

## **ARTH 495/599 Objects and Archives in Art History: Curating the Display of the Plaster Cast Collection in Horizon Hall**

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Email to arrange meetings.

Tuesdays 4:30-7:10 (Hybrid in-person and synchronous online)

### **Course description:**

This course will center around the extensive plaster cast collection currently on display in Robinson Hall B and throughout GMU's campus environment. The content of this corpus is drawn primarily from the tradition of Greek and Roman classical art, and given the differences in modern culture/reception, both the medium of the plaster cast and the subject matter begs for a more lucid presentation to the modern audience. With the opening of the new Horizon Hall this semester (Spring 2021) which will house the History-Art History Department, we have been given the exciting opportunity to determine where and how the plaster casts will be exhibited in the new structure.

The result of these parameters is a chance to curate the display of the Robinson Plaster Cast Collection (formerly in Robinson Hall) in the newly constructed Horizon Hall and to re-present it to the University audience with new texts that will clarify the significance of the casts as both reproductions and as substitutes for original works of art.

In this class students will participate in designing the permanent exhibition of the casts, conducting research on the history of plaster casts (broadly, but also with particular emphasis on Mason's corpus), producing curatorial essays to contextualize the casts, writing wall text, working on a new catalogue for the casts in JSTOR Forum. This course will differ from the typical seminar in that it will explore the practical, hands-on side of curatorial work in addition to scholarly research.

For students enrolled at the 495 level, the seminar carries the designation of a Mason Impact & RS (Research and Scholarship) course. This designation can be included on your transcript. For details see the end of this document.

I am currently working with GMU's Mason Publishing office, which has expressed enthusiasm about publishing the Curatorial essays that we produce in the seminar. The publication would be digital with print-on-demand options. I will continue to work with MP and keep you all apprised of the situation. See the document on Curatorial Essays for further details.

The seminar will be a hybrid with online and in-person meetings; see below.

### **Course Goals:**

- To learn the history of plaster casts reproducing famous works of art
- To consider the future of plaster casts
- To become familiar with the procedures, parameters and requirements of specific aspects of exhibition display (research, cataloguing, communication, physical placement of objects)
- To contextualize the Robinson Collection of Plaster Casts for a modern audience by considering various historical and cultural lenses through which to view them

- To propose a plan for the placement and display of the Robinson Cast Collection in Horizon Hall on the GMU Fairfax Campus
- To produce a series of academic but accessible texts of varying lengths (curatorial essays, wall texts, labels, catalogue entries) that contextualize the plaster casts for students, faculty, staff, and visitors to the GMU Fairfax Campus

**Course Readings:**

There are no textbooks to buy for this seminar. Our readings will be on Blackboard or on the web. See Weekly Schedule for specific dates and readings.

**Course Requirements and Graded Percentages:**

Weekly Assignments (individual)	20%
JSTOR Forum Cataloguing (individual)	15%
Label texts draft (individual)	10%
Label texts final version (individual)	5%
Wall text (group)	5%
Curatorial Essay Preliminary Bibliography and Outline	5%
Curatorial Essay Draft 1 (group)	12%
Curatorial Essay Draft 2 (group)	5%
Curatorial Essay Draft 3 (group)	3%
Curatorial Essay Final (group)	10%
Group Peer Review (individual)	10%

**Grading Scale:**

A+ (100-97) A (96-93) A- (92-90) B+ (89-87) B (86-83) B- (82-80) C+ (79-77)  
 C (76-73) C- (72-70) D (69-60) F (59 and below)

**Attendance and Participation**

Although not a separate grading category, excessive absences or failure to engage in discussions or group work will negatively impact your final grade. I reserve the right to assign a failing grade to anyone who misses more than three seminar meetings without a documented excuse (e.g. medical reasons).

**Meetings**

For the first part of the semester, we will meet virtually using Blackboard Collaborate Ultra.

Weeks 6 and 7 (March 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>), I plan to have us meet in Horizon Hall to facilitate our discussion and planning of the physical display of the Robinson Collection of Plaster Casts. That is subject to change given the state of the GMU Fairfax campus and the pandemic.

