



The Collection of the Museo Nacional de Reproducciones Artísticas, now in the Museo Nacional de Escultura 1877–2021

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of the Museo Nacional de Reproducciones Artísticas (Spain) within a brief history of art replicas. After a brief mention of its historical and plastic foundations, centered on the ideas and artistic forms of Antiquity and its resurgence throughout the Modern Age, an account is given of its emergence throughout the 19th century. It was then when the Museo Nacional de Reproducciones Artísticas, whose trajectory is the central theme of this work, was created. After an initial boom from its foundation until the first decades of the 20th century, its long decline was followed by an equally long occultation, but it is currently re-emerging as part of the collection of the Museo Nacional de Escultura.

Keywords: copy, antiquity, Museum of Artistic Reproductions, National Museum of Sculpture, Collections of plaster casts

La colección del Museo Nacional de Reproducciones Artísticas, ahora en el Museo Nacional de Escultura. 1877-2021

Resumen: Se presenta una síntesis de la trayectoria del Museo Nacional de Reproducciones Artísticas, inserta en la historia de las réplicas de obras de arte. Tras una breve mención de su fundamento histórico y plástico, centrado en las ideas y formas artísticas de la Antigüedad y su resurgimiento a lo largo de la Edad Moderna, se da cuenta de su eclosión a lo largo del siglo XIX. Es entonces cuando se crea el Museo de Reproducciones Artísticas, cuya trayectoria es el tema central de este trabajo. Tras unos primeros momentos de auge desde su fundación hasta los primeros decenios del siglo XX, su larga decadencia fue seguida de una no menos larga ocultación, pero en la actualidad está resurgiendo como parte de la colección del Museo Nacional de Escultura.

Palabras clave: copia, antigüedad, Museo de Reproducciones Artísticas, Museo Nacional de Escultura, colecciones de réplicas en escayola

A coleção do Museu Nacional de Reproduções Artísticas, agora no Museu Nacional de Escultura. 1877-2021

Resumo: Apresenta-se uma síntese da trajetória do Museu Nacional de Reproduções Artísticas (Espanha), inserido na história das réplicas de obras de arte. Após uma breve menção à sua fundação histórica e plástica, centrada nas ideias e formas artísticas da Antiguidade e no seu ressurgimento ao longo da Idade Moderna, dá conta da sua emergência ao longo do século XIX. É então que é criado o Museu Nacional de Reproduções Artísticas, cuja trajetória é o tema central deste trabalho. Depois de alguns momentos de apogeu desde a sua fundação até às primeiras décadas do século XX, ao seu longo declínio seguiu-se uma ocultação igualmente longa, mas atualmente ressurge como parte da coleção do Museu Nacional de Escultura.

Palavras-chave: cópia, antiguidade, Museu de Reproduções Artísticas, Museu Nacional de Escultura, Coleções de réplicas de gesso

The Copy at the Origin

Copies are making a comeback and claiming their place in the world of museums. This is not so much a revolutionary idea as an inevitable one, like a truth whose time has come.

Copies never actually left us. They are at the very foundations of biology and culture, economy and artistic creation. In art, as the twentieth century progressed, copies acquired connotations of illegitimacy and creative weakness. They were maligned and neglected as suspect, while absolute originality became the quintessential requirement for artistic creation. Today we question that maximalist notion and have begun to recover an overlooked and neglected aspect of our cultural heritage. Though often still invisible, its extension and significance can surprise us by offering gratifying aesthetic experiences that link us to the roots of our art and culture.

If we approach the topic objectively and without prejudice, we can acknowledge the replica as a way of learning, an element of reflection and analysis, a vehicle for spreading ideas, an object of tribute or devotion. Replicas have always been present in the cultural progression of humanity; they naturally accompany every creative act and facilitate fruitful dialogue between learning and innovation (Bolaños 2013).

We can go back in time as far as we like to ground this statement, but it is sufficient here to identify the role of replicas at the beginning of our cultural cycle, in Greek art, where we just begin to know their role, and in the Roman world, where we know this from early on.

