

Books

Plaster Casts: Making, Collecting and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present. Edited by Rune Frederiksen and Eckart Marchand. 752 pp. incl. 36 col. + 292 b. & w. ills. (De Gruyter, Berlin, 2010), £129.95. ISBN 978-3-11-020856-6.

Reviewed by ANN COMPTON

THE SAYING: ‘Clay the life. Plaster cast the death. Bronze and Marble the resurrection’, usually attributed to Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844), was frequently recited in nineteenth-century texts on sculpture.¹ Long taken as confirmation that practitioners regarded plaster as a purely transitional medium devoid of expressive possibilities, this book amply demonstrates that such one-dimensional interpretations overlook more complex underlying narratives. Indeed, this publication, the first to provide a wide-ranging and detailed account of a frequently misunderstood material, reveals that, far from having a purely mechanical function, plaster has always been central to the creative process. For example, Thorvaldsen conferred a central role to the cast in shaping his artistic legacy when he donated the full-scale plaster models of all his works to the museum built in his honour in Copenhagen in 1838–48.

This publication is the outcome of a three-day conference organised in 2007 by its editors, Rune Frederiksen and Eckart Marchand.² This was arranged in response to growing scholarly interest in plaster as a medium and in reinterpretations of historic cast collections, of which the current refurbishment of the cast courts at the V. & A. is a good example. With contributions on casts made between the fourteenth century BC and the late twentieth century, this volume is set to become a standard work. Its substantial new research more than compensates for its relatively modest visual impact (there are around 350 illustrations, but most are quarter- or half-page black-and-white images). This review considers a few of the many avenues of research that will be served by this richly rewarding publication.

Several essays offer important new information about the use of casts to reproduce, disseminate and reinterpret the antique. For example, Valentin Kockel demonstrates that understanding of classical architecture and decoration was greatly facilitated by the production of plaster models and casts during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while Frederiksen and Christa Landwehr show that working in plaster and the creation of reproductive casts was another form of classical revival given that these techniques were

widely used by the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. The provisional list of museum holdings of antique plaster casts attached to Frederiksen’s essay offers an invaluable starting point for further investigation.

Today plaster is often considered a ‘humble’ material. By contrast, plaster casts, particularly casts after antique sculptures, were central to the trade in luxury goods up to the mid-nineteenth century. Several essays reflect on changing patterns of patronage and consumption: Parra, Miramón, Sánchez and Nogué discuss two of the high-quality casts commissioned by Velázquez on behalf of Philip IV of Spain during his visit to Rome (1649–50); Claudia Wagner and Gertrud Seidman evaluate substantial collections of gem-impressions formed by Catherine the Great, Goethe and Sir Henry Wellcome; and Charlotte Schreiter outlines the flourishing trade in casts after Roman and Greek statuary in eighteenth-century Germany.

Recent research into studio and workshop practice is enhanced by a number of texts on the use of plaster as a ‘final’ material. Early examples of this are described in Martin Biddle’s essay on the materials, methods and origins of the stuccos at Nonsuch Palace, and the Arnolds’ and Rüber-Schütte’s description of a current project to conserve the remarkable thirteenth-century polychrome plaster modelling on the choir-screens at the Church of Our Lady, Halberstadt. Marchand’s study of ‘Plaster and Plaster Casts in Renaissance Italy’ presents a comprehensive survey of the theory and practice of the medium in this period. His illuminating analysis includes discussion of permanent and ephemeral architectural decorations created in plaster and of painters’ contributions to developing techniques and novel uses for the material. Léon Lock provides a visual reinterpretation of the artists’ use of casts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and draws on the evidence of genre paintings of studio interiors, popular in the Low Countries at the time. A fresh perspective on the discourse of ‘originality’ in sculpture and the ways in which plaster was used to forge new relationships between artist and patron/public is provided by recent research on its use in the studios of Antonio Canova (by Johannes Myssok) and Francis Chantrey (by Greg Sullivan).

The museological significance of plaster casts is currently the subject of widespread re-evaluation. Frederiksen and Marchand grouped the seven papers about collections in London, Paris, Prague, Moscow, Auckland and America under the heading ‘Casting Nations: the National Museum’. This suggests a new perspective on objects often considered to have been acquired for educational purposes. Separate consideration is given to the pedagogical role of the cast. Notable among these texts is Thomas Macsotay’s study of the reproductive casts held by the Académie de France in the late eighteenth century. Macsotay effectively counters the assumed drudgery associated with studying from plaster replicas

by outlining the complex narratives underpinning their display at the Académie de France and their use in teaching memory techniques to advanced students. The Academia de San Carlos in Mexico City is unusual in having retained its large cast collection, started in 1791, and also holds over 5,000 student drawings. This remarkable body of work, discussed by Elizabeth Fuentes Rojas, offers a rare overview of changing teaching methods c.1790–1940.

