The University of Melbourne cast collection

In 1855, Frederick McCoy, the Professor of Natural Sciences at the University of Melbourne, requested the addition of antique sculpture casts to the University's Natural History Collection. McCoy's aim was to educate students in history and to assist in developing 'taste' in the colony. Following his death in 1899, his collection was transferred to the National Museum of Victoria.

The university's collection of casts as we know it today largely owes its existence to three university staff members and a generous bequest. Jessie Web (1908–1944), lecturer in ancient history, and Cecil Scutt (1915–1955), Professor of Classical Philology, were the leading figures behind amassing the classical cast collection in the 1920s, 1930s and 1950s. Webb requested grants to purchase ancient coins and casts of statuary for teaching purposes. Scutt developed the collection using funds from the Sutton Bequest, which was in memory of John Hugh Sutton, a promising young classics student tragically killed in 1925. By 1929, Scutt had amassed a vast array of casts and artefacts. Though documentation is scant, it is possible to trace some acquisitions, such as the purchase of the Acropolis kore in December 1928 and the five crates donated by the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1930.

The Middle Eastern studies cast collection was largely established through the efforts of Professor John Bowman—appointed in 1959 to the Chair of Semitic Studies—who played a crucial role in promoting the Middle East in Australia. He created an extensive collection of resources, including plaster casts, to enhance teaching and research.
Cast collections and Victorian taste

In the late eighteenth century, museums began to commission and collect plaster casts for educational purposes. By 1800, museums in Berlin, Paris, Vienna, Copenhagen, Munich and Cork all had established cast collections of famous and renowned statues from antiquity. The idea of a ‘museum of enlightenment’ became popular; to show accomplishments of humankind from around the world, not bound to one nation or civilisation.

The 1851 Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, London, did much to promote the idea that a cast collection should form the basis and centre of all comprehensive museums of art. The Victorian and Albert Museum (V&A) in London followed this trend and created a great Cast Court for reproductions. The V&A was instrumental in promoting the production and international sharing of casts of antique sculpture. The first director, Henry Cole, initiated the Convention for Promoting Universal Reproductions of Works of Art in 1867. Signed by the Prince of Wales and fifteen other European princes, it had the grand aim of sharing each nation’s prized artworks for the educational good of all.

In Australia, judge and anthropologist Sir Redmond Barry (1818–1880), was intent on promoting cultural advancement in the colonies. Between the years 1859–62, Barry managed to acquire a classically-based collection of casts, which he intended to display at a Victorian Museum of Casts (which was never realised).

By the late nineteenth century, cast collections around the world had begun to fall from favour. Contemporary artists were attracting attention, and the focus of collectors and museums moved from the classical to the current. Many cast collections were relegated to storage or sold. In the case of Redmond Barry’s collection, much was put up for auction or given away. Cast collections in museums and galleries are now rare.
The technical process of casting

A plaster cast is an exact replica taken from another object through the use of a mould. Various items can be cast including sculpture, architectural elements, fossils or even a living person. The art of plaster casting is generally believed to have spread from the East, and was used by the ancient Greeks and Romans.

In the traditional casting process, the original was given a protective coating (typically beeswax mixed with turpentine) and then plaster would be applied in sections or 'piece moulds', much like a jigsaw puzzle. When removed, a negative impression was formed. Plaster could then be pressed or poured in, and on removal of the moulds, a replica of the original was revealed.

Plaster in its basic form is made from mixing the powder created by roasting limestone with various binding materials such as sand, animal glue, hair and water. Traditionally, the hardest and whitest plaster used for sculpting and manufacturing copies was **stucco**. **Stucco** is formed by mixing the lime obtained when burning marble or Roman travertine with pulverised marble and other ingredients. Another variation of plaster which is more liquid in form is **gesso** —also known as 'Plaster of Paris'. Gypsum is the main ingredient in gesso and was traditionally found in the Montmartre district of Paris. Though very fine and brilliantly white, it is extremely brittle and can splinter and break easily.

From the sixteenth century, plaster casts had become common on the art market, and as such the quality was not guaranteed. By the late eighteenth century, a thriving business had formed in Britain supplying casts of famous artefacts and sculptures to the wealthy nobility. It was only after the Copyright Act of 1798, that the business became regulated. Plaster casting continues and is still utilised by many museums around the world for producing copies of popular works. The British Museum sells thousands of replicas of the Rosetta Stone each year—in this context the cast acquires souvenir status.
The role of cast collections

Do replicas undermine the original? Questions such as this have plagued museums since they first began to use casts to complement their collections. Reproductions were originally collected by museums with the primary function of making artworks accessible to the whole world. With the affordability and possibility of travel so much greater in modern times and the recent global digitisation of collections, the relevance of casts has come under question.

Cast collections broke down the barriers of location and ownership, providing an opportunity for many to study and witness artistic achievements. Renaissance and later Victorian ideas gave rise to renewed interest in the classics. However as quickly as cast collections came into vogue, they became obsolete. Casts were dismissed in favour of 'original' artworks. The question now remains, what is the function and relevance of a cast collection?

Along with representing great works of art, casts provide security. Ultimately no museum can guarantee the safety of its artworks absolutely. Threats of natural disaster, war and theft are very real problems that museums face. Casts provide security that the artwork will never be truly lost. The replica can be displayed in place of the original, it can be a representative object in another country, or act as a substitute during conservation. At the University of Melbourne, our cast collection is studied by a diversity of students to enhance teaching and learning in a wide range of subjects including archaeology, art history, classics, conservation, education, history, languages, and media and communication. Casts have never been used by museums to intentionally deceive. They were manufactured to inform and enlighten, as much as they were a trend.

Casts were designed to represent that which could not be obtained in its original form. The subsequent history attached to casts has seen them attract an interesting history in their own right and they continue to be created, used and exhibited around the world. For example, the cast bronze reproduction of the statue of Artemision Zeus (or Posiden) currently standing the courtyard of the Elizabeth Murdoch building was a gift of the Greek Orthodox community of Melbourne in commemoration of the 1956 Olympic Games. This rare replica is one of only two castings which were made with the permission of the Greek government; the first casting is located in the United Nations building, New York.
Can a plaster cast replace the original?

Controversy surrounds the question of whether a reproduction can replace the 'real thing'. For those nations who have had their artefacts removed or stolen, a cast may be a considered an unacceptable replacement, serving only as a reminder of what has been lost.

The great archaeological excavations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw many iconic objects removed from their places of origin. Museums in Europe and North America sponsored expeditions to Greece, Italy, Egypt and the Near East which amassed vast collections of objects of cultural significance. Debate has raged for years over the repatriation of items such as the Rosetta Stone and the Bust of Nefertiti, discovered in Egypt and held in London and Berlin respectively. Perhaps the most famous example is the request for the return of the Parthenon Marbles (also known as the Elgin Marbles) from the British Museum to Athens. Although casts have been made available to Greece and Egypt, Greek officials continue to campaign for the return of the original sculptures. Issues regarding the safety, accessibility and patrimony of artefacts are central to these repatriation debates.

While the cast may not possess the same powerful aura as the original, it may provide an opportunity for information to be more widely disseminated. Plaster casts and copies, along with museum souvenirs, have allowed these objects to be viewed on a worldwide scale. By creating replicas and ensuring these are held in a variety of institutions, museums ensure the object's survival. A cast is an ambassador for the original, an insurance policy, and an effective marketing tool—much more than a replacement of the 'real thing'. 