

PLASTER CAST COLLECTIONS IN THE COLONIAL WORLD:
CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CLASSICS AND RACIAL IDEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the connections between Classics and issues of race by examining the function and reception of plaster cast collections of Greek and Roman sculpture in the colonial world. The sculptures of the Greeks and Romans were associated with racial theories during the period of colonialism. Scholarship about Greece, particularly in regards to art, focused on its originality and its superiority over other ancient artistic traditions. As inheritors of this tradition, white Europeans viewed themselves as superior to the indigenous populations of the colonial world. By studying plaster cast collections in the British colonies and in the United States, racial ideologies and inequalities can be accessed. The collections can affirm the classical heritage for the white community, set up contrasts between Europeans and indigenous peoples, and be challenged from within the indigenous community. These functions and receptions provide insight into the controversial history of the classical education worldwide.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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Plaster Cast Collections in the Colonial World:
Connections between Classics and Racial Ideology

Introduction

The histories, function, and reception of plaster cast collections of Greek and Roman sculpture in Europe have been a topic of interest since the latter half of the twentieth century. While there has been research regarding the European collections, only a handful of comprehensive papers have been written about plaster cast collections in the colonial world. Specifically, research regarding the collections in the United States has been minimal and not widely disseminated. Today, it is especially relevant to study these collections as the history of Classics, its scholarship and its education, is undergoing a moment of critique that has prompted contentious debates in the field. Works, such as Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, created a controversy about the classical heritage that still reverberates today.¹ Bernal argues that there was decisive influence from Egypt on Greece in its early stages of civilization. He goes on to state that, during the modern era, classical scholars argued for a Greek civilization that was free from any Egyptian influences. This 'Aryan Model', which promoted Greek settlement by colonizers from Central Europe, was more compatible with the prevailing world-view of the time. European colonialism profited from these new understandings of Greece which supported white European superiority over other races.

In this paper, I intend to investigate the connections between Classics and racial ideologies and the implications of these connections by examining the function and reception of plaster cast collections of Greek and Roman sculpture in colonial settings. During and after the

¹ Bernal, Martin. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1987.

Renaissance, Greek and Roman sculptures were taken from where they were found, restored according to contemporary interpretations, bought and sold at high prices, and displayed together in private collections.² The sculptures provided visual images that helped to cultivate the memory of the past and express classical ideals, which added to the study of classical texts. An understanding of classical art became a component of European education, which was dominated by Classics. Since all members of society could not afford or could not travel to see original sculptures, copies, that were less expensive and easier to obtain, began to be manufactured in plaster.³ By the seventeenth century, casts and copies were being distributed throughout Europe. The copying of casts was part of a larger engine of imitation and replication in Europe. All forms of media, including art and literature, were being reproduced at a growing rate due to technological advancement, allowing these works to become more accessible to a larger portion of the community. This trend of imitation and replication expanded beyond Europe into the colonial world.

In this paper, I will focus my discussion on plaster cast collections that were developed in colonies or former colonies of the British Empire. First, I will discuss the role of Classics in the British education system and in British imperial and colonial ideology as this plays a role in understanding the collections in the colonies. Second, I will discuss the function and reception of the plaster cast collections in Melbourne, Auckland, and Cape Town. These collections have been researched in some depth and can provide insight into the relation between Classics and racial ideology. Third, I will discuss how Classics was utilized within the United States,

² Christian, Kathleen Wren. *Empire Without End: Antiquities Collections in Renaissance Rome, c. 1350-1527*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. p. 2.

³ Haskell, Francis and Penny, Nicholas. *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture 1500-1900*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. p. 16.

particularly in relation to racial ideology during the Civil War era. Fourth, I will examine the plaster cast collections from Boston and New York City, showing how they can inform us about the relationship between Classics and racial ideology. In studying these collections, the main questions which I will consider are: How is Classics, particularly Greek and Roman sculpture, related to racial ideologies? How do the plaster cast collections express racial ideologies? How can the function and reception of the plaster cast collections inform us about these ideologies? And, how does an understanding of these collections add to discussions about the controversial history of the discipline of Classics?

Classics and Colonialism within the British Empire

The influence of Classics and its parameters expanded beyond architecture and the decorative arts to larger connections with political, social, and cultural projects in Britain. Classics dominated school programs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which allowed students to have a thorough knowledge of Greek and Latin literary works.⁴ These students were primarily young men, who came from families of the social and political elite, as well as some from the middle class.⁵ Therefore, the shared familiarity of the ancient world created an ideological focus for a group of predominantly white, elite men. The classical education framed the styles of thought and endeavors of these men, who would go on to hold important positions within Britain and in the British colonies.⁶

⁴ Coltman, Viccy. *Fabricating the Antique: Neoclassicism in Britain, 1760-1800*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. p. 12.