One area calling out for further investigation is the period after 1850, in particular to assess curators’, art historians’ and practitioners’ shifting perceptions of the cast since 1900. A valuable prelude to this is provided by studies on Medardo Rosso, Umberto Boccioni and Rachel Whiteread in this publication. These indicate that approaches to this period need not be limited to modernist opposition and postmodern rehabilitation of the cast, but that there are important continuities in attitudes to multiples, authorship, replication and uses of plaster in the twentieth century waiting to be revealed. As Malcolm Baker argues, the plaster cast belongs to a larger category of reproductive methods (photographs, prints, wax models, electrotypes etc.) and must be understood in this wider context.

¹ The wording varies and is often given without any attribution or, on some occasions, is ascribed to Antonio Canova.

² Marchand has organised three international conferences held at the University of Reading (2006), Oxford (2007), and London (*Plaster and Plaster Casts: Materiality and Practice*, V. & A., 12th–13th March 2010, organised with Marjorie Trusted).

An Ardent Patron; Cardinal Camillo Massimo and his antiquarian and artistic circle. By Lisa Beaven. 440 pp. incl. 158 col. + 49 b. & w. ills. (Paul Holberton Publishing, London, in association with Centro de Estudios Europa Hispanica, Verona, 2010), £40. ISBN 978-1-903470-98-5.

Reviewed by HELEN LANGDON

CARDINAL CAMILLO MASSIMO (1620–77) was one of the most fascinating of seventeenth-century Italian collectors and patrons. He was a passionate collector of ancient sculpture, coins, medals and gems, and a contemporary praised him as ornamented by ‘an exquisite erudition and knowledge of antique things’ (p.84). Yet he was also an inspirational patron, particularly of landscape painting, who encouraged contemporary artists to respond imaginatively to the classical past; he commissioned paintings from Velázquez, Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, and enjoyed unusually warm friendships with these artists. His views were nurtured by Giovanni Pietro Bellori, who remained a faithful friend and adviser throughout the sudden reversals of fortune that marked his career. A brilliant

future seemed assured when Massimo was sent as papal nuncio to Spain in 1653, but in 1658 he was recalled in disgrace, due, Beaven has revealed, to irregularities in the accounts of his nunciature. He was exiled to his estates outside Rome, where he languished in isolation and poverty for several years. Massimo's fortunes revived with the Altieri papacy of Clement X, and in the 1670s he played a dominant role in the Roman art world.

Lisa Beaven, whose book vastly enriches our knowledge of Cardinal Massimo's achievements, demonstrates how he developed an unusually consistent taste. Her early chapters describe his family background and the first influences upon his career. There follows a chapter on Massimo at the court of Spain, where, despite enjoying the friendship of Velázquez, whose portrait of him (Fig. 51) radiates success and opulence, he was so out of tune with royal taste that the material is a little flat. Unexpectedly, it is the following period, when Massimo was out of favour, that is most interesting, and the most remarkable section of this book is devoted to his architectural projects at Roccasecca, his estate and place of exile, and to the display of his collection at the Palazzo Massimo alle Quattro Fontane in Rome.

The chapter on Roccasecca is based on a series of fascinating letters to Bellori and to his builders, discovered by Beaven and published in an appendix. This unusually vivid correspondence brings to life the partnership between Massimo, Bellori and Poussin. At Roccasecca, Massimo built two odd little churches, which in a scholarly and archaeological spirit aimed to reproduce ancient buildings, but he desired to give splendour to these '*oggetti troppo umili*' (p.404) by entreating Poussin to supply drawings for their decoration, for which Massimo devised an extremely precise programme. Poussin, old, ill and expensive, never sent any drawings, but the existing frescos, whose designs Beaven convincingly attributes to Giovanni Angelo Canini, follow Massimo's instructions precisely. The grandeur of his aims far surpassed his achievements, and the letters are more interesting than the churches. But the chapter's conclusion, an analysis of Claude's *View of Delphi with a procession* (1673; Art Institute of Chicago), later commissioned by Massimo, pays tribute to the ambition and poetry of his vision. Beaven cleverly suggests that this painting is a kind of memorial to the Roccasecca project, and that Claude's rendering of the rocky slopes of Parnassus, studded with minor temples and arches, also alludes to the churches at Roccasecca and to the surrounding landscape of Massimo's family territory of Privernum, itself rich in ancient remains and Virgilian references. This is an attractive idea, and throughout this book Beaven associates the antiquarian note in one group of Claude's paintings with the direct intervention of Massimo and with his sense of how landscape may express complex ideas about family and ancient lineage. Her arguments are clear and precise, but it is the photographs, unusually



