

ULRIKE MÜLLER
HÉLÈNE VERREYKE
TINE D'HAERYERE

BETWEEN ART HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION AND DIDACTIC FUNCTIONALITY: THE CAST COLLECTION OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS OF ANTWERP

Collections of plaster casts containing reproductions of canonic sculptures experienced a considerable boom during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Mainly assembled for art schools and in specialized cast museums, such collections made it possible to bring together in one location large numbers of masterpieces from the history of sculpture normally spread over collections in different places.¹ In comparison to other emerging reproduction media such as lithography and photography, plaster casts had the advantage of reproducing original art works by maintaining their original shape, physical properties and presence.² As such, plaster casts were considered ideal tools for the transmission of artistic knowledge and taste, and as models for art education.³ Initially

¹ For a general overview on the collection of plaster casts during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, see E.M. Payne, "Casting a new canon. Collecting and treating casts of Greek and Roman sculpture, 1850–1939", *The Cambridge Classical Journal*, 65, pp. 113–149; K. Nichols, *Greece and Rome at the Crystal Palace. Classical Sculpture and Modern Britain, 1854–1936*, Oxford 2015; Ch. Schreiter, ed., *Gipsabgüsse und antike Skulpturen. Präsentation und Kontext*, Berlin 2012; R. Frederiksen and E. Marchand, eds., *Plaster Casts. Making, Collecting and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, *Plaster Casts*, Berlin 2010.

² M. Baker, "The Reproductive Continuum. Plaster Casts, Paper Mosaics and Photographs as Complementary Modes of Reproduction in the Nineteenth-Century Museum", in: *Plaster Casts. Making, Collecting and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, ed. R. Frederiksen and E. Marchand, Berlin 2010, p. 486.

³ M. Joly-Parvex, "Des écoles d'art académiques aux écoles d'art. Des collections et des lieux, un patrimoine à valoriser", *In Situ. Revue des patrimoines* 2021, 43, <https://doi.org/10.4000/isitu.10000>.

focused on famous examples of classical Greco-Roman sculpture, the canon for such collections gradually extended in the course of the nineteenth century to include works from other art historical periods and examples of “national” sculpture. In some cases, collections also expanded to include a global profile with casts of Far East Asian, African and American sculpture.⁴

While specialized cast museums were mainly intended for the aesthetic formation and promotion of national art and heritage among the expanding nineteenth-century public,⁵ collections of plaster casts belonging to nineteenth-century art academies functioned within a longer tradition of art education and drawing after antique models practiced since the early modern period.⁶ Despite these differences in their function and purpose, museums and academic collections of plaster casts shared a number of similarities. Both largely depended on the same networks, relying on the deliveries of large (inter)national plaster casting workshops that emerged during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including the Parisian *atelier de moulage* (founded in 1794),⁷ the *Gipsformerei* Berlin (1819),⁸ and the Brussels cast

org/10.4000/insitu.28556. See also E. Marchand, “Apostles of Good Taste? The Use and Perception of Plaster Casts in the Enlightenment”, *Journal of Art Historiography* 2021, 25, <<https://doi.org/10.48352/uobxjah.00003459>>; E. le Breton, E. Schwartz and A. Thomine-Berrada, “Des modèles au service de la création française (XVIIe–XXe siècle). Autour de l’histoire des moulages de l’école des beaux-arts / Models of French Creation (17th–20th century). The History of Plaster Casts at the École des Beaux-Arts”, in: *Sculptures infinies. Des Collections de moulages à l’ère digitale / Infinite Sculpture. From the Antique Cast to the 3D Scan*, ed. P. Curtis, Paris 2019, pp. 46–63.

⁴ See f.i. V. Montens, *Les moulages des Musées royaux d’Art et d’Histoire. Histoire de la collection et de l’atelier des reproductions en plâtre*, Brussels 2008, esp. pp. 30, 45, 74; F. Rionnet, *L’atelier de moulage du Musée du Louvre. 1794–1928*, Paris 1996, pp. 120–126.

⁵ Ch. Schreier, “Competition, Exchange, Comparison. Nineteenth-Century Cast Museums in Transnational Perspective”, in: *The Museum Is Open. Towards a Transnational History of Museums, 1750–1940*, ed. A. Meyer and B. Savoy, Berlin 2014, pp. 31–43; L. Nys, *De intrede van het publiek. Museumbezoek in België 1830–1914*, Leuven 2012, esp. pp. 194–195.

⁶ V. Sancho Lobis, “Rubens, the Antique, and Originality Redrawn”, in: *Das Originale der Kopie. Kopien als Produkte und Medien der Transformation von Antike*, ed. T. Bartsch et al., Berlin 2010, pp. 249–268; L.E. Lock, “Picturing the Use, Collecting and Display of Plaster Casts in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Artists’ Studios in Antwerp and Brussels”, in: *Plaster Casts. Making, Collecting and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, ed. R. Frederiksen and E. Marchand, Berlin 2010, pp. 251–268.

⁷ Rionnet, *L’atelier de moulage du Musée du Louvre*, pp. 2–3.

⁸ M. Helfrich and C. Haak, eds., *Casting. Ein analoger Weg ins Zeitalter der Digitalisierung? Ein Symposium zur Gipsformerei der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin*, Heidelberg

workshop (1849).⁹ The cast collections housed in academies and museums also shared the same fate. After a peak in popularity at the turn of the twentieth century, such collections began to lose their attraction from the 1920s onwards. Attesting to the twentieth-century focus on originality and aura, but also related to advancements in reproduction techniques, cultural tourism as well as artistic education and practice, plaster casts were then increasingly decried as unauthentic and antiquated, and downgraded due to allegedly low material value, resulting in the abandonment, neglect or outright destruction of such collections.¹⁰

Since the 1980s, there has been a steady resurgence of interest in plaster casts and cast collections, in academia and museums alike.¹¹ Recent research has been dedicated, for example, to the cast museum as a cultural phenomenon illustrating rapid fluctuations in taste and display, and to pinpoint changing approaches to concepts such as authenticity and originality.¹² The cast collections of academies and art schools, in turn, are not often the topic of in-depth research. One reason for the lack of interest in, and visibility of, such collections may be related to the (seemingly) more limited function and purpose of casts in the academic context, namely their reduction to a use value, and their exclusive function as hopelessly conservative, traditional and old-fashioned study objects for art students. A lack of interest in the history of art teaching methods also seems to be related to the modernist discourse

2016, available online: <<https://books.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/arthistoricum/catalog/book/536>> [accessed: November 22, 2023].

⁹ C. Montens, "La création d'une collection nationale de moulages en Belgique. Du musée des Plâtres à la section d'Art monumental des Musées royaux des arts décoratifs et industriels à Bruxelles", *In Situ. Revue des patrimoines* 2016, 28, <<https://doi.org/10.4000/insitu.12564>>; E. Van Binnebeke, "Casting Ivories in Exchange? A Short History of the Brussels Atelier de Moulage", *Sculpture Journal* 2014, 23, pp. 81–92, <<https://doi.org/10.3828/sj.2014.8>>.

¹⁰ For a recent volume exploring this issue, see A. Alexandridis and L. Winkler-Horaček, eds., *Destroy the Copy. Plaster Cast Collections in the 19th–20th Centuries: Demolition, Defacement, Disposal in Europe and Beyond*, Berlin 2022, esp. pp. 4–7.

¹¹ Frederiksen and Marchand, *Plaster Casts*, p. 2; B. Van den Driessche, "Les moulages en plâtre dans les academies et les universités belges", *La Vie des Musées* 2001–2002, 15, p. 65.

¹² A. Patterson and M. Trusted, *The Cast Courts*, London 2018; M. Lending, *Plaster Monuments. Architecture and the Power of Reproduction*, Princeton 2017; D. Bilbey and M. Trusted, "'The Question of Casts'. Collecting and Later Reassessment of the Cast Collections at South Kensington", in: *Plaster Casts. Making, Collecting and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, ed. R. Frederiksen and E. Marchand, Berlin 2010, pp. 463–484.

of late-twentieth-century art itself. The radical shift in art theory and practice that emerged since the 1960s and 1970s not only lead to the abandonment of traditional teaching methods (including drawing after plaster casts), but the impact of the modernist paradigm also profoundly influenced the view on – and research into – the history and heritage of didactic practices to the present day.¹³ Often, such discourses too easily distinguish between conservative and progressive (in which all evidence of “tradition” is to be rejected in favour of the “modern” and the “new”), leaving little room for observing and embracing continuities, cross-references and the complexity of historical and present-day realities.