⁵ Bowen, James. "Education, Ideology and the Ruling Class: Hellenism and English Public Schools in the Nineteenth Century." *Rediscovering Hellenism: The Hellenic Inheritance and the English Imagination*. Ed. Clarke, G.W. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. p. 163.

⁶ Vasunia, Phiroze. "Greek, Latin, and the Indian Civil Service." *British Classics Outside England: The Academy and Beyond*. Eds. Hallett, Judith P. and Stray, Christopher. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009. p. 61-93.

Thus, classical ideology and texts became prominent in discussions about British governmental systems, ideas of empire, and imperial and colonial ideology. Initially, there was a close affinity between Britain and Rome in these discussions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷ Antiquity was accessed to inform, shape, legitimize, and evaluate the British Empire. Specifically, Edward Gibbons' *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* came to inform leading officials about how the Empire should run so that it would not meet the same fate as Rome.⁸ After the American Revolution, tensions between empire and colony came to the forefront. Focus, then, shifted in Britain to the study of Greece, its history and its relationships with its colonies and the non-Greek world. These studies, which extended to racial theory, were rooted in prior scholarship on classical art. For instance, the works of Johann Joachim Winckelmann provide some of the prevailing theories about classical art which remained popular through the twentieth century.⁹ Particularly, Greek art was seen as superior to other art from antiquity, leading to the perception that Roman art consisted merely of imitations, or copies, of Greek art. The Romans, themselves, viewed Greek art as aesthetically pleasing and their words shaped modern scholarship. Thought to be unaffected by outside influences, Greek art came to be viewed as the highest expression of culture. Comparable artistic styles and forms from Egypt and the Middle East were seen to be more primitive. These notions of Greece in modern

⁷ Vlassopoulos, Kostas. "Imperial Encounters: Discourses on Empire and the Uses of Ancient History during the Eighteenth Century." *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire*. Ed. Bradley, Mark. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. p. 29-53.

⁸ Gibbons, Edward. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1955.

⁹ Winckelmann, Johann Joachim. *History of Ancient Art*. Trans. G. Henry Lodge. Boston: J.R. Osgood and Company, 1880. Winckelmann, Johann Joachim. *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*. Dresden: Im Verlag der Waltherischen Handlung, 1756.

scholarship were filtered through a long process of acquisition over the centuries in Europe, which did not wholly represent the cultural realities of Greece.

During the nineteenth century, Greek sculpture came to epitomize physical and racial perfection and the ancient Greeks were placed at the top of a hierarchy along with other white Europeans as their equal.¹⁰ Greek sculpture was utilized in physiognomy, the practice of judging character and mental capacity through observing body, especially facial, features. The Greek head was promoted as the best Caucasian type and the head of the Apollo Belvedere was the most prominent choice in comparative profiling.¹¹ While European skulls were more comparable to the shape and size of the head of the Apollo Belvedere, non-European skulls were not comparable in those qualities. Therefore, the mental capabilities of non-Europeans were considered to be less than their European counterparts. These ideas about race and the superiority of the European body transitioned into colonial ideology and the treatment of indigenous peoples in the colonial world.

New archaeological investigations in Greece during the eighteenth century and new travel publications, such as James Stuart and Nicholas Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* published in 1762, created a large audience for the arts of Greece.¹² There was a sense of allegiance to the ancient Greek world rather than the modern, which led to the exploitation of ancient artifacts from the Mediterranean. The acquisition of classical antiquities expressed the might of the British in Europe. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the collections at the British

¹⁰ Challis, Debbie. "'The Ablest Race': The Ancient Greeks in Victorian Racial Theory." *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire*. Ed. Bradley, Mark. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. p. 94-95.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 102.

¹² See Weber Soros, Susan. *James "Athenian" Stuart, 1713-1788: The Rediscovery of Antiquity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

Museum were organized around the collection of classical antiquities.¹³ Around the same time as the Elgin marbles arrived in the Museum, casts began to be commissioned to enhance the collection at the Museum. Casts of the Museum's original sculptures were also produced to sell to foreign museums and collectors.¹⁴ As the Empire grew, so too did the British Museum's collections. Artifacts were gathered from the peripheries of the world showing the might of the British beyond Europe. These artifacts were contrasted with the high culture of the classical sculptures, creating an argument for the intellectual and technological superiority of Europe and the British. The indigenous populations in the British colonies were not believed to be capable of creating art that was comparable to that of the Greeks and, by association, the British.

