

For the Gipsformerei, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
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Veronika Tocha

# Near

The  
Gipsformerei

200 Years of  
Casting Plaster

# Life



**Staatliche Museen zu Berlin**  
Preußischer Kulturbesitz

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Admired for her beauty and grace during her lifetime and thereafter, Queen Louise of Prussia died in the summer of 1810, when she was only thirty-four. Her wax death mask was taken by the stucco plasterer and sculptor Christian Philipp Wolff (1772–1820). Today, it is part of the collection of the Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg. The cast, an example of a mass-produced death mask, contributed significantly to the mythologization around the Queen after her death. The bust of Louise was made in the context of a life-size recumbent figure by Christian Daniel Rauch that Frederick Wilhelm III commissioned as her funerary monument, is also based on this death mask. The monument was installed in the mausoleum of Schlosspark Charlottenburg in 1815.



*Death Mask of Luise Queen of Prussia (1776–1810)*  
Master model, before 1965  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
Gipsformerei

After Christian Daniel Rauch  
*Recumbent Bust of Louise Queen of Prussia*  
Master model, before 1965  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
Gipsformerei













After an unknown artist  
*Death Mask of Filippo Brunelleschi*  
 Realised as a Bust  
 Master model, 1882,  
 and cast, ca. 2000  
 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
 Gipsformerei

After an unknown artist  
*Death Mask of an Unknown*  
*Woman Realised as a Bust*  
 Master model, 1882  
 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
 Gipsformerei

According to Giorgio Vasari, the Florentine sculptor Andrea del Verrocchio (1435–1488) was the first in early modern times to reintroduce the ancient practice of taking moulds from nature. That this practice in fact predates Verrocchio is proven by a number of extant objects, such as the death mask of Filippo Brunelleschi (+ 1446) (ill. left) and the death mask of a lady with a veil moulded in the round, likewise dating from the earlier part of the fifteenth century (ill. above). Even though these objects are at odds with Vasari's

claim, the famous biographer was right in attesting to a boom of casting after nature in the quattrocento. It was a hallmark of the Florentine Renaissance to make use of death masks and body casts in the artistic work on portrait busts, funerary statuary and monuments — a practice that was to spread to Germany later, as is documented in our exhibition with works such as Johann Gottfried Schadow's bust of Carl Friedrich Christian Fasch (ill. p. 120) and the bust of Queen Louise (ill. p. 118–19).





# In the Artist's Studio

In the workshop practice of sculptors, casts have always played an important role. From antiquity to the present, they have served as models that contribute to the conceptual aspect of the final artwork, as well as artistic tools which make them part of the work's material origins. In what might be seen as paradigmatic, Édouard Dantan's painting *Un moulage sur nature* (1887) illustrates this double role. This painting of a studio vividly foregrounds the practice of life-casting, while in the background iconic sculptures, such as a reduced cast of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* (1513–16) and the cast of a female bust, stand guard over the work process, maybe even inspire it. Does Dantan allude here to the oppositions between art and technology, free modelling and mechanical replication, creation and imitation? Or is he making a productive connection between these aspects, which are often difficult to tell apart?

In addition to Dantan's painting, there are other such scenes set in academies and studios that show both the workshops of sculptors furnished with exemplary casts and the casting process itself; they form the starting point of this chapter. The core, however, is informed by those casts of human body parts and of faces that — like the casts taken from animals in *Still Lives and Nature morte* — once belonged to the collection of teaching aids in use at the *Unterrichtsanstalt des Kunstgewerbemuseums* in Berlin. They were integrated into the collection of the *Gipsformerei* in the late nineteenth century. These holdings comprise plaster effigies of stunning lifelikeness, which shed light on the blind spots in the histories of the two institutions. *Near Life* presents these works to the public for the very first time.



The use of antique sculptures for tuition and study purposes in modern times is attested by the many depictions of academies from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, including the drawing *Aktsaal der Kunst-Academie zu Berlin* (Life Drawing Hall at the Art Academy in Berlin, 1696) by Dutch baroque painter Augustin Terwesten (1649–1711). The Akademie der Künste in Berlin was founded in the same year as the drawing by Prussia's future king Friedrich I, similarly to the academies of Paris and Rome. Located on the upper floor of the Royal Stables on Unter den Linden, the Akademie was both an artists' society and training institution. Plaster casts, mostly procured from Rome, helped to introduce young artists and scholars to the study of antiquity.

As the collection of plaster casts was destroyed almost completely in a fire at the stables in 1743, the inventory of sculptures can only be reconstructed tentatively. Preserved fully in the form of graphic reproductions, Terwesten's drawing is one of the few sources we can draw on today. It proves that students at the Akademie had casts of the *Farnese Hercules*, the *Laocoön Group*, the *Medici Venus*, the *Farnese Hermes* and the *Satyr with Cymbals and Kroupezion* at their disposal to train eye and hand. The plaster cast collection of the Akademie der Künste was the foundation of the collection, which was prominently placed on display between 1855 and 1911 on the first floor of the Neues Museum and continuously supplied with new pieces made at the Gipsformerei.