The end of the classical world opened a new era in which Antiquity resurfaced partially, tenuously and intermittently in successive 'renaissances', that evoked admiration, vague remembrances and a certain sense of proximity that seemed to hinder full understanding of the radical break between the two periods (Gramaccini 2000). Much later, humanism brought fuller awareness of the great rupture between the late medieval era and remote classical times. A frenetic interest in lost culture and art ensued as the Renaissance sought to unearth the brilliant Greco-Roman legacy. The educated classes studied and enjoyed it, appreciating originals or copies indistinctly in the collections of powerful civil or ecclesiastical figures.

During the Modern Age, the main examples appeared of what were often considered references in the visual arts: Laocoön, Apollo and Belvedere Torso, Silenus and the Infant Bacchus, the Borghese Gladiator, the busts of Caracalla, etcetera. It became clear that one could not possess "all" beauty, except through copies. Acquiring replicas thus became a complex process involving permissions, relationships and favours only attainable by the wealthiest, such as Francis I of France or Philip IV of Spain. There was no sense of inferiority about using replicas to design or complete their collections. Soon, the idea spread that others might also obtain such goods. Artists, those responsible for

the aesthetic pleasure of the powerful, were clearly the ones who could best utilize these treasures. This explains the origins of the French Academy in Rome and its collections of copies in the late seventeenth century (Haskell & Penny 1990) or the first Berlin collection of reproductions, begun in 1696 (Winkler-Horaček & Schröder 2021).

These developments acquired an institutional profile in the art academies that emerged in every country touched by the Enlightenment. During the eighteenth century in Spain, the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando [San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts] acquired several collections, mostly royal in origin, along with the noteworthy donation of the Mengs collections (Luzón Nogué 2007). This phenomenon was repeated across Europe, from its centre in Rome to Sweden and Poland, as well as in Russia and the United States.

Besides this historical evolution towards devotion to copies, other factors of that era contributed to their diffusion. Among them, we will mention here the rise of the professional mould maker (Negrete Plano 2014) and the appearance of lists of reproductions for sale, such as the one published in 1794 by the Leipzig art merchant Carl Christian Heinrich Rost. However, the most singularly pertinent factor was the advent of the idea of the public museum, which envisioned the people – though not always in a uniform manner or according to current criteria – as the beneficiaries of these rising institutions (Osterhammel 2015) [Figure 1].



Figure 1.- The Casón del Buen Retiro, first seat of the National Museum of art Artistic Reproductions (MNE Archive).

Nineteenth-century Copy Culture

In the nineteenth century, copies reached their moment of greatest acclaim. They spread throughout developed countries and across almost all socio-economic strata, from those who could only buy humble prints on the streets of London or Rome to the powerful states of the Industrial Revolution. These countries drove a great museum movement, that included replica museums.

Multiple factors contributed to this, such as the persistent conviction in the early nineteenth century that a proper education was synonymous with knowledge of the classical Greco-Roman world of literature and ancient art: “the immovable foundations of culture and taste”. Accordingly, “for these didactic purposes, replicas were as good as, or in some senses better than, the originals” (Wallach 1998: 46-50, as cited in Anderson 2015: 47, note 63).

Another determining factor was the impact of the recognition of Greek art, as exemplified in the British Museum exhibition of the Parthenon Marbles from 1816 on, and those of the Aegina Temple in the Munich Glyptothek, which opened in 1830. For Felix Ravaisson, who promoted the museum of replicas that existed in the Louvre from 1898 to 1927, “only reproduction museums can give the artist the feeling of what Greek art is, in contrast with Roman art” (Ravaisson, as cited in Martinez 2000: 81). In these spaces, fragments could be brought together from diverse places, and works could be recomposed to achieve an understanding of them that would otherwise be impossible. Certain originals could also be relieved of the annexes sometimes added after their discovery without undermining their value, while using the opportunity to revise stylistic and iconographic attributions. Similarly, copies could be used to complete understanding and representation of missing works and periods, because “nobody can bring together all the ancient originals, but copies make it possible to create the perfect collection” (Raisma 2008: 93, as cited in Anderson 2015: 49).