Plaster Cast Collections in the British Colonies

During the nineteenth century, museums became more prominent within the British colonies. These museums displayed specimens and artifacts that were acquired through the dispossession of the local cultures.¹⁵ Colonial museums exemplified British governorship of both the natural and the human world. The colonial museums lacked true antiquities and expressions of high culture, and as a result, antiquities from Europe were introduced into the collections.¹⁶ Plaster casts of Greek and Roman sculpture provided an accessible media for displaying and collecting classical arts. While their acquisition was meant to promote art and culture, the appearance of these collections in the colonies and their reception within the community holds larger racial implications.

¹³ Bradley, Mark. "Introduction." *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire*. Ed. Mark Bradley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. p. 2-9.

¹⁴ Wilson, D. *The British Museum: A History*. London: British Museum Press, 2002. p. 126-128.

¹⁵ MacKenzie, John M. *Museums and Empire: Natural History, Human Cultures and Colonial Identities*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009. p. 5.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

One of the first major plaster cast collections established in the British colonies was the ‘Museum of Casts’ in Melbourne, Australia in 1861. The main population of Melbourne was middle and lower class families, but as the city developed and grew, a new group of social elite came from Britain. Melbourne’s patron of the arts and proponent for educational and cultural enhancement of the city was Redmond Barry, who was educated in Classics from a very young age.¹⁷ Barry was exposed to classical antiquities and casts, both at the Trinity College Library and in London at the British Museum.¹⁸ After arriving in Melbourne, Barry aided in the creation of the first University, the Public Library, and a Museum of Fine Arts and Antiquities which would become part of the Library.

The arrival of the plaster cast collection in Melbourne can be related to the civilizing mission of colonialism, which was intended for the indigenous populations, as well as for non-elite European migrants. In the creation of this new museum, Barry drew on references from the library at Trinity College and the British Museum where classical sculpture and classical texts were juxtaposed.¹⁹ By placing the collection within the Melbourne Public Library, the casts and texts were meant to enhance each other and the community. Though not indigenous peoples, the lower classes had a similar lack in knowledge of Classics. At the Library, they would be able to learn about their white European heritage by viewing the casts and reading texts. The acquisition of the collection reinforces the system of imitation and replication. Both the texts and the sculptural casts are copies, which were made possible through the technological might of Britain.

¹⁷ See: Galbally, Ann. *Redmond Barry: An Anglo-Irish Australian*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1995.

¹⁸ Galbally, Ann. “The Lost Museum: Redmond Barry and Melbourne’s ‘Musée des Copies.’” *Australian Journal of Art* 8 (1998): p. 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

In Melbourne, they stand together distinct from connections to the local indigenous culture of the area.

In 1878, it was announced at a meeting of the Auckland Institute that a set of twenty-two plaster casts and eleven busts would be donated to the Auckland Museum by Thomas Russell, a financier from New Zealand who at the time lived in London.²⁰ Similar to Melbourne, the main population of Auckland was not a wealthy elite, but was comprised of merchants, ex-soldiers, and indigenous peoples. Although Russell may have intended to impress his social circle with the donation rather than to specifically serve the community in Auckland, the collection was greatly appreciated by the Auckland Institute and the Auckland Museum.²¹ Particularly, John Logan Campbell, a member of the Institute, saw the influence that the collection would play in the community and in the creation of a School of Design in Auckland.²²

The Auckland collection was utilized in the same way as the Melbourne collection in that it was meant to educate the public and elevate the culture of the city. Different in this situation, though, is the inclusion of indigenous peoples in the civilizing mission. The sculptural casts were contrasted with local indigenous artifacts that were viewed as primitive. It was believed that the local Maori populations did not possess the mental capabilities to produce works of art like those that the casts represented. The British, on the other hand, had the ability to create similar works and to recreate and replicate original works. Further, the sculptural casts presented an idea of beauty that was not common to the indigenous populations, but which was at the core

²⁰ Cooke, Ian. "Colonial Contexts: The Changing Meanings of the Cast Collection of the Auckland War Memorial Museum." *Plaster Casts: Making, Collecting, and Displaying from Antiquity to the Present*. Eds. Rune Frederiksen and Eckart Marchand. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010. p. 578.

²¹ Blackley, Roger. "Beauty and the Beast: Plaster Casts in a Colonial Museum." *On Display: New Essays in Cultural Studies*. Eds. A. Smith and L. Wevers. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004. p. 44.

²² Cooke, Ian, p. 580.

of European artistic traditions. The casts represented idealized and imagined bodies that were more closely connected to Europeans rather than Maori.

