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Apostles of Good Taste? The use and perception of plaster casts in the Enlightenment

Eckart Marchand

The late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries witnessed increasing popularity of plaster casts, when at times even the appearance of the material itself, the often maligned or at best ignored gypsum plaster, came to be seen as of intrinsic value.[1] In one of his texts, Johann Joachim Winckelmann goes even farther and uses the pouring of liquid plaster over a human form as a *simile* for an aesthetic sensation, which he identified as central to good taste. While Winckelmann's engagement with the material in this passage – albeit literary – is without compare, the notion of casts of ancient Roman sculpture as propagators of good taste was ubiquitous. Starting with Winckelmann and drawing on a wide range of additional sources, the present article considers how changing perceptions of plaster casts as objects in their own right and as substitutes of venerated works of art interrelated with their role as propagators of good taste.

The notion of good taste stands at the centre of Winckelmann's 1763 *Treatise on the Capacity for Sensitivity to the Beautiful in Art and the Method of Teaching*, in which he mentions casts, the casting process and the material plaster.[2] Early in this treatise, and without much emphasis, Winckelmann uses 'good taste' as a synonym for the capacity for sensitivity to the beautiful in art to which his article is dedicated: 'There is nothing more hurtful than to deny someone good taste, which is another word for this very ability'.[3] In the second section of his text, where Winckelmann focuses on

[1] Most importantly Hans Ulrich Cain, 'Gipsabgüsse: Zur Geschichte ihrer Wertschätzung', *Anzeiger des Germanischen Nationalmuseums und Berichte aus dem Forschungsinstitut für Realienkunde* 1995, 200–215, here 206-207; see also Christiane Holm, 'Goethes Gipse: Präsentations- und Betrachtungsweisen von Antikenabgüssen im Weimarer Wohnhaus', in Charlotte Schreiter, ed., *Gipsabgüsse und antike Skulpturen: Präsentation und Kontext*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2012, 117-34, here 117-21 and Hanna Philipp, 'Winckelmann und das Weiss des Rokoko', *Antike Kunst* 39, 1996, 88-99, here 98-99 with note 77.

[2] Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen in der Kunst, und dem Unterrichte in derselben*. Dresden: Waltherische Buchhandlung, 1763. For a recent critical edition of this text see Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Römische Schriften – Text und Kommentar* (*Johann Joachim Winckelmann Schriften und Nachlaß*, vol. 9.2), Adolf H. Borbein, Max Kunze and Axel Rügler, eds, Mainz, Philipp von Zabern, 2020. In the following the first edition of 1763 is referenced. For an English translation see: 'Treatise on the Capacity for Sensitivity to the Beautiful in Art and the Method of Teaching It', in *Johann Joachim Winckelmann on Art, Architecture, and Archaeology*, David R. Carter, trans. Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer, 2013, 149-67.

[3] 'Es ist nichts empfindlicher, als jemandem den guten Geschmack, welcher in einem andern Worte eben diese Fähigkeit bedeutet, absprechen wollen'. Winckelmann, *Abhandlung*, 1763, 4; Winckelmann, 'Treatise on the capacity', 150. The German words for 'good taste' here used are 'guter Geschmack'.

instruction in that aesthetic capacity, he mentions the use of plaster casts after classical sculpture as a means of teaching good taste. A more unusual and instructive mention of plaster, however, occurs in the first part of this treatise, where Winckelmann uses the process of making a plaster mould as a metaphor for the capacity for sensitivity to the beautiful in art, that is, good taste. This ability, Winckelmann explains, consists both of the person who perceives the beautiful and the object that embodies the concept of beauty: 'of that which contains and that which is contained'.[4] Later on, Winckelmann returns to this image of the feeling for the beautiful as a container that enfolds its object, and he does it in a manner that stresses the nature of this aesthetic act as a sensual, but also religiously charged process:

> The true feeling for the Beautiful is like fluid gypsum [plaster] that is poured over the head of Apollo and reaches and envelops every part of him. The model for such a feeling is not that which is extolled by instinct, friendship, and a pleasant disposition, but that which is felt by a finer inner sense, purified of all personal intent, for the Beautiful itself.[5]

The plaster mould is of course the most bespoke container, recording, as it does, the exact form (three-dimensional outline) of that from which it is made. Winckelmann's image goes farther, however, as it also references the material characteristics of gypsum plaster. Resulting from processes of burning, milling and sifting, purging and purification, gypsum plaster is a material free from any value or meaning of its own. To follow Winckelmann's comparison, it is open to reflect only the beauty of that which it reproduces.



Figure 1 Roman, *Apollo Belvedere*, c. 2nd century AD. Marble, H 224. Rome: Vatican Museums. Photo: Warburg Institute.

[4] 'Das Enthaltene und das Enthaltende': Winckelmann, *Abhandlung*, 1763, 4; Winckelmann, 'Treatise on the capacity', 150.

[5] 'Das wahre Gefühl des Schönen gleichet einem flüßigen Gipse, welcher über den Kopf des Apollo gegossen wird, und denselben in allen Theilen berühret und umgiebt. Der Vorwurf dieses Gefühls ist nicht, was Triebe, Freundschaft und Gefälligkeit anpreißen, sondern was der innere feinere Sinn, welcher von allen Absichten geläutert seyn soll, um des Schönen willen selbst, empfindet'. Winckelmann, *Abhandlung*, 1763, 9-10; Winckelmann, 'Treatise on the capacity', 153.