As the physical remainders of – and thus intimately linked to – (former) teaching practices at art schools, cast collections of academies are an ideal tool to better understand the diverse and changing approaches to art education during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – but also the ways in which these institutions were above all shaped by continuity and methods of creative adaptation and appropriation. This article focuses on cast collections at art academies, and how the formation and functioning of such collections related to broader educational concepts and practices at these schools. Taking the collection of plaster casts of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp as a case study, we will trace the various actors, methods and strategies employed to create the collection, uncover how the collection related to the artistic idea(l)s handled in the educational programme of the institution, and discuss how and where it was located and displayed.¹⁴ Particular attention will be on the extent to which the plaster casts reflected continuities and changes in the everyday academic teaching practice. We will argue how cast collections formed by art academies – in addition to representing the art historical canon of a given place or period – are an important reflection of the didactic practices, aesthetic priorities and above all the creative encounters that distinguish these institutions from the purposes of the public (cast) museum.

¹³ Joly-Parvex, *Des écoles d'art académiques aux écoles d'art*.

¹⁴ For earlier research on the plaster casts in the Antwerp Academy, see C. van der Star, “De Academie als museum? De erfgoedcollecties van de academie en de zorg ervoor”, in: *Contradicties. Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen 2013–1633*, ed. J. Pas et al., Ghent 2013, pp. 273–278; C. van der Star, “The Plaster Cast Collection at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp”, in: *Heads on Shoulders: Portrait Busts in the Low Countries 1600–1800*, ed. V. Herremans and J. Muller, Ghent 2008, pp. 29–39. For a more general history of the academy, see J. Pas et al., eds., *Contradicties. Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen 2013–1633*, Ghent 2013; J. Lampo, *Een tempel bouwen voor de muzen. Een korte geschiedenis van de Antwerpse Academie (1663–1995)*, Antwerp 1995; F.J.P. Van den Branden, *Geschiedenis der Academie van Antwerpen*, Antwerp 1867.

Between the (late) eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp assembled a large and diverse collection of plaster casts (ill. 1). Since ca. 1810, the collection has been housed in the former monastery of the Friars Minor at Antwerp's Mutsaardstraat, which became the new seat of the academy after the dissolution of the religious orders of the Revolutionary period. While no exhaustive inventory exists to document the extent of the collection at its heyday around 1900, preserved purchase lists and photographic material suggest that the collection may once have contained some 500 casts of antique and modern sculptures, reliefs and busts, excluding a large number of smaller study objects in plaster cast from life such as hands, arms, legs and feet. Just like many other cast collections, the Antwerp Academy collection fell from favour after the Second World War, resulting in the neglect, dislocation and even destruction of many examples. Today, only a small part of the original collection survives at the campus, comprising ca. 200 casts. In the meantime, the campus



1. The cast gallery in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp, photograph, c. 1950, Antwerp, Felixarchief, Archive of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp, photo collection, inv. GP#1861

has undergone several organisational and structural changes. Since 2014, the academy has shared the campus with the University of Antwerp, which organizes courses in the renewed academic programs Conservation-Restoration and Heritage Studies at this location. At the moment, the university and the academy are executing a research and assessment project which aims to map the campus collection in its breadth and depth, assess its value via a participatory trajectory, and thereby pave the way for its future preservation and meaningful valorisation on site.¹⁵ This article intends to present some results of the research executed in the course of this project, focusing on the formation, content and purpose of the nineteenth-century plaster collection of the Antwerp Academy.

COLLECTING CASTS FOR THE ANTWERP ACADEMY: CULTURAL NETWORKS AND POLITICAL ALLIANCES

In Antwerp, plaster casts have been present in artists' studios and in the local academy since the early modern period.¹⁶ As such, the collection of plaster casts is strongly linked to the organization of artistic training. Founded in 1663 and originally housed in the building of the Old Bourse in the Hofstraat, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp is one of the oldest institutions for art education in Europe. The first lessons in drawing based on antique models (in the shape of plaster casts) were organized in 1694 but were suspended due to the difficult economic situation of the institution in 1723.¹⁷ The lessons were successfully reinstated in 1765 by draughtsman and engraver Pieter Franciscus Martinasie (1729–1789). In need of appropriate study material for his lessons, Martinasie turned to the owner of an important collection of antique sculptures in Belgium, Duke Charles Marie Raymond of Arenberg (1721–1778). Via the mediation of a certain N. J. De Busschere from Brussels, in 1766 Martinasie thus obtained plaster copies of 25 antique portrait busts from the ducal collection, including the heads

¹⁵ The project "Collectie Campus Mutsaard: Participatief waarden van 360 jaar erfgoed van de Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen" ("Collection Campus Mutsaard: Participatory assessment of 360 years of heritage of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp") is a two-year initiative (2022–2024) funded by the Culture Department of the Flemish Government.

¹⁶ Lock, *Picturing the Use, Collecting and Display of Plaster Casts*.

¹⁷ Van den Branden, *Geschiedenis der Academie van Antwerpen*, pp. 35–37.

of Julius Cesar, Horace, Homerus, Socrates, Plato, and the Medici Venus.¹⁸ One year later, another professor of the institution, the painter Martin-Joseph Geeraerts (1707–1791), donated a plaster copy of the antique sculpture *Dancing Faun*,¹⁹ which was still present in the academy collection in the 1950s (ill. 1).²⁰ Also, during the 1770s and 80s, several casts after classical Graeco-Roman sculptures – including the *Borghese Gladiator*²¹ and the *Dying Gladiator*²² – were donated to the institution, having been brought back by members of Antwerp’s art-loving high society from their *Grand Tour*, including Théodore Van de Werve and François Van Ertborn, who were active in local art circles and affiliated with the academy.²³ Until the turn of the nineteenth century, the casts were kept in the separate “Cabinet des Antiquités” (large sculptures) and “Salle de la Bosse” (busts and smaller study objects), where the drawing lessons took place.²⁴

The further history of the cast collection of the Antwerp Academy was strongly shaped by the French rule over the Southern Netherlands during

¹⁸ Liste des bienfaiteurs/donateurs du Musée et de l’Académie Royale des Beaux Arts d’Anvers, Felixarchief, inv. 2767#278. See also Van den Branden, p. 53; Lampo, *Een tempel bouwen voor de muzen*, p. 11. *Medici Venus* or *Venus de’ Medici*, original in Florence, Uffizi, inv. 224. See F. Haskell and N. Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, New Haven/London 1981, pp. 325–328.

¹⁹ *Dancing Faun*, also known as *Faun with Clappers*, *Medici Faun* or *Faun with Cymbals*, original in Florence, Uffizi (Tribuna), inv. 220. See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 205–208.

²⁰ The donation of a cast of the “Faune aux cymbales” is referred to in the catalogues of the Antwerp museum of 1857 and 1890 (but the cast itself is not catalogued), see *Catalogue du Musée d’Anvers*, Antwerp 1857, p. 438; *Catalogue du Musée d’Anvers*, Antwerp 1890, p. 178.

²¹ *Borghese Gladiator*, also known as *Fighting Gladiator*, *Héros Combattant* or *Borghese Warrior*, original in Paris, Louvre, inv. Ma 527. See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 221–224.

²² *Dying Gladiator*, also known as *Dying Gaul*, *Roman Gladiator*, *Wounded Gladiator* or *Myrmillo Dying*, original in Rome, Musei Capitolini, inv. S 747. See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 224–227.

²³ A cast of the *Gladiateur* was given by Théodore Van de Werve and François Van Ertborn in 1776, and a cast of the *Gladiateur mourant* was given by Mr. De Neuf d’Aissche in 1783, both brought back from Rome, while casts of the *Laocoon*, *Venus* and *Apollo* have reportedly been in the academy collection in 1772, see Liste des bienfaiteurs ..., Felixarchief, inv. 2767#278.