In South Africa, a plaster cast collection was gifted to the National Gallery of Cape Town in 1908. Unlike Melbourne and Auckland, Cape Town was not originally part of a British colony, but was ceded to the British by the Dutch. The plaster cast collection was initially proposed by a Dutch landscape painter, Abraham de Smidt, in 1871. He recommended that casts be acquired as they could easily be procured from London and that they be housed in the public library in the absence of an art gallery like the Melbourne collection.²³ The casts were presented by a group of men connected with the British South Africa Company. This company's aim was to spread British colonial rule northwards through Africa.²⁴

By proposing that the collection be assembled in the public library, de Smidt suggested educational purposes for the collection like Barry did in Melbourne. Further, he called for the promotion of an art school within the colony like Campbell did in Auckland. Eventually, the collection was gifted by a British company with motivations that dealt with imperial policy in the colony. The gift came after the success in the Second Boer War, at a time when the British grasp on the colony was being reasserted. Viewed in this manner, its arrival can be seen as an appropriation of the classical world by the British imperialist project in South Africa. While it was meant to educate members of the colony, it was also meant to maintain social distinctions between the British and other nationalities, both indigenous and not.²⁵ The trustees of the gallery

²³ De Smidt, Abraham. "An Art Gallery for South Africa." *Cape Monthly Magazine* V.2 No.10. April Cape Town: J.C. Juta, 1871: p. 237-246.

²⁴ Tietze, Anna. "Classical Casts and Colonial Galleries: The Life and Afterlife of the 1908 Beit Gift to the National Gallery of Cape Town." *South African Historical Journal* 39 (November 1998): p. 78.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

decided that the casts would not be available for viewing by the general public and that special permission would be required to view the collection.²⁶ Like a classical education during the colonial period in South Africa, the casts were not meant for the indigenous population. Classics became a distinguishing factor between British and non-British in South Africa. The classical culture belonged to the British colonists rather than the indigenous population, the Dutch settlers, or other immigrant colonists.

The collections, themselves, had many similarities. Melbourne's collection, acquired between 1859 and 1862, and Auckland's collection, acquired in 1878, came from the workshop of cast-maker Signor Domenico Brucciani of Covent Garden, who worked at the British Museum in London.²⁷ While specifics of Cape Town's collection are not accessible, we can assert that many of the casts came from London and that the assemblage contained similar casts to those in Melbourne and Auckland. The casts selected for these collections contained some of the most famous and well-known works, such as the Apollo Belvedere, the Laocoon, and the Venus de Medici. These choices were in accordance with prevalent European taste in classical art. They comprised groupings with which the educated public was expected to be familiar. Preference was given to Greek sculptors, such as Phidias and Praxiteles, who were thought to have perfected the ideals of beauty and culture in their works and to sculptures that followed in Greek artistic traditions. The importance of Greece can be seen in a catalogue authored by Redmond Barry in 1867. He writes, "Greece may be considered the country in which [sculpture] achieved its

²⁶ Ibid., p. 86.

²⁷ Brucciani, D. & Co. and South Kensington Museum. *Catalogue of Casts for Schools*. London: D. Brucciani & Co., 1889.

highest perfection.”²⁸ Of the Romans, he says, “They may be regarded as admirers of art, rather than as a nation producing artists from amongst themselves.”²⁹ The educational value of the casts was not lessened by their status as copies. As three-dimensional pieces, the casts were able to evoke the same prototypical ideals portrayed in the original works more effectively than in a copy such as a photograph or a drawing.

The reception of the collections varied. While the Cape Town collection did not survive long, perhaps due to its exclusivity, the Melbourne and Auckland collections have longer histories. Today, Melbourne and Auckland remain strong centers of classical scholarship. When Barry organized his ‘Museum of Casts’, he did not initially provide a catalogue or any specific information about the casts.³⁰ Barry believed that the ideals of the works should have been self-evident. Contrary to this, English-born journalist James Smith reacted to the collection in a piece in the *Argus* in 1865, saying that most leave the Gallery with no greater comprehension than when they entered due to the lack of descriptive material.³¹ He goes on to state that the casts are clustered together with no attempt at presenting them in chronological order or artistic rank. The educational value of the casts, therefore, was not being utilized fully. Smith’s critiques suggest a need for a better understanding of the development of the classical heritage, which the people of Melbourne, as European migrants, should be made aware of as it is their heritage. Critiques eventually led to the creation of a catalogue for the collection by Barry which described the casts and connected them to classical texts that could be found in the Public Library.

²⁸ Museum of Art. *Catalogue of the Casts of Statues, Busts and Bas-reliefs in the Museum of Art at the Public Library, Melbourne*. Melbourne: Government Printer, 1867. p. iii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xii.

