

The Historic Cast Collection at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

BY CHERYL LEIBOLD





t Philadelphia's Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) first-year art students enroll in "Cast Drawing," a

discipline with a long history in Europe and America. Artists have practiced drawing plaster casts of ancient sculpture for over two centuries, yet today's students soon learn to appreciate what might seem like a very conservative pursuit. Indeed, they realize, as one graduate put it: "Drawing a cast is challenging. You have to capture subtle variations in tone across curved surfaces, and observe changes in the light at the same time." For Academy students the cast drawing studios represent more than just faded displays of naked gods and heroes from ancient history. They are true classrooms, where aspiring artists solidify their drawing skills in a manner that goes back more than two hundred years (Fig. 1).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, public institutions acquired cast collections in the belief that plaster casts were perfect copies of ancient Greek and Roman sculptures and were as instructive as the originals (Fig. 2). Especially for Americans — when

travel to Europe was difficult and photographs not widely available — casts were thought to provide meaningful educational and aesthetic substitutes for the originals.¹

In July of 1805, even before land for a building had been secured, Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) one of the founders of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, contacted Nicholas Biddle (1786–1844), then secretary to the American ambassador to France and the nineteen-year-old brother of another founder, William Biddle (1791–1835), and asked him to send a collection of plaster casts from Paris. Biddle eagerly accepted the commission and purchased seventeen casts of statues, twenty-five casts of busts, and six of feet and hands from the studio of Getti, Mouleur du Musée Napoléon,

the officially sanctioned plaster cast maker for the new Louvre museum. These included casts of the Belvedere Torso, the Venus de Medici, Laocoön and His Sons, and the Borghese Gladiator. On the advice of the French sculptor Jean Antoine Houdon (1741–1828), Biddle obtained several casts not on Peale's list, including a cast of Houdon's *L'Ecorché* (*The Flayed Man*). Almost two centuries later a cast of this Houdon work was stunningly drawn by student Frank Taylor (Fig. 3).

On arrival, the casts were placed on view in the Academy's new building. Casts were subsequently displayed along with original works of art in the growing collection as if they were works of art in themselves. From the earliest days, students and visiting artists — among them Thomas Cole, William Harnett, and

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Fig. 1: A student uses a plumb bob to align her drawing of the cast of the Winged Victory. The cast of Michelangelo's *David* can be seen in the background. Photograph by the author, Cheryl Leibold, 2008.

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Fig. 4: William Sidney Mount (1807–1868), *The Painter's Triumph*, 1838. Oil on wood, 19½ x 23½ inches. Bequest of Henry C. Carey, 1879.88.18.

Fig. 3: Frank Taylor (b. 1959), drawing of the cast of Jean Antoine Houdon's *L'Ecorché* (*The Flayed Man*), 1986. Charcoal and white conté, 24 x 15 inches. PAFA School collection. Taylor is a two-time winner of the annual prize for a cast drawing at the Academy.

Fig. 2: Frederick Gutekunst (1831–1917), *Rear Gallery at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts*, 1876. One half of an albumen stereo card, 4 x 3½ inches. PAFA archives. This is the first photograph of the display of casts, shown here in the third Academy building opened in 1876.

Fig. 5: Charles Truscott (active 1880s–ca. 1910), *The Cast Hall of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts*, ca. 1890. Albumen print, 6 x 8¼ inches. PAFA archives. The student drawing pads are arranged to show their depictions of a cast of Pierre Puget's *Milo of Croton*.





survives in Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans*: "The door was open, but just within it was a screen, which prevented any objects in the room being seen from without. Upon my pausing to read this inscription, an old woman who appeared to officiate as guardian of the gallery, bustled up, and addressing me with an air of much mystery, said, 'Now, ma'am, now; this is just the time for you — nobody can see you — make haste.' I stared at her with unfeigned surprise, and disengaging my arm; which she had taken apparently to hasten my movements, I very gravely asked her meaning. 'Only, ma'am, that the ladies like to go into that room when there is no gentlemen watching them.'" ²