²⁴ Inventaire de tout ce qui a appartenu à la ci-devant Académie de Peinture, Sculpture, etc., ainsi que de tout ce qui concerne le ci-devant corps de Saint-Luc, dit des Peintres, établi dans le local, au-dessus de la Bourse de la commune d’Anvers, chef-lieu du Département des Deux-Nethes, 1796–1797, Felixarchief, inv. 2574#7.

the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the region was annexed by France in 1794. In the same year, the academy was closed due to a lack of funds. Local artists and politicians, including Willem Jacob Herreyens (1743–1827) and Simon Pierre Dargonne (1749–1839), lobbied for the reanimation of artistic life in Antwerp. Their efforts resulted in the re-establishment of art education in Antwerp by means of the creation of the *Ecole spéciale pour peinture, sculpture et architecture* in 1796.²⁵ On this occasion, an inventory was drawn up of all the artworks and study objects that were located in the former academy at the Old Bourse, including 75 plaster sculptures and busts cast after the antique.²⁶ The French successively invested in the improvement of local art education. For this purpose, Charles d'Herbouville (1756–1829), since 1800 prefect of the Departement des Deux Nèthes, advocated the creation of a museum in Antwerp, which was to be used for the benefit of the local art students. Since 1794, however, great numbers of Flemish artworks that could function as models for young artists had been confiscated by the French occupiers from churches and other religious and secular institutions and transported to Paris to be exhibited in the Louvre or stored in local depots. In the early 1800s, d'Herbouville and Mattheus Van Brée (1773–1839), then a young professor at the local art school, repeatedly travelled to Paris to lobby for the return of the artworks, albeit without results. The majority of the confiscated artworks returned to Antwerp only in 1816.²⁷ While the claims for the restitution of Flemish artworks were not heard, d'Herbouville and Van Brée were more successful in obtaining plaster casts for the academy to complement and expand the existing collection.²⁸ Many of these were cast from originals that had been brought to France as trophies from the Napoleonic Wars and were produced in the recently created *atelier de moulage* of Paris (1794). The archives of the academy preserve the correspondence between Her-

²⁵ L. De Jong, S. Beele, and E. Joos, *Het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen. Een geschiedenis 1810–2007*, Oostkamp 2008, p. 19.

²⁶ *Inventaire de tout ce qui a appartenu à la ci-devant Académie ...*, 1796–1797, Felixarchief, inv. 2574#7.

²⁷ C. Loir, *L'émergence des beaux-arts en Belgique. Institutions, artistes, public et patrimoine (1773–1835)*, Brussels, 2004, p. 140; J. Van den Nieuwenhuizen, "Antwerpse schilderijen te Parijs (1794–1815)", *Tijdschrift der Stad Antwerpen* 1962, 8(2), pp. 66–83.

²⁸ In 1801, Herreyens compiled an inventory of the casts existing at the Antwerp Academy for d'Herbouville, containing 74 casts (including the *Laocoon*, *Apollo Belvedere*, *Gladiateur combattant*, *Antinous*, *Gladiateur mourant*), in which he notably also indicated the condition of the casts, see *Inventaire des tableaux, plâtres, etc., existants à l'Académie de Peinture, Sculpture*, 1801, Felixarchief, inv. 2574#8.

reyns (who stayed in Antwerp), d'Herbouville and Van Brée (who regularly travelled to Paris in search of new casts), and Jean-André Getti, the *mouleur* (molder) of the Louvre.²⁹ In June 1802, for example, Getti announced the shipment of a copy of the *Laocoon group*³⁰ to the *Antwerp Academy*.³¹ The original *Laocoon* had been taken from Rome to Paris in 1798, where it was reproduced in the atelier de moulage. A year later, d'Herbouville and Van Brée obtained another set of casts for the academy, including copies of the *Apollo Belvedere*³² and the *Borghese Gladiator* (which the academy already owned), but also new casts of the *Germanicus*,³³ the statues of *Castor and Pollux*,³⁴ *Hermaphroditus*,³⁵ busts of *Homerus* and *Euripides*, and the heads of the *Venus of Arles*³⁶ and of *Demosthenes*.³⁷ Notably, in this period, the same casts also entered other "provincial" academy collections. In 1802, for example, casts of the *Laocoon*, *Gladiator*, *Castor and Pollux* and the *Hermaphroditus* also entered the collections of several other academies, including the one in Lyon, reflecting the decided cultural politics of Napoleonic France.³⁸ In addition to casts of classical sculptures, Van Brée also managed

²⁹ Archive Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp, Correspondence artistic matters concerning antique art objects (sculptures), 1801–1847, Felixarchieff, inv. 2767#277. On Jean-André Getti, see Rionnet, *L'atelier de moulage du Musée du Louvre*, pp. 2–20.

³⁰ *Laocoon*, original in Rome, Musei Vaticani, inv. 1059. See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 243–247.

³¹ Letter from Jean-André Getti, mouleur des antiques au Louvre, 2 Thermidor an 10 (2 June 1802), Felixarchieff, inv. 2767#277. See also Rionnet, *L'atelier de moulage du Musée du Louvre*, p. 358; Van den Driessche, *Les moulages en plâtre dans les académies et les universités belges*, p. 63.

³² *Apollo Belvedere*, original in Rome, Musei Vaticani, inv. 1015. See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 148–151.

³³ *Germanicus*, also known as *Marcellus*, *Augustus*, *Brutus*, *M. Marius Gratidianus*, *Man playing morra*, *Mercury* or *Roman Orator*, original in Paris, Louvre, inv. 1207. See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 218–220.

³⁴ *Castor and Pollux*, also known as *The Decii*, *Odescalchi Dioscuri*, *Two Genii*, *The San Ildefonso group*, *Two Lares*, *Orestes and Pylades* or *La Paix des Grecs*, original in Madrid, Prado, inv. E000028. See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 173–175.

³⁵ *Hermaphroditus*, also known as *Hermaphrodite endormi*, original in Paris, Louvre, inv. Ma 231. See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 234–236.

³⁶ *Venus of Arles*, original in Paris, Louvre, inv. Ma 439.

³⁷ Letter by Van Brée to the members of the Antwerp Art Society (Kunstmaatschappij), as cited by F.J.P. Van den Branden, *Geschiedenis der Antwerpsche Schilderschool*, Antwerp 1883, p. 1322.

³⁸ S. Betite, "Dessiner d'après la bosse à Lyon", *In Situ. Revue des patrimoines* 2021, 43, <<https://doi.org/10.4000/insitu.28732>>.

to obtain other valuable study objects for the academy, including casts of “bras, jambes, pieds et mains, moulé sur la nature”.³⁹

Van Brée, who would become the director of the academy after the death of Herreyens in 1827, thus played an important role in the acquisition of diverse kinds of study objects for the academy. He further developed his own teaching method, which drew heavily on the cast collection he had helped shape. In 1821, Van Brée published his *Leçons de dessin* as the theoretical basis of his method.⁴⁰ The book was accompanied by an additional volume containing line drawings after plaster casts to serve as models for art students. The volume contained a total of 100 plates. Almost all of the plaster casts then present in the academy are represented, including the *Discobolus* (ill. 2),⁴¹ *Borghese Gladiator*, *Laocoon*, as well as the busts of *Homerus*, *Euripides* and the *Venus of Arles*.⁴² Van Brée's publication may thus be considered an illustrated catalogue of the cast collection.

After the fall of the Napoleonic regime in 1815, and the restitution of the looted artworks to Antwerp in 1816, the cast collection at the Antwerp Academy remained an important asset in art education and was further extended. In the meantime, the academy and its collections had moved to its new premises, the former convent of the Friars Minor in the Mutsaardstraat, which was officially inaugurated in 1811. According to an inventory drawn up in 1817, the academy collection then contained a total number of 113 casts of antique sculptures: 29 large statues and groups, nine half-sized statues, three torsos, three busts “de grandeur colossale”, 66 busts and heads of regular size, 13 bas reliefs, plus “plusieurs bras, jambes et autres objets d'étude” (i.e. the above-mentioned study objects obtained by Van Brée).⁴³ Following the defeat of Napoleon, the Southern Netherlands became a part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands under King William I. The extension of the Antwerp

