by the cast on display) was found east of the Parthenon.

Athena and Theseus, ca. 480 BCE

Plaster cast from Parian marble original

Archaeological Museum, Delphi

Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006

The Athenian Treasury was located below the Temple of Apollo on the Sacred Way in Delphi. It was built as a Doric structure around 490 BCE; a time of transition from the Late Archaic to the Early Classical period in Greek Art.

This Treasury, which was just one of many such structures at Delphi, functioned on several levels. It was, for example, a votive offering, dedicated to Apollo and the Delphic Oracle in recompense for their perceived help in defeating the Persians. On a more prosaic level, the structure functioned

as a repository for rich gifts left by worshipers, in addition to providing an important, visually compelling, place to display war booty.

The metopes of the Treasury depict some of the Labors of Herakles as well as the Deeds of Theseus. On the south side, for example, Theseus confronts various monsters and barbarians, including a Minotaur and an Amazon; both frequent metaphors for the Persian enemy, whose defeat by the Athenians is celebrated in the sculptural program.

The metope represented here shows a meeting between Athena (on the left) and Theseus (on the right). The goddess bestows her blessing upon the Athenian hero, thus emphasizing the special relationship and protection she offers him and, by extension, the entire city of Athens. Theseus stands quietly, unlike the other metopes in which he battles mythological beasts or uncivilized foes.

Attributed to Lysippos

(Greek, active ca. 370-ca. 300 BCE)

Agias of Pharsala, the Pankratist, Son of Agnosios,

ca. 337-333 BCE

Plaster cast from original Pentelic marble copy of original Greek bronze

Archaeological Museum, Delphi

Around 335 BCE at Delphi, Daochos II, tetrarch of Thessaly, erected a monument to honor his ancestors and to pay homage to the god Apollo. The dedication consisted of eight freestanding statues representing several generations of family members arranged on a long marble pedestal, as well as the colossal statue of a seated Apollo. It was within this assembly that the striking figure of *Agias* stood. A Thessalonian prince who lived during the 5th century BCE, *Agias* was an accomplished boxer. Originally he would have worn a wreath on his head, signifying victory.

Somewhat distinct stylistically from the other statues of the Daochos monument at Delphi, *Agias* is the only figure of the nine to have been attributed to the sculptor Lysippos. This attribution is uncertain since the marble *Agias* of the Delphi group is thought to be a copy after a lost bronze original by Lysippos. Nevertheless, the work exhibits a number of traits characteristic of the artist, whose innovations in anatomical representation distinguished his work from other Greek sculptors of the same period. Exhibiting a high degree of verisimilitude, Lysippan figures are generally tall and slender with smaller heads. These proportions differ from the earlier Polykleitan canon of proportions, and tend toward a more accurate representation of the human form. This is reflected in the sculptor's minute attention to detail. The gentle indentations that delineate *Agias*'s powerful calves, for example, are treated with as much care and precision as the gradual swell of his pectoral muscles or the earnest line of his jaw.

One is immediately struck by *Agias*'s *contrapposto* stance, in which his right leg supporting his weight. The strong S-curve of his torso creates a double shift in weight, an innovation introduced in the 4th century BCE. Upon closer inspection, the figure conveys a latent physical power that is intentionally held at bay. Perhaps the most arresting aspect of *Agias* is his convincing three-dimensionality. Historically, freestanding figures were intended to be viewed frontally. Unlike earlier figures, however, *Agias* maintains the same absolute visual integrity when examined from any angle.

Cast Corridor

Head of Iris, 442-438 BCE
From the East Frieze, Block 5, Parthenon, Athens
Plaster cast from Pentelic marble original
Acropolis Museum, Athens
Gift of the First Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical
Antiquities—Acropolis Museum, Athens, 2010

The original marble head, after which this cast was taken, was found built into a Byzantine wall to the southwest of the Acropolis. Iris, who has also been identified variously as Hebe or Nike, attended the enthroned Hera who sat beside her consort, Zeus, within an Assembly of the Gods flanking a ceremony usually described as the Peplos Ceremony (see *Two Female Attendants in the Peplos Ceremony*, 442-438 BCE, below). Block 5 from the east frieze is in the British Museum, with the exception of this head of Iris, which has always remained in Athens.

Youths leading Heifers to Sacrifice, 442-438 BCE
From the North Frieze, Block 2, Parthenon, Athens
Plaster cast from Pentelic marble original
Acropolis Museum, Athens
Gift of the First Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical
Antiquities—Acropolis Museum, Athens, 2010

The original block was found at the eastern edge of the north side of the Parthenon, directly below the position it occupied on the temple. The scene is part of the *Panathenaic* procession showing animals being led to sacrifice in honor of Athena.