³⁰ Galbally, Ann, p. 43.

³¹ Smith, James. “The Victorian Sculpture Gallery.” *Argus* 7 January 1865: p. 5-6.

Unlike the Melbourne collection, the casts in the Auckland collection were intermixed with natural history objects in the Main Hall of the Auckland Museum.³² John Logan Campbell designed the space with the casts as the predominant focus of attention. His design encouraged comparisons and connections to be made between the casts, such as between the Venus de Milo and the Venus de Medici, which were placed across from one another.³³ Similar to the Melbourne collection, no additional information was provided about the casts beyond their names because Campbell believed the casts could speak for themselves. Maori reactions to the collection varied from those of European colonists. It was reported in the *Auckland Star* that all “semi barbarians” value strength and courage because they were in continual states of warfare.³⁴ This was why the Maori appreciated the larger frame of the Venus de Milo compared to the slimmer frame of the Venus de Medici. Descriptions of Maori reactions suggest that due to their limited mental capacity, the Maori did not understand what high culture and art looked like. This distinguishes the Maori from Europeans and promotes the superiority of the British.

As the Auckland Museum grew, a new annex was added specifically for the casts. In order to arrive to the annex, museum visitors needed to pass through the Ethnographical Hall, which contained Maori and Pacific Island artifacts.³⁵ This arrangement suggested a progression in aesthetic quality of art from the Maori artifacts to the master works of Western sculpture. Around the same time, a second cast collection from Paris arrived at the museum, consisting of

³² Cooke, Ian, p. 580.

³³ Ibid., p. 583.

³⁴ “The Evening Star: With Which Are Incorporated the Evening News, the Morning News, and the Echo.” *Auckland Star* 19 February, 1879: p. 2.

³⁵ Cooke, Ian, p. 590.

casts of ethnological types.³⁶ These were casts of heads of various races of men, which were the focus on discussions of race during the nineteenth century. While the classical casts provided a sense of the ideal European body, the ethnological heads provided a direct comparison between races. The latter became more influential in asserting the superiority of white Europeans over other races.³⁷ In this case, the power of the classical heritage to assert European superiority was eclipsed by the new ethnological discussions. The racial ideologies within Classics, however, promoted the ethnological studies that took its place.

The Role of Classics in the United States

Classics had a presence in the United States prior to independence. The American colonies, with their ties to Britain, had similar traditions in education, with its focus on Classics. Prior to the American Revolution, colonial grammar schools mainly taught Greek and Latin grammar, rather than English.³⁸ Classics remained at the core of the standard school and college curriculum until the middle of the twentieth century, even though it was continually challenged by those who denied its practical utility.³⁹ Study of Greek and Latin provided the early colonists with illustrations of oratory skills, the need for civic virtue, the nobility of heroes, and the course of liberty.⁴⁰ Classical writings and ancient history played a large role during the revolutionary period. The Founding Fathers drew inspiration for the formation of the Constitution from

³⁶ Blackley, Roger, p. 51.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 56.

³⁸ Richard, Carl J. *The Golden Age of Classics in America: Greece, Rome, and the Antebellum United States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. p. 2.

³⁹ Reinhold, Meyer. *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984. p. 181-213.

⁴⁰ Briggs, Walter. "United States." *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*. Ed. Kallendorf, Craig W. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. p. 281.

accounts of the democratic movement in Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries BC and the Roman Republic of the sixth through the first centuries BC.⁴¹ These histories provided examples of civic virtue as well as civic failure that served as guidelines for the formation of the new government. After the revolution, the number of institutions which focused on a classical curriculum increased. These academies and private schools were founded and attended by the middle class and elite population in the United States. At the collegiate level, almost all institutions prior to the Civil War required students to demonstrate proficiency in the classical languages.⁴² Students who attended these academies and colleges often organized adult literary societies after they graduated, creating vast networks in the early United States.

African American students in some northern cities also had access to a classical education several decades prior to the Civil War.⁴³ For African Americans, Classics became a weapon for abolitionist movements. Knowledge of the classical texts was used by educated African Americans in their fight for liberty and equality in the United States.⁴⁴ While the classical education was accessible, it was controversial within the African American community as some believed that they should focus on studying more practical skills. Others argued that by learning the art of oratory through the study of classical texts, they could better assert their rights. Specifically, abolitionists cited texts which describe barbarian peoples as well as Egyptians. In 1849, William Wells Brown wrote that the Britons were viewed as barbarians by the Romans,

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 283.