The historical current emphasizing artistic copies had another outcome. Some cultural erudites, such as John Ruskin or William Morris, held that the Industrial Revolution had – among other things – diminished the aesthetic quality of products. This state of affairs was regularly condemned and various initiatives were launched to address the problem. Among them was an attempt to bring together the best examples of ancient production and make them accessible to the working classes, to serve as inspiration and stimulus for production (Fernández Polanco 1989).

The two currents converged in the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations (London 1851), dedicated to displaying the finest achievements of art, science and technical skill. Two important projects resulted from this initiative. One was an exhibition that opened in 1854 at the Crystal Palace, offering “the complete history of civilization”. Beginning with the dinosaurs, it ranged from Egypt to Assyria, Greco-Roman antiquity, Byzantium, the English and European Middle Ages and the Renaissance, all the way to the nineteenth century, making systematic use of plaster models. The other project was a museum linked to the Government School of Design and was formally established in 1852 as the Museum of Manufactures. It was later renamed the South Kensington Museum (SKM) until 1899, when it became the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) that we know today (Swenson 2009; Afonso 2018).

That London exhibition was not the first of its kind, but it was the first to offer a global perspective. It helped foster and intensify international relations in the sphere of art replicas. The reference point for this trend was the Universal Exhibition of Paris in 1867. There, the spirit of collaboration was reflected in a document known as the Convention for Promoting Universally Reproductions of Works of Art for the Benefit of Museums of All Countries, undersigned by the members of the ruling houses of eleven nations.

These events increased the demand for copies and transformed their production into a lucrative business throughout Europe. Workshops were created in the various museums of reproductions, and catalogues facilitated national and international awareness of available collections (Swenson 2009). This activity was generally linked to specific individuals: the *formatori* (mould makers). They worked autonomously or for diverse institutions, creating magnificent replicas at a time when moulds could be made directly from the originals, and copies were carefully appraised and judged. Anderson (2015: 52) provided an extensive list that included top names such as Geiler, Kreittmayr and Gerber in Munich, Berlin and Cologne; Brucciani in London; Malpieri and Mercatelli in Rome; or Arrondelle in Paris. To these we may add the unknown but noteworthy José Trilles in Madrid.

As a result, many museums and collections were created during the nineteenth century, in what Alan Wallach calls a “copy culture” that extended across the western hemisphere and beyond. Copies were not confined to the burgeoning museums of replicas but found their way into the most charismatic museums containing original pieces, such as the Louvre, the SKM, the Neues Museum in Berlin or the Museo Arqueológico Nacional (MAN) [National Archaeological Museum] in Madrid. They enhanced their discourse using originals and replicas.

The Museum of Artistic Reproductions

The creation of the Museo de Reproducciones Artísticas (MRA) [Museum of Artistic Reproductions], in Madrid, must be understood in this context. It took place in 1877, at the very beginning of the Restoration – one of the few periods of relative calm in Spain’s convulsive nineteenth century – and should be seen as a project within a national program.

The mission of the new institution was clearly outlined in the initial pages of its first catalogue, which appeared in 1881. It indicated that the “reproductions of objects of art, exhibited in orderly series, complete teaching and extend it in a manner similar to how libraries facilitate knowledge of literary works. There has always been a need to collect reproduced models, but never so much as today.”^[1] (Riaño 1881: 3).

Together with the value assigned to replicas as a source of culture, another of economic nature was added, with

the stated objective of influencing industry “which has a constant need for new forms and models”, as there was no “nation with enough originals to satisfy the demands of production”. Further clarity about the institutional orientation was provided in the instructions of the President of the Council of Ministers regarding the funds initially designated for this project. “Mister Canovas decided that the moulds of the Parthenon sculptures should be purchased as the foundational elements of this museum” (Riaño 1881: 3-4).

