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The rise and fall of Melbourne's plaster cast collection

Those familiar with contemporary Melbourne's diverse array of public museums, libraries, art galleries and art schools may be surprised to learn that their different roles and functions were all addressed originally by a single institution, the Melbourne Public Library (now State Library Victoria). The Swanston Street building, opened to the public in 1856, once housed not only the permanent collection of books and periodicals but also a lending library (discussed by Andrew McConville on pages 84–97 in this issue), various collections of museum objects (also described in this issue, by Christine Bell, on pages 98–100) and an art gallery and art school. Most of these are now relocated and administered by others, notably Museums Victoria and the National Gallery of Victoria.

Works of art were envisaged as a key component of the Library's collections from the outset, reflecting ideals of public benefit and improvement widely shared in the Victorian era. As Sir Redmond Barry, president of the trustees, explained at the formal opening of the Museum of Art, in May 1861:

The primary idea entertained by the trustees, in recommending the formation of [the Museum of Art], had reference to the establishment of a school of design, in which would be assembled types of those choice productions of

Plaster busts of 'remarkable persons' displayed in Queen's Hall from 1861 onwards. Sears' Studios, interior of the Queen's Hall, looking north, Public Library, Museums and National Gallery (detail), photograph: gelatin silver, c. 1910, H4740





Samuel Calvert (after Charles Nettleton), *Sculpture gallery at the Public Library*, wood engraving, London: Robert Stewart, 1866, IMP27/07/66/305, published in *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 27 July 1866, p. 305

genius by the ancient sculptors which have been alike the astonishment and delight of ages. This in a country such as ours, so far removed from the seat of such distinguished works, would ... much assist in moulding the public taste and creating betimes in the young an appreciation of what was correct and beautiful ... With this view casts of some of the best known works have been procured.¹

In the first modern study of Melbourne's plaster casts, published in 1988, art historian Ann Galbally elaborated on the early development of the collection. The plan was announced by Redmond Barry at the official opening of Queen's Hall, in May 1859, and the first batch of casts arrived from England the following year. Most were purchased from Brucciani & Co., the major British manufacturers; this collection was supplemented by donations from wealthy Victorian pastoralists and public figures (and members of Barry's own family).²

In 1861, a selection of the busts of 'remarkable persons selected not for their artistic value, but for the celebrity of the persons represented' (as they were described before their purchase) was installed in Queen's Hall, near

