

# Museum of Plaster Casts and Original Collection University of Innsbruck

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## **Abstract**

*The Museum of Plaster Casts at Innsbruck includes over 500 exhibits, many of them restored to resemble the bronze or marble colouration of the originals. It is actively used by students of classical art and enjoyed by the wider visiting public.*

Part of the former Institute of Classical Archaeology at the Leopold Franzens University at Innsbruck, this museum harbours a rich store of plaster casts of antique statuary, the originals of which are to be found in all great museums of the world. The museum, which is in the main university building, was designed at the beginning of the last century, specifically in order to exhibit the plaster cast collection.

Plaster cast collections of this kind are part of a tradition that goes back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when excavated objects were appearing in great number. The spirit of classicism coupled with the "yearning for antiquity" gave rise to collections of plaster casts, usually copies of classical Greek works of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. In art academies these served as models for artists, while educated private citizens used them to decorate their salons. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe adorned his house in Weimar in this way.

The first such collection in Germany was established in 1825 at the University of Bonn, but many others soon followed. At Innsbruck the museum of plaster casts was set up in 1869 at the "old University" and by the time of the move to the new University in 1920 the museum already had 420 plaster casts and originals.

From 1951 onwards the museum was part of the Institute of Classical Archaeology. Under Professor Alfons Wotschitzky a new era began; classification rooms were classified according to periods of antique art, old plaster casts were restored with coloration in a bronze tone or in the same shade as the marble originals. The collection thus acquired an entirely new character, setting it apart from most other displays with their bright white plaster figures so far removed from the originals.

After various modifications the museum was reopened in 1989 in its present form, 120 years after its foundation. The collection is continually extended thanks to the purchase of plaster casts and originals and with objects found in our local excavations. Today, it contains more than 500 exhibits. These apparently worthless plaster figures can cost anything up to EUR 7,000, so new acquisitions are expensive.

What does such a museum signify for students and visitors in the present day? One could argue that there is no need for casts when one can see the originals in museums. Perhaps, but nowhere can one find statues from Athens, Rome, Naples, Berlin, New York, Ephesos or Samos together in one place and in their original appearance. No photograph can show a statue in its three dimensionality either. From this overall viewpoint the museum is of great value for lovers of antiquity and for students who are thus able to observe and to draw comparisons.

The copies of statues, relief works and small sculptures as well as original ceramics and statuettes enable visitors to obtain a holistic view of antique art, and one that takes in early Aegean art from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C., works of archaic and classical Greek art, the baroque plasticity of Hellenistic statues and objects of Roman daily life. Without any effort at all, the experience is within easy reach; the whole ensemble itself is delightful, too, the room having been conceived as a museum all along. The opportunity to visit this museum on the University of Innsbruck should not be missed!

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