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Willy Römer  
*Teaching Institute of the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin (In the Art Room for Anatomical Drawing)*, 1920s  
 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstbibliothek – Museum für Fotografie

Right

Willy Römer  
*Teaching Institute of the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin (Anatomy Class and Sculptors' Workshop)*, 1920s  
 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstbibliothek – Museum für Fotografie



Constantin Friedrich Blesendorf (attributed) after a drawing by Augustin Terwesten  
*Der Aktsaal der Berliner Akademie der Künste*, ca. 1700  
 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstbibliothek

Charles-Nicolas Cochin (the Younger), Benoît Louis Prévost (engraver)  
*Zeichenkurs in der Akademie, nach einer Vorzeichnung für die Illustration in Diderots und d'Alemberts Encyclopédie*, 1763  
 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett





*Male Torso (Front)*

*Male Torso (Back), former inv. no. 32*

Master models, 1908 and 1870  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
Gipsformerei





*Female Torso (Front)*

*Female Torso (Back)*

Master models, 1894 and 1894  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
Gipsformerei









» These masks are absolutely extraordinary. The times when the persons who were moulded for these casts were alive are now in the distant past, but face-to-face with the casts you feel surprisingly close to them. There is nothing about the face masks to suggest that these people belonged to the nineteenth century, that they breathed an entirely different air from what we breathe today, and saw and heard entirely different things. Only few clues actually date these masks, such as traces of a lace shirt that was likely fashionable around the turn of last century. The casts are remarkably exact. Presumably they are original casts, which would mean that they are positives derived from the lost moulds of the face. Such casts are distinguished by an especially high degree of authenticity and closeness to the original. For the purposes of reproduction they were transformed into gelatine models, that is, they were worked on a plate and a mother mould was added, which covers the face like a lid. Sprue holes allow the gelatine to be poured in. The result is a negative mould which is used in turn to create new casts. However, the last time these model were used at the Gipsformerei was several decades ago.

Timo Klöppel, artistic plasterer





After Polykleitos  
*Doryphoros*  
Master model, 1871  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
Gipsformerei







Édouard-Joseph Dantan  
*Un atelier de moulage*, 1884  
Centre national des arts  
plastiques, Paris,  
On permanent loan since 1963  
from Musée des Beaux-Arts,  
Limoges, FNAC 609

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Denis Diderot, Jean Le Rond  
d'Alembert  
*Encyclopédie. Sur Les Sciences,  
Les Arts Libéraux, Et Les Arts  
Mécaniques: Avec Leur Explication,  
Sculpture*, 1775  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
Kunstabibliothek

# Glossary:

## Technology and Craftsmanship at the Gipsformerei

Fabian Burg, Thomas Schelper  
and Timo Klöppel

### Artistic Plasterers

The skills practised today by artistic plasterers at the Gipsformerei, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin were originally developed in the workshops of sculptors and stucco plasterers in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. It was in those workshops that plaster casters and moulders, decorative and stucco plasterers refined the historical moulding techniques that are still in use today. Most of these moulding professions, however, were hardly traceable in the first half of the twentieth century. Today, the Gipsformerei trains stucco plasterers and related practitioners over three years to become artistic plasterers (*Gipskunstformer\*innen*). Elements of the training curriculum include: the crafting and use of various types of traditional moulds; moulding from the original; moulding and casting with plaster, polymer compounds and wax; retouching casts; and the preservation and conservation of the inventory. The Gipsformerei is one of the few places in the world where the craftsmanship and the traditional knowledge of the old moulding trades are still actively cultivated and passed on in the twenty-first century.

### Cast

A cast is a cast replica of an object that is usually referred to as an original. The cast is obtained from a negative mould created by → **Moulding**. Depending on their size and shape, the casts are either solid or hollow. Plaster casts often consist of several cast segments and are reinforced by → **Reinforcements**, when required.

### Casting after Nature / Lifecasting

A cast taken from nature is an → **Original Cast** in the broader sense. The term describes casts of human beings, animals (after life) or plants (after nature). The object is moulded (with a → **Lost Mould**), from which the positive cast is then obtained. The collection of the Gipsformerei comprises roughly five hundred lifecasts.

### Gelatine Mould

From the end of the nineteenth century until the introduction of the → **Silicone Mould** in the 1960s, the gelatine mould, also known as the (animal) glue mould (ill. p. 237 top), was regularly used for the rapid → **Moulding** of objects and the production of casts. As a moulding material,

gelatine enables flexible → **Moulding**, and thus large-scale moulding even of highly complex and undercut surfaces. Gelatine moulds are taken either directly from the original or from the model using the → **Mother Mould**. A model exclusively reserved for (animal) glue or gelatine moulds is often referred to as a gelatine or glue model. The gelatine is melted in a water bath and then poured over the object to be moulded. Once it has set, the image side of the gelatine mould is tanned with alum salt and treated with a → **Release Agent**. The resulting mould can only be used for some days before wearing out. However, the gelatine mass itself can be treated and reused. The technique of crafting and handling gelatine moulds is demanding and reserved for the experienced plasterer.

### Keys and Locks

Keys are conical depressions (negative keys) and elevations (positive keys) in mould pieces, i.e. the parts that form the → **Mother Mould** or → **Plaster Piece Mould**. These keys interlock with great accuracy due to applying the key-lock principle, which prevents the pieces from becoming misaligned. They ensure that