

Re-Casting the Gregory Collection: The Role of Plaster Cast “Antiquities” in the Formation of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

“During the past year there has been added to the attractions of the University a large collection of Statuary and pictures, the gift of the citizens of Champaign and Urbana... There is perhaps no Collection in the West that equals it in number and value of its Specimens. Many of the great masterpieces of Sculpture are here exhibited in casts taken directly from the originals... The value of this splendid collection is already exhibiting itself...” (Catalogue and Circular 1874–5).

On New Year’s Day 1875, the Fine Arts Gallery of the then-called Illinois Industrial University opened to the public for the first time. On the third floor of University Hall’s new west wing, in a gas-lit open expanse with low horizontal partitions and dark maroon walls, visitors were faced with “a crowd of variously posed chalky white figures in full and reduced scale” (Scheinman 1981), among which stood sixteen full-sized plaster cast replicas of some of the most famous sculptures of antiquity – several of Praxiteles’ figures, the Venus de Milo, and the Laocoön group, to name a few (12th Board of Trustees Proceedings, 1884). In a special dispatch from the two-evening launch event, the Chicago Tribune (Jan 2nd, 1875) noted the significance of the collection that had been assembled by Regent John Milton Gregory, “now the largest west of New York”, while the Illini newspaper (May 1876) continued to editorialize on the collection’s “ultimate and beneficial results” as “one of the most valuable” assets among the University’s departments; indeed, Gregory’s representative copies and casts were seen as contributing to a “rapidly approaching” new age in which “foreigners [would] no longer cry out against the supremely disgusting taste of Americans.”

How was it, though, that such an impressive collection came to be at such a newly formed Land-grant University in the Midwest? What was the impetus behind Gregory's decision to amass this collection of "antiquities"? And what does his decision, and the subsequent reactions to it, tell us about the role of neoclassical reproductions within the formation of the culture of the now-University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign? In this paper, through close engagement with documents from the University of Illinois archives, I will set out the history of the formation of Gregory's collection and its initial reception; focusing specifically on the rhetoric of "Culture" used by Gregory and his allies to persuade not only the university administration but also the local Champaign-Urbana community to donate to his cause.

Scholars have previously demonstrated the popularity of plaster cast collecting in nineteenth century America, showcasing how the country's institutions can provide interesting case studies in the use of plaster casts as both a "flexible instrument for the advancement of cultural, ideological, and institutional classicism" (Dyson 2010), and an "important symbol of aesthetic refinement" (Fahlman 1991). Within this body of scholarship, however, it is rare to find even the briefest of discussions regarding Gregory's collection, with many surveys failing to mention it all – an odd omission, I will argue, based on the size of the collection, its unveiling as part of a newly formed Land-grant institution, and Gregory's own positioning as a pioneer of the movement to bring collections of "a plaster-of-Paris antiquity" (*The Nation* 3, 1866) to the American masses. In doing so, this paper will not only contribute to a growing body of scholarship on the historicity and re-evaluation of cast collections in American higher education institutions (e.g. Cornell Collections of Antiquities Database), but also demonstrate the rich mine of untapped information that the Gregory collection can provide us for understanding the role of classical sculpture in the diffusion of a new taste for "fine art" in Illinois.

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