51. *Portrait of Camillo Massimo*, by Diego Velázquez. 1649–50. Canvas, 74.5 by 59.5 cm. (Kingston Lacy, Dorset).

copious and beautiful, which bring the text to life and eloquently demonstrate the relationship between the real landscape and architecture of Roccasecca and the landscape paintings of both Claude and Poussin.

In the subsequent chapter Beaven turns her attention to Rome, and her reconstruction of Massimo's rooms at Palazzo Massimo alle Quattro Fontane, supported again by useful illustrations and plans, is a valuable addition to our knowledge of seventeenth-century display. Most interesting is the final section, where Beaven demonstrates that Claude's *Origin of coral* (1674; Holkham Hall, Norfolk) hung on the library wall as a prelude to the 'Last Room of the Mosaics'. The *Origin of coral* is saturated with the spirit of ancient art, and in the final room Massimo displayed fragments of ancient paintings and mosaics mingled with contemporary landscapes by Carracci and Claude.¹ The room suggested the influence of ancient landscapes on Claude's art, an influence that is easy to sense but not always easy to demonstrate; it underlines how important was Massimo's belief, which he shared with Bellori, that contemporary art should draw inspiration from the ancients.

With Massimo's return to favour, as Cardinal and as art agent to Clement X (1670–76), he had the power to give richer expression to his beliefs. He and Bellori were involved in many of the Altieri projects, and together embarked on an ambitious programme to document ancient paintings and mosaics. At the Altieri chapel in S. Maria sopra Minerva, Rome, Massimo, acting as designer, created a chapel glowing with rare and rich marbles, based on the architecture of the Pantheon. It brings to a splendid conclusion the ideas Massimo had explored at Roccasecca, where, alone and impoverished, his achievements had lagged so far behind his vision.

This book is an important addition to patronal studies. It presents a clear case for the exceptional nature of Camillo Massimo's patronage, which was based on an unusually coherent theoretical viewpoint and an unusual ability to unite the passions of a collector with an active and creative patronage.

¹ See the exhibition review on Claude Lorrain in this issue p.494.

The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History. By Robert Finlay.

415 pp. incl. 24 col. ills. (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2010), £24.95. ISBN 978-0-520-24468-9.

Reviewed by ROSE KERR

THIS BOOK EXPLORES the cultural influence of porcelain in world history, a subject close to this reviewer's heart and one that provides an excellent paradigm for the study of social, economic, ritual and technological interchange. The international trade in porcelain can be explored from many different perspectives: for example, artistic conventions, international trade, industrial development, state control, consumption patterns, interior design, fashion styles, dining and drinking etiquette, manufacturing technology, scientific research, ceremonial beliefs and cultural contacts. Perhaps above all, the topic can be related to the importance of porcelain in historical commerce, a subject low on the agenda of most art historians, collectors and connoisseurs. Robert Finlay is right to highlight this aspect of study, although he rather overstates the 'exceptional and long-standing barriers [that] segregate the study of art from that of economics', for there are excellent works in the field such as Gerald Reitlinger's *The Economics of Taste* and Arjo Klamer's *The Value of Culture: On the Relationship between Economics and Arts*.

Finlay emphasises the important role of the country of origin of porcelain, namely China. Rather than starting with the earliest appearance of porcelain c.600 AD in north China, the narrative moves straight to the centre of manufacture from the eleventh century onwards, at Jingdezhen in south China. The tale is told largely through the eyes of Father François-Xavier d'Entrecolles, a Jesuit missionary who worked at Jingdezhen for more than twenty years at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and who wrote detailed accounts of the porcelain industry there.

D'Entrecolles was only one of several industrial spies sent to China to discover the secret of making porcelain. The desirable product was producing ever-larger holes in the exchequers of European countries, which were eager to import Chinese products such as tea, silk and porcelain, but had no other trading recourse to pay for these sought-after luxuries than silver coinage. The first