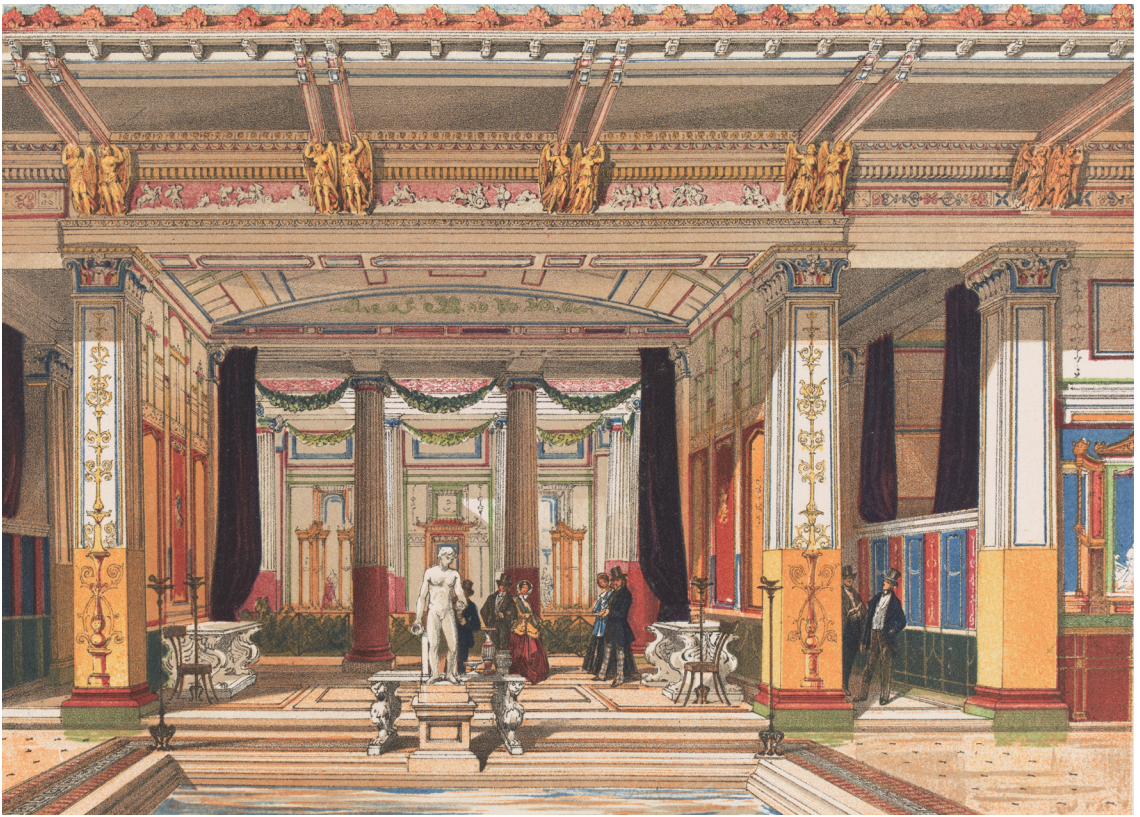


Domenico Brucciani (attrib.), cast of Parthenon frieze XLIII north, plaster, 103.0 × 123.5 × 7.0 cm (irreg.), c. 1860, RMIT University Art collection, 1895.1. Courtesy of the RMIT Art Collection

books by or about the individuals portrayed (see page 33).³ Shortly afterwards, the first casts of statues and reliefs were exhibited in the Library's new Museum of Art; engravings show fashionable Melburnians admiring the installations (see opposite). Casts of the famous Parthenon frieze reliefs were given particular attention in an 1865 *Argus* review by influential local critic James Smith, who waved aside concerns about their being only plaster replicas (see above):

Enough, that we can contemplate the creations of Phidias as fresh and real as if actually chiselled in the marble by his own hand. We may indeed be well satisfied with the beginning we have made of such excellent and beautiful casts ... These, including the Parthenon slabs, from the Elgin Collection in the British Museum, amount to close on 100 works.⁴

The trustees' choice of plaster casts as the first substantial acquisitions for the Library's new Museum of Art, partly necessitated by budgetary constraints, also reflected the current appetite for reproductive technologies. Indeed, recent research has produced considerably more evidence of just



E Walker (after Philip Henry Delamotte), *Pompeian court, from the nave*, chromolithograph, in MD Wyatt, *Views of the Crystal Palace and Park Sydenham*, London: Day and Son, 1854, plate 1, RARESF 725.91 W97

how enthusiastically casts and other replicas were regarded at the time, both in Britain and beyond. In 1859, for example, when Melbourne's first order was sent to Brucciani, the casts displayed in the Crystal Palace at Sydenham in London (see above) attracted well over a million visitors.⁵ Plaster casts were also collected and displayed in various museums, including the South Kensington (now Victoria & Albert) Museum. The founding director of that institution, Sir Henry Cole, wrote a remarkable declaration, signed by 19 countries at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1867, trumpeting the virtues of reproduction:

Throughout the world every country possesses fine Historical Monuments of Art of its own, which can easily be reproduced by Casts, Electrotypes, Photographs, and other processes, without the slightest damage to the originals.