The standard of good taste upon which in this comparison the feeling for the beautiful is cast/modelled, namely 'the Apollo', is of course primarily the *Apollo del Belvedere* (fig. 1), but by dropping the epithet, Winckelmann implicitly also references the ancient god of the arts himself. A similar if considerably less physically charged conflation can be seen in John Flaxman's early self-portrait of 1779, where a reduced copy of the *Apollo del Belvedere* appears as both sculptural model and inspiring visualization of the god (fig. 2).



Figure 2 John Flaxman, *A Self-Portrait at the Age of 24*, 1779. Pen and ink, with pale pink tinting on face and hands, 18.7 x 18.1. London: UCL Art Museum, University College London, inv. no. 616. © UCL Art Museum, University College London.

Winckelmann's image of the viscous material flowing slowly down the human head and body alludes not just to the physical but to ancient rites of anointing with oil. Winckelmann deliberately invokes this allusion, as he starts his text with a reference to Pindar, who in his 10th Olympian Ode describes its dedicatee, a young athlete, Agesidamus of Locri, as being 'poured over' with grace.[6] Later on in his treatise Winckelmann denotes the capacity of good taste as 'a gift from heaven'.[7]

[6] 'Von der Grazie übergossen': Winckelmann, *Abhandlung*, 1763, 3; my translation. The reference to Pindar's 10th Olympian Ode, dedicated to Agesidamus of Locri, comes as part of an elaborate apology for the delay in presenting the published text to its original addressee: 'Über den Verzug dieses Ihnen versprochenen Entwurfs von der Fähigkeit, das Schöne in der Kunst zu empfinden, erkläre ich mich mit dem Pindarus, da er den Agesidamus, einen edlen Jüngling von Lokri, 'welcher schön von Gestalt und mit der Grazie übergossen war', auf eine ihm zugedachte Ode lange hatte warten lassen: 'Die mit Wucher bezahlte Schuld', sagt er, 'hebt den Vorwurf.'' The image of the annointment is lost in Carter' translation: 'Concerning the delay of the draft text promised to you on the ability to

In his *Observations sur la sculpture et sur Bouchardon* (Observations on Sculpture and [Edmé] Bouchardon), Denis Diderot used a not dissimilar and equally religiously charged metaphor for plaster casts of ancient statuary. In this text addressed to Friedrich Melchior Grimm, editor of the *Correspondance litteraire* in which it was published coincidentally in the same year as Winckelmann's *Abhandlung* – 1763 – Diderot famously describes plaster casts as 'the apostles of good taste to all the nations'. He argues for the superiority of sculpture over painting and encourages his addressee to step away from the common models of his time, exemplified by images of the *Virgin and Child* by Raphael and Guido Reni. Instead, he sketches an ideal image of Grimm's study as a place of ancient sculpture: on one side the *Hercules Farnese* flanked by the *Venus de Medici* and the *Apollo del Belvedere*; on the other side the *Torso del Belvedere* stands between the *Dying Gladiator* and the *Antinous del Belvedere*; and opposite the '*Faun who is looking at a child'*, he envisages, 'entirely on its own', the *Laocoön*: 'These are the apostles of good taste to all the nations; these are the masters of Girardon, Coysevox, Coustou, Puget, and Bouchardon; [...] this is the company that befits you. Oh, if only I were rich!'[8] Here Diderot refers to the most famous sculptures as they were displayed in the Vatican, but his last words '*Ah! Si j'étais riche!*' make it clear that he imagined reproductions that were available for sale, if at a forbidding price.[9] The biblical image of these plaster copies as apostles, sent out to spread good taste, implicitly reads the casting process as an investiture whereby the casts are issued from the negative moulds that had been formed upon the original marble works. That these originals were kept in the Vatican – the seat of Christian authority from which, according to Catholic belief, the sacred authority of all priests is distributed by direct touch throughout the world – could be seen as heightening the religious connotations of Diderot's image. Given Diderot's ambivalent view of the Catholic church and the rhetorical charge of his writings, there may be a satirical note in this comparison, namely that whatever one thinks of the Roman church and those it sends out, 'these [casts] *are*

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appreciate beauty in art, I shall explain myself in the words of Pindar. When he had made Agesidamus, a noble youth from Locri, 'beautiful of form and permeated with grace,' wait a long time for an ode he had intended for him, he said 'A debt paid with interest removes the reproach.'' Winckelmann, 'Treatise on the capacity', 149.

[7] 'Eine Gabe des Himmels': Winckelmann, *Abhandlung*, 1763, 5; my translation.

[8] 'Que j'aimerais à y voir d'un côté l'Hercule Farnèse entre la Vénus de Médicis et l'Apollon Pythien; d'un autre le Torse entre le Gladiateur et l'Antinoüs; ici le Faune qui a trouvé un enfant et qui le regarde; vis-à-vis le Laocoon tout seul ... . Voilà les apôtres du bon goût chez toutes les nations; ....voilà la compagnie qui vous convient. Ah! si j'étais riche!': Denis Diderot, 'Observations sur la sculpture et sur Bouchardon' [originally published in Friedrich Melchior Grimm's *Correspondance litteraire*, 1er mars 1763], cited after Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes*, J. Assézat, ed., 20 vols, Paris: Garnier, 1875–77, vol. 13, 1876, 40–47, here 45–46; my translation.

[9] To be able to obtain and freely give away plaster cast did indeed require considerable funds at the time, much to the contrary of frequent statements about their low prices; see Charlotte Schreiter, *Antike um jeden Preis: Gipsabgüsse und Kopien antiker Plastik am Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts.* Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014, 13.

the apostles of good taste to all nations'.[10] The implied view of plaster casts as pure substitutes of the originals, however, is a very familiar one:[11] Diderot does not refer to the material at all, whereas Winckelmann's image, by contrast, engages closely with cast-making and the materiality of gypsum plaster.