These moulds were obtained in 1879, and “it seemed opportune... to continue completing as far as possible the series from the classical period, in order to present unity in the early acquisitions, which should not only contain the plaster moulds group but also extend to models made from bronze, glasswork, ivory, cameos and others, by means of modern procedures” (Riaño 1881: 5).

The Royal Order for the creation of the museum designated Juan Facundo Riaño (1829-1901) to select the works for the collection of this institution. By a similar order, he was appointed director the following year. Riaño had been a full professor and chair of Fine Arts at the Escuela Superior de Diplomática [College of Diplomacy] since 1863, a consultant to the SKM in the field of Spanish decorative arts, a member of the Real Academia de la Historia [Royal Academy of History], and that of Bellas Artes de San Fernando. He had authored numerous scientific articles on the medieval world and industrial arts. He was also very interested in updating pedagogy in Spain and occupied several political posts in successive legislative periods. Riaño was one of the intriguing and multi-faceted personalities of his age, whose knowledge of classical culture was strengthened by frequent trips abroad. This, along with his understanding of technical and administrative procedures involved in obtaining and transporting reproductions, made him the ideal candidate to lead the fledgling institution (Muñoz González 2016).

The museum was to be located in the Casón del Buen Retiro, one of the few remaining buildings of the important palace complex constructed for Philip IV in Madrid. Its great dome, which had been decorated by Luca Giordano with the Allegory of the Golden Fleece, was deteriorated but still complete.

1887–1959: Rise and Decline

The MRA opened on 6 January 1881. Its two exhibition rooms displayed 156 pieces, mostly copies of the Parthenon [Figure 2]. Through a network of contacts that we just begin to know, the museum acquired pieces in Paris, London, Rome and Berlin to complete its classical art collection. The work involved delegates in Italy and France, foreign *formatori* and packers, customs agents and local mould makers who would mount or even repair the works that arrived in Madrid. Around the great main room,



Figure 2.- One of the first museographical exhibition designs, in the Main Hall of the Casón (MNE Archive).

extensions were added to the museum in 1887, 1892, 1894 and 1902, to house new pieces of archaic Greek art, Roman sculpture, the recently discovered Iberian art, the Egyptian and Mesopotamian worlds and medieval, renaissance and baroque sculpture.

Even at the height of its splendour, however, signs of decadence were beginning to show. This can be inferred from the draft of a response by Riaño to a piece being offered to the museum: “Finally, we must reply that we cannot purchase that mould at this time. The object is insignificant and the price ridiculous. In the good times, this museum would not even have accepted this piece as a donation” (Riaño 1894).

The pace of acquisitions declined in the early twentieth century. However, in the very beginning of the third decade a mould workshop was added to the institution to repair existing pieces and, significantly, to produce its own works. This fit with a renewed spirit of international cooperation, as manifest in the 1926–1927 agreement of the League of Nations International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, to foster the exchange of models among museums and national collections. Prior to this, from 1923 to 1925, the museum had added a series of Belgian pieces from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, thanks to an international agreement from

1910. Then in 1926, thanks to an agreement with the V&A Museum, the MRA received a small collection of replicas of the Pórtico de la Gloria of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela (Almagro 1998). To display these novelties and other recent Spanish, Italian and French medieval and renaissance acquisitions, along with the work from its own atelier, the MRA inaugurated six new halls and remodelled three in 1929.

All these attempts, however, which were also perceptible in other countries, were actually a “swan song” for replicas. The impulse that had given life to these institutions had changed direction. As heirs to the romantic questioning of neoclassical tenets, the artistic currents of the day – all the “isms” and corollary vanguards – coincided in their critique of these academic models. Ultimately, the collection did not survive the disdain of the successors of those who had exalted it.