... The knowledge of such monuments is necessary to the progress of Art, and the reproductions of them would be of high value to all Museums for public instruction.⁶

In 19th-century Australia, where access to British and other European originals was limited, casts and copies played a particularly important role, as local scholar Alison Inglis has observed. Casts like those of Hiram Powers's *Greek slave* and John Gibson's *Tinted Venus* acquainted local audiences with recent sculptural trends (and associated debates about morality and realism) and were later reinforced by marble and bronze originals acquired during the remainder of the century.⁷

The original plan was for Melbourne's main cast collection to survey sculptural styles ranging from ancient Egypt and Assyria to contemporary work (following a pattern established in the Fine Arts Courts of the Crystal Palace a few years before), although this was later restricted essentially to copies of Greco-Roman and 15th- to 19th-century sculptures. Many of Melbourne's examples replicated statues and reliefs also shown in plaster copies at the Crystal Palace in 1854, as documented in catalogues and illustrated volumes acquired for the Melbourne Public Library in the later 1850s.⁸

Later, it seems, Barry's enthusiasm for casts waned, first after 1863, when the initial purchases of original paintings and sculptures were made, and again after 1870, when the National Gallery of Victoria was established as a semi-autonomous entity.⁹ Nonetheless, casts (and other reproductions, including copies in marble and Parian porcelain, autotypes, chromolithographs, electrotypes and so on) continued to be acquired throughout the remainder of the century, both before and after Barry's death in 1880.

After 1866, most of the casts were transferred to a truss-roofed 'sculpture gallery' in the new north wing of the expanded Library building, and photographs taken from about 1870 onwards record the changing installations and the occasional new arrival (see pages 38 and 39). Catalogues were issued regularly, the most expansive, the 1894 National Gallery catalogue, listing well over 200 casts then on display. A decade later, the collection had swelled to over 300 objects, but by then the casts had obviously come to be regarded essentially as a teaching resource for the National Gallery Art School, as witnessed in the 1905 gallery catalogue, where previous detailed entries were replaced by a single photograph of the space, labelled simply *The drawing school*, complete with easels and a student in the background (see page 40).¹⁰

Shortly afterwards, deaccessioning began. Some of the casts were transferred to the nearby Working Men's College (now RMIT University) and the Royal Exhibition Building, and the remainder were later sold, given away or simply thrown out. By the early 1930s, as Australian author George Johnston later recalled in his novel *My brother Jack*, the 'Antique School' seemed to the art student 'an unnerving, jolting sort of place' marked by 'the scatter



Sculpture gallery, north wing, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, photographic print: albumen silver, c. 1870[?], H11789

everywhere of dismembered fragments, severed heads, amputated hands or feet ... [and] the blank white staring of sightless eyeballs'.¹¹ In a modernist climate unsympathetic to Victorian tastes and values, and suspicious of replicas and copies, the casts had simply become relics, and by the 1940s they had almost all been removed from the collection. Most of them have apparently disappeared, although a few survive, including several busts still in the Library, of British writers Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Coleridge and John Dryden, and the 'protector of Aborigines' George Augustus Robinson, discussed below.

Unfortunately, the early-20th-century purge of the plaster casts also led to the loss of original plaster sculptures by noted local artists. These included a bust of sculptor Charles Summers by James Scurry, and Bertram Mackennal's *Triumph of truth*, a reduced-scale model entered in an 1891 competition to find a companion for Sir Edgar Boehm's *St George and the dragon* outside the Library. The trustees' failure to give Mackennal the commission (despite agreeing that his design was the best) seems to have led directly to the sculptor's decision soon afterwards to leave for Europe.¹²



View of Melbourne's casts, including *Cyprissus* (right foreground). Sculpture gallery, north wing, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, photograph: albumen silver, toned, c. 1900 – c. 1910, H11790

In one straightforward sense, the rise and fall of Melbourne's plaster cast collection can be explained as yet another familiar episode in the history of taste, echoing a global pattern that saw many casts sold off or donated to art schools during the 20th century, leaving only a few such collections intact now, notably those in the Victoria & Albert Museum's cast courts.¹³

Probing deeper, though, further observations may be made. While in numerous respects Melbourne's cast collection paralleled many others elsewhere (including Sydney) – its focus on famous statues, like the *Venus de Milo*, being an example – it appears to have been rather staid and conservative by comparison with the cast displays at the Crystal Palace and the Victoria & Albert, where vivid, often-controversial colour and occasional grand scale contributed interest and variety, and art from non-classical traditions, such as Egyptian, medieval and Islamic, was included.¹⁴

Some of Melbourne's individual casts after Greek and Roman originals certainly were of quality and interest. James Smith's claims for the excellence of the Parthenon casts, quoted earlier, are borne out by the three casts of the frieze still extant in the RMIT University Art Collection, testifying to



The drawing school, in Illustrated catalogue of the National Gallery, Melbourne: trustees of the Public Library, Museums and National Gallery of Victoria, 1905, p. 159

the high standards of the British Museum's cast-manufacturing unit during its early years. Similar comments also applied, presumably, to the casts of other reliefs and statues in the British Museum also acquired for Melbourne around 1860.

