RESEARCH GUIDE

Plaster casts – research resources in the V&A Archive

From the mid nineteenth century onwards the Victoria and Albert Museum collected plaster casts of art objects and engaged in the commercial reproduction of objects from its collection. Casts and reproduction objects in the Museum’s collections can be identified by their object number which is in the form of the prefix ‘REPRO’ followed by the year number, then object number – the reverse of the usual order for ‘original’ Museum objects. Hence REPRO.1857-161 is the full object reference for the plaster cast of Michelangelo’s David in the Cast Courts.

The Cast Collection and the Cast Courts

The most prominent display of acquired reproductions can be found in the famous Architectural or Cast Courts. The V&A Archive holds records relating to the early years of the Cast Courts and its collection:

- the accepted tenders (ED84/7) and specifications (ED84/15) for building the Cast Courts
- the formation of the gallery of casts, 1879-1882 (ED84/168)
- the organisation and administration of the gallery of casts, 1883-1934 (ED84/169)
- the Perry Collection of Casts from the Antique (which was transferred to the British Museum and the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, in 1907) (ED84/168, ED84/169)
- the installation of the pedestal of the cast of Trajan’s column in 1872 (MA/2/T6)
- a policy file for the period 1865 to 1935 concerning reproductions of works of art which contains reports and details of the establishment of a casts collection with recommendations by J.C. Robinson for casts be made of various objects in Italy (ED84/166)
• the discussions about the rearrangement of the Cast Courts after the opening of the new museum buildings in 1908/9 (ED84/155)
• V&A Advisory Council minutes of 1928 which include a report by Sir Reginald Blomfield proposing the disposal of the casts collection (MA/46/1/2)
• V&A Advisory Council minutes of 1953 which include a short report by Sir Kenneth Clark proposing the attractive redisplay of the casts collection (MA/46/1/5)
• the Museum’s Précis of Board minutes of the Science and Art Department (ED84/35 to 42) provide details of the construction and decoration of the Cast Courts, and also the acquisition and commission of casts
• Bruciani’s cast of the Portico de la Gloria at Santiago de Compostela is mentioned in the J.C. Robinson’s Art Referee reports (MA/3/16, 17, 19)
• the disposal of the cast of Melpomene (ED84/429)
• photographs of the Cast Courts from 1873 onwards

The Sculpture Department holds registers providing acquisition details for the Museum’s Cast Collection.

Links:
V&A, ‘The Cast Collection’: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-vanda-cast-collection/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-vanda-cast-collection/)
V&A, ‘The Portico de la Gloria, Santiago de Compostela’: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/medieval-and-renaissance/the-portico-de-la-gloira-santiago-de-compostela](http://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/medieval-and-renaissance/the-portico-de-la-gloira-santiago-de-compostela)

**Correspondence with cast makers in England**

The Museum acquired casts for its collection from a number of English moulders and through agents, institutions and individuals, although not all correspondence for these acquisitions has survived. The Archive holds correspondence and records of acquisitions of casts from England, such as the London moulders and agents D. Bruciani and Co. Ltd. (MA/1/B3087), Enrico Cantoni (MA/1/C338), and Franchi & Son (MA/1/F1178).

Further records relating to casts can be found in the Archive:
• two catalogues for C. Smith & Sons dating from circa 1919 and from circa 1925 can be found in ED84/175 and ED84/177 respectively
• the Sculpture Department acquired a large number of architectural casts from the...
Architectural Association in 1915 as detailed on the Association’s Nominal File (MA/1/A772). The Sculpture Department holds a register of objects lent to the South Kensington Museum by the Architectural Association in 1860

- correspondence requesting the casting of the Gosforth pillar cross (MA/2/G3)

**Correspondence with cast makers in Europe**

The Archive holds correspondence and records of acquisitions of casts from Europe which includes those from the Parisian moulder Jean Pouzadoux et Fils (MA/1/P1844), the Roman moulders Michele and Virgilio Gherardi (MA/1/G475), and the Florentine moulders Oronzio and Giuseppe Lelli (MA/1/L996).

The Museum acquired casts through a series of exchanges with European governments, museums and institutions as part of the ‘International Convention of promoting universally Reproductions of Works of Art’ established during the Paris International Exhibition of 1867. Records of these casts acquisitions and exchanges can be found in the Exchanges and Presentation files for Belgium (MA/2/E6), France (MA/2/E8), Germany (MA/2/E9), Holland (MA/2/E10), Italy (MA/2/E11) and for Spain and Portugal (MA/2/E12). A copy of the International Convention and general details of the exchange system can be found in ED84/228.

The Archive holds correspondence regarding the failed request to make a new casting of the equestrian statue of Colleoni in Venice (MA/2/C15) and the acquisition of casts of the Triumphal Arch of Trajan Beneventum (MA/2/C25).

**Casts of Indian objects**

The Museum commissioned casts of important architectural structures in India, such as a cast of the Sanchi Gateway that could previously be seen in the Cast Courts. Details of these commissions can be found in a file dating from 1867 to 1876 held in the Archive (MA/2/I3).