In 1845 a fire gutted the original Academy building, destroying virtually all of the casts. Fifty-five cast replacements arrived from Paris in 1856 and a group of over thirty casts of the Parthenon sculptures were also ordered from the British Museum (Fig. 5). Other additions included Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* from the Florence Baptistery in 1847 and several reductions of Michelangelo's figures for the Medici chapel in Florence (by 1869). In addition to the many sculptural casts, students could study several thousand clay or plaster impressions of ancient gems and cameos. It was thought that these tiny relief or intaglio images facilitated a study of Greek and Roman mythology (this collection now resides in storage). An Academy property catalogue of 1889 lists 280 casts of statues, busts, reliefs or anatomical fragments in the collection, probably the highest total ever.

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Fig. 6: Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), *Two Women in Classical Costume Sitting on Couch*, ca. 1883. Platinum print, 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches. Charles Bregler's Thomas Eakins Collection. Purchased with the partial support of the Pew Memorial Trust. 1985.68.2.663. In this image Eakins posed two students in emulation of the cast of two goddesses from the Parthenon pediment sculptures by Phidias.

Fig. 7: Thomas Anshutz (1851–1912), *Drawing of a cast of a river god from the Parthenon*, ca. 1895. Charcoal, 18 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 24 $\frac{3}{16}$ inches. Gift of Mrs. Edward Anshutz, 1971.8.120.

Mary Cassatt — drew from the casts in the galleries. In addition to improving drawing skills, the student was also absorbing the ideal anatomical proportions and understanding of human anatomy as represented in classical art. In *The Painter's Triumph* (1838), William Sidney Mount (1807–1868) points out his familiarity with ancient art by depicting his studio decorated with just one item: a drawing of the head of the Apollo Belvedere (Fig. 4).

A printed circular titled *Rules for the Study of the Antique* from about 1860 gave days and times when "Antique Class" (as it was then called) took place and warns that singing, whistling, smoking, spitting, or indecorous conduct would not be permitted. Mondays were set aside for female visitors exclusively, so that they could view the casts without the potentially embarrassing presence of men, a practice that ended at mid-century with the strategic placement of fig leaves. An 1832 firsthand account of the custom of Ladies Day at the Academy

A printed circular titled *Rules for the Study*

Occasional gifts augmented the collection, such as John Struthers' gift of a cast of the Winged Victory of Samothrace in 1894, and Edward H. Coates' 1890 gift of casts from animal sculptures by Antoine-Louis Barye (1796–1875). New casts were routinely purchased for the collection until about 1920, usually coming from commercial firms such as Caproni Brothers in Boston. An unusual late-twentieth-century donation was the full-size replica of Michelangelo's *David*, a 1987 gift by the John Wanamaker department store of a "cast-off" from an Italian merchandise promotion.

In about 1880, any casts still in the museum galleries were removed to the studios, for exclusive school use. At about the same time, many newly founded museums, such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Corcoran Gallery, began acquiring cast collections and building elaborate "cast courts" to house them. Most remained on view until the 1920s or 1930s, when changing attitudes relegated them to storage or destruction. However, there are still several public museums with a significant number of casts on view, among them the Slater Memorial Museum, Norwich, Connecticut; The Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. (The latter collection was part of The Metropolitan Museum of Art's now dispersed, but once massive, cast collection.)

The increasing size of both the Academy's annual exhibitions and its permanent collection were two factors prompting the banishment of the casts to the studios. A third factor in this transformation of the cast from an "object of virtue" to strictly a teaching tool



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Fig. 8: Daniel Garber (1880–1958), drawing of a cast of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave*, ca. 1900. Charcoal, 25 $\frac{5}{16}$ x 19 inches. Gift of the artist, 1945.14.7.