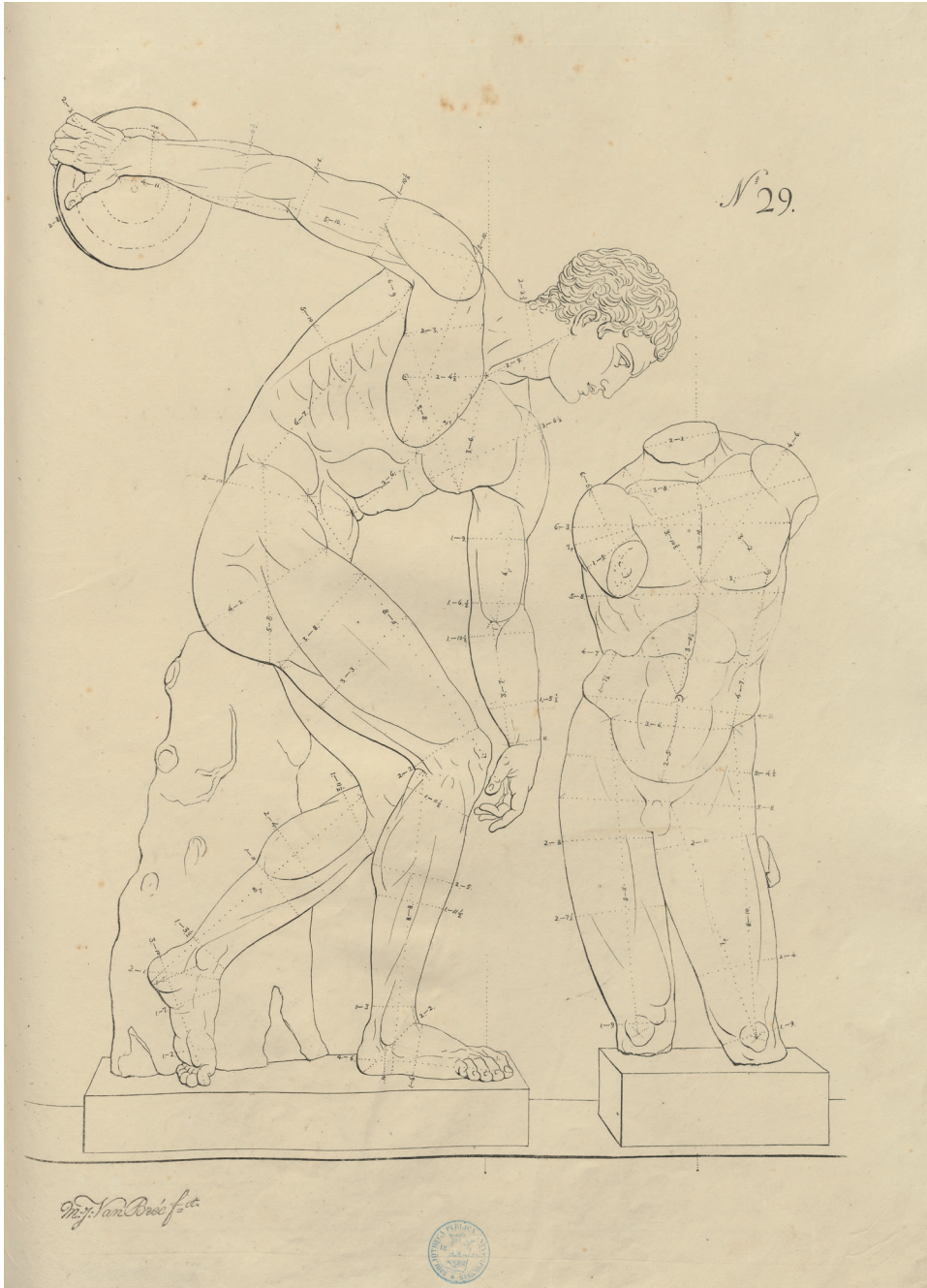
³⁹ Letter from Van Brée to Herreyens, 24 August 1807, Felixarchief, inv. 2767#277.

⁴⁰ M. Van Brée, *Leçons de dessin ou explication sur les cent planches, qui forment le cours d'études des principes de dessin*, Antwerp 1821. See also P. van de Moortel, “Een schild tegen de modes en de slechte smaak. Mattheus Van Brée en de vernieuwing van het 19de-eeuwse kunstonderwijs”, in: *Contradicties. Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen 2013–1633*, ed. J. Pas et al., Ghent 2013, pp. 155–172.

⁴¹ *Discobolus*, original in Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano (Museo delle Terme). See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 198–202.

⁴² A folio edition of the illustrated volume is preserved in the library of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp (inv. P-455). An inventory of the collection drawn up in 1817 lists a total of 113 casts, see *Liste des Modèles antiques que possède l'Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts*. September 1817, Felixarchief, inv. 2767#277.

⁴³ *Liste des Modèles antiques ... 1817*, Felixarchief, inv. 2767#277.



2. Discobolus, Lithograph after an original drawing by Mattheus Van Brée, from Mattheus Van Brée, *Leçons de dessin...*, 1821, Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, H 5504, 2

Academy collection reflected the new political alliances. This is little surprising, given the endeavors of the Dutch king to stimulate the cultural unification of his country via the support of the art scene, among others. In 1826, for example, the academy received casts of a collection of gems and cameos from the Royal Numismatic Cabinet from The Hague as a gift from the King.⁴⁴ But the academy also continued to order casts from the atelier de moulage in Paris, such as new copies of the *Discobolus* and the *Laocoon* (in a version without the two sons) in 1843.⁴⁵

In those years, the further expansion of the cast collection was deemed logical and necessary due to the continuous growth of the institution. A year report of the academy from 1843–44 indicated that the student numbers had risen from 427 in 1837 to 1,124 in 1843, and as a “respectable” art school, the academy naturally required an extensive cast collection that benefited teaching.⁴⁶ The same report also proudly announced the ongoing expansion of the academy’s collection of plaster casts, citing in particular the acquisition of seven large plaster sculptures and fifty smaller casts in Paris, as well as the donation of 93 “models of Greek, Roman and ogival architecture” that had been cast in Paris and given to the Antwerp Academy by Charles Jean Stier d’Aertselaer (1770–1847).⁴⁷

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF THE CAST CIRCUIT AND THE *PRIX DE ROME* PLASTERS

From the middle of the nineteenth century, additions to the cast collection of the Antwerp Academy grew exponentially and gained a more regular and structural character. The increasing acquisitions were the result of the ongoing professionalization of the cast circuit in Belgium, as well as a number of changes in the institutional framework for art education and the broader cultural politics. In 1849, the Brussels Museum of Fine Arts officially created a section designated to plaster casts after antique models. Initially part of the Musée de Sculpture, the cast gallery became an independent department in

⁴⁴ Letter from the Minister of the Interior to the Board of Directors of the Antwerp Academy, 15 September 1829, Felixarchieff, inv. 2767#279.

⁴⁵ List of the casts ordered from the atelier de moulage in November 1843, Felixarchieff, inv. 2767#278.

⁴⁶ Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp, Year Report 1843–44, Felixarchieff, inv. 2767#278.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

the course of the second half of the century.⁴⁸ An atelier de moulage was created in the same year as the cast gallery. This workshop was deemed necessary for the restoration of casts arriving from all over Europe, but over the years, and due to stimulation from the central government, the Brussels atelier became the foremost place for the production of casts in Belgium and their dissemination among art schools and provincial museums throughout the country.⁴⁹ From the beginning, the Antwerp Academy stood in direct contact with the Brussels cast workshop, and the extensive correspondence with Jean-Pierre Van den Broeck (?–1869), “mouleur de l’état”, and his followers attest to the regular order of casts for the art school. In 1850, for example, a “statue d’écorché” (a figure showing the muscles of the human body without skin) was sent from Brussels to Antwerp as a model to be used during anatomic drawing lessons.⁵⁰

Around the same period, the central government, under the impetus of the Minister of the Interior Charles Rogier (1800–1885), launched attempts to uniformize art education via special subsidies, programs and inspections. Rogier also favored the promotion of national models in art education. For this purpose, the minister created a *Conseil de Perfectionnement de l’enseignement des arts du dessin* (active from 1859).⁵¹ In 1864, the *Conseil* issued a list with obligatory models for drawing lessons in the academies.⁵² The list represented the stronger institutional regulation of art education and aimed to diversify the classical canon of antique sculpture. While still suggesting traditional models such as the *Laocoon*, *Apollo Belvedere* and *Borghese Gladiator*, the list also included sculptures, ornaments and architectural elements from the Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque periods. The minister’s measure was supported by the *Commission royale des monuments et*

⁴⁸ Montens, *La création d’une collection nationale de moulages en Belgique*; M. Van Kalck, “La collection de moulages ou Collection d’après l’antique, de l’époque de la Renaissance et du Moyen Age (1849–1880)”, *Archiacti(e)ve. Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* 2000, 5, pp. 3–9.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 5–8.

⁵⁰ Letter from Jean-Pierre Van den Broeck, “mouleur de l’état”, to Gustave Wappers, director of the Antwerp Academy, 29 December 1850, Felixarchieff, inv. 2767#278. Casts of écorché figures had also been acquired by Van Brée and used in his drawing method, see Van Brée, *Leçons de dessin*, and correspondence about an écorché cast that Van Brée’s widow asked back from the academy in 1847, Felixarchieff, inv. 2767#277.

⁵¹ H. Stynen, *De onvoltooid verleden tijd. Een geschiedenis van de monumenten- en landschapszorg in België, 1835–1940*, Brussels 1998, pp. 156–157.