My hope is that we will be in the classroom for the later portion of the semester. I will make announcements regarding meetings as appropriate. If I do not specifically send out a message calling for an in-person meeting (except for those two classes in March), assume that we are online for the meeting.

**Blackboard and Blackboard Collaborate Ultra**

*Activities and assignments in this course will regularly use the Blackboard learning system, available at <https://mymason.gmu.edu>. Students enrolled in online courses at GMU are required to have regular, reliable access to a computer with an updated operating system (recommended: Windows 10 or Mac OSX 10.13 or higher) and a stable broadband Internet connection (cable modem, DSL, satellite broadband, etc., with a consistent 1.5 Mbps [megabits per second] download speed or higher).*

We are going to be relying heavily on Blackboard, especially the Collaborate Ultra (BCU) feature. I have set up a link on the main page of our class Blackboard; in the black band at the left, you will see “BCU Classroom”. Click on that link and then on the specific area for that day (e.g. “January. 25, Pompeii Introduction lecture”).

If you are not familiar with BCU, please take a few minutes and familiarize yourself with it using these tutorials, provided by Mason:

<https://help.blackboard.com/Collaborate/Ultra/Participant>

Especially useful will be the links ‘Get Started’, ‘Join Session’ and ‘Participate in Session’.

Keep in mind that GMU clearly states its expectation that online students will do the same amount of work for a course that is held in the classroom (8-10 hours per week); when taught face-to-face, this course meets twice a week for 75 minutes. That does not include time outside of class for reading, studying or carrying out assignments. You should be prepared to spend roughly this same amount of time with the online version of the course.

<https://masononline.gmu.edu/success/>

### **ARTH 495 Students**

This course is designated as a **Mason Impact + RS** course and is part of Mason Impact. For more information about the Mason Impact please visit [masonimpact.gmu.edu](http://masonimpact.gmu.edu).

From the Office of Mason Impact:

“Your course has both a **RS** designation and a **Mason Impact (MI)** designation. Because of this, your students will be able to submit their project to the undergraduate education office, at which point, they will receive an additional line on their transcripts that highlights the name of their specific project, similar to a master’s thesis notation. In order to facilitate this, your students must submit their project to the undergraduate education office. The link to complete the submission can be found at [masonimpact.gmu.edu](http://masonimpact.gmu.edu)”

If you are interested in pursuing this designation, I will be happy to work with you towards that goal. You will need to contact the MI office and start the process through the link above; once you know what you need to do, you can contact me and we will proceed from there.

The MI Learning Outcomes are:

1. Understand knowledge creation: Students will understand how knowledge is generated and communicated, and how it can be used to address questions or problems in disciplines and in society.

2. Engage multiple perspectives: Students will be able to identify and negotiate multiple perspectives, work collaboratively within and across multiple social and environmental contexts, and engage ethically with their subject and with others.
  3. Investigate a meaningful question: Students will use inquiry skills to articulate a question; engage in an inquiry process; and situate the concepts, practices, or results within a broader context.
- Students will be able to ask increasingly complex questions about significant problems, debates, or challenges.
  - Students will be able to evaluate and choose inquiry methods that are appropriate to a project.
  - Students will be able to explain how a project has value to local, civic, professional, scholarly, or global contexts.



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## The GMU Plaster Cast Collection: Art or Artifact? Curatorial Seminar Weekly Schedule

### Week 1 January 26<sup>th</sup>, The GMU Cast Collection and our Goals

Discussion of Goals and Tasks:

*Cataloguing (JSTOR)*: this will largely be entering data from the current website into a new, JSTOR-linked format with some possible revisions or additions.

*Revised wall labels*: current labels, which are based on the catalogue entries, will be reviewed and revised if necessary. These will appear with the casts when they are installed in the new Horizon Hall over the summer of 2021.

