Recasting the Past: The Gipsoteca of Carrara between Education and Heritage

Academic Supervision
Carlo Sassetti

RESEARCH UNIT
Accademia di Belle Arti di Carrara

Project Overview

The creation of a **small collection of plaster copies** after the antique at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Carrara dates back to the years immediately following its foundation in 1769, beginning with the acquisition of a few but significant works such as the *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Dying Gaul*, and the *Borghese Silenus*.

In 1806, with the annexation of Massa and Carrara to the Principality of Elisa Baciocchi Bonaparte, the Academy gained increasing prominence within both the Tuscan and international artistic landscape. Elisa's political and cultural vision positioned the **institution as a major centre for artistic renewal**. She promoted several initiatives, including the transfer to Carrara of numerous plaster casts from the Lucca Art Institute. She also brought Lorenzo Bartolini from Florence to teach sculpture, while the Banca Elisiana—founded to support the marble trade and related industries—contributed financially to the Academy's development. During these years, many plaster copies were also acquired on the Roman and Florentine markets.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the repertoire of plaster casts after the antique expanded further. It was enriched by **models and copies donated by professors and sculptors** active in the Academy's studios, as well as by the large

reliefs executed by students as examination pieces for the *Pensionato di Roma*. Many freestanding sculptures sent by the prize-winners testified to the technical mastery achieved under Roman teachers.

In the 1960s, the Gipsoteca was unfortunately dismantled and transferred to unsuitable storage conditions, where the casts suffered serious—and in some cases irreversible—damage. Nearly two decades passed before attention shifted back to this heritage and a restoration campaign began, which continues today in the Academy's Restoration Laboratory for Natural and Artificial Stone Materials.

A **catalogue of the Gipsoteca** was published in 1993, but in light of new research and ongoing restorations it now requires updating and expansion. Many models and copies have already been catalogued using ICCD OA forms, thanks to the commitment of the Superintendency BAAAS of Pisa.

In recent years, systematic surveying, restoration, and reorganization have been carried out in the Monterosso storage facility, where most of the Academy's **400 plaster copies are now housed pending a future museum display**. Current work includes the preparation of a **new inventory**, the routine maintenance of restored works, and **additional restoration campaigns**. In 2022, restoration began on the model of the statue of *Napoleon I as Mars the Peacemaker*.

The present initiative also involves **the cataloguing and organization of the repertoire of moulds**—both sectional and in silicone rubber—comprising more than **170 casts of sculptures ranging from antiquity to the figurative tradition of the twentieth century**.

This endeavour provides a valuable opportunity to **update, disseminate, and share**—nationally and internationally—**the data relating to a heritage of immense historical and cultural value**, which has also served for more than 250 years as an exceptional educational resource for the young artists trained at the Carrara Academy.

Actions

- **Conduct a thorough mapping** of the current location of works displayed or stored in the Academy's two main sites: Palazzo Cybo-Malaspina and the Monterosso laboratories, which house both the storage of models and casts (moulds) and the restoration workshop.

- **Organize a training internship** dedicated to an inventory survey of all plaster works, including sculptures executed by students in the 1950s and

1960s, and **prepare simplified data sheets** for their documentation.

- **Prepare an updated inventory**, essential not only for the aims of the project but also because no trace survives of the inventory revisions carried out during the twentieth century. The Excel-based inventory—structured during a previous internship—includes the following fields:
  unique numerical identifier; catalogue sheet and page number; ICCD OA record number; photographic archive ID (Superintendency ABAP Pisa); author/attribution; date; site, location, and photograph.

- **Include in the inventory all lost sculptures** (destroyed, donated, or stolen), integrating archival evidence and historic photographic documentation.

- **Catalogue all works not yet registered with OA forms**, using the expedited ministerial form (MIDV) or another model agreed upon with the lead institution.
  Enter all data into the SIGeCWeb platform, ensuring consistency with national cataloguing standards, and **publish a selected group of enhanced records**—chosen for their didactic, historical, or documentary significance—on the IartNET database.