⁵² Liste des modèles recommandés par le Conseil de perfectionnement pour l’enseignement du dessin, Felixarchieff, inv. 2767#278.

des sites (founded in 1835) and was paralleled by important initiatives to better document and preserve the country's national cultural heritage. From the 1850s onwards, for example, the *mouleurs* active for the Brussels Museum were called upon to make plaster copies of important sculptural and architectural monuments all over Belgium.⁵³ These copies entered provincial and local museums as well as academies, where they were preserved as valuable examples of national heritage, but not necessarily used as actual models for art education. In 1892, for example, the Antwerp Academy ordered a set of plaster casts from the Brussels *atelier de moulage* (which in the meantime had moved to the Cinquantenaire Park), including the five statues of the chimney piece of the Franc of Bruges (*Brugse Vrije*) representing Charles V, Mary of Burgundy, Maximilian I of Austria, Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon.⁵⁴ Representing masterpieces of sixteenth-century Flemish sculpture, these casts – some of which are preserved until the present day – were in fact not used in the artistic training programs at the academy but found a place in the former director's apartment at the academy site.⁵⁵ Other casts ordered from the Brussels workshop in those years included Michelangelo's *Dying Slave*⁵⁶ and *Madonna of Bruges*⁵⁷ (ill. 3), several parts of the Parthenon Frieze, the Nike of Samothrace (found in 1863),⁵⁸ as well as new copies of the *Borghese Gladiator* and the *Antinous*⁵⁹ that represented established values in academic art education.⁶⁰

The growth of the academy collection went parallel with the blossoming of cast museums all over Europe, as well as the emergence of a large-scale exchange network set up to facilitate the international dissemination of plaster casts. An important initiative to realize this aim was the *Convention for Promoting Universally Reproductions of Works of Art for the Benefit of all*

⁵³ Van Kalck, *La collection de moulages*, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Order list of casts from the Brussels Atelier de Moulage, Parc du Cinquantenaire, 1892, Felixarchief, inv. 2767#278.

⁵⁵ Undated restauration report of the plaster cast of Mary of Burgundy, University of Antwerp, Archive of the Department Conservation-Restoration.

⁵⁶ Michelangelo, *Dying Slave*, original in Paris, Louvre, inv. MR 1590.

⁵⁷ Michelangelo, *Madonna and Child*, original in Bruges, Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk.

⁵⁸ *Nike of Samothrace*, also known as *The Winged Victory of Samothrace*, original in Paris, Louvre, inv. Ma 2369. See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 333–335.

⁵⁹ *Antinous*, also known as *Captioline Antinous*, original in Rome, Musei Capitolini, inv. MC0741. See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 143–144.

⁶⁰ Order list of casts from the Brussels Atelier de Moulage, Parc du Cinquantenaire, 1892, Felixarchief, inv. 2767#278.



3. A plaster cast of Michelangelo's *Madonna of Bruges* in the cast gallery in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp, photograph, c. 1950, Antwerp, Felixarchief, Archive of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp, photo collection, inv. GP#1845

Nations established during the 1867 Universal Exhibition in Paris.⁶¹ Belgium was one of the fifteen nations to sign the agreement that year. To facilitate the collaboration, the Royal Belgian Committee for International Exchange (*Commission Royale de Belgique pour les Echanges Internationaux*) was founded in 1871.⁶² By this means, casts of important sculptural works from Belgium found their way to museums all over Europe. In 1872, for example, a cast of Michelangelo's *Madonna of Bruges* was sent to the Victoria and Albert Museum, most likely produced from the same mould as the cast that entered the Antwerp Academy twenty years later.⁶³

In addition, during the second half of the nineteenth century, the academy collection was enriched with plaster models by contemporary artists and copies produced by laureates of the acclaimed *Prix de Rome*. The *Prix de Rome* was a yearly competition, first organized at the Parisian Academy, and held at numerous art schools all over Europe and throughout the nineteenth century that would allow excellent students to complete their artistic education in the Italian capital. In Antwerp, the *Prix de Rome* was organized between 1819 and 1921. Initially aimed exclusively at painters, a section for bas-reliefs was introduced in 1830, and from 1880 onwards, free-standing sculptures were accepted for the prize.⁶⁴ The sculptures by the winning candidates created for the competition became property of the Academy. In 1888, Jules Lagae (1862–1931), an art student of the Brussels Academy, won the competition with *The Sower of the Good Grain* (ill. 4). Artists like Charles Auguste Fraikin and Jef Lambeaux were part of the jury. The archive of the Antwerp Academy houses the documentation of the competition and correspondence during the four-year “tour” through Europe and Italy, from 1889 to 1892. Lagae initially suggested twenty-four cities for his tour starting in London, followed by a three-year stay in Italy, in cities such as Venice, Verona and Padua. The final year would be mostly spent in northern European cities such as Amsterdam, Berlin and Vienna. The President of the *Prix de Rome*, Governor of the Province of Antwerp Charles Du Bois de Vroylande, and some of the members of the jury, such as Jean Cuypers, underlined Rome, Naples, Florence and Par-

⁶¹ Lending, *Plaster Monuments*, pp. 21–23; Bilbey and Trusted, *The Question of Casts*, p. 466.

⁶² Van Binnebeke, *Casting Ivories in Exchange?*, p. 85.

⁶³ Van der Star, *The Plaster Cast Collection at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp*, p. 34.

⁶⁴ K. Dierckx, “Volgens de regels van de kunst. De Prix de Rome (1819–1921) als nationale prestigewedstrijd en hoogmis van het kunstacademische conventionalisme”, in: *Contradicties. Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen 2013–1633*, ed. J. Pas et al., Ghent 2013, pp. 173–184.



4. Jules Lagae, *The Sower of the Good Grain*, 1888, plaster, 146 cm, Antwerp, Royal Academy of Fine Arts © KIK-IRPA, Brussels (Belgium), cliché B192844

is, suggesting the candidate could enjoy prolonged stays in these cities, and would be allowed to start or finish his tour in London, limiting the journey drastically. Clearly, the focus had to be on Rome and other prominent cities.⁶⁵ Another condition was that laureates had to submit a report of their study trip

⁶⁵ Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp, Archive of the Prix de Rome, box 17, dossier 57.

and produce two copies of antique works for the Academy's study collection.⁶⁶ These copies had to be freely modelled after the originals (and not the result of a casting process). The jury had listed nine preferred sculptures that ideally would be copied, mostly consisting of classical sculptures of draped figures from collections such as the Vatican Museums, Villa Borghese or the Capitoline Museums. Lagae responded that these figures had already been copied by other laureates in the past and that he preferred an antique bas-relief recently discovered in Rome. Although it is difficult to identify Lagae's contribution to today's collection, one such copy by another (unidentified) laureate is a plaster version of the so-called *Arrotino*.⁶⁷ The plaster version still present today in the Academy collection is not an exact copy but shows marked differences in anatomic relations as well as less detail with respect to the original.⁶⁸ The *Prix de Rome* competition thus represented a specific (and creative) strategy for adding objects to the collection, with original pieces by contemporary artists as well as copies after antique models. Notably, these plaster sculptures related to the *Prix de Rome* were regarded as original art objects rather than as pieces to be used as models in art education at the time, which seems to have benefitted their preservation and may thus explain how relatively many of these sculptures have survived in the collection until today.

CAST MUSEUM OR STUDY COLLECTION?

The growth of the cast collection in Antwerp during the nineteenth century went parallel with – and was closely related to – the emergence of the Academy Museum, which formed the basis of the local Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Antwerp, today situated in Antwerp's South district. Since the seventeenth century, the academy has owned not only plaster casts but also a small collection of Flemish paintings. During the revolutionary period, several artworks from secularized religious buildings that were not transported to Paris found a new home in the academy, and after the fall of Napoleon, the paintings restituted from France were exhibited in the newly founded academy museum in the former church of the Friars Minor.⁶⁹ In 1817, the Antwerp Museum

⁶⁶ Dierckx, *Volgens de regels van de kunst*, p. 183.

⁶⁷ *Arrotino*, also known as *Scythian Slave*, *Knife Grinder* or *Blade Sharpener*, original in Florence, Uffizi, inv. 230. See Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 155–157.

⁶⁸ Van der Star, *The Plaster Cast Collection at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp*, p. 36.