Fig. 9: Julius T. Bloch (1888–1966), drawing of a cast of two goddesses from the Parthenon, 1912. Graphite, size unknown. Reproduced in the PAFA school catalogue of 1912–13, p. 22.



almost certainly was Thomas Eakins' (1844–1916) famous dislike of cast drawing. Eakins began teaching at the Academy in 1876 and by 1882 was Director of the Schools. "I don't like a long study of casts even of sculptors of the best Greek period," Eakins commented to an interviewer in 1879. "At best they are only imitations, and an imitation of imitations cannot have so much life as an imitation of nature itself. The Greeks did not study the antique...The draped figures in the Parthenon pediment were modeled from life, undoubtedly."³ Although Eakins reduced the time students spent copying antique casts in order that they might move more quickly into life drawing, he had high regard for classical art, especially the Parthenon sculptures by Phidias (Fig. 6).

Eakins' aversion to cast drawing was not shared by his successor on the faculty. Thomas Anshutz (1851–1912) encouraged students to draw from casts, but with a new emphasis on using drawing as an expressive tool. His

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Fig. 10: Lyndall Bass (b. 1952), drawing of a cast of Verrocchio's *David*, ca. 1972. Sanguine, 24 x 18 inches. PAFA school collection.

Fig. 11: Unidentified student, drawing of a cast of the head of *Laocoön*, 1980s. Charcoal and white conté, size unknown. From a color slide in the PAFA archives.

"demonstration" drawings, produced during classroom sessions, are exemplified in his figure of a river god from the Parthenon (Fig. 7). Examples from the group of fifty Anshutz cast drawings in the Academy collection are used as teaching tools for first-year cast drawing students. His preference for charcoal worked into dramatic contrasts of light and dark, and the use of the medium more for mood than representation, is still one of the drawing styles students learn today. In 1900 or 1901, Anshutz's student Daniel Garber (1880–1958), who would eventually become one of America's most famous impressionist painters, drew Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* in a similar style, but with the added interest of a view into the

background where additional casts can be discerned in the gloom (Fig. 8).

A more traditional and linear approach was, and still is, an integral part of the cast drawing program. During Anshutz's tenure Julius Bloch (1888–1966) drew the cast of two Parthenon goddesses in a more literal manner than his teacher might have (Fig. 9). And sixty years later, first-year student Lyndall Bass (born 1952) opted for a simple and elegant line in sanguine to draw the cast of Verrocchio's *David* (Fig. 10). Contemporary students use a wide range of methods often featuring colored chalks or papers, unusual angles, and dramatic lighting, as they move through the cast drawing course. An unidentified student drew the head and torso of *Laocoön* in about 1986 using pale green paper and white pastel highlights (Fig. 11), and Joseph Lozano (born 1982) took an even more modern direction in his *Venus* of 2006 (Fig. 12).

The cast hall in the Academy's Historic Landmark museum building still looks remark-


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Fig. 12: Joseph Lozano (b. 1982), drawing of a cast of the Venus de Milo, 2006. Pastel and gouache, 40 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist. In 2007 this image won Lozano the Samuel David Prize for Cast Drawing. Students compete for this annual award, selecting subjects from over 125 casts in the collection.

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Fig. 13: The cast corridor at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, ca. 1990. Photographer unknown. PAFA archives.



ably like it did in 1876 (Fig. 13), causing visiting researchers to often exclaim: "It feels like we've stepped back into the nineteenth century!" Tours of the cast collection may be reserved when the classrooms are not in use. For more information call 215.972.7600 or visit www.pafa.org. 

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1. For an excellent overview of cast collecting in America, see Betsy Fahlman, "Plaster of Paris Antiquity: Nineteenth Century Cast Collections." *Southeastern College Art Conference Review*, XII, no. 1 (1991): 1-9. The author thanks Barbara Katus of the PAFA Museum for assistance on this article.
2. Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, ed. by Donald Smalley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 268-69.
3. William Brownell, "The Art Schools of Philadelphia." *Scribner's Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 18, no. 5 (September 1879): 737.