Centaur Fighting Lapith, 447-442 BCE
South Metope 5, Parthenon, Athens
Plaster cast from Pentelic marble original
British Museum, London
Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004

The Parthenon's Doric frieze originally had a total of 92 carved metopes, which was unusual for a temple of the Doric order. All four sides depicted mythological battles, which required the sculptors and designers to invent new compositions to fill the many marble panels. The earliest battle appears in the east metopes where the Olympian Gods fight the earth-born Giants. Moving in temporal progression, the south metopes show Lapiths fighting Centaurs at a Wedding Feast. The west series, with Amazons fighting Greeks (possibly Athenians), alludes powerfully to the Persian Wars. In contrast, the north metopes provide an account of the Sacking of Troy, a legend that perhaps has now achieved comparable status with the other great mythological battles.

The fullest account of the battle between the Lapiths and Centaurs at the Wedding Feast is recorded by the 1st-century poet Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses*. Here we read that Pirithous, the Lapith King, invited his neighbors, the centaurs, to his wedding with Hippodame. The half-man, half-horse creatures, emboldened by drink, assaulted the women of the wedding party including the bride. The Lapiths leapt up from their dining couches to rescue the women and to attack the Centaurs.

A violent skirmish between a Lapith and a centaur is depicted here. The latter's body creates an almost perfect diagonal line through his rearing pose, as he kicks his forelegs wildly in the air. The centaur wears a cape, and his muscles are well-defined; his body is tense and ready to attack.

Today only the centaur is seen on the metope, but 17th-century drawings of the Parthenon metopes (attributed to Jacques Carrey) make apparent that the centaur was battling a standing Lapith youth, whose wrist can be seen pushing against the bearded chin of the centaur.

Two Female Attendants in the Peplos Ceremony, 442-438 BCE

East Frieze, Block 5, Parthenon, Athens

Plaster cast from Pentelic marble original

British Museum, London

Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004

The Peplos Ceremony is the centerpiece of the Parthenon's East Frieze. It is the only element in the temple's sculptural program that does not refer to mythology, but rather a celebratory ritual that took place every four years in Athens.

The generally accepted interpretation of this scene proposes that the two smaller female figures, at left, who are perhaps carrying stools with cushions on their heads, are *arrephoroi*; maidens who spent a year weaving a *peplos* or woolen dress while living on the Acropolis. This *peplos* was created as a gift, offered to the goddess Athena during the greatest of all Athenian festivals, the *Panathenaia*, which celebrated the Athenian's victory over the Giants. This scene shows the moment after a sacrifice has been made and the old *peplos* has been folded for placement in the treasury, or back room, of the Parthenon.

Procession of Maidens, ca. 442-438 BCE

East Frieze, Block 7, Parthenon, Athens

Plaster cast from Pentelic marble original

Louvre, Paris

Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004

This section is from the right side of the East Frieze and is part of the procession of maidens walking to the left toward the *peplos* ceremony. The full panel, which is in the Louvre (Paris), contains four additional figures at left: two maidens between two marshals.

The object being carried by the third figure is a *phiale* (shallow offering bowl). The women are dressed either in a linen *chiton* covered by heavy and voluminous *himation*, or in a woolen *peplos* with a mantle draped over their shoulders. Some have their long hair tied up in a scarf, while others wear it loose and streaming down their backs. Such distinctions indicate the rank and status of the young women depicted, and their prescribed roles in the ceremony. For example, *kanephoroi* (or upper-class maidens), who were permitted the honorable task of carrying the ceremonial basket, are identifiable by a *chiton* with *himation* and bound hair.

Eros, Aphrodite, Helen, and statue of Athena, 447-442 BCE
North Metope 25, Parthenon, Athens
Plaster cast from Pentelic marble original
Acropolis Museum, Athens
Gift of the First Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical
Antiquities--Acropolis Museum, Athens, 2010

This metope depicts a key moment during the Sacking of Troy: when Menelaos sets out to find his wife Helen, whom he intends to murder in revenge for the loss of so many of his comrades. Meanwhile Eros and Aphrodite work their charms, causing Menelaos, in the adjacent North Metope 24, to drop his sword at the sight of his beautiful wife. In the next moment he will fall hopelessly in love with her again.

This version of the story shows Helen racing to the safety of a statue of Athena before harm can befall her. Importantly, this specific metope helped 19th-century scholars to decipher the entire thematic program of the north metopes.

Dionysos Attacking a Giant, 447-442 BCE
East Metope 2, Parthenon, Athens
Plaster cast from Pentelic marble original
Acropolis Museum, Athens
Gift of the First Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical
Antiquities-Acropolis Museum, Athens, 2010

Here we see Dionysos attacking a giant, who was originally fully armed and equipped with helmet and shield. The giant struggles to pull away from the god's grasp as two animals, a leaping panther and a coiling snake, accompany Dionysos as part of his retinue.

In the 19th century, the German scholar Adolf Michaelis recognized this composition as being directly related to the larger battle of the Gods fighting Giants. His discovery, in turn, provided the key to understanding the east metopes. The difficulty of recognizing the theme was due entirely to severe damage intentionally inflicted on the relief sculptures sometime between the late 4th and 6th centuries during a period of anti-pagan fervor.