⁴² Richard, Carl, p. 5.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴⁴ Malamud, Margaret. "Classics as a Weapon: African Americans and the Fight for Inclusion in American Democracy." *Classics in the Modern World: A 'Democratic Turn'?* Eds. Hardwick, Lorna and Harrison, Stephen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. p. 90.

noting that the powerful British were descended from slaves.⁴⁵ The romanticized descriptions of the primitive Germans compared with the decadence and corruption of the Romans in Tacitus were also cited.⁴⁶ By making connections to Egypt, African Americans made their own claims to the classical past. They argued that they were the descendants of the ancient Egyptians, whose civilization was greatly admired by the Greeks and Romans.⁴⁷ Abolitionists claimed that Egypt was the source of all the glories of Greece and Rome. They meant to show that racial prejudices were not natural law.

Further, classical texts were influential in white American opinions on slavery in the United States during and after the Civil War. Men and women from the North and South weighed their opinions on this issue with examples and comparisons to antiquity. For instance, Lydia Maria Child condemned modern slavery and connected it to the oppressions of women, past and present.⁴⁸ Her studies of slavery in Greece and the differences in Athenian and Spartan slavery led to her analysis of the modern situation in the United States. She directly compared the South to Sparta, which enslaved thousands of helots, while the North, with more lenient slave policies was more similar to Athens.⁴⁹ On the other end of the spectrum, slaveholder Louisa McCord argued for slavery.⁵⁰ She provided examples from antiquity that showed how a racially equal society could not function. For her, the way towards development was for white men to

⁴⁵ Brown, William Wells. *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*. New York, Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968. p. 34-35.

⁴⁶ Crummell, Alexander. *Africa and America: Addresses and Discourses*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969. p. 87.

⁴⁷ Malamud, Margaret, p. 98.

⁴⁸ Winterer, Caroline. *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. p. 169.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173-174.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

lead society with women in a subordinate position and with African Americans as slaves. Here again, the classical heritage is filtered through the particular life experiences of individuals.

During the nineteenth century, the belief in Greek superiority over Rome took hold in the United States just as in Britain. One of the leaders of the American Hellenist movement was Edward Everett, who became a young professor at Harvard in 1815.⁵¹ After his appointment, Everett traveled and studied in Europe for four years in order to become a better classical scholar. When Everett returned to Harvard, he began a campaign to promote the study of the Greek language and Greece following the model of German scholarship. Everett declared that Rome and the Western world were indebted to Greece for all of its literature and culture. His and his successor's ideas of Greek superiority were instilled in the minds of their students, who carried it forward into the nineteenth century.⁵²

Plaster Cast Collections in the United States

After the Revolution, American sculptors began traveling to Europe and a pervasive classicism in architecture and the arts began to emerge in the United States. Federal buildings and plantations were designed in the neoclassical style. Between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, efforts were made to elevate the taste of the general public and the artistic community in the United States.⁵³ Since original works were difficult to attain, plaster cast collections were predominant in promoting art and culture. Discussion of plaster cast collections in the United States has been limited to descriptions of the rise and fall of cast collections as a whole and to

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 11. Also see: Reinhold, Meyer, p. 204-220; Winterer, Caroline, p. 44-76.

⁵² Ibid., p. 12.

⁵³ Dyson, Stephen L. *Ancient Marbles to American Shores: Classical Archaeology in the United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998. p. 21-26.

descriptions of their relation to art academies and the promotion of culture.⁵⁴ The histories of these collections are an important part in the discussion of Classics in the United States. However, more can be said about how the collections relate to larger racial tensions within Classics.

In 1807, the Boston Athenaeum, a library and literary society, was organized.⁵⁵ The proximity to Harvard, with its focus on Classics, created a receptive and eager audience for a plaster cast collection in the educated community. John Thornton Kirkland, an educator and president of Harvard from 1810 to 1828, wrote that the Boston Athenaeum should collect objects which would serve as examples and illustrations of taste in the fine arts.⁵⁶ Although he called for a range of objects in the collection, the target audience was mainly men of the elite class, who were members of the literary society. These men were already leaders in politics, commerce, education, and religion, and through observing the fine arts at the Boston Athenaeum, they were to become leaders in taste and culture.⁵⁷ The provision of the collection suggests bias in the community. Access for educated women was limited and it is unlikely that the uneducated lower classes and African Americans were part of the literary society. The collection can also be viewed as an access point to the classical heritage that Americans identified with.