*Physical placement* of casts in Horizon Hall (final decisions by the end of the semester):

our

seminar will be responsible for determining the display of the former Robinson Hall Collection in the new academic building on campus. We will need to consider not only where, but how.

*Curatorial Essays*: these will be produced by groups of 3-4 seminar students. Each group will get a specific topic. The essays will be revised at least three times over the course of the semester. The final length will be 5-7 pages, not including bibliography. I will provide an introductory essay, which the class will also contribute to as a whole. The final disposition of these essays is still being determined. They may be published in a physical book/booklet or housed on the web. I am currently in discussion with Mason Publishing and will keep you posted on how the conversation develops. We will likely need to work with formatting as well as content over the course of the semester. Note that the last weeks of the seminar are each assigned to one of these topics. The group will provide one or two readings for the class at least one week in advance, along with the current draft of the group's essay. We will discuss and offer peer input.

- ❖ Art or Artifact?: An Introduction to the seminar and the plaster casts at GMU
- ❖ The Rise and Fall of the Plaster Cast: the Evolution of the Medium
- ❖ The Olympia Pediments as Symbols of Classical Art
- ❖ Reading Beyond the Surface: the Case of the Lapith Woman
- ❖ Seeing Color in Antiquity: Polychromy in Antiquity and Casts
- ❖ A Place for Plaster Casts in the New Millennium?

*Wall texts*: these will be one paragraph summaries of the essays. Think of them as an abstract for your Essay. They may appear on the walls of Horizon Hall after installation of the casts.

These assignments will each have their own module on our Blackboard page, containing instructions and other relevant materials for completing that aspect of the curatorial project.

*Readings for the first meeting:*

Pamela Born, "Cast as Canon: Plaster Casts in American Museum and University

Collections,” *Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 21.2  
(2002): 8-13

Joseph V. Noble, “A New Gallery of Models and Casts,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

*Bulletin* New Series 18.4 (1959): 138-143.

Douglas C. McGill “Plaster Casts of Statues: From Storage and Into Vogue” *New York Times* Jan. 1, 1987  
(pdfs in seminar folder)

The GMU Plaster Cast website

<https://plastercast.gmu.edu/plaster-casts-at-gmu>

Read:

History>>Plaster Casts at GMU

History>>The Last Casts, parts I-IV

Explore the Collections tab >> click on Ancient Greece and Rome image >> click on images of the casts, especially no. 23, The Barberini Faun

For many seminar meetings, there will be two equally important sets of reading.

The Academic Background is necessary for understanding the origin, significance and changing attitudes towards plaster casts.

The Practicalities of Exhibition readings give you necessary knowledge required for producing text (labels, essays) and determining how to display objects.

Equal weight should be applied to all of these readings.

## **Week 2 February 2<sup>nd</sup>, The Place of Plaster Casts in the canon of Art History**

### *Academic Background*

Mary Beard, “Casts and Cast-offs: The Origins of the Museum of Classical Archaeology,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 39 (1993): 1-29.

### *Practicalities of Exhibition*

Explore the following collections of plaster casts online.

*Assignment (due by the start of class, upload through portal in Week 2 module on Blackboard)*

You will turn in a critique of each of the web exhibitions of plaster casts below in which you explain at least three things that you liked about each and three things that you thought could be improved (and how). Consider format, content of labels, associated essays, visuals, etc.

Notice that one of these is an older, tradition institution (Carnegie Museum of Art), the second and third are university collections with a history very similar to ours (Morehead State University, Ithaca College) and the last is a relatively new institution that acquired its casts in a way similar to the MSU, Ithaca College and GMU corpora.

Also explore the Chromophilia online exhibit at the ICAA website.