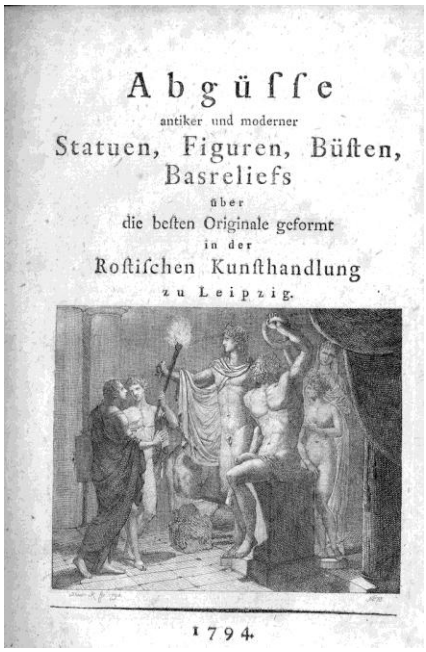


Figure 3 Rostische Kunsthandlungen, *Abgüsse antiker und moderner Statuen, Figuren, Büsten, Basreliefs über die besten Originale geformt in der Rostischen Kunsthandlung zu Leipzig*. Leipzig, 1794, title page. Photo: author.

A distant echo of Diderot and Winckelmann's metaphors can be found in a German sales catalogue, issued in Leipzig in 1794 by the Rostische Kunsthandlung, the most important provider of plaster casts in late eighteenth-century Germany

[10] Diderot's often critical view of institutionalized Christian religion is expressed in a number of publications, see, e.g., his entry 'Intolérance' in the *Encyclopédie, vol. 8 (1765), 843-44* (*Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, etc., eds: Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Spring 2021 Edition), Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe (eds), https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/encyclopedie0521/navigate/8/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/846/?byte=8920654) (last accessed on 01/09/2021), and was a core issue in his difficult relationship with his brother, the Abbé Didier-Pierre Diderot; Arthur M. Wilson, *Diderot*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, 248, 354-356, 582 and elsewhere.

[11] See, e.g., the comment by Asmus Jacob Carstens, who stated that he had encountered the *Apollo Belvedere* for the first time in 1776 in the Royal Academy in Copenhagen (rather than referring to the plaster cast he had actually seen); see Cain, 'Gipsabgüsse', 206; cf. also Ekaterina Michajlovna Andreeva, 'Die Bedeutung der Sammlung von "Gipsantiken" der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Künste für die Rezeption und Verbreitung der Ideen von J.J. Winckelmann in Russland', in Max Kunze and Konstantin Lappo-Danilevskij, eds, *Antike und Klassizismus – Winckelmanns Erbe in Russland, Akten des internationalen Kongresses St Petersburg 30. September – 1. Oktober 2015*, Ruhpolding and Petersberg, Michael Imhof Verlag and Franz Philipp Rutzen, 2017, 126-131, here 127.

(fig. 3). In the title of this pamphlet, 'Casts of ancient and modern Statues, Figures, Busts, Bas-reliefs, formed over the best originals in the Rostische Kunsthandlung, Leipzig',[12] the expression 'formed *over* the best originals' rather than 'after' conflates cast and mould at the expense of the mould. It may be tempting to see the phrase as a strategic one, aimed at advertising the faithfulness of the casts, but it is more likely to reflect a wider use, just as in a number of European languages the term 'form' can denote both the negative mould and a positive shape.

The propagation of good taste



Figure 4 Philipp Daniel Lippert, *Daktyliothek*, 1776. L 57, H 36, W 21. Oxford: Beazley Archive, inv. no. 158a-c. Photo: Claudia Wagner.

In the second part of his treatise, as already mentioned, Winckelmann discusses how to strengthen good taste in young men. Exposure to classical works is important, and Winckelmann lists where appropriate models may be found across Europe. For those who lived in the German countryside, like the addressee of his text, Winckelmann suggests the use of engravings after ancient statuary, as well as collections of small casts, the so-called *Dactyliothecae* (fig. 4).[13] Often organised in small mahogany cabinets with sliding drawers, these collections contained casts in plaster or sulphur after ancient gems and/or modern renditions of classical motifs. Winckelmann's suggestion to turn to such small-scale collections reflects the virtual unavailability of large-scale plaster casts in most parts of eighteenth-century

[12] Carl Christian Heinrich Rost, 'Abgüsse antiker und moderner Statuen, Figuren, Büsten, Basreliefs über die besten Originale geformt in der Rostischen Kunsthandlung zu Leipzig' [sales-catalogue]. Leipzig, 1794; for this publication see Charlotte Schreiter, ''Moulded from the best originals of Rome' – Eighteenth-Century Production and Trade of Plaster Casts after Antique Sculpture in Germany', in *Plaster Casts: Making Collecting and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, Rune Frederiksen and Eckart Marchand, eds, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010, 121-42, here 121-23; for a more extensive discussion in German see Schreiter, *Antike*, 2014, 133-255.

[13] Winckelmann, *Abhandlung*, 1763, 16-18; Winckelmann, 'Treatise on the Capacity', 157.

Germany. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe recalls in his *Italian Journey* and as Charlotte Schreiter demonstrates in her magisterial work on late eighteenth-century cast traders in Germany, casts after the antique were very rare, expensive, and difficult to obtain.[14] Substantial collections appeared only towards the end of the century, a point to which I shall return later.

