

Historical series

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Historical plaster casts from the Louvre collection in Versailles

The impressive collection of plaster casts of ancient statues is now open to artists, historians of art, and the public.

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Royal stables opposite the Palace of Versailles

The "Petite Ecurie" (part of the Great and Small Stables, symmetrical buildings on the edge of the Place d'Armes commissioned by Louis XIV and built by Jules Hardouin-Mansart) has housed a collection of sculptures and casts for some forty years, and is now opening to the public, if only on special occasions. This classical building, erected around 1680 as stables for the royal draft horses, is home to the gypsothèque of the Louvre Museum, that is, the

Louvre's collection of plaster casts, some of which date to the 17th century. Unlike the Thorvaldsen Museum (discussed in *La Lettre Blanche* no. 45), the building was not initially designed to be a museum. But the immense volumes of the stables provide a perfect setting for the works--indeed, the height is required for certain colossal statues or for castings of the architectural orders, including columns and their capitals. The works are organized in three long galleries that radiate from a central rotunda.

We were invited to rediscover this collection last January by Elisabeth Le Breton from the Louvre, who is responsible for conservation of the collection and for the museographic project. Nearly one hundred works have been restored over the past decade, with efforts by eminent specialists and utilization of the most recent techniques. Each restoration project provided an opportunity for more detailed study of individual works.

A collection saved from destruction

The roughly 5,000 works in Versailles have a range of provenances. Some were formerly in Paris -- in the Louvre museum, in the École des Beaux-Arts, or at the Sorbonne. Others had been in the royal collection of the kings of France since Louis XIV. They were brought to Versailles between 1970 and 1973. Many were mutilated during the uprising of May 1968, before incurring further damage when trucked to Versailles. The damage can be seen as the final stage in a long, thoroughgoing process of disinterest in the works, which even the professors of art no longer wanted. They were saved by a handful of enthusiasts, including Simone Besques and Christiane Pinatel, and more recently by Jean-Luc Martinez, the President of the Louvre Museum, and, of course, Elisabeth Le Breton with the help of several students.



Large Herculaneum Woman (Dresden), plaster cast.

A taste for art from classical antiquity

This rich collection is valuable in many ways. It provides information on French artists' familiarity with the works of antiquity, which they often knew only via the castings from the 16th and especially 17th centuries, including the *Dying Gaul*. Apart from a long and costly stay in Rome, these provided the only opportunity for direct contact with the masterpieces of the ancient world, which they could then study and copy. The greatest artists were immediately attracted to the works, and the interest continued unabated from the 17th through the early 19th century. This is evidenced in the casts sent from Rome to Paris by the painter Ingres, when he was Director of the French Academy in Rome, from 1834 to 1841. In fact, the directors of the academy, which has occupied the Villa Medici since 1803, tried to satisfy the orders from the professors at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. The new galleries are arranged in chronological order, making it possible to follow changes in taste and in the rediscovery of ancient sculpture. The earliest interest was in the Hellenistic period (4th through 2nd centuries B.C.), whereas the art of the archaic period (8th through 5th centuries B.C.) was only rediscovered much later, during archeological digs at the end of the 19th century (as seen, for instance, in the casting of the Sphinx of the Naxians, from Delphi).

Original text and photos by Jacques Hantraye



Trajan frieze (Arch of Constantine, Rome), plaster cast.



The Capitoline wolf (Capitoline Museums, Rome) and Phocion (Pio-Clementino Museum, Vatican, Rome), plaster casts.



Farneese Hercules, (National Archeological Museum, Naples), plaster cast.



The Dying Gaul (or Dying Galatian), (Capitoline Museums, Rome), plaster cast.



Caryatids of the Erechtheion, (Athens Acropolis), plaster cast.



Metope from Olympia depicting Herakles' Eleventh Labor, with Atlas and the golden apples of the Hesperides (Olympia), plaster cast, defaced by graffiti.