Carnegie Museum of Art

Hall of Sculpture: <https://cmoa.org/about/hall-of-sculpture/>  
Hall of Architecture: <https://cmoa.org/about/hall-of-architecture/>

Morehead State University's Plaster Cast Collection from the Metropolitan Museum  
[https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/metropolitan\\_art\\_collection/](https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/metropolitan_art_collection/)  
[https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/metropolitan\\_art\\_collection/8/](https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/metropolitan_art_collection/8/)

Fairfield University (NY) Plaster Cast Collection  
<https://www.fairfield.edu/museum/collections/plaster-casts/>  
Include Introduction and:  
Greek Classical>>High Classical (review catalogue entries)

ICAA (Institute of Classical Art and Architecture) Online Catalogue and  
Chromophilia Exhibition  
<https://www.classicist.org/resources/plaster-cast-collection/>

### Week 3 February 9<sup>th</sup>,

#### *Academic Background*

Donna Kurtz, editor, "Chapter 8: Continental Cast Collections before 1800," in *The Reception of Classical Art in Britain* (2000): 123-128.

Mary Beard, "Art Collections on the Bay of Naples," in *Pompeii and the Roman Villa*,  
edited  
by C. Mattusch (2008): 71-83.

Note: both of the above readings are suitable exemplars for your own exhibition essays. They are relatively brief but scholarly works which seek to create context for understanding material for a broad audience. The first is taken specifically from a monograph on plaster casts while the second is from the catalogue of a museum exhibition on Pompeii held at the National Gallery of Art in DC.

#### *Practicalities of Exhibition*

Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, "Language and Texts," from *Museums and their Visitors* (1994): 115-135

Gail Gregg, "Your Labels Make Me Feel Stupid" (2010) online at ARTnews:  
<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/your-labels-make-me-feel-stupid-319/>

*Assignment (due by the start of class, upload through portal in Week 3 module of Blackboard)*

Make a list of five or six points that you found useful for our planned exhibition and explain how you think the ideas should be employed.

Also consider whether there are any points that you strongly disagree with.

**Week 4 February 16<sup>th</sup>, The Popularity of Classical Art in Europe and North America in the 18<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> centuries**

*Academic Background*

From *Taste and the Antique*:

Introduction, xiii-xv

Chapter XI: The Proliferation of Casts and Copies, 79-91

Chapter XIII: Reinterpretations of Antiquity, 99-107

*Practicalities of Exhibition*

From the V&A's "Writing Gallery Texts at the V&A: A Ten Point Guide" (2018): 4-28

Visit the V&A website for the Museum's 'Cast Court' and read the History section:

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/history-of-the-cast-courts>

**Deadline:** preliminary bibliography and outline for essays due in class (minimum of 5 sources)

**Week 5 February 23<sup>rd</sup>, Changing the Tastes of a Nation**

*Academic Background*

James K. McNutt, "Plaster Casts After Antique Sculpture: Their Role in the Elevation of Public Taste and in American Art Instruction," *Studies in Art Education* 31.3 (1990): 158-167

*Practicalities of Exhibition*

From the V&A's "Writing Gallery Texts at the V&A: A Ten Point Guide" (2018): 29-50

*Assignment (due at start of class, upload through portal in Week 5 module on Blackboard)*

Visit these two online plaster cast collection and assess their labels by the V&A standards by finding three examples from each site where they follow or violate the V&A guidelines (the three can be any combination of positives and negatives). Focus on the Greek and Roman examples since they are closest to our own collection.

Slater Museum Online Plaster Cast Exhibit

<https://www.slatermuseum.org/exhibitions/permanent-exhibitions/the-plaster-cast-collection/online-cast-exhibition>

Ithaca College Plaster Cast Collection

<https://icplastercasts.wordpress.com>

**Week 6 March 2<sup>nd</sup>, Placing the GMU Collection in Horizon Hall, part 1**

First part of class: Tour Horizon Hall and begin the discussion of placement

View the pdf file of Horizon Hall plans and digital constructions beforehand

Worksheet on physical placement:

- Material for supports (metal, wood, color)
- Form of supports (shelves, boxes; continuous or individual)
- Considerations of lighting
- Where should the label be placed (ideally)
- Where should wall text be placed (ideally)
- Inclusion of catalogue number on label and support

Second part of class: final decisions on the format of our labels (e.g. what is useful and usable from the V&A guidelines). Everyone should come in with at least 5 things from the guide that they want to offer as basic requirements for our labels.