A notable later addition, presented by the Bavarian Ministry of Public Instruction after its inclusion in the 1880–81 Melbourne International Exhibition, was a group of casts of 15 late-archaic and early-classical warriors carved for the Temple of Aphaia at Aegina, Greece, in about 500 BCE. The original sculptures were installed in King Ludwig I of Bavaria's Munich Glyptothek in 1830, after restoration by noted Danish neoclassical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. Melbourne's casts, visible in the right foreground of the photograph from the 1905 National Gallery catalogue shown on page 39, and last documented as lent to the Royal Exhibition Building in 1908, have apparently disappeared. Their loss is to be regretted particularly because they would have provided a record of Thorvaldsen's restorations (removed in the 1960s). As art historian William Diebold points out, this 'derestoration' not only destroyed the neoclassical additions but also obscured the problematic history of the Nazis' admiration for both Ludwig I and Thorvaldsen.¹⁵



Benjamin Law, bust of George Augustus Robinson, plaster, 60 × 54 × 26 cm (irreg.), 1836, LTS 58. Presented by Henry Downie

However, most of the major casts were less noteworthy. Only a minority of the Greco-Roman examples diverged from the conventional taste of the early modern era, as catalogued in Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny's *Taste and the antique*.¹⁶ While Barry was keen to avoid inferior casts and took pains in his catalogue notes to identify and describe the originals, we know now that most of the statues reproduced were themselves Roman copies of Greek originals, and often rather freely restored later. One cast catalogued as based on an ancient original, a Cyparissus, actually reproduced a figure carved in 1798 by French neoclassical sculptor Antoine-Denis Chaudet. And some of the casts after supposed Renaissance originals reflected overoptimistic 19th-century attributions to Donatello, Raphael and Michelangelo.¹⁷

The plaster busts of ‘remarkable persons’ included a parade of British prime ministers and such, paralleling the marble busts of Barry and his peers, and ‘oval portraits’ of colonial governors in gilt frames, displayed elsewhere in the Melbourne Public Library during the 19th century.¹⁸ Other casts, though, provided more varied fare, portraying writers, philosophers, artists and scientists, and even a few notable locals, such as explorer Robert O’Hara Burke, and Henry Parkes, the ‘father of federation’. The list also turns up a few surprises from left field including: British radical Charles Fox, who criticised George III, supported the American War of Independence and the French Revolution and opposed slavery; Joseph Priestley, noted both as an experimental scientist and a radical political philosopher, who inspired riots in Birmingham in 1791; and Daniel O’Connell, known as the ‘Irish liberator’ for his opposition to British rule in the first half of the 19th century.

Others, like Roman emperors Nero (the infamous persecutor of early Christians) and Lucius Verus (characterised in one of Brucciani’s cast catalogues as ‘licentious and dissolute’), appear to have been cautionary models.¹⁹ Least admirable of all, surely, was King Leopold II of Belgium, whose plaster bust was donated by the Belgian delegation at the 1880–81 Melbourne International Exhibition. It emerged a few years later that Leopold ran the Congo Free State as his private company, making a fortune from ivory and rubber, while authorising such savage treatment of the local population that it has been described as a ‘hidden holocaust’. Joseph Conrad was appalled during an 1890 visit to the Congo, later basing his novella *Heart of darkness* on the experience. The critiques by Conrad and other influential contemporaries did force Leopold to relinquish his investment shortly before his death in 1909. However, Belgium remained in control until 1960, and only in June 2020, on the 60th anniversary of the creation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, did King Philippe formally express his ‘deepest regrets’ for ‘painful episodes’ during his country’s colonial rule.²⁰