In Augsburg the aristocrat and magistrate Paul von Stetten initiated the acquisition of a *Dactyliotheca* for a local school in 1792.[15] Von Stetten recalls that at the time great scholars had recommended such collections 'not only for the knowledge of Greek and Roman antiquities but also as a source of good taste and all beauty in the arts'.[16] This may read like a direct reference to Winckelmann's *Abhandlung* but the invocation of good taste was commonplace in Germany when it came to the acquisition of plaster casts and in particular for those selling them, according to Christian Gottlob Heyne, the Director of Göttingen's University Library. In his review of one of Rost's sale catalogues, Heyne reflects on the trader's rhetoric and the restraints experienced by a collector in a limited market that played entirely in favour of the dealer. This, he observes, causes a complete reversal of the expected attitudes of dealer and scholar: 'One likes to hear the art dealer talking about sacrifice and the desire and aim to further taste and the arts, even if some small objections might come to the surface. But when one sees a scholar think and act in mercantile terms, one's feelings are offended'.[17]

Not only does Heyne reveal the reference to good taste as common parlance among dealers when advertising their merchandise, but he also acknowledges that

[14] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Italian journey: 1786–1788, Wystan H. Auden trans. London: Collins, 1962, 490; Schreiter, *Antike*; see also Schreiter 'Moulded from the best originals of Rome', 121-42.

[15] Verena Bestle, ''Eine Quelle des guten Geschmacks' Daktyliotheken und die Kunstakademien in Augsburg 1670–1806', in *Daktyliotheken: Götter und Caesaren aus der Schublade. Antike Gemmen in Abdrucksammlungen des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, Valentin Kockel und Daniel Graepler, eds, Munich: Biering and Brinkmann, 2006, 53-56. See also Valentin Kockel, '"Dhieweilen wier die Antiquen nicht haben konnten ..." – Abgüsse, Nachbildungen und Verkleinerungen antiker Kunst und Architektur im 18. und 19. Jh.', in Dietrich Boschung and Henner von Hesberg, eds, *Antikensammlungen des europäischen Adels im 18. Jahrhundert als Ausdruck einer europäischen Identität: Internationales Kolloquium in Düsseldorf vom 7. 2. bis 10. 2. 1996*, Mainz, von Zabern, 2000, 33-34.

[16] 'Eben dzu der Zeit wurden von Grossen Gelehrten nicht nur zu Kenntniss der griechischen und roemischen Alterthuember sondern auch als eine Quelle des Guten Geschmacks und alles schoen in kuensten, die Dactyliotheck des Dresdenischen Kuenstlers Lippert angepriesen, und wir konnten der Versuchung nicht widersstehen, dieselbe fuer das Gymnasium anzuschaffen'. The unpublished autobiography is here cited after Bestle, 'Quelle', 2006, 53-56.

[17] 'Den Kunsthändler hört man gern von Aufopferung und von Begierde und Absicht, den Geschmack und die Künste zu befördern, sprechen, wenn auch noch eine kleine Bedenklichkeit dabey aufsteigt; da es dagegen das Gefühl beleidigt, wenn man einen Gelehrten bloß mercantilisch denken und handeln sieht': Christian Gottlob Heyne, *Göttingische Anzeigen von Gelehrten Sachen*, 17, 1795, January, 164-66, cited after Schreiter, *Antike*, 693; translation of the author.

the thinking of a scholar in charge of building a teaching collection was more likely to be governed by issues of finance and availability. British Grand tourists in Rome did not have Heyne's intellectual scruples, and mercantile discourses about plaster casts are in fact well documented among them.[18] They touch on price, availability, quality and potential problems in relation to the faithfulness of casts in representing the original, but also on comparisons with copies in other materials, and issues of transport. Many of these wealthy travellers had first-hand insights and experiences from visits to cast makers' workshops in the city. When in 1749 Lord Malton encouraged his father Lord Rockingham to acquire marble copies rather than plaster casts for the decoration of their house, Wentworth Woodhouse, he noted:
'As I hear it will be impossible to have antique statues and as the Models made from them in plaster of Paris are so easily broke and at best but have a mean look, and will never be proper for so fine a room as the Great Hall, I intend trying to get Copies done in Marble of the best antique statues'.[19]

In Rome, like many other British aristocrats and their agents, Lord Malton was sitting at the source with an established transport infrastructure via Leghorn and London and could rely upon immeasurable financial resources. At the time, this situation was entirely restricted to the British. In this specific context, plaster casts were part of a wider trade that included ancient marble sculpture, marble copies and contemporary sculptures, all intended for country houses where their main purpose was to signal social status and wealth and to affirm the good taste of the owner.

A visitor to the Roman plaster cast makers' workshops with very different interests and means than the British aristocrats was Goethe. When it comes to the aesthetic experience of marble and plaster, he leaves little doubt regarding his preferences:

> Marble is an extraordinary material. Because of it, the Apollo Belvedere gives such unbounded pleasure. The bloom of eternal youth which the original statue possesses is lost in even the best plaster cast. In the Palazzo Rondanini opposite, there is an over-lifesize mask of a Medusa in which [...] the fearful stare of death is admirably portrayed. I own a good cast of it, but nothing is left of the magic of the original. The yellowish stone, which is almost the colour of flesh, has a noble, translucent quality. By comparison, plaster always looks chalky and dead.[20]

[18] Viccy Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique, Neoclassicism in Britain, 1760–1800.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006, 126–55.
[19] Cited after Coltman, *Fabricating*, 134.
[20] 'Der Marmor ist ein seltsames Material, deswegen ist Apoll von Belvedere im Urbilde so grenzenlos erfreulich: denn der höchste Hauch des lebendigen, jünglingsfreien, ewig jungen Wesens verschwindet gleich im besten Gipsabguß. Gegen uns über im Palast Rondanini steht eine Medusenmaske, wo [...] das ängstliche Starren des Todes unsäglich trefflich ausgedrückt ist. Ich besitze schon einen gutn Abguß, aber der Zauber des Marmors ist nicht übriggeblieben. Das edle Halbdurchsichtige des gelblichen, der Fleischfarbe sich nähernden Steins ist verschwunden. Der Gips sieht immer dagegen kreidenhaft und tot'. Johann