*Practicalities of Exhibition*

British Council Guidelines on Exhibitions (pdf in seminar folder)

Read and make a list of 8-10 points that you think are relevant or applicable to our display of the plaster casts in Horizon Hall.

**Note:** next week there are several deadlines and written requirements. Be sure to look ahead so that you can organize your time adequately and submit all assignments on time.

**Week 7 March 9<sup>th</sup>, Placing the GMU Collection in Horizon Hall, part 2**

Class begins in Horizon Hall: Deciding where to place the individual pieces in Horizon Hall

*Practicalities of Exhibition*

Read the following sources. In a brief essay (due by the start of class), respond to the following questions.

How do each represent a different approach to displaying plaster casts? What makes each one distinct? Are there similarities?

Totally Plastered by Rafael Cardoso

<http://kvadratinterwoven.com/totally-plastered>

Near Life: the Gipsformerei – 200 Years of Casting Plaster

Milena Melfi, “Old meets New: the Oxford University collection of casts from the antique and the new Ashmolean,” in *Plaster Casts of the Works of Art: History of Collections, Conservations and Exhibition Practice* (2010): 23-35.

James Perkins, “Living with Plaster Casts” in Frederikson & Marchand, *Plaster Casts: Making Collecting and Displaying from classical antiquity to the present*

<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.mutex.gmu.edu/lib/gmu/reader.action?docID=605968&ppg=5>

Alessandra Menegazzi, “The Museum as a Manifesto of Taste and Ideology: the twentieth-century collection of archaeology and art at the University of Padua,” in Frederikson & Marchand, *Plaster Casts: Making Collecting and Displaying from classical*

*antiquity to the present*

<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.mutex.gmu.edu/lib/gmu/reader.action?docID=605968&ppg=5>

**Deadline:** all entries should be in the JSTOR Forum Catalogue by this date

**Deadline:** First Draft of Labels are due, upload through portal in Label Module in Blackboard

**Week 8 March 16<sup>th</sup>, Changing Tastes: the trials of classical art in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries**

*Academic Background*

From Vout's *Classical Art* (2018): Chapter 9, "The Death of Classical Art?": 220-242.

*Practicalities of Exhibition*

Anna Klosowska, Michael Obarzanowski, "Plaster Casts in the collection of the National Museum in Krakow: Conservation issues," in *Plaster Casts of the Works of Art:*

*History*

*of Collections, Conservations and Exhibition Practice* (2010): 103-115.

**Deadline:** First Draft of Curatorial Essays/Wall texts with updated bibliographies are due, upload through portal in Essays Module in Blackboard

**Week 9 March 23<sup>rd</sup>, The Rise and Fall of the Plaster Cast: Evolution of the Medium**

**Deadline:** Second Draft of Labels are due, upload through portal in Labels Module in Blackboard

**Week 10 March 30<sup>th</sup>, The Olympia Pediment Casts As Symbols of Classical Art**

**Week 11 April 6<sup>th</sup>, Reading Beyond the Surface: The Case of the Lapith Woman Cast**

**Deadline:** Second Draft of Curatorial Essays/Wall texts with bibliographies are due (at least one new source required), upload through portal in Essays Module in Blackboard.

**Week 12 April 13<sup>th</sup>, Seeing Color in Antiquity: Polychromy in Sculpture and Casts**

**Deadline:** Final Version of Labels are due, upload through portal in Labels Module in Blackboard

**Week 13 April 20<sup>th</sup>, Plaster Cast in a New Millennium: Art, Artifact or Something More**

**Deadline:** Third Draft of Curatorial Essays/Wall text with updated bibliographies are due (at least one new source required), upload through portal in Essays Module in Blackboard.

Felicecalchi: Plaster Casts & Sculptures

<https://www.felicecalchi.com/?lang=en>

**Week 14, April 27<sup>th</sup>**

Review of placement decisions

Final discussion of content and formatting for essay publication

Any additional unfinished business