The Civil War (1936-1939) was not seriously detrimental to the MRA. As early as 1940, a budget was approved to build a gallery on the first floor. This would be its final extension. At that time, the museum had 21 rooms: eleven on the ground level “for Oriental and Greco-Roman art and another ten on the upper level ... for medieval, renaissance and modern art” (Almagro 1989: 309). In all truth, however, by the end of that decade the museum was already a corpse, perhaps a “*exquisite corpse*”, but a corpse. Discussions began concerning its content, purpose, etcetera, which foretold dark times. Just after the end of the Civil War a board of trustees had been created to provide intellectual guidance for the institution. The name was changed for a brief time and in 1941 the number of job positions at the Moulds Workshop was drastically reduced.

As an institution in crisis, virtually no new pieces were added to the MRA in the 1940s and 1950s. These were years of rapid decline and constant repairs to the building. In the late 1950s, a sobering report by museum director Enrique Lafuente Ferrari (1898-1985) described the deplorable state of the facilities, along with the economic difficulties and staffing problems that were even affecting the conservation of the pieces. The museum was in a state of dereliction (Campano 2019) [Figure 3].

The lack of official support and the rapid progress of other means of diffusion, such as film and photography, in a context of economic growth that facilitated trips to where the original pieces were located, led to the closure of the museum in 1959. An order from the General Directorate of Fine Arts dictated that the museum collections should be moved to the Palacio de Velazquez in the Retiro Park, so the Casón could be repaired. A colleague described in rather understated terms how the pieces were transferred “in an unorthodox manner”, and how “the deterioration and loss of pieces began” (Fernández-Sabugo 2013: 37). After its renovation, one temporary exhibition on Velazquez was held at Casón. When it ended, the replicas were never returned.



Figure 3.- View of one of the rooms of the Museum of Artistic Reproductions towards 1957 (MNE Archive).

1959-2012: Hidden, Forgotten and Revealed again

Although the MRA never returned to its original site, and despite what has just been said, it was not entirely overlooked by the State. In fact, Gratiano Nieto (1917-1986), the Director General of Fine Arts, adopted two measures that favoured the museum. He ordered the provisional installation of part of the collection in the Museo de América building, so “it could fulfil the educational mission it had been given” (Order of 23 March 1961, of the Directorate General of Fine Arts) [Figure 4]. Moreover, a new museum building was planned, with twice the surface of the Casón (3,000 m²). It was to be located where Lafuente had proposed: close to the Schools of Architecture, Fine Arts and Humanities in the Madrilénian university district, the Ciudad Universitaria. Despite initial difficulties, the project was approved in 1962 and practically finished around 1966. However, the construction company lost its contract in 1968 due to discrepancies between the architect and the contractor. The building, though essentially complete, was closed.

The search for a new Madrid location for the collection began. The long list of candidate sites included the old General Hospital of Madrid (1985), where the Museo de Arte Reina Sofía [Reina Sofía Museum] was finally installed. Also the Museo Nacional de Etnología [National Museum of Ethnology], which would move its collection to a building



Figure 4.- The collection of the National Museum of Artistic Reproductions in the Museum of America (MNE Archive).

that would house the State anthropological collections to create the Museo Nacional de Antropología [National Museum of Anthropology], then converted to Museo del Traje [Costume Museum]. Other proposals suggested the Palacio de Capricho [Capricho Palace] (1997) and the Fábrica de Tabaco [Tobacco Factory] (2004). None of these ideas prospered.

The portion of the collection that was being displayed at the Museo de América had to be closed in 1990 for building renovation in preparation for the celebration of 500 years since the discovery of America. After that, the part of the collection on display was limited to a small sample of classical art in what was called the Sala Antiquarium. It was inaugurated in October 1991 and is thought to have closed around the year 2000 [Figure 5].

With the new millennium, renewed interest in replica collections began to develop. After years of amnesia and neglect, the works were inventoried, cleaned, restored, acknowledged as valuable and presented to the public. The need to find a location for the museum's collection led the Ministry of Culture to close the MRA in 2011 and assign the collection to the Museo Nacional de Escultura (MNE) [National Museum of Sculpture], in Valladolid.



Figure 5.- Partial view of the Sala Antiquarium (MNE Archive).