⁶⁹ De Jong, Beele, and Joos, *Het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, pp. 79–80.

had a total number of 127 paintings on display.⁷⁰ This collection saw steady growth during the following decades. In 1840, the museum received the substantial bequest of 106 paintings from Florent van Ertborn (1784–1840), the former mayor of the city.⁷¹ An indication of his dedication to the Antwerp art school, Van Ertborn had already given a plaster copy of Canova's *Mary Magdalen* to the academy in 1817.⁷² Like the cast collection, the museum was managed by the direction of the academy. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that for the expansion of its collections the academy could draw on similar networks of support. Benefactors like Florent Van Ertborn and Charles Jean Stier contributed to the museum as well as to the academy collection of casts and other study material.⁷³

But despite being managed by the same entity and housed in the same building, both collections differed in their *raison d'être*. This becomes clear when taking a close look at the precise location, display and functioning of the collections in the academy. After the institution moved to its new premises in the former convent of the Friars Minor in The Mutsaardstraat, the diverse art collections were installed in the secularized convent church. During the following decades, the site underwent a series of transformations and adjustments that paralleled the growth of the collections and the changing needs of the art school. The first adjustments of the building took place in 1807, when French engineer Joseph-Nicolas Mengin (1760–1842) rebuilt the nave of the former church to function as a museum. For this purpose, the windows were closed and the nave was transformed into an exhibition hall with a second floor fitted in to extend the display space.⁷⁴ While the paintings were hung in the nave, the right aisle served as a gallery of plaster casts after the antique ("Galery der Antieken"), which were directly connected to the academy classrooms ("Klassen van de Academie") situated in the right wing of the former abbey.⁷⁵ Fittingly, the first classroom right next to the cast gallery was the room

⁷⁰ *Notice des tableaux exposés au Musée d'Anvers* (Antwerp: Vander Hey, 1817).

⁷¹ J. Glassée, "Van collectionneur naar donateur. Florent van Ertborn (1784–1840) en de betekenissen van een schilderijenverzameling", in: *500 jaar verzamelen in Antwerpen. Een passioneel verhaal*, ed. H. Van de Velde and N. Van Hout, Leuven 2013, pp. 130–145.

⁷² *Liste des bienfaiteurs ...*, Felixarchieff, inv. 2767#278.

⁷³ For example, Stier d'Aertselaer also donated several paintings, architectural drawings and books to the academy, see U. Müller, "Private verzamelaars en het ontstaan van een cultuur van kunstschenkingen in negentiende-eeuws Antwerpen", in: *1818–2018. Schenkingen aan het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten van Antwerpen*, ed. L. De Jong, N. Schrijvers and U. Müller, Tiel 2020, pp. 41–42.

⁷⁴ De Jong, Beele, and Joos, *Het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, p. 81.

⁷⁵ Floor plan of the Antwerp Academy, 1829, Felixarchieff, inv. 697#67.

for drawing based on antiquities (“Zael naer de Oudheden”).⁷⁶ Following the important bequest of Florent Van Ertborn’s paintings collection to the academy museum in 1840, the building underwent another major transformation: the former church was rebuilt and enlarged by Pierre Bourla (1783–1866), who designed the museum as a classicist art temple. The building featured a grand entrance hall with a double staircase leading to the “Musée Ancien” and the new “Musée Van Ertborn” on the first floor, and underneath to the “Salle des Antiques” on the ground floor (ill. 5). This layout was in line with conventional museum and gallery architecture, presenting works of sculpture on the ground floor in side-lit galleries, and paintings on the upper floor, usually provided with modern skylights adapted for the display of paintings.⁷⁷

The physical separation of the collections underlined the elevated position of the academy’s collection of canonic Old Master paintings, and provided the basis for developing the museum as an independent tourist attraction that was frequently visited by local and international connoisseurs and travelers.⁷⁸ Notably, the plaster casts were never included in the successive editions of the official museum catalogue published throughout the nineteenth century,⁷⁹ and also popular travel guides and travelogues did not mention the collection as a site worth visiting in Antwerp – in stark contrast to the paintings collection of the “Musée Ancien” and the “Musée Van Ertborn”, which were extensively described.⁸⁰ Instead, the academy’s collection of plaster casts continued to function mainly in the teaching context of the academy.⁸¹ Situated in the

⁷⁶ Floor plan of the classrooms of the Antwerp Academy, 1828, Felixarchief, inv. 697#49.

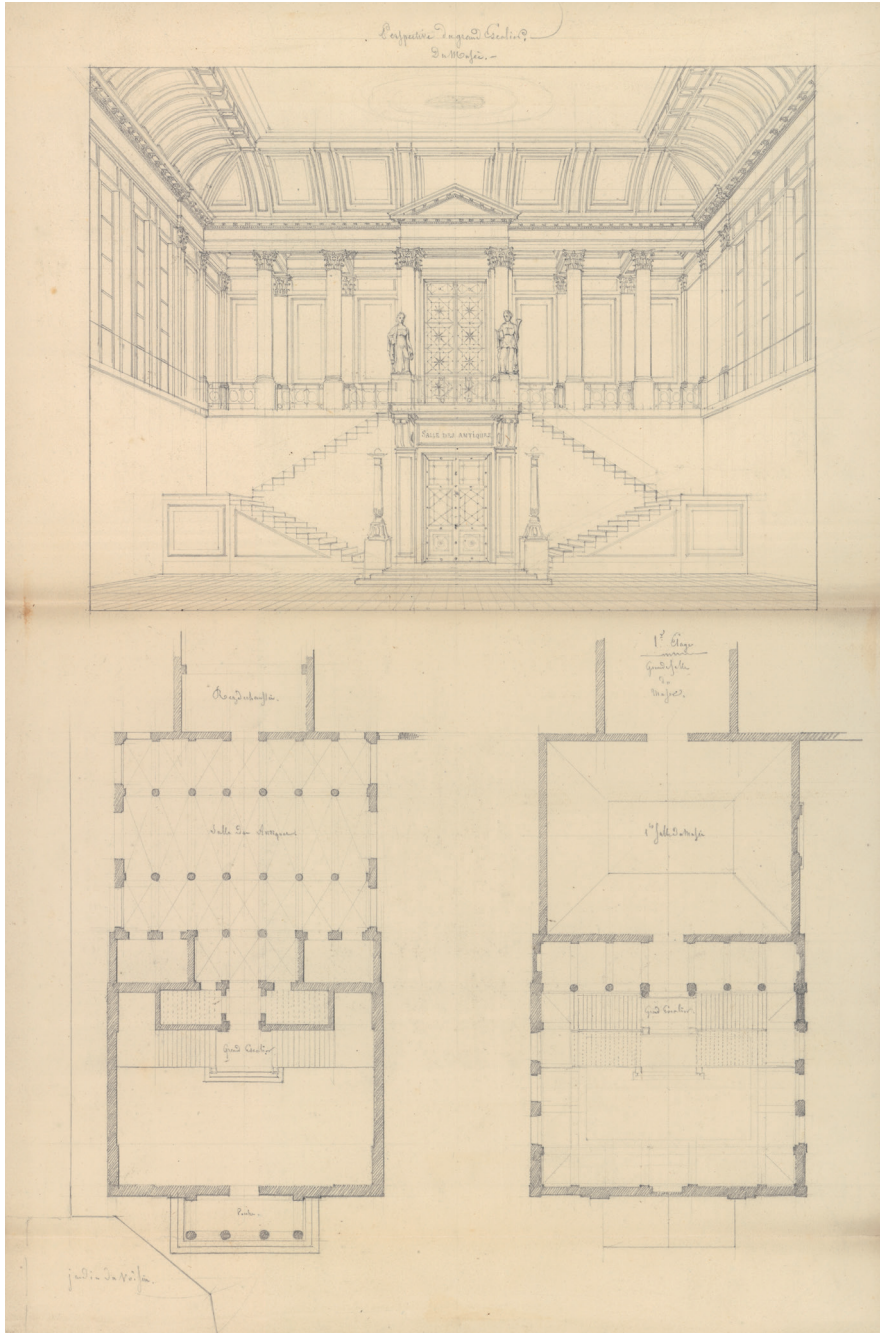
⁷⁷ M. Compton, “The Architecture of Daylight”, in: *Palaces of Art. Art Galleries in Britain 1750–1990*, ed. G. Waterfield, London 1991, pp. 37–47.

⁷⁸ De Jong, Beele, and Joos, *Het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, pp. 131–139.

⁷⁹ Compare *Notice des tableaux exposés au Musée d’Anvers*, 1817; *Catalogue du Musée d’Anvers*, 1857; *Catalogue du Musée d’Anvers*, 1890.

⁸⁰ The popular Baedeker guides, for example, extensively described the Antwerp museum, but it did not mention the academy’s cast collection. See, for example, K. Baedeker, *Belgien und Holland. Handbuch für Reisende*, Koblenz 1868, pp. 105, 110–116; K. Baedeker, *Belgien und Holland nebst dem Grossherzogtum Luxemburg*, Leipzig 1888, pp. 100–105.