Yet, Goethe still felt compelled to buy casts. During his life, he successively built up two veritable collections, the first while he was resident in Rome, the second, later in life, when he had settled in Weimar.[21] In his *Italian Journey* the author states that living in Rome he grew so accustomed to the constant encounter and discourse with ancient sculptures that he felt the urge to surround himself with them in his flat. The obvious response to such an urge in Rome, he states, was the acquisition of plaster casts, and indeed he afforded himself a collection of possibly a dozen casts of busts, heads of sculptures, as well as reliefs and other objects. But when preparing his return to Germany he had to leave them all behind, due to legal obstacles, the danger of breakage and immense costs involved in moving them to landlocked central Germany.[22]

For Goethe ancient sculptures functioned as civilizing agents that transport their beholder to earlier times and a better state of mankind. Casts enabled him to extend this engagement with works and characters of the classical past into his own living sphere. Seeing them first thing in the morning, he suggests, one was elevated by them and prevented from falling into barbarism.[23] Here Goethe anticipated the ideals of nineteenth-century German 'humanist education', as promoted by Alexander von Humboldt and others. This was an education that insisted on general human values which it saw incarnated in ancient Greek culture. 'Philhellenism' as it was often called, enabled the German bourgeoisie to raise its own status through the appropriation of previously aristocratic Greece and Rome centred notions of good taste.[24] As part of this wider educational embrace of ancient culture at the end of the eighteenth century, Germany witnessed the installation of a number of public plaster cast collections.[25] These were built up for didactic purposes, aiming both at artists' training and the education of a wider public. The *Antikensaal* in Mannheim, founded in 1767 by the local Prince-elector Karl Theodor (1724-1799) as part of the

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Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italienische Reise: Auch ich in Arkadien!*, in *Goethes Werke*, 14 vols, Hamburg, 1950–60, vol. 11. Hamburg; Christian Wegener, 1950, 151; my translation, based on Goethe, Auden (transl.) *Italian Journey*, 1962, 140.

[21] On the later collection in Weimar see Holm, 'Goethes Gipse', 2012, 121-32.

[22] Goethe, Auden (transl.) *Italian Journey*, 1962, 488-89.

[23] Goethe, Auden (transl.) *Italian Journey*, 1962, 489; Eckart Marchand, 'Six cents ans de collection de moulages: quelques aspects de leur réception / 600 Years of Cast Collections: aspects of their reception', in Penelope Curtis et al, *Sculptures infinies / Infinite Sculpture* exhib. cat. Paris, Beaux Arts, 2019, 32-45, here 40.

[24] Esther Sophia Sünderhauf, *Griechensehnsucht und Kulturkritik. Die deutsche Rezeption von Winckelmanns Antikenideal 1840–1945*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004, 5; see also Coltman, *Fabricating*, 9; Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750–1970*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996 and H. B. Nisbet, *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism. Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

[25] For the rise of museums in enlightenment Germany and a mention of several of the first cast collections, see Bénédicte Savoy, ed., *Tempel der Kunst: Die Entstehung des öffentlichen Museums in Deutschland 1701–1815*. Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 2006.

local academy of design, was an important example.[26] In the same year Heyne established the university collection in Göttingen noted above.[27] In 1792 the Prince-elector August III of Saxony acquired and gave to the Dresden academy the plaster cast collection that had been gathered in Italy by the painter Anton Raphael Mengs.[28] In addition to casts of famous Roman sculptures, complete and partial, most of these collections also included busts of famous men, ancient, recent and contemporary.

Heyne's statement on dealers and collectors gives an idea of the difficulties faced by those who built up such collections. It reflects the omnipresent social implications of the concept of good taste when early descriptions of these collections are coloured by the interests, demands and social outlooks of their respective authors. The Mannheim Antikensaal triggered a particularly diverse set of responses. In contrast to display practices elsewhere, the presentation of this collection did not follow established principles of social representation. There was no grand staircase leading up to an upper level where these sculptures could receive their visitors like aristocrats or members of the established bourgeoisie, nor were they staged in an ordered fashion that reflected rank and importance of either the Roman sculpture or ancient character represented. Instead, this collection was housed at ground level in a bourgeois townhouse and its dense movable display prioritised the practical demands of local artists.[29] An anonymous author, writing in 1795 in *Die Rheinischen Musen: Zeitung für Theater und andere Schöne Künste* (*The Rhenian Muses: Journal for Theatre and other Fine Arts*), may well reflect the academy's

[26] For a discussion of the Antikensaal and collection of late eighteenth- / early nineteenth-century sources about this collection see Sebastian Socha, 'Der Antikensaal in der Mannheimer Zeichnungsakademie', in Savoy, *Tempel*, 2006, 243-60 and documents at 466-75. See also Max Kunze, 'Die Mannheimer "Zeichnungsakademie" und der Antikensaal' in M. Kunze, ed., *Der Pfälzer Apoll: Kurfürst Karl Theodor und die Antike an Rhein und Neckar*, Ruhpolding and Mainz, 2007, pp. 113-121 and other contributions in that volume. For the founding of the Antikensaal see also Ellen Suchezky, *Die Abguss-Sammlungen von Düsseldorf und Göttingen im 18. Jahrhundert. Zur Rezeption antiker Kunst zwischen Absolutismus und Aufklärung*, Berlin, de Gruyter 2019, 152-153.