Since February 2012, the public has been able to view a small selection of reproductions – mostly plaster, but some of metal and paper – that provide a sample of the classical art collection, in the church of San Benito El Viejo, one of the MNE buildings, annexed to the Casa del Sol (Catalogue, 2013) [Figure 6].



Figure 6.- The Hall of Reproductions in the Casa del Sol, one of the seats of the National Sculpture Museum, (authors: Javier Muñoz y Paz Pastor, MNE archive).

Projects and Values

Currently, the collection is divided between two locations. A small portion, including more than one hundred pieces (or 671 if individual cameos are counted) is on display in Valladolid. The larger portion is stored in the basement of the Museo del Traje, waiting for the Casa del Sol to be refurbished as a potentially visitable storehouse for the entire collection.

The MNE has worked intensively on every aspect of this collection, from reviewing the inventory and state of

conservation of stored pieces to arranging loans of works for diverse temporary exhibits, mainly in Madrid (Museo del Prado, Museo de América and Hall Alcalá 31), Alcalá de Henares (Museo Arqueológico Regional) and Bilbao (Museo de Reproducciones). Pieces from the collection have been included in several temporary exhibits organized by the MNE (*Anatomía [Anatomy]*, *Non Finito [Unfinished]*, *Extraña Devoción [Strange Devotion]*, etcetera). Some of these were monographic exhibits, such as *Tesoros Eléctricos, [Electric Treasures]* which was shown from 2017 to 2020 at the MNE, the MAN and the Museo de Reproducciones de Bilbao.

Around the collection numerous talks have been featured, as well as readings of classical literature, musical encounters and temporary exhibitions. In these, an attempt has been made to create dialogue between the nineteenth-century copies and works of art, mainly in plaster, by contemporary artists such as Baltasar Lobo and Joan Miró. Since its inauguration, the priority of the museum has been to update knowledge of the exhibited collections. This study is ongoing and advanced, with several pieces already accessible on the Ministry of Culture website. A conference titled *Copia e invención [Copy and Invention]* was held in 2013 on the occasion of the arrival of the collection in Valladolid and has since been presented at forums and conferences in Madrid, Pontevedra and Possagno (Italy).

This is not intended as an exhaustive list, but to draw our attention to the fact that no justification is required to recognise and try to transmit the values of this collection, these collections.

Questioned throughout the twentieth century as the epitome of the staliest academic views, today deprived of their role as the ideal intermediary between ancient excellence and the daily life of remote communities, what are their values? Do they actually have any value? I think they do, and that those values remain substantially unchanged, though the current offer of knowledge is infinitely superior to the original moment. To avoid repetitions talking about their interest as artistic models or pedagogical resources, or their potential in relation to the history of art and archaeology, we will just limit to suggest that these collections should be understood as a crossroads of multiple paths. This takes us back to the time when they were conceived, and the time when they were recreated. It also takes us to the time when they were recovered and the humans who loved them as expressions of higher ideals. It brings us to our time and to research about our perceptions and our value scale in matters of knowledge and artistic expression. It is a game of mirrors, reflecting the very roots of that which is human.

Notes

[1] These and subsequent texts of Riaño have been translated from Spanish by the author.

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Artísticas [National Museum of Artistic Reproductions], approached from the point of view of the great institutional milestones, but also attending to the "intrahistory" and trying to know the name and work a whole plethora of professionals from very different fields, almost anonymous, who made it possible to carry out the enormous task of collecting works carried out by the museum.

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Alberto Campano Lorenzo, who holds a degree in Geography and History from the University of Valladolid, is a museum curator at the Museo Nacional de Escultura [National Sculpture Museum], where since 2012 he has been in charge of the Collection of Artistic Reproductions. Within this last area, he has published studies on works from this collection, on the trajectory of the National Museum of Artistic Reproductions and about the history of the sculptural replica from Antiquity. He has curated several exhibitions focused on the world of copies, such as *Electric Treasures*, or others where reproductions have played an important role, such as *The Museum as Divine Comedy*. His current lines of work are focused on the revision and updating of the pieces in the aforementioned collection and on researching the history of the Museo Nacional de Reproducciones