⁵⁴ For an overview of the history of plaster cast collections in the United States see: Born, Pamela. "The Canon Is Cast: Plaster Casts in American Museum and University Collections." *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 21.2 (Fall 2002): p. 8-13; Dyson, Stephen L. "Cast Collecting in the United States". *Plaster Casts: Making, Collecting, and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present*. Eds. Rune Fredericksen and Eckard Marchand. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010. p. 557-575; McNutt, James K. "Plaster Casts after Antique Sculpture: Their Role in the Elevation of Public Taste and in American Art Instruction." *Studies in Art Education* 31.3 (Spring 1990): p. 158-167.

⁵⁵ Dearinger, David B. "Collecting Paintings and Sculpture for the Boston Athenaeum." *Acquired Tastes: 200 Years of Collecting for the Boston Athenaeum*. Eds. Cushing, Stanley Ellis and Dearinger, David B. Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 2006. p. 34.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

Casts of antique sculpture and copies of paintings would become the dominant features of the Athenaeum's annual exhibitions. The collection of casts began in 1817 with a gift of the Laocoon and the Dying Gaul by Solomon Willard, an architect who designed in the Greek Revival style.⁵⁸ Five years later, another gift was made, including the Apollo Belvedere, the Borghese Gladiator, and the Venus de Medici.⁵⁹ These casts represented the same groupings found in the previous colonial collections, which included the major cultural works and some of the grand archaeological discoveries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1822, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Harvard student, visited the Athenaeum and wrote that the casts attract the visitor from every corner of the building.⁶⁰ He noted that the casts have the ability to make a connoisseur out of the most diligent visitors. The connoisseur would be elevated with the classical sculpture alongside the classical texts. Emerson also wrote that those without any appreciation for the antique stare blindly and gain no new knowledge. This suggests that only those educated in the field of Classics can appreciate the casts and further their education and taste by viewing them.

By 1879, almost the entire art collection from the Boston Athenaeum was moved to the new Museum of Fine Arts in Boston as a long term loan.⁶¹ This allowed the plaster casts to appear together in a larger and more accessible setting for wider public viewing. The cast catalogue of the Museum of Fine Arts was written by Edward Robinson, a graduate of Harvard

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

⁶⁰ Emerson to Hill. July 3, 1822. *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson Vol. 1*. Ed. Ralph L. Rusk. New York: Columbia University Press, 1939. p. 119-120.

⁶¹ Dearing, David, p. 57.

and the Curator of Classical Antiquities.⁶² In the catalogue, Robinson wrote that the descriptions he provides are meant to be useful for public visitors, but especially for students.⁶³ Special designation in the catalogue was given to the sculptures from Olympia and the sculptures from the Parthenon. Olympia was described by Robinson as the place where the Greeks manifested a sense of unity, in spite of their internal dissensions.⁶⁴ At a time after the Civil War, this description of Olympia was especially relevant for the United States as it was regrouping as a nation. His discussion of the Parthenon brought in notions of Greek independence and the beauty of Phidias' sculptures.⁶⁵ The Parthenon was the symbol for Athenian democracy after the Persian Wars. This description is reminiscent of the Revolutionary period in which the United States won its independence from Britain. Finally, Phidias' works were described as the zenith of art. Robinson wrote that his works were established for all time in the laws of beauty and sublimity and that they have never been surpassed. This description falls in line with the notion of Greek supremacy in art that was taught at Harvard and held to be true worldwide.

A second collection was organized at the Metropolitan Museum of Art about the same time as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The Metropolitan Museum was conceived by a group of Americans, who wanted to create a national institution and gallery of art in New York City.⁶⁶ The museum was intended to bring art and art education to people of all walks of life. Collection of plaster casts began in 1886 and covered a long period. Having a plaster cast

⁶² Robinson, Edward. *Descriptive Catalogue of the Casts from Greek and Roman Sculpture*. Boston: A. Mudge & Son, 1887.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 64-66.

⁶⁶ Tompkins, Calvin. *Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970. p. 28.

collection was essential for the museum. It is noted in an article in 1891 that the Metropolitan Museum of Art was behind similar museums abroad and within the United States in the collection of plaster casts.⁶⁷ The collection, therefore, was important in regards to education as well as in regards to competition.