[27] Daniel Graepler, 'A Dactyliotheca by James Tassie and Other Collections of Gem Impressions at the University of Göttingen', in Frederiksen and Marchand, *Plaster Casts*, 435-50, here 435-36; see also the catalogue of that collection, K. Fittschen, ed., *Verzeichnis der Gipsabgüsse des Archäologischen Instituts der Georg-August-Universität Göttingen*, Göttingen 1990 and, most recently the discussion of this collection and Heyne's rôle in its creation in Suchezky, *Abguss-Sammlungen*, 2019, 169-327.

[28] Moritz Kiderlen, *Die Sammlung der Gipsabgüsse von Anton Raphael Mengs in Dresden*, Munich: Biering and Brinkmann, 2006 and Katharina Pilz, 'Die Gemäldegalerie in Dresden unter Berücksichtigung der Mengsschen Abgusssammlung', in Savoy, *Tempel*, 2006, 145-74 and 411-35. See also, most recently, Rolf H. Johannsen, *Vorbild Antike: Die Abgusssammlung des Anton Raphael Mengs: Skulpturen Sammlung Dresden*, Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, 2020, esp. 33-45.

[29] Another case that illustrates the conflicts between an academy's use of casts and their representation as worthy objects is discussed by Sarah Betzer, 'Canova, 1816: Marble, Plaster, Surface' in *Sculpture Journal*, 28: 3, 2019, 315-30, here 322-25.

own position. The author outlines the didactic purpose of this hall as a place of artistic education before turning to a detailed description of the hall. He gives the dimensions (50 feet length, 40 width and 30 height) and describes the windows as being high up in the northern wall in order to provide an even, unchanging light and mentions that they were furnished with curtains so as to enable the artists to control the fall of light. As to the presentation of the individual casts he refers especially to the movable socles that made it possible to move the works to study them from different sides. This apparently well-travelled author then draws favourable comparisons with the presentation of original sculptures in Florence and Rome, which, he argues, were in many ways splendid but not helpful for artists, in particular with regard to the mentioned issues of staging in terms of light and the accessibility of different viewpoints.[30] Other sympathetic visitors include Johann Friedrich Karl Grimm, physician to the House Saxe Gotha, a northern-German lawyer with wider socio-cultural interests who visited in 1790, and, a year later, the Prussian Secretary of State Karl Gottlieb Samuel Heun.[31] Heun's account is informed by his *alter ego* as an immensely successful writer of light entertainment novels.[32] He observes playfully how the *Farnese Hercules* had turned his face to the window, bluntly ignoring *Venus* next to him, whose beauty was shrouded in darkness, while *Cupid*, normally her most faithful companion, had abandoned his mother hiding, as he was, in a corner where he gave heat to the thoughts of an ever so serious *Cicero*. Elsewhere in his text, and on a more serious note, the author explains that one must not expect a carefully orchestrated presentation in a place intended for practical use, where everybody can enter and position sculptures as he sees fit.[33]

This is exactly what Jens Immanuel Baggesen, an author at the Danish court with social aspirations, expressed in his published diary of 1789. He begins his account with the claim that he had come with the greatest expectations, although his line 'Plaster or marble are all the same when it is the form that matters' should not be read too literally.[34] His report demonstrates that issues of content, social presentation and hierarchical order mattered as much as or more than form. He likened the appearance of the collection to that of a storage space in which 'heaps of casts' had been dispersed at random. Only when accidentally confronted with the

[30] Published in Socha, 'Der Antikensaal', 2006, 474-75.
[31] These and others are published in Socha, 'Der Antikensaal', 2006, 465-75.
[32] Heun published these novels under the pseudonym Heinrich Clauren. On Heun / Clauren see see Karl Richter, 'Clauren, Heinrich' in *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 3, 1957, 267-68 [Online-Version]; URL: https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118521101.html#ndbcontent [accessed last on 10/02/2020].
[33] The report is published as part of a letter, dated 1791, in an anonymous collection of letters 'from Carl to Eduard': Anonymous, *Carls Vaterländische Reisen in Briefen an Eduard*, Leipzig: Heinsius, 1793, 316-17, cited after Socha, 'Der Antikensaal', 2006, 473.
[34] 'Nie bin ich mit größeren Erwartungen einer Sehenswürdigkeit entgegen gegangen, denn Gips oder Marmor ist einerlei, wo es auf die Form ankmmt!', Jens Immanuel Baggesen [1789]: *Das Labyrinth oder Reise durch Deutschland in die Schweiz 1789* [Altona and Leipzig: Kaven, 1795], Leipzig and Weimar, Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1985, 303–304, cited after Socha, 'Der Antikensaal', 2006, 472. Christiane Holm, 'Goethes Gipse', 2012, 118 quotes the passage as evidence for a veritable 'Gips-Kult' in the eighteenth century.