Artemis, Figure G, 438-432 BCE
East Pediment, Parthenon, Athens
Plaster cast from Pentelic marble original
British Museum, London
Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004

Figure G belongs to a group of statues showing the birth of Athena in the east pediment of the Parthenon. The theme of the Parthenon pediments was cited by the ancient traveler Pausanias in the 2nd century. Some of the other gods and goddesses from the east pediment have been lost to time and history, but Figure G remains nearly intact. Her original placement is confirmed by a drawing of the pediment attributed to Jacques Carrey.

Figure G depicts a female running to the left on strong, highly energized legs. Her rapid movements cause her *peplos* and cloak to billow out in deep, curving folds behind her. The uncertain identity of Figure G continues to attract scholarly debate. Most likely, the goddess represents either Artemis or Hekate, both of whom are associated with reproduction and childbirth and, accordingly, would be appropriate figures to include in a scene such as this one.

Torso of Poseidon, Figure M, 438-432 BCE
West Pediment, Parthenon, Athens
Plaster cast from Pentelic marble original
British Museum, London and Acropolis Museum, Athens
Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004

The upper portion of this monumental torso is all that remains of the figure of Poseidon from the west pediment of the Parthenon. It was the Parthenon's west façade that greeted ancient visitors as they proceeded through the Propylaea, or entrance to the Acropolis. In general, the west end of a typical Greek temple is the back of the temple, and this is where we can expect to see a more dynamic story in the pediment, in contrast to a quieter scene in the east or front of a temple.

Originally, the massive figure of Poseidon stood near the center of the pedimental composition, across from the goddess Athena. This disposition accords well with accounts from Pausanias, who identified the scene as the Contest between Athena and Poseidon for the Land of Attica.

As the dueling Olympians move away from each other, they create a powerful V-shaped composition, also known as the "strife motif." Athena has already won the contest, but Poseidon challenges her. The two leap from the center of the composition, as a thunderbolt hurled by Zeus settles the contest. The city is named for the victor, Athena.

Boys Leading Rams to Sacrifice, 442-438 BCE
North Frieze, Block 4, Parthenon, Athens
Plaster cast from Pentelic marble original
Acropolis Museum, Athens
Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004

This scene, from block 4 of the North Frieze, represents events related to the sacrifice for the *Panathenaia*. A procession of four bulls and four rams being brought to sacrifice appears in the four blocks closest to the east end of the frieze. The depiction is solemn as the procession moves at a stately walk.

Sources tell us that ancient Athenian law required the offering of a ewe to Pandrosus, daughter of Kekrops, the first king of Athens, whenever Athena received a cow. This offering is incorporated into the overall subject of sacrifice within the North (and the South) frieze.

Riders, 442-438 BCE
North Frieze, Block 36, Parthenon, Athens
Plaster cast from Pentelic marble original
Acropolis Museum, Athens
Gift of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004

The Riders are the most widely recognizable sculptures from the Parthenon's frieze, in large measure because they are perhaps the best preserved sculptures in the entire ensemble. They are also remarkable for their embodiment of the Classical ideal of both man and horse.

The action on the North Frieze, as in this example, shows the cavalcade in full motion. Subtle overlapping defines groups which we now know are rows of riders. The sculptors brought the row forward to fill one or two blocks within the frieze, in part because they did not yet know how to show six or eight riders receding directly into the distance, an innovation that would be discovered within the Hellenistic period.

Each rider is expressive in a unique and individual way. Here, for instance, one is seen holding the reins low in his left hand, while another extends his right arm, as if to caress his horse gently between its ears. Horses tug at the bit, shake their heads, flicker their ears, arch or extend their necks in a variety of ways to convey their nervous energy within the procession. Remarkably, the sculptors and designers never repeated the same horse or rider within the entire frieze.

Kallimachos (possibly attributed to)
(Greek, active 2nd half of 5th century BCE)
***Nike Tying her Sandal (Sandalbinder)*, 421-413 BCE**
Plaster cast from marble original, Acropolis Museum, Athens
Gift of the First Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical
Antiquities—Acropolis Museum, Athens, 2010

Nike Tying her Sandal, more familiarly known as the "Sandalbinder," is one of the best-loved sculptures from the Acropolis. Here Nike, or the personification of Victory, is shown balancing on her left foot so that she may raise her right foot to adjust her sandal. Though treating a disarmingly simple subject, the sculptor's dramatic use of drapery – both on Nike's *chiton*, with its buttoned sleeves, and the mantle that crosses her right thigh before rising to cover her left shoulder – conveys a sense of impressive energy and monumental grandeur. Indeed, the voluminous fabric, under the artist's skillful chisel, has assumed an architectural quality; one that seems to help Nike maintain her balance.

The sculpture represented by this cast was originally located on a parapet wall that surrounded the Temple of Athena Nike on three sides of the bastion just to the right of the Propylaea. As visitors in antiquity arrived at the steps to the Acropolis, they would have seen this Nike facing outward on the marble parapet, along with several other examples of Nike approaching a seated Athena.