After leaving the Museum of Fine Arts, Robinson became the Director at the Metropolitan Museum in 1910. Under his direction, Gisela A.M. Richter, who studied at Cambridge and the British School of Archaeology in Greece, was hired to catalogue the large collection of Greek vases.⁶⁸ She became full curator of Classical Art in 1925. Together, Robinson and Richter were involved in cataloguing the casts of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁶⁹ In his preface, Robinson again wrote that the catalogue is meant to inform and educate the visitor or student as they view the collections.⁷⁰ Richter's descriptions of the Greek and Roman casts were archaeologically oriented. She highlighted the originality of the sculptures even though she noted influences from other cultures, like Egypt.⁷¹ Notions of the primitive nature of Egyptian art was widespread during the nineteenth century. A New York Times article published in 1873 stated, "the difference between the taste of the Greeks and that of the Egyptians, even in so small a matter as that of a hand lamp" is exemplified in the Metropolitan Museum's collections.⁷² While the Greek lamp is admirably adapted by the maker, the Egyptian lamp is

⁶⁷ *The New York Times*. "To Have New Treasures: Plaster Casts for the Metropolitan Museum of Art." 26 February, 1891.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁶⁹ Robinson, Edward. *Catalogue of the Collection of Casts*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1910.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. v.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35-37.

⁷² *The New York Times*. "Metropolitan Museum of Art." 2 October 1873.

described as a flattened out lump of clay. Therefore, the artistic taste of the Greeks far surpassed the Egyptians even for basic items. This analysis and Richter's statements about the individuality of Greek artistic forms support the notions of white European superiority.

Just as in the British colonies, the plaster cast collections in the United States were meant to educate the public in art, taste, and culture. In a similar way to the British examples, the plaster cast collections help to foster a connection between the United States and the classical past. The United States, during the period of the Revolution and the Civil War era, consistently made connections to antiquity, staking a claim to the classical heritage. By participating in the trends of imitation and replication and organizing plaster cast collections, the United States put itself on equal footing with the European nations, particularly Britain. Since these claims to the classical past were made, the implications of white superiority were also brought to the United States.

These notions of racial ideology in Classics created a divide among the American population. There were those who accessed the classical heritage to promote slavery and those who called for its abolishment. This came from African Americans as well as white Americans. Following the trends of the time, the plaster cast collections were written about in ways that fostered notions of Greek individuality and Greek superiority over other ancient cultures. Therefore, the collections in the United States continued to represent a white European heritage. However, these ideas were challenged by some who argued for African influence on Greece, particularly in the arts. They utilized Classics to show that they were equal to the white race that claimed superiority over them. These challenges came mainly in the form of textual traditions, but can also be related to the artistic. By challenging the notions of Greek superiority, they

challenged the classical artistic tradition. Further, by challenging the classical artistic tradition, they challenged the classical education as a whole. They asserted that the ways in which classical scholarship has discussed Greece were fundamentally racist.

Conclusion

The controversial nature of the casts as copies in the twentieth century led to the degradation and destruction of plaster cast collections worldwide. This, along with issues of nudity in casts, has been discussed as the most controversial topic in the history of plaster cast collections, particularly in the colonial world. However, in this paper, I have asserted that studying the function and reception of the plaster cast collections in relation to racial ideology can provide scholars with another access point into the study of the controversial history of Classics as a discipline. This history is increasingly relevant today in light of Martin Bernal's discussion about the African influences on Greece as well as the current social and racial injustices that are still occurring today.

Classics was one of the most influential disciplines in European and American education systems from the Renaissance through the first half of the twentieth century. In this paper, I have shown how classical scholarship promoted the idea of white superiority over other races. Classics was utilized to promote colonialism and to promote the superiority of Europeans over the indigenous populations in colonial lands. These ideas were transferred to the United States as Americans made claims to the classical tradition. In the United States, this caused debates over the reception of Classics in regards to race.

The plaster cast collections of Greek and Roman sculpture were part of a larger tradition of imitation and replication throughout the world. As classical scholarship relating to the art of

the Greeks played a large role in racial ideologies and the promotion of white European supremacy, the plaster cast collections provided an effective medium to access and spread those notions. They are an effective medium because they are visual rather than literary and, therefore, are more accessible to a wider population. Further, they are more appealing to the general public and can be viewed without any formal education. While the casts do not explicitly express racial ideologies, their reception can be connected to those notions. The collection in Melbourne promoted these ideas among the white population in the city so that the lower classes could learn about their classical heritage. In Auckland, there was a direct comparison between the casts and the artifacts of the indigenous Maori populations. This stressed their differences and suggested that the Maori were not as intelligent as the Europeans. In Cape Town, the casts were not accessible by the indigenous population and were only meant for white British colonialists. The cast collections in Boston and New York City were accessible to large portions of the community and continued to be discussed along the same trends in classical scholarship. However, debates within the country challenged those longstanding artistic traditions.

The plaster cast collections, therefore, express more than a taste in art and a promotion of culture. They convey unequal relationships between different groups of people, specifically between different racial groups in this case. With further archival research, this study can be expounded upon and can be discussed in regards to other relationships involving social class and gender. By studying these collections, scholars can place another piece in the puzzle of the history of Classics.

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