Four of the Library’s busts shed light on Australia’s own terrible colonial history: an 1836 portrait of the ‘protector of Aborigines’ George Augustus Robinson, by Benjamin Law (see page 41); and ‘casts of the last three survivors of the Tasmanian Race’, Truganini, Woureddy and William Lanne, donated by Melbourne art collector William Lynch in 1891.²¹ Robinson’s bust, an early acquisition (by 1865), and apparently the sole extant cast, was displayed alongside admired contemporaries, while the casts of the three Tasmanians were consigned to the ethnographic section of the museum.

Robinson, a problematic figure, was appointed in 1828 to ‘conciliate’ between Indigenous Tasmanians and the white settlers who did their best to



James Scurry[?], *Interior of the Tasmanian court*, including cast of bust of William Lanne (centre foreground), in Richards & Co. & J Plummer, *The International Exhibition 1879–1880*, illustrated by original photographs, Sydney: Richards & Co., 1880, no. 24, National Library of Australia, P2113/24

wipe them out in the so-called Black War, between around 1824 and 1832. He succeeded, but only by deporting the few surviving Aboriginal people to Flinders Island. Hailed as a humanitarian hero – as in Benjamin Duterrau’s 1840 painting *The conciliation* – he was subsequently appointed ‘protector of Aborigines in Port Phillip’, holding the position from 1839 to 1849. However, not all of Robinson’s contemporaries were convinced that he deserved his accolades. Gilbert Robertson, discussing Law’s busts in Hobart’s *The True Colonist* in 1836, scoffed openly at Robinson’s ‘foolish vanity’ in having himself shown as a classical hero. Anthropologist Gareth Knapman observed that the name by which Robinson was known in Tasmania, the ‘pacificator’ (inscribed on the back of Melbourne’s bust), more accurately describes his role. The recent biography of Truganini by Cassandra Pybus (based substantially on Robinson’s journals) suggests that his official actions were at the least ineffective. Indeed, his Tasmanian career may well be seen as one of complicity in what Australian critic Robert Hughes described in *The Fatal Shore* as ‘the only true genocide in English colonial history’. Historian Henry Reynolds quoted Robinson to the effect that he clearly understood the local inhabitants to have been deprived of their land; and soon after arriving in Port Phillip, he admitted frankly in his

journal that there was ‘a complete system of expulsion and Extermination’.²²

While the bust of Robinson asserts a stereotypical Roman gravitas, the moral and aesthetic weight rests firmly with Law’s 1835–36 busts of Woureddy and Truganini. Extant in multiple casts held in various museums, including the National Gallery of Australia, these proved more popular with collectors. Initially, they excited largely ethnographic interest, but appreciation of their quality as expressive works of art has grown with time. The two casts donated to Melbourne in 1891 are in the collection of Museums Victoria, but unfortunately access and photography have been delayed by recent COVID-19 restrictions, so they are not pictured here.²³

The third bust donated in 1891 (identified as ‘Lanne’) showed William Lanne, the so-called last Tasmanian, who was taken to Flinders Island as a child, and whose body was mutilated after his death, in 1869, in a disgraceful quasi-scientific attempt to discern traces of his history. This was presumably based on a bust by Melbourne sculptor James Scurry, a plaster copy of which is held by the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, signed on the back by the artist. Plaster busts of Lanne were exhibited at both the Sydney International Exhibition in 1879 and the Melbourne International Exhibition in 1880–81 (loaned in each case by Audley Coote, a prominent Hobart politician). Neither exhibition catalogue records the name of the artist, but photographs and engravings show a work similar to Scurry’s Launceston bust (see page 43). The Lanne cast donated in 1891, possibly acquired by Lynch after the 1880 Melbourne exhibition, may also have been based on Scurry’s bust, although these hypotheses have yet to be verified, pending examination of the cast held by Museums Victoria.²⁴