⁸¹ In contrast to the Antwerp case, several European academy collections of plaster casts – including those in Milan and Vienna – did have a public function and were accessible to the public, see f.i. F. Valli, “The Galleria delle Statue of Brera Academy in Milan, 1806”, in: *Gipsabgüsse und antike Skulpturen. Präsentation und Kontext*, ed. Ch. Schreiter, Berlin 2012, p. 251; J. Bauer, “Gipsabgüsse zwischen Museum, Kunst und Wissenschaft. Wiener Abguss-Sammlungen im späten 19. Jahrhundert”, in: *Gipsabgüsse und antike Skulpturen. Präsentation und Kontext*, ed. Ch. Schreiter, Berlin 2012, p. 284.



5. Pierre Bourla, Design of the entrance hall of the Museum of Fine Arts of Antwerp in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, with indication *SALLE DES ANTIQUES* above the door on the ground floor, 1841, Antwerp, Felixarchief, inv. MA#883

“Galerie des plâtres”, a columned hall on the ground floor underneath the “Musée Ancien”, the casts maintained their strategic location and close proximity to the academy classrooms for “drawing after the antique”, to which they could be easily moved via a connecting door, so that the casts were, above all, readily available to aspiring artists for study purposes.⁸² In line with the strong expansion of the cast collection during those years, the plaster gallery was enlarged in 1870 by creating an additional room for the casts (“modellenzaal”), but again not with the aim of creating a public display.⁸³ Rather than aspiring to the creation of a publicly accessible cast museum comparable to the ones created in Brussels, Paris or London during the second half of the nineteenth century, the Antwerp Academy casts thus maintained their central position in the teaching practice at the academy and their purely educational function.

TEACHING PRACTICES AND THE CONTINUITY OF THE ACADEMIC TRADITION IN ANTWERP

Rather than museum objects, the academy’s plaster casts were articles of daily use for teaching purposes at the art school. As such, they were frequently moved and intensively manipulated, and as a consequence were subject to abrasion and at times damage. Notably, the inventory compiled in 1796–97 mentions the loss of certain pieces as a result of their frequent handling, referring, for example, to the breakage of two casts after antique busts from the Arenberg collection between 1782 and 1785, after which they were replaced with new casts made in 1785 by *mouleur* Giovanni Derchi.⁸⁴ In his 1801 notice, Herreyns considered it necessary to indicate the condition of the pieces then present at the institution, perhaps to emphasize the need for new casts.⁸⁵ Moreover, later in the century, the casts were often exposed to potential damage. In 1894 the concierge Van Gastel and the maintenance manager Jan Blose reported to director Albrecht De Vriendt that students had damaged the plaster sculpture of Christ from a *Deposition from the Cross* in the vestibule of

⁸² Floor plan of the Antwerp Academy, 1883, Felixarchief, inv. 697#1662. The classrooms for “drawing after antiquities” are indicated with the letter O in the plan.

⁸³ Floor plan of the extension of the cast gallery of the Antwerp Academy, 1870, Felixarchief, inv. 697#557.

⁸⁴ Inventaire de tout ce qui a appartenu à la ci-devant Académie ..., 1796–1797, Felixarchief, inv. 2574#7.

⁸⁵ Inventaire des tableaux, plâtres ..., 1801, Felixarchief, inv. 2574#8.

the Academy Museum.⁸⁶ The nature and use of the casts thus required regular maintenance, replacements, as well as the ordering of new pieces. For certain pieces, the acquisition of several versions is documented. A cast of the *Borghese Gladiator*, for example, had already entered the collection in the late eighteenth century.⁸⁷ A new cast was acquired in Paris by d'Herboubille in 1803,⁸⁸ and another copy was ordered from the Brussels casting studio and arrived in the academy in 1889. The cast still exists in the academy today.⁸⁹ The frequent orders of the same piece indicate not only the heavy use of the plaster casts in everyday academic practice, but also the continuing high status of certain canonical statues as study objects.

It was the academy professor and later director (1827–1839) Mattheus Van Brée who significantly shaped the actual use of the plaster casts at the Antwerp Academy. The method he introduced with his *Leçons de Dessin* provided the basis for the teaching practices at the institution for decades to come. It represented a structured approach for art students to acquire “une connaissance exacte des forms du corps humain et de ses proportions”.⁹⁰ For this purpose, Van Brée's work offered a sequence of model drawings subdivided in different categories, from line drawings of antique sculptures and heads representing ideal proportions, details of hands, feet, eyes and ears, to figures and busts rendered with correct and realistic shading. Taken together, Van Brée's model plates represented the classical ideal of beauty and anatomy, as well as the principles of classicist drawing.⁹¹ The Academy archive preserves a number of folders containing multiples of these plates that were circulated among students and served as models during the lessons in drawing reproductions before the students would actually follow the lessons of drawing after plaster casts. In his popular novel *Hoe men schilder wordt* (“How to become a painter”) from 1843, Flemish author Hendrik Conscience (1812–1883) described the progression of the drawing lessons at the Antwerp Academy as a long jour-

⁸⁶ Letter from Van Gastel to De Vriendt, 1894, Felixarchieff, inv. 2767#279.

⁸⁷ See *Liste des bienfaiteurs ...*, Felixarchieff, inv. 2767#278; *Inventaire des tableaux, plâtres ...*, 1801, Felixarchieff, inv. 2574#8.

⁸⁸ Van den Branden, *Geschiedenis der Antwerpsche Schilderschool*, 1322.

⁸⁹ The cast of the *Borghese Gladiator* still existing in the academy collection today bears the number 27, which refers to the number handled by the Brussels casting studio and which is referred to in: *Liste détaillée des reproductions de moules des objets d'art qu'ont été envoyées par le gouvernement à l'academie royale des Beaux-Arts de Anvers depuis le 1^{er} Janvier [1888] jusqu'à ce jour, March 1893*, Felixarchieff, inv. 2767#278 (with nr. 27 having arrived in 1889).

⁹⁰ Brée, *Leçons de dessin*, pp. vii–viii.

⁹¹ See Van de Moortel, *Een schild tegen de modes en de slechte smaak*.

ney, consisting of “one year of drawing noses and ears, one year of drawing heads, two years of drawing figures, three years of drawing after plaster casts, and four years of drawing from life”.⁹² Van Brée’s method was very successful, and the same model plates were still in use when Antwerp artist Edmond Van Offel (1871–1959) attended the academy in the early 1880s. The reorganization of the academy under the direction of Charles Verlat (1824–1890, director 1885–1890) only confirmed the central importance of drawing lessons after the antique. Van Offel recalls how in this period “Van Brée’s old prints were banished to the attic. One would now, from the very beginning, draw from plaster models.”⁹³

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Antwerp Academy enjoyed a good reputation that attracted many aspiring artists from different countries such as Germany, The Netherlands, Britain and even the United States. In contrast to the more progressive and open orientation of the art schools in Brussels or Paris, the Antwerp Academy was internationally known as a stronghold of traditional art education.⁹⁴ The thorough training and emphasis on correct drawing from antiquities was one of the factors that contributed to the international renown of the institution. A preserved photograph dating from 1892 and showing the academic corps proudly posing in front of the cast collection demonstrates the great value attributed to this aspect of artistic training (ill. 6). Among the numerous students from abroad was Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890), who spent a short period in Antwerp before moving on to Paris. During his stay at the Antwerp Academy in February and March 1886, he followed the classes of antique drawing. Van Gogh greatly appreciated drawing based on plaster casts as a means to study human anatomy, and he regarded the cast collection of the Antwerp Academy as being of very good quality, even though he objected to the poor representation of female figures in the collection (according to Van Gogh, nine out of ten sculptures were

⁹² “Als gy op de Akademie moogt komen, dan gaet gy eerst een jaer lang op de klas van de Neuzen en de Ooren; dan een jaer op de Koppen; dan twee jaer op de Mannekens; dan een jaer of dry op het Pleister; dan een jaer of vier op het Leven.” H. Conscience, *Hoe men schilder wordt: Eene ware geschiedenis van eenen schilder die nog leeft*, Antwerp 1843, pp. 16–17.

⁹³ “De oude prenten van Van Brée vlogen naar de zolder. Men zou thans, van de meet af, naar pleistermodellen tekenen.” E. Van Offel, *Antwerpen 1900*, Antwerp 1950, cited after Lampo, *Een tempel bouwen voor de muzen*, pp. 21–22.