Laocoön a suitable sense of social order and decorum asserted itself on him, making him remove his hat. The ancient priest's suffering appeared to him to have been doubled by the surroundings of the Antikensaal. Turning to the relationship between casts and the originals, Baggesen concluded with the statement that in such conditions it no longer mattered whether the casts were faithful or not. The substitutional role of the casts is nevertheless confirmed, with his exclamation that 'Apollo here seems to be angry about his place'.[35] If, according to Baggesen, Apollo was offended, then that was because he had fallen into the wrong hands, those of people who did not have the good taste required to give these substitutes of venerable works and ancient gods and heroes their appropriate place. August Joseph Ludwig von Wackerbarth also observed critically that the room was somewhat dark and at ground level. Wackenbarth voiced this concern in relation to the comfort of the artists, but one may also sense an expectation that the guarantors of good taste should be housed in the lighter spheres of the *piano nobile*.[36]

The concerns about a lack of social order and hierarchy implicit in these criticisms were made explicit by the German aristocrat August von Kotzebue. He ends the account of his visit to the Antikensaal in 1790 with the anecdote of a man, socially his inferior, whose ill judged attempt to teach him is portrayed as symptomatic of an ill-conceived attempt to democratize education: 'A common chap, somebody who serves the local academy as a life-drawing model, assigned himself the position of guide and teacher for us. 'Over there', he said, 'you can also see Voltaire, who died in Paris'.'[37] For Kotzebue the collapse of social order expressed by the 'common chap's' attempt to teach the aristocrat was also symptomatic of the apparently disorganised and non-hierarchic presentation of the collection. Winckelmann's lofty image of good taste as a purified inner feeling also implies social distinction and difference. These notions of social distinction are always present in the idea of good taste, regardless of whether the upper spheres are associated with the aristocracy's *piano nobile* or the educated bourgeoisie's raised ground floor.[38]

Plaster's whiteness

If, for Winckelmann, liquid gypsum plaster appealed as a simile that illustrated the purified nature of good taste, then there is a strong argument that plaster's

[35] 'Apollon schien sich hier über seinen Platz zu ärgern'. Baggesen, *Labyrinth*, 1985, cited after Socha, 'Der Antikensaal', 2006, 472.
[36] August Joseph Ludwig von Wackerbarth, *Rheinreise*, Halberstadt: Gross, 1794, 143-45, cited after Socha, 'Der Antikensaal', 2006, 473.
[37] 'Ein gemeiner Kerl, welcher der hiesigen Akademie zum Modell dient, gab sich das Ansehn uns herum zu führen und zu belehren. 'Dort', sagt er, 'steht auch Voltaire, der in Paris gestorben ist.'' August von Kotzebue, *Meine Flucht nach Paris im Winter 1790. Für bekannte und unbekannte Freunde geschrieben*, Leipzig: Paul Gotthelf Kummer, 1791, 69–70, cited after Socha, 'Der Antikensaal', 2006, 473.
[38] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, Richard Nice trans. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.

whiteness also played a role in his choice of this comparison. In abstract or idealizing discourses, however, it is this very whiteness that is commonly associated with the material.[39] For Winckelmann white was the most beautiful colour, because it encompassed all other colours and emanated more light than any other.[40] In the eighteenth and for large parts of the nineteenth centuries plaster was often praised and occasionally even preferred over marble for its whiteness and the evenness and coherence of its surface.[41] As to this latter point the late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century sculptor John Flaxman praised a set of casts of Ghiberti's second set of Baptistery Doors in the Florentine Accademia and compared them favourably with the bronze originals in terms of the legibility of their design. The present author has suggested elsewhere that Flaxman may even have preferred plaster in general for its ability to render the three-dimensional form without any abstraction through the accidental appearance of the matter.[42] While there can be no question that plaster sculpture was greatly appreciated during that period for its ability to represent pure form, however, the preference of the material over marble in general was only expressed in situations where obtaining an original marble was either not an option or where, as in the case of nineteenth-century archaeology, the 'original marble' was discredited as a Roman copy.[43]

Many casts would not have been as white as these writers wanted them to be. Plaster casts of some age, whether surface treated or not, often would have sported some sort of patina, and be it simply through the accumulation of dirt and dust. It may be in part because of the unexpected presentation of the casts in the Mannheim Antikensaal that the visitors there felt compelled to comment on the rather yellowy patina of the casts in this collection. Some of the accounts explain this as the result of

[39] Renaissance authors, such as Cennino Cennini, Pomponio Gaurico and Giorgio Vasari, set to write positively about any artistic material described plaster as white if not translucent and marble-like; see Eckart Marchand, 'Material Distinctions: Plaster, Terracotta, and Wax in the Renaissance artist's workshop', in *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics, c. 1250–1750*, Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela Smith, eds, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014, 160-79, here 166.

[40] Winckelmann, *Geschichte des Altertums*, Part 1, chapter 4 in Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (*Johann Joachim Winckelmann Schriften und Nachlaß*, vol. 4,1), Adolf H. Borbein, Thomas W. Gaethgens, Johannes Irmscher and Max Kunze, eds, , Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2002, p. 248/249. See also Hanna Philipp, 'Winckelmann und das Weiss des Rokoko', in *Antike Kunst* 39, 1996, 88-99; see also 98, note 77 on the issue of white casts which she also perceives as affected by a wider change in taste.

[41] See above note 1.

[42] Eckart Marchand, 'The Flaxman Gallery and the Rôle of Plaster Casts in the Workshop of John Flaxman 1755-1826', in: Mario Guderzo and Tomas Lochman, eds, *Il valore del gesso come modello, calco copia per la realizzazione della scultura. Atti del quarto convegno internazionale sulle gipsoteche. Possagno, 2-3 ottobre 2015*, Crocetta del Montello, Antiga Edizioni, 2017, 309-320, esp. 315.