Viewed in the light of these Tasmanian busts, Melbourne’s casts could be thought of as simply having disappeared into the shifting sands on which the entire colonial enterprise was erected. Looking back, it is hard to avoid the sense of the whole cast collection as an attempt to create a facsimile of old-world ‘civilisation’ on the other side of the globe, in rapidly changing times, in a continent which, according to the convenient concept of *terra nullius* (first officially proclaimed by New South Wales governor Sir Richard Bourke, in 1835), had no significant earlier history or monuments.²⁵

Redmond Barry’s enterprise and energy, typical of the Victorian era, still command admiration. But he obviously shared the paternalistic views of other influential early colonists, many of whom saw themselves as the guardians of civilised standards in the face of disorder and savagery. For instance, Charles La Trobe, the superintendent of Port Phillip and Victoria’s first lieutenant-governor, wrote to British publisher John Murray in 1840:



Wolfgang Sievers, interior of penthouse apartment, Kilpara flats, 703 Orrong Road, Toorak, photograph: gelatin silver, 1971, Wolfgang Sievers collection, H2001.40/247

You, my dear Sir, have I believe never been transported 1600 miles [2600 kilometres] from civilization & cannot imagine what it is to be cast so far beyond the reach of the thousand daily means of improvement & enjoyment which they possess who breath[e] the air of Europe ... I have called our present position Exile, and so it is to all intents and purposes.²⁶

The motivation for the cast collection, and so much else of Barry's public life in Melbourne, could hardly be explained more clearly. Barry, who also arrived in Australia in 1839, was in close professional contact with La Trobe until the latter returned to England, in 1854, and made similar remarks in letters to members of his Irish family in the 1840s.²⁷

As regards the plaster casts, the claims for moral superiority implied by the classical gods and heroes (typically male) and ideals of beauty (typically female), and by the effigies of exemplary individuals, must have seemed increasingly irrelevant the further the century progressed, as the documentation of colonial

greed and brutality in Tasmania and elsewhere revealed the hollowness of the rhetoric and Britain's supposed authority wavered, as Australia neared Federation. Of course, these are large and complex issues, well beyond the scope of the present discussion, and still evolving. At the time of writing at least, the continuing struggle for adequate recognition of Indigenous Australians' rights and prospects for a genuine republic both remain unfinished business.



The wheel of taste continues to turn, and casts and copies are now interesting again. Even at the height of modernism, several of Melbourne's former Parthenon frieze casts surfaced as perfect complements to a sleek new Toorak apartment building by local architects Yuncken Freeman, in a 1971 photograph by Wolfgang Sievers (see page 45). These days, cast collections like the Victoria & Albert's are popular once more, while many contemporary art museums have rediscovered a taste for the distant past, typically inflected by current concerns and parodic wit, as exemplified by several exhibits in the latest National Gallery of Victoria Triennial (December 2020 – April 2021). Contemporary United States artist Tony Matelli's *Hera (bronze)*, for instance (see opposite) – which mimics watermelon and decayed stone, contrasting the mutability of the human-made with the freshness of nature – is a replica of a Greco-Roman marble statue in Copenhagen.²⁸

Three-dimensional digital copies (the contemporary equivalent of plaster casts) may even help to solve one of the greatest problems confronting modern museums. In 2017, ReACH (Reproduction of Art and Cultural Heritage), a UNESCO initiative, reprised Henry Cole's 1867 Paris declaration (quoted earlier) in the *ReACH declaration for promoting universally the reproduction, storage and sharing of works of art and cultural heritage through digital technology*. As Australian human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson comments in his 2019 book *Who owns history?*, this initiative may assist with the restitution of plundered objects, from the Elgin Marbles to Indigenous Australian artefacts, enabling museums 'to reproduce the stolen cultural property before they return the original'.²⁹ These ambitious ideas demonstrate the continuing fascination with replicas and copies while also alerting us to the notion that 'civilisation' has a contradictory value, especially in a post-colonial world.



Tony Matelli, *Hera* (bronze) (NGV Triennial 2020 installation view), painted bronze, 2020. Commissioned by National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Proposed acquisition with funds donated by Barry Janes and Paul Cross, 2020. © Courtesy the artist and Marlborough Gallery. Photograph by Tom Ross