⁹⁴ S. De Bodt, “De Antwerpse academie in een veranderende kunstwereld. Hoe het twee grote Nederlandse kunstenaars en hun collega’s in de 19de eeuw aan de Antwerpse academie verging”, in: *Contradicties. Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen 2013–1633*, ed. J. Pas et al., Ghent 2013, pp. 203–215.



6. Professors of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp in the cast gallery of the institution (with casts of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* and *Madonna of Bruges* recognizable in the background), photograph, 1892, Antwerp, Collectie Stad Antwerpen, Letterenhuis, Artwork in the public domain; image courtesy of the Collectie Stad Antwerpen/Letterenhuis

male figures).⁹⁵ The only preserved drawing that can be attributed to this period with certainty is his study of the *Discobolus*, which he represented from an unconventional angle and in the vigorous style that is so characteristic of his work, but that deviates from the classical academic drawing technique taught at the institution (ill. 7). Van Gogh obviously had difficulties adjusting to the academic principles in Antwerp based on traditional (classical) line drawing and fine shading that was in contrast to his own interest in developing his compositions based on volumes, dramatic shapes and an expressive use of the medium.⁹⁶ Other drawings executed at the academy make clear to what extent Van Gogh's approach deviated from the norm. The study of the *Borghese Gladiator*, with which Henri Geertsen (1892–1969) earned the first prize for

⁹⁵ M. Vellekoop et al., *Vincent van Gogh. Tekeningen, Antwerpen & Parijs, 1885–1888*, Amsterdam 2001, p. 64.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 14–15, 63–70.

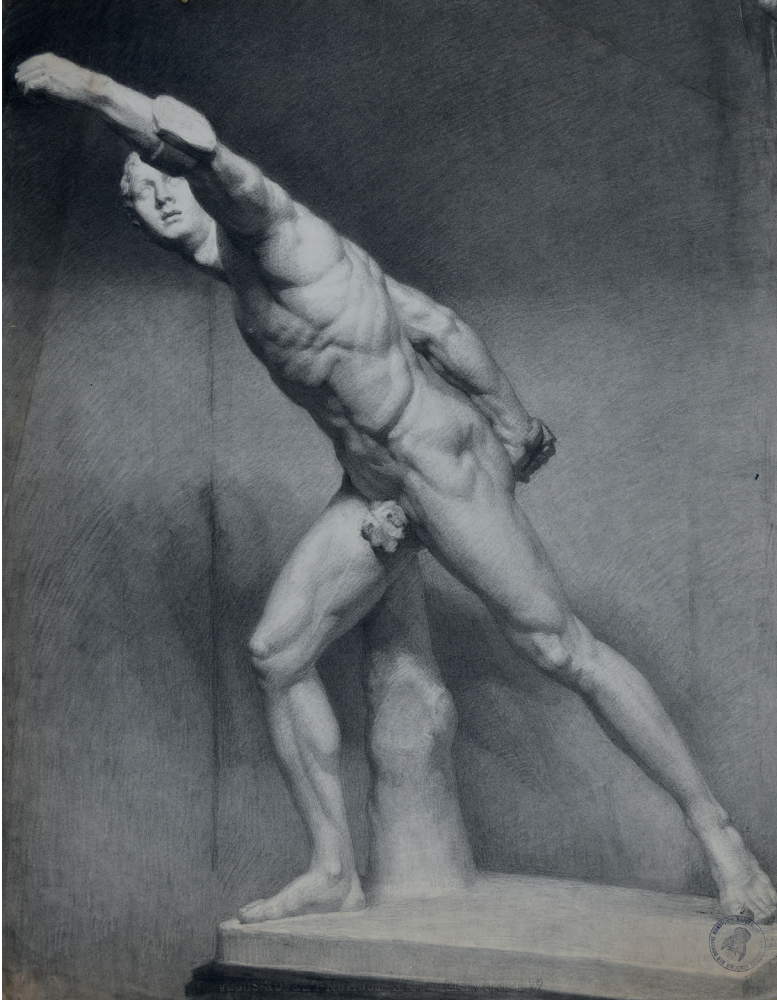


7. Vincent Van Gogh, *The Discobolus*, 1886, black chalk on paper, 56.2 x 44.3 cm, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

figure drawing during his training at the academy (1906–1914), shows the fine lines and shading typical of the academic style (ill. 8).

The Antwerp Academy also maintained its position and reputation after the First World War and the cast collection continued to be used in the training of young art students certainly until the 1950s.⁹⁷ It is notable that

⁹⁷ See a photograph of academy students drawing from plaster casts dating from 1952 and published in J. Pas et al., eds., *Contradicties*, p. 145.



8. Henri Geertsen, *The Borghese Gladiator*, 1906–1914, charcoal and black chalk on paper, 72 x 55.4 cm, Antwerp, Royal Academy of Fine Arts

in everyday teaching practice, the focus remained on such classical models as the *Belvedere Torso*, different Venuses, and ancient busts. In other words, the student drawing exercises seem to demonstrate a remarkable continuity of established teaching methods. At the same time, the models used for drawing lessons do not seem to reflect the broadening scope of the cast collection during the second half of the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

During the nineteenth century, collections of plaster casts emerged all over the Western World as a distinctive collection category in museums and academies alike. Born from an overarching art historical canon and classicist didactic ideals, such collections flourished thanks to tight local and (inter) national exchange networks and were strongly related to the production of a small number of important cast workshops. In Antwerp, the emergence and growth of the cast gallery of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts was strongly related to particular figures and their networks, namely individual professors and local supporters of the art school who acted within a specific cultural and political context. The collection thus reflected the personal interests, ideological profiles and political associations of the academicians and the institution's promoters.

Due to a tight and internationally active casting circuit, as well as the generally accepted art historical canon, cast collections at museums and academies often had similar contents, first and foremost consisting of copies of sculptures from classical antiquity, and, as the century progressed, examples of important pieces of "national" heritage from different historical periods. However, there have been significant differences in the function of these casts. While cast museums mainly focused on the representation of the art historical canon as models for general cultural formation to a wider audience, this article has shown how the cast collections formed by art academies mainly reflect the teaching practices and creative encounters that distinguish these institutions from the purposes of the public museum. As such, the preserved cast collection of the Antwerp Academy bears evidence of the diverse and changing educational ideals and teaching practices handled at the art institution during the past decades and centuries, from intense and dedicated use as ideal models to abandonment, deliberate destruction or creative repurposing. But the collection also reflects a great deal of continuity. As important material remnants of artistic and art teaching practices, the preserved casts shed light on the numerous and varied creative encounters that shaped the careers of artists for generations.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Antwerp City Archive/Felixarchief, Archive of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp

Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp, Archive of the Prix de Rome

Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp, historical collections

University of Antwerp, Archive of the Department Conservation-Restoration

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Ulrike Müller

University of Antwerp/Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

Hélène Verreyke

University of Antwerp

Tine D'haeyere

University of Antwerp

BETWEEN ART HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION AND DIDACTIC FUNCTIONALITY: THE CAST COLLECTION OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS OF ANTWERP

Summary

During the long nineteenth century, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp – just like many other art schools in this period – assembled a collection of some 500 plaster casts after ancient and modern sculptures, which played an essential role in the education of young art students. The creation of such collections went in parallel with the blossoming of cast museums all over Europe, as well as the emergence of a large-scale exchange network set up to facilitate the international dissemination of plaster casts. However, in contrast to cast museums, which brought together masterpieces of classical Western sculpture in order to contribute to the aesthetic edification of the public, the cast collections of art academies had a more pragmatic and didactic function. This article focuses on cast collections at art academies, and how the formation and functioning of such collections related to broader educational concepts and practices at these schools. Taking the collection of plaster casts at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp as a case study, we will trace the various actors, methods and strategies employed to create the collection, uncover how the collection related to the artistic idea(l)s expressed in the educational programme of that institution, and discuss how and where it was located and displayed. Based on the rich archives of the academy, it examines a broad range of different sources, including purchase lists, inventories and correspondence concerning the formation of the collection, as well as floor plans, photographs and original drawings attesting to the location and use of the casts. It traces the provenance of the objects, analyzes the profiles of the individuals and institutions involved in creating the collection, and identifies to what extent and how creative repurposing played a role in the collection's functioning. The article argues how cast collections formed by art academies – in addition to representing the art historical canon of a given place or period – are an important reflection of the didactic practices, aesthetic priorities and, above all, the creative encounters that distinguish these institutions from the purposes of the public (cast) museum.

Keywords:

plaster casts, academic heritage, academy museums, art education, reproduction, drawing after antique models