[43] On nineteenth-century German archaeologists and their attitudes to plaster casts see Stefanie Klamm, 'Vom langen Leben der Bilder. Wahrnehmung der Skulptur und ihrer Reproduktionsverfahren in der klassischen Archäologie des 19. Jahrhunderts', in: *Pegasus, Berliner Beiträge zum Nachleben der Antike*, 9, 2007, 209–228, here 215–217.

an oil coating which the anonymous reviewer in the *Rheinische Musen* explains as advantages to the casts primary function:

> For the purpose of study these casts are even better suited than the originals themselves, as the original marbles, because of the particular shine they get through the process of polishing, give an unsteady, dispersed and false light; which the plaster casts don't. These plaster casts have as a precaution been saturated with oil, in part to make them last better, so that bits of them cannot be that easily stained, wiped off or even broken, in part such that light and shade better strike the eye, than it is normally granted by the blinding whiteness of plaster.[44]

Johann Friedrich Karl Grimm, the already mentioned physician to the House Saxe Gotha who visited the Antikensaal in the early 1770s, saw in the yellowish tone a positive similarity to the appearance of the originals, the closeness to which he had already asserted: 'They are polished extraordinarily smoothly, and as the plaster has slowly assumed a glass yellow colour, they appear at a superficial glance, as if of marble'.[45] His was a rare view and some visitors called for the ideal whiteness of plaster which they rightly or wrongly attributed to the casts in other collections they had seen before. 'These plaster casts are from Rome, Naples, Florence, Venice, etc. and the unpleasant thing about them is that the plaster is yellow, while the figures would be far more beautiful if they were completely white like the ones in the Göttingen Library'.[46]

A yellowy, marbled surface was given to John Flaxman's plaster cast models when they were first installed in the Flaxman Gallery in University College London in 1851. There, the declared aim was indeed to make these workshop models appear like marbles. This may in part express a British High Victorian approach to materials that stands in contrast to that of Winckelmann's time. The comparison is nevertheless instructive as, at UCL, Flaxman's models were not presented as substitutes of famous absent originals, but rather as material instantiations of artistic inventions by a famous artist. Here the marble-like presentation elevated the three-dimensional images, brought them together and turned the entire gallery into a

[44] 'Diese Abgüsse sind zum Studium noch besser als die Originale selbst, in dem die Originale von Marmor, wegen ihrem eigenthümlichen durch die Politur erhaltenen Glanze, ein unsicheres, zerstreutes und falsches Licht geben; die Abüsse von Gips aber nicht. Diese Gipsabgüsse sind wohlbedeächtlich mit Öl getränkt, theils sie dauerhafter zu machen, damit nicht so leicht etwas daran beschmutzt oder abgewischt oder gar zerbrochen werden kann, teils auch, damit eben dadurch Licht und Schatten besser in die Augen falle, als es die blendende Weiße des Gipses gewöhnlich gestattet'. Anonymous author in the *Rheinische Musen*, cited after Socha, 'Der Antikensaal', 2006, 474-75.

[45] 'Sie sind ungemein glatt polirt, und da der Gyps nach und nach eine glassgelbe Farbe angenommen hat, so sehen sie dem, der sie nicht genau betrachtet, wie von Marmor aus', as Johann Friedrich Karl Grimm, cited after Socha, 'Der Antikensaal', 2006, 466.

[46] August Joseph Ludwig von Wackerbarth [1791], *Rheinreise*. Halberstadt, 1794, 143-45, cited after Socha, 'Der Antikensaal', 2006, 473.

coherent monument to Flaxman. In Mannheim visitors like Wackerbarth may have expected substitutes that were pure and free from any qualities and pointed back towards an ideal form, rather than attempting to imitate the accidental external appearance of the Roman sculptures.

Conclusion

Winckelmann's evocation of liquid plaster enveloping the head of 'the Apollo' as a *simile* for good taste or the 'capacity for sensitivity to the beautiful in art' relates closely to notions of good taste and the perception of plaster and plaster casts in the period. Through the invocation of purity, processes of annointment and investiture and its focus on the image of a god that was kept in the Vatican, good taste in Winckelmann and Diderot's writings gained a religious dimension that borrowed from both ancient Roman rites and Christianity. Plaster casts had an important role as propagators of what Winckelmann describes as 'the content', that is, the canonical sculptures of classical antiquity onto which good taste is firmly anchored. Thus the potential and to some extent demonstrable appeal of plaster and plaster casts in the period can be explained through the function (multiple substitutes), technique ('formed over' the originals), and materiality (purified, white and seamless) of plaster casts. Lord Molton's preference for marble copies over plaster casts may have been based primarily on issues of social status for which material value was more important than truthfulness of reproduction, but he also expressed an aesthetic judgement – 'plaster at best has a mean look' – which Goethe's 'plaster looks always chalky and dead' echoes. Goethe, I would argue, rather than having an entirely different outlook than his German contemporaries, commented on plaster in comparison to the marble original, a comparison that in many other comments on plaster casts at the time does not feature. Even then, the descriptions of the Mannheim Antikensaal demonstrate that the eighteenth-century enthusiasm for plaster casts was not unconditional. The purity and whiteness of the material, the coherence and evenness of the casts' surface are all factors that lead away from the cast as an object and allow one to think of an absent original or engage with the notion of an abstract three-dimensional form. Where casts attracted attention to themselves, either through a presentation that was perceived as unworthy for the represented, or through an unexpected patina, even in the eighteenth century there were those who rejected them as unworthy objects, reproductions in a cheap material.[47]

[47] On the tension between the narrative of eighteenth- and nineteenth century boom, twentieth-century decline and late twentieth-century Renaissance on the one hand and the constantly present rejection of plaster casts on account of their status as copies in a cheap, visually unstimulating material see Mary Beard, 'Cast: Between Art and Science' in Henry Lavagne and François Queyrel, eds, *Les moulages de sculptures antiques et l'histoire de l'archéologie: actes du colloque international, Paris, 24 octobre 1997*. Geneva: Droz, 2000, 157-66, and Marchand, 'Six cents ans', 32-45.

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