*Cast (REPRO.1872-113 to 122) of the Eastern Gateway of the Great Buddhist Stupa at Sanchi, photographed in 1872 during the completion of the east Cast Court. V&A Archive, MA/32/28 negative 9732*
Links:
V&A, ‘Sanchi’: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/b/buddhist-pilgrimage-sites-india/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/b/buddhist-pilgrimage-sites-india/)

## Casts for other museums and schools of art

![Cast of the Monasterboice Cross (REPRO.1903-25) in the Cast Courts photographed in 1913. V&A Archive, MA/32/113 negative 37074](image)

Whilst collecting casts for its own collection the South Kensington Museum also acquired reproductions for the other national museums that were administered by the Science and Art Department’s staff during the late nineteenth century. Details of these acquisitions can be found in the Nominal Files for the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh (MA/1/E201) and National Museum of Ireland, Dublin (MA/1/D1726). The files also record the acquisition of casts of objects held in these museums, for instance the acquisition of a cast of the Monasterboice Cross, Louth, organised by the Dublin Museum in 1903.

_Cast of the Monasterboice Cross (REPRO.1903-25) in the Cast Courts photographed in 1913. V&A Archive, MA/32/113 negative 37074_

## Sale of casts to other museums and schools of art

From the 1870's onwards the South Kensington Museum operated a fund which gave grants to provincial museums and galleries to develop their cast collections and for schools of art to acquire casts for use in teaching art. Records of the casts acquired through this fund, from cast makers such as Bruciani, Enrico Cantoni, Cesare and Lorenzo Malpieri, are contained in Grant-in-Aid to Provincial Museums ledgers (MA/58/1). Further details of these acquisitions can be found on the Grant-in-Aid files for the individual museums and schools of art (MA/58/2), as well as a ‘List of Casts approved by the Science and Art Department and supplied [by Bruciani] to Schools of Art, National and other Public Schools, Institutions, &c.’ (dated 1870, in MA/58/2/2/1).

The Museum produced a ‘List of Casts towards the purchase of which aid is given by the Department of Science and Art, for use in Art Classes and Schools of Art and supplied by Messrs. Bruciani’ (on ED84/166). This file also contains details the procedure for the creation of new casts for art schools and provincial museums, the general policy concerning the reproduction of works of art and information on the care of plaster casts. Life-sized casts of the male and female figure, by Sir William Hamo Thornycroft and Edouard Lantéri respectively, were ordered for teaching use by the National Art Training School and other art schools; details can be found on the file for Professor Lantéri (MA/1/L333). Casts were also transferred to the Museum from the Royal College of Art in 1907 (MA/1/R3878).
The V&A’s Art Work Room made plaster casts of objects in the Museum’s collections from at least 1910 onwards for use by the Circulation Department and for issue to provincial schools of art. A register of reproductions (MA/9/2) lists casts that were made of Museum objects by the Art Work Room for the Circulation Department between 1914 and 1936.

Sale of casts to members of the public

Requests from members of the public for casts of Museum objects were initially directed to commercial firms who approached the Museum for permission to make casts of the objects.

From 1915 the Board of Education began discussions with The Treasury regarding the proposed takeover of the failing cast maker Brucciani. The Archive holds detailed files relating to the V&A’s acquisition and absorption of the business (ED84/175 to 179). The files include lists of the plaster casts sold by Brucciani and later the V&A, as well as premises details and business accounts before the takeover. The move of Brucciani’s staff and casts required a rearrangement of the Museum’s workshops, the details of which are on ED84/99.

The Museum operated a Department for the Sale of Casts (later the Casts Department) from 1926 onwards in conjunction with the amalgamated Brucciani business that operated within the V&A. Very few records of this commercial operation have survived apart from a collection of ca.5,000 index cards dating from ca.1934 to ca.1957 recording cast descriptions, object numbers, the location of moulds and dates of orders supplied (A0110). Later policy files detail the sale of casts and the closure of the V&A’s casting service in the late 1950s (ED84/283, ED84/382 and V&A Policy Files VA/75). The V&A Advisory Council minutes of October 1951 note the members of the Advisory Council’s displeasure at the Ministry of Education’s decision to close the casts workshop (MA/46/1/5). There are also catalogues of plaster casts sold by the V&A dating from 1936 and 1939 (A0158) and from 1948 (VA/75).

Further information about the Department for the Supply of Casts between 1933 and 1938 can be found in an HM Treasury Supply Department record housed in The National Archives (TNA catalogue reference T161/828).

Links:
V&A Search the Collections database: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/>
Contact details

V&A Archive, Blythe House, 23 Blythe Road, London, W14 0QX
Tel: +44 (0)20 7942 2340
Contact us online at http://vam.altarama.com/ref000.aspx

Access to the V&A Archive

The Blythe House Reading Room, which serves the Archive of Art and Design, the V&A Archive and the Theatre and Performance Archive, is open Tuesdays to Fridays, from 10.00 to 16.30, by appointment only.

Further details of how to make enquiries and access the archives can be found on our homepage